Media, Culture & Society
http://mcs.sagepub.com/

Beyond user-generated content: a production study examining the ways in which UGC is used at the BBC

Claire Wardle and Andrew Williams
Media Culture Society 2010 32: 781
DOI: 10.1177/0163443710373953

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/32/5/781

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Media, Culture & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/32/5/781.refs.html

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

Beyond user-generated content: a production study examining the ways in which UGC is used at the BBC

Claire Wardle
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY, UK

Andrew Williams
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

This article provides a case study of the BBC, and the attitudes of its news workers towards audience material, or, as it is more commonly referred to, user-generated content (UGC). Research has been carried out about the adoption of participatory and interactive elements in online newsrooms (Boczkowski, 2004a, 2004b; Örnebring, 2008; Thurman, 2008), but this is one of the first articles to examine a major broadcast organization.

Before the London bombings on 7 July 2005, BBC News Interactive in London received around 300 emails on an average day. This has now risen to around 12,000, with spikes around certain popular stories. This transformation has been reflected in the establishment of a dedicated newsroom, the UGC Hub, responsible for centrally managing material sent in by the public. From a very low base around three years ago, the hub now receives around 1000 stills and video clips in a quiet week, and during the floods in June 2006 they received around 7000 photos and videos in five days. These are just approximate figures for the information and raw material flowing into the BBC's growing UGC Hub; they do not include the content sent directly to individual programmes, or to the many local and regional newsrooms across the UK, which can be considerable, especially during big 'UGC stories', such as a terrorist attack or extreme weather.

We propose that the term 'audience material' should be used instead of UGC, because the latter fails to capture adequately the range of phenomena

Media, Culture & Society © The Author(s) 2010, Reprints and permissions:
http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav Vol. 32(5): 781–799
[ISSN: 0163-4437 DOI: 10.1177/0163443710373953]

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

it describes: breaking news footage, audience comments, audience experiences, collaborative journalism (community reporters, digital stories), networked journalism (BBC journalists tapping into expert communities online), and non-news content included in news output. The term 'UGC' developed as a way of describing content created and shared by users on the internet, and in this context the term 'user' is appropriate, but in the context of the BBC, which produces television and radio content alongside online content, it is not. Similarly, while a YouTube clip is 'generated', a comment about the presidential campaign or the current economic situation is not. And, finally, the idea of 'content' also fails to capture some of the material which is described with the term 'UGC', such as participatory journalism drawing on nodes of expertise within the blogosphere, or a collaborative journalism project training community reporters to produce their own stories.

The findings are based on a major study of audience material at the BBC, co-funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the BBC, which studied: the ways in which the production of BBC journalism was affected by audience material; which audience members were submitting material; and their attitudes towards it.[1] This article focuses on the production element of the research, which examined the attitudes of BBC journalists towards the increased use of audience material in news output, and how they used the material on a daily basis, to answer the fundamental question: is audience material (UGC) changing journalistic practice? To answer the questions, a team of five researchers spent ten weeks in nine different newsrooms across the BBC, both in London and across the United Kingdom. As part of these observations, we interviewed 115 journalists, and ten senior managers and editors.

A number of important issues have been raised by this research: first, the fact that there are five different types of audience material used within BBC news output and the term 'UGC' is inadequate to describe the range of contributions made by BBC audiences; second, that BBC journalists display markedly different attitudes towards the five types of audience material; and, third, that each of these types plays a different role within the BBC. Ultimately, we argue that the continual reliance on this catch-all term is preventing us from acknowledging the complexity of the very different types of contributions made by the audience, and the different ways in which these contributions are considered and used within the newsroom.

