User-Generated Content and Journalistic Values

Jane B. Singer and Ian Ashman

The various forms of user-generated content (UGC) described in this book not only raise
practical issues for journalists but also challenge long-standing occupational values. Who
decides what is credible, true, or even newsworthy? What happens to the prized journalistic
norm of autonomy in this interconnected environment? When the content space is shared,
who is responsible for what it contains? What might an optimal relationship between
journalists and user/contributors – the people Bruns (2007) calls 'produsers' – look like, and
what are the obstacles to achieving it?

The rapid advent of UGC in the digital media environment has given a new twist to long-
standing journalistic ambivalence – at best – about citizen journalism. A perception that
moves toward civic journalism, the term for prototypical efforts to explicitly incorporate
public input into deciding what to cover and how to cover it, would undermine journalists'
ability to make autonomous news judgments and report accordingly were at the heart of
professional resistance to the idea in the 1990s (McDevitt, 2003). More recent objections
have included protests that citizen journalism is not really journalism at all, notably because
much of what users create seems to have little to do with the broader public interest (Stabe,
2006).

Essentially, at issue is journalistic control not merely over definitions but also, as this chapter
explores, over the norms that journalists see as framing their own products and processes, but
not necessarily those of users. We examine the topic by looking at how journalists at Britain's
Guardian newspaper and its internationally popular website – part of a media organization in
which clearly articulated values are culturally embedded – are assessing and incorporating
UGC.

Guardian Media and the Scott Trust

The *Guardian* and Sunday *Observer* are flagship newspapers of the Guardian Media Group, a
company wholly owned by a trust whose core purpose is to safeguard the financial and
editorial independence of its holdings. The Scott Trust states that profit must be used 'to
sustain journalism that is free from commercial or political interference' – journalism that in
turn must uphold a set of values articulated by *Manchester Guardian* editor CP Scott on the
paper's 100th anniversary in 1921. 'Comment is free, but facts are sacred', he declared.
Newspapers have 'a moral as well as a material existence', and 'the voice of opponents no

less than that of friends has as right to be heard' (Guardian Media Group, 2007). Applying those values to a digital age, current *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger wrote:

> The character of Scott Trust journalism depends on its independence of ownership, behaviour and belief. Our journalists should be fierce in their protection of that independence. In the absence of a proprietor, our journalists' main relationships are with other colleagues and with readers, viewers or listeners. There should be a high premium on transparency, collaboration and open discussion. (Forgan, n.d.:7-8)

The *Guardian*, *Observer*, and guardian.co.uk together employ nearly 800 journalists. About 10 percent work on the award-winning website, which includes hundreds of blogs from staffers and commissioned writers. The 'Comment Is Free' section, launched in 2006, is Britain's leading commentary blog, attracting 350,000 comments or more a month. Its stated aim is to provide 'an open-ended space for debate, dispute, argument and agreement' (guardian.co.uk, n.d.). Aside from topics deemed especially sensitive, such as 'Blogging the Qur'an', comments are not pre-moderated. As of this writing, the *Guardian* allows relatively little free-form 'citizen journalism' – that is, material not directly tied to content it has provided.

Although most readers of the printed newspapers live in the UK, two-thirds of the website users are outside the country. *Guardian* journalists accustomed to writing for, and getting feedback from, a British audience must therefore now accommodate an international readership.

Journalistic Values in a Networked Environment
Building on work that traced the encroachment of blogs on journalists' occupational turf (Lowrey, 2006), researchers have turned to the ways in which journalistic culture encompasses, or not, material from users that increasingly occupies the same digital space. Deuze and his colleagues suggest that participatory ideals do not mesh well with notions that journalists should keep their professional distance, 'notions which tend to exclude rather than to include' (Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger, 2007:335). Journalists interviewed by Thurman (2008) in his study of UGC in nine British news outlets highlighted content concerns including newsworthiness, quality, balance, and decency.

In their multi-national study of UGC on media websites, Domingo et al. (2008) found that news organizations in Europe and the US are interpreting online user participation mainly as an opportunity for readers to debate current events; the core journalistic culture remains largely unchanged, as professionals retain the decision-making power at each stage of the news production process. Similarly, Hermida and Thurman (2008) found that UK journalists are retaining traditional gatekeeping roles in adopting user content on their websites.

Deuze (2005) places normative values including autonomy within what he calls the ideology of journalism, a system of beliefs that enable a group to produce meanings and ideas. In considering the challenges to journalists posed by citizen journalists and other external content providers, Singer also highlights autonomy, along with accountability. She suggests that in a networked environment, where all communicators and all communication are connected, 'the notion of autonomy becomes unavoidably contested' (Singer, 2007:90).

Autonomy and accountability, as well as authenticity, are normative values related to journalistic credibility that Hayes and his colleagues suggest need to be both strengthened and reinterpreted in a digital environment, where 'old assumptions about journalistic roles and values can no longer be accepted uncritically nor old approaches to them continued indefinitely' (Hayes et al., 2007:275).

This chapter offers empirical evidence about journalists' views of these values in an environment that includes citizen journalism and other forms of user input. It is based on interviews with 33 print and digital *Guardian* journalists between November 2007 and February 2008. Brief questionnaires also enabled journalists to provide up to three words or short phrases associated with credibility (related to authenticity), responsibility (accountability), autonomy, and competence; in addition, they were invited to highlight a key ethical issue related to audience input into the news product or production process. All but five completed at least some parts of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire data provide a benchmark for understanding how these journalists define their occupational values. A relatively small set of traits are seen as essential. Accuracy stands out as central; the two dozen journalists who answered this question mentioned it most often in connection with credibility, responsibility, and overall competence.

Other associations also spanned more than one construct. Honesty and balance / fairness were associated with both credibility and responsibility; thoroughness and expertise, including notions about authority, were highlighted in connection with credibility and competence. Independence was seen as an important aspect of credibility, as well as comprising the core of journalistic autonomy.

UGC and Journalistic Values at the *Guardian*
The 15 journalists who identified key issues related to UGC focused mainly on credibility and civility – and the potential for 'debasing journalism' by their absence, as a print editor wrote. 'The platform gives credibility to people whose comments may be completely inaccurate, offensive or without foundation in fact. It arguably undermines the work of professional journalists by placing the words of people who have no training or professional responsibility alongside, or even on a par with, those who do', wrote an online journalist.

At the same time, respondents linked UGC to values of free speech – 'letting people have their voice heard without intimidation', as an online editor wrote – and strengthened relationships. 'We're no longer writing for people, but having a conversation with them', a print editor wrote. 'The relationship is more balanced than ever before'. Some tied UGC to what they felt the paper stood for. 'It is a challenge to extend the *Guardian*'s values and ethics', an online editor wrote, 'which on many counts we are achieving successfully and others not'.

The 33 interviews expand on these ideas and suggest others. We will take the three concepts of authenticity, autonomy, and accountability in turn, then examine how *Guardian* journalists see relationships with users evolving in this increasingly shared, global media space.

Authenticity
For *Guardian* staff, being a 'true' or authentic journalist encompasses occupational norms of credibility, authority, and accuracy. The extent to which UGC jeopardizes or undermines personal and institutional authenticity was a major concern.

Most agreed that users pose a challenge to journalistic authority – but opinions differed on whether this was a good or bad thing. Some saw democratization of discourse as healthy. 'The old model of top-down, from-the-pulpit editorializing just doesn't do anymore. The vitality of the whole [Comment Is Free] enterprise is in the debate', an online editor said. 'You're not there to give people definitive answers'. Others felt UGC was not credible or authoritative enough to be inherently beneficial. They saw a crucial ongoing role for 'the expert journalist who can interrogate and understand and all of those sorts of things in a way that the citizen reporter just can't', as a print editor said.

Notions of authority and credibility were closely related. Journalists believed they took adequate steps to ensure what they wrote was credible but had little or no way to either assess or improve the credibility of what users provided. One editor said she had no expectation that users would be credible, citing issues of 'what they know, what they don't know, what motivation they have, and what views they bring with them'.