When the different types of audience material are disentangled, it becomes clear that currently, across the organization, news workers are enthusiastic about certain types of audience material. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are types which fit the traditional model of journalism: audience footage, audience comments and experiences. They are types of audience material which the BBC has always received and always used. For the majority of newsworkers, therefore, nothing has changed significantly, apart from the technological advances, which have meant that the BBC receives much larger amounts of content, at much faster speeds. However, there are certain key people based

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

in individual newsrooms, and some holding senior management positions, who are also enthusiastic about types of audience material which challenge traditional models of journalism: collaborative and truly participatory models of journalism. And while it is true that there are a number of impressive examples of collaborative and participatory journalism that exist throughout the BBC's UK operations, most news journalists perceive UGC in news-gathering terms first of all. This article will therefore argue that, when discussing audience material with BBC news journalists, they are likely to think of it as a source of news material to be processed in the same way as other material flowing into the newsroom. As a result, the participatory and democratizing possibilities of UGC are often an afterthought, if they are mentioned at all. So while the establishment of the UGC Hub signalled that the BBC was taking audience material seriously, it is necessary to explore the motivations behind that decision further, and to examine critically the ways in which the audience are actually able to take an active role in the production processes of the news.

Newsroom ethnographies

Production studies of newsrooms date back to the 1950s and the early formative newsroom research (see Cottle, 2007, and his overview of news production studies), which focused on the role of editorial gatekeepers (White, 1950), the impact of newsroom policy on journalistic behaviour (Breed, 1955), the strategic use of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972) and the centrality of daily routines in shaping news output (Tuchman, 1973). These early studies were followed by a number of substantive ethnographies in the US and UK which used continued periods of observations to provide a fuller understanding of the socio-cultural contexts which shape newsmaking production processes (Ericson et al., 1987; Gans, 1979, Golding and Elliott, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978).

These studies have stood the test of time and remain influential, but towards the end of the 1990s and since, there has been a re-awakening of interest in newsroom production studies, as a way of understanding the impact of technological change on newsrooms, particularly in terms of the enforced multi-skilling (or de-skilling) of journalists (Bromley, 1997; Cottle, 2003; Cottle and Ashton, 1999; MacGregor, 1997). As Cottle argues: '[t]oday news producers contribute to and work within a complexly differentiated news ecology' (2007: 9).

The transformation of newsrooms with respect to convergence, multimedia and interactivity has received a tremendous amount of scholarly attention (Belanger, 2005; Boczkowski, 2002, 2004a; Deuze, 1999, 2003; Erdal, 2007; Gillmor, 2004; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Singer, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), with researchers attempting to tackle the issue of whether, as MacGregor has argued: '[i]t is a world where a certain

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

news bias has developed, one which turns around technology' (1997: 2). Some positioned themselves firmly in the technologically determinist camp (McNair, 1998; Pavlik, 2000; Sylvie and Witherspoon, 2002), but Cottle and Ashton, in their study of a BBC news centre and its adoption of an updated news management system, were among the first scholars to emphasize the cultural influences within the newsroom, and to warn against technological determinism:

> Technologies of news production, in this context, are put to work in the production of news – understood by audiences and producers alike – as a distinctive and differentiated cultural form. (1999: 41)

Others mirror this argument, underlining the ways in which the adoption of particular technological advances is often driven more by the wider social context, and individual technical skills and abilities, rather than simply availability (Boczkowski, 2004a; Deuze, 1999; Domingo, 2008; Garrison, 2001; Paulussen, 2004). Boczkowski, in his influential article on the processes of adopting multimedia and interactivity in three online newsrooms, argued persuasively that there was a need to turn established wisdom on its head, and rather than seeing user-authored content as an effect of technological change, asking whether 'newsworkers' vision of their audience as consumers or also co-producers shapes the adoption of multi-media and interactivity' (2004a: 200). And as Domingo underlines: 'the professional culture … [does] not exist in a vacuum, but rather [is] recreated and renegotiated in every production task, in the design of the content management software or in the staffing decisions' (2008: 698).

The term 'user-generated content' has become established as the catch-all phrase to describe material created by audiences, in news and non-news contexts. Another similarly vague umbrella term is 'participatory journalism', which in 'the sociology of news literature, has become commonly accepted to refer to the wide variety of initiatives undertaken by mainstream media to enhance the integration of all kinds of user contributions in the making of news' (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 25). Both of these terms encompass a range of phenomena: citizen journalism (Allan, 2006), networked journalism (Gillmor, 2004), blogging (Lowrey, 2006; Matheson, 2004; Singer, 2005), and collaborative journalism (Kim and Hamilton, 2006; McIntosh, 2008). It is significant that individual journalists and newsrooms talk about 'UGC', rarely acknowledging the different types of audience contribution, whereas scholars have tended to concentrate on one type of audience participation, mainly citizen journalism. As Paulussen and Ugille argue: '[s]o far, the literature on participatory journalism is rather scarce, as researchers have primarily focused on the emergence of citizen journalism as an alternative to professional journalism rather than on the synergy between both' (2007: 25).

In the last year, there has been a sudden emphasis on UGC in the news (Avilés and Carvajal, 2008; Domingo et al., 2007; Örnebring, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008), with studies that have examined the types

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

of UGC being used in different newsrooms and that have emphasized the need to examine the extent to which users have control over the UGC they create and the types of content they are given the opportunity to create. As Örnebring asks: 'to what extent [do] users have control over the "UGC" provision … and what types of content … [are] they … given the opportunity to create' (2008: 772)?

Scholars writing about the impact of participatory journalism on newsrooms have concluded that change has been slow, but fear of technology is not one of the explanations offered. O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008), in their study of journalists from 11 European countries, refute the argument that technology itself has prevented change, arguing that there are low levels of technophobia; they actually describe many journalists as 'net progressives' (2008: 367). Belanger (2005), writing about Canadian Public Radio and the adoption of audience material argued that, the 'challenge was not a technical one but a philosophical one' (2005: 425), underlining the influence of the journalistic mind-set which journalism studies scholars have highlighted since the earliest newsroom ethnographies. Gillmor, discussing the apprehension editors show when faced with truly embracing blogs and allowing audience comments, argues there is a:

> mistrust among traditional editors of a genre that threatens to undermine what they consider core values – namely editorial control and ensuring that readers trust, or at least do not assume there is an absence of, the journalists' objectivity and fairness. (2004: 114).

This nervousness about the blurring of journalistic values is sometimes demonstrated in concerns that audience contributions are not of a high enough standard (Chung, 2007; Schultz, 2000) and, most recently, O' Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) argued that there is a strong rejection of 'personal or DIY journalism'. They state in fact that:

> [t]here is a 'principle of continuity' in journalism. The profession has striven for its status among other professions in society since the 1800s. Even now, there seems to be an internal need to adhere to practices which ensure that status, and to maintain the particular values that both generate and legitimize those practices. Newspaper journalists appear to want to stay newspaper journalists. This is not to say that they are recalcitrant technophobes, but they welcome the Net when it suits their existing professional ends, and are much less enthusiastic about, and unlikely to promote, radical change in news work. (2008: 368)

Drawing on this conceptual framework, this study provides a typology of audience material which relates to the BBC but is applicable to most news organizations. This typology allows for an examination of the attitudes of BBC journalists towards the different types of audience material, the different roles they play at the BBC, and a focus on the different tensions which exist between the different types of audience material.

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Studying the newsroom

This research was conducted using multi-site newsroom observations, with a team of five Cardiff University researchers spending a total of 37 days in different newsrooms across the BBC, both at the network and regional level. While access to BBC newsrooms was made easier because the BBC co-funded the research, there were the usual problems of being able to organize access for any period of time. These concerns were lessened by the consistency of data from emerging from different newsrooms. Researchers spent time at the following locations:

REGIONAL: BBC Devon Plymouth (10 days); BBC Cardiff (5 days); BBC Sheffield (10 days); BBC Leeds (3 days)
NETWORK: BBC UGC Hub (6 days); *BBC Breakfast* (1 day); *News 24* (1 day); *World Service Newshour*; *World, Have Your Say* (1 day)

Before beginning our research we devised a research plan which included emphases on exploratory and semi-structured interviews, ethnographic mapping, and observation of day-to-day routines, including shadowing exercises and meetings and exchanges between staff