Institutional authenticity is also at stake. Respondents were universally supportive of '*Guardian* values' – and proprietary about protecting them. They saw their employer as providing a quality product and standing for things they approved, including enabling diverse voices to be heard. But they worried that those voices would harm the paper's own place in the world of credible opinion, potentially undermining the brand by sheer nastiness.

Another threat to authority was more direct: Users do not hesitate to challenge, often stridently, what journalists write. The challenge takes three forms: personal attacks, disagreement over opinion, and disputes about factual information. All three require time and energy to deal with, resources not always in adequate supply. Journalists who feel they already have too much to do wonder 'why would I want to respond to BigDick119?' an online editor said.

Otherwise, journalists favored a different response to each challenge. Personal attacks were easiest, in theory: Grit your teeth and try to ignore them – if you can. 'Sometimes I snipe back', one online writer confessed. 'I try to take a deep breath, be positive and say, "Well, the reason we said this was because …" But to be honest, I don't feel it's part of my job to go and disabuse people of notions they shouldn't be holding in the first place'. A print editor said his reaction to abusive users was: 'YOU set the tone for the discourse – you can't expect us not to respond in kind. If you call us ignorant imbeciles, you've got to expect that we'll take it to heart a little bit'.

Differences of opinion drew mixed reaction, though particularly among online staffers, honest (and civilly expressed) disagreement was seen as providing healthy opportunities for meaningful engagement and even self-reflection. Having one's opinions challenged 'removes complacency', a print editor said, and responding constructively to users involves explaining why you disagree with their point of view: 'You have to question yourself as well as them'.

Challenges of factual statements also were valued, though for a different reason: knowing their work would be open to comment made journalists pay extra attention to getting it right in the first place. One blogger said she asks herself if what she has written is 'bullet-proof': 'I'm going to go and triple-check it because I know someone will shoot me down if I don't, and obviously that will destroy the credibility of anything else you say'. However, responding to challenges can be time-consuming. 'It's good that people can raise things. The

internet gives them more standing to do that. The difficulty is it can then involve the media in long and tedious work to justify themselves', an online editor said. 'They often question very basic assumptions'.

Autonomy

In challenging 'basic assumptions' and otherwise questioning what journalists write, UGC has the potential to erode professional autonomy as well as authority. Indeed, journalists see the concepts as closely related. An online editor said user feedback did not threaten his autonomy because 'ultimately, I'm still in charge of it, and they're not', adding 'you want to please them, but that's different from eroding your sense of autonomy'.

Most interviewees treasured the large amount of individual autonomy they felt they had. Online staffers in particular commented on their freedom to write – and post – what they liked, in comparison to more protracted print editing processes. A former newspaper writer who had moved online said the editor who 'scrutinizes everything' before publication has been replaced to some extent by users who 'can act as whistle blowers if there's dodgy content'.

Input into decisions about what and how to write is not necessarily desired, however. The main area where UGC was seen as potentially impinging on journalistic autonomy related to the ready availability – indeed, the seductiveness – of hit logs and comment counts. Journalists accustomed to their work being part of a package for which only aggregated readership figures are available (and those only a few times a year) can see exactly how many people read their stories – and how many feel compelled to respond. Some saw such information as useful. 'I have an enormous amount of independence. I can write about anything', an online journalist said. 'But there's got to be a reason for it and a demand for it and an audience for it. Online, you do have this kind of instant knowledge of whether something you've written is of interest to people or not. … We may feel "well, that obviously was really popular, what else can we do along those lines?"'

However, most were reluctant to say that usage information either did or should dictate what they wrote or how they wrote it, a practice a print writer described as 'traffic whoring'. They stressed the importance of journalistic autonomy in content decisions. 'I wouldn't ever throw the more in-depth stuff out the window just to get comments', said an online writer. 'If you're going to start chasing hits, you're just going to end up writing about gratuitous remarks', said another. 'It appals me, the idea of what you'd have to do for popularity'.

Some journalists phrased their objections in terms of safeguarding the *Guardian* brand as distinct from the British 'red-tops' or down-market tabloids. 'You have to balance the desire for hits with what we think the paper should represent', an online editor said. Several said that while 'dumbing down' their content, for instance with celebrity gossip, would attract more hits, such appeals to 'the lowest common denominator' ultimately would alienate 'real'*Guardian* readers.

Accountability

The interviewees felt a clear responsibility to those readers, one related both to the quality of the content – 'my responsibility to the community is to put up good quality stuff that is interesting and accurate', an online journalist said – and to the quality of the resulting discourse. Indeed, they felt that sense of responsibility distinguished them from users. 'With

citizen journalists, it's all rights and no responsibilities', a print writer said. 'They can opt out at any moment, and I can't', a print editor said.

For journalists, overlapping considerations of honesty, transparency, and trust all related to accountability in an interactive environment. 'It works by being honest', a print editor said. 'What makes people cross is if they think you're being unfair or dishonest or disingenuous'. An online editor said users now expect journalists to 'step out from behind articles, defend, and discuss them'. Another journalist cited the need to 'be seen putting our hands up' when they got something wrong.

One simple aspect of being accountable is having a byline. 'Commenters behind a shroud of anonymity don't have that responsibility' not to be cruel, an online writer said. 'They don't care. But I can't do that'. Indeed, almost all the respondents who mentioned anonymity suggested it was a factor in the too-often abusive tone of online discourse. 'People feel licensed to say things in content and style that they wouldn't own if publishing as themselves', said an online editor.

Several respondents also touched on a perceived responsibility to be fair and balanced. An online journalist cited a need to 'consciously signal' efforts to look at a topic from different perspectives. Once an item is published, she said, 'You're going to get loads of perspectives! So if you haven't even thought about one of them, I think it undermines your initial attempt'.

Negotiating new relationships
All these views highlight the many complexities journalists face in negotiating new forms of interaction with other citizens. Some interviewees valued the more open and dialogic relationships. 'It's made it a much more balanced site', an online editor said; despite a few disruptive contributors, 'most are eloquent, intelligent, and able to add to the debate'. Interviewees embedded in online communities outside their *Guardian* role were notably more comfortable. Veteran journalists asked to engage with users want to know '"why am I being thrown to the lions?" Whereas I don't see them as lions', a blogger-turned-journalist said. 'They're part of the tribe that I am still part of, but in a different way'.

Others were taken aback by what they saw as disturbingly confrontational discourse. Several characterized it as blatantly sexist. 'Female journalists tend to be subject to abuse', one woman interviewee said. 'It tends to be like a big boy's playground'. Some saw it as rude to the point of being abusive. An editor said one of his writers told him, 'If I want to be called a cunt all day, I'd become a traffic warden and do it in the open air'. Some confessed to feeling hurt or upset. 'You get really, really depreciative comments', an online writer said. 'Whatever kind of maxims you repeat to yourself about how anything good always has haters, it subconsciously works away'.

At the moment, no explicit policies for journalist-user interaction exist at the *Guardian*, though informal guidelines are emerging – they suggest thanking users who correct errors, engaging with those who raise valuable (in the journalists' eyes) points and trying to ignore the irredeemably obnoxious. Several interviewees indicated that they were coming to see encouragement of cogent contributions as having more long-term value than discouragement of the less cogent. 'You can ignore the very hostile ones and respond to the more constructive ones', an online editor said.

Some said that though interaction was great, a bit of professional distance also was needed. Reading through comment threads, an online editor said, can lead to 'getting very depressed: "They all hate us, what's the point, why don't we just pack it all in?" And that's where the sense of autonomy comes in, and you have to say, "Actually, this is still our website, and this is what we're trying to do here." You have to remember what you're there to do in the first place'. She cited the Scott Trust mandate to enable debate of issues of the day: 'If we didn't have our autonomy, we wouldn't be producing that range of voices that we do produce'.

In general, *Guardian* journalists conveyed a feeling that the interactive terrain was one they were only just learning to navigate and had considerable ambivalence about. One online journalist said her colleagues were not trained or prepared for the 'slip from professional discourse into a more personal discourse'. Their role is no longer simply to inform or entertain; it is to engage and interact with a hugely diverse range of unseen, but definitely not unheard, people all over the world.

Summary
The *Guardian* journalists studied here expressed concerns about the credibility of UGC itself and about the effects of anonymous and / or uncivil comments on personal and institutional credibility. The perception that UGC potentially challenged their authority was widespread; though they said they appreciated the fact that more voices could now be heard, many clearly felt that too many of those voices were not worth listening to. One perceived value of UGC, however, was that it encouraged increased attention to accuracy, a paramount professional virtue.

Autonomy was highly valued, and most journalists were adamant that usage data – direct and immediate feedback from users about what they were interested in reading – should not be allowed to encroach on their professional news judgment. However, they also felt accountable to those users and indeed saw having explicit responsibilities as something that set them apart. The simple fact that users can be anonymous while journalists cannot was highlighted as an important component of online accountability.

All these issues – from autonomy to accountability, credibility to civility – are connected to the challenges inherent in negotiating new relationships. *Guardian* journalists, particularly the ones more deeply embedded in the traditional media culture, expressed considerable ambivalence about those relationships. Long-standing cultural norms position autonomy as a safeguard of credibility, and accepting explicit interdependency can be a lot to ask. Moreover, many were taken aback by the tone of some user contributions. Although most saw a theoretical value in broadened discourse, the reality presented a more profound challenge to their professional sensibilities than they had perhaps anticipated.

More broadly, this work suggests that journalists are thinking about the issues raised by citizen contributions in terms of an existing cultural framework defined by occupational norms – with varying degrees of accommodation and resistance. They face challenges in an open, global, and networked media environment that they did not confront when the product they alone produced was one they alone controlled.

When journalists control the product and the discourse surrounding it, relations with users are destined to be held at a distance. Yet in a seamless network, with its flattened or even obliterated hierarchies, all are in close proximity, a click of a mouse away. Journalists are

increasingly comfortable seeing themselves as citizens of this networked world, but they have doubts about whether the reverse – that citizens are journalists – is also true.

REFERENCES

Bruns, A. (2007). Produsage: Towards a broader framework for user-led content creation. Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity & Cognition. Retrieved 21 March 2008 from: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00006623/01/6623.pdf

McDevitt, Michael. (2003). In defense of autonomy: A critique of the public journalism critique. *Journal of Communication 53* (1): 155-164.

Stabe, Martin. (2006, 9 June). The four critiques of 'citizen journalism.' Pressgazette.co.uk. Retrieved 27 June 2008 from: http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=1&storycode=34418

Guardian Media Group. (2007). The Scott Trust: The Scott Trust values. Retrieved 18 March 2008 from: http://www.gmgplc.co.uk/ScottTrust/TheScottTrustvalues/ tabid/194/Default.aspx

Forgan, Liz. (n.d.). Foreword to *A Hundred Years* (CP Scott, originally published 1921). Retrieved 18 March 2008 from: http://www.gmgplc.co.uk/Portals/7/CP_Scott_leader.pdf (pp. 7-8).

guardian.co.uk. (n.d.). Comment Is Free: About this site. Retrieved 21 March 2008 from: http://commentisfree.*Guardian*.co.uk/about.html

Lowrey, Wilson. (2006). Mapping the journalism-blogging relationship. *Journalism 7* (4): 477-500.

Deuze, Mark, Bruns, Axel, & Neuberger, Christoph. (2007). Preparing for an age of participatory news. *Journalism Practice 1* (3): 322- 338 (p. 335).

Thurman, Neil. (2008). Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media. *New Media & Society 10* (1): 139-157.

Domingo, David, Quandt, Thorsten, Heinonen, Ari, Paulussen, Steve, Singer, Jane B., & Vujnovic, Marina. (2008). Participatory journalism practices in the media and beyond: An international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers. *Journalism Practice 2* (3): 326-342.

Hermida, Alfred, & Thurman, Neil. (2008). A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice 2* (3): 343-356.

Deuze, Mark (2005). What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered. *Journalism 6* (4): 442-464.

Singer, Jane B. (2007). Contested autonomy: Professional and popular claims on journalistic norms. *Journalism Studies 8* (1): 79-95 (p. 90).

Hayes, Arthur S., Singer, Jane B., & Ceppos, Jerry. (2007). Shifting roles, enduring values:

The credible journalist in a digital age. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22 (4): 262-279 (p. 275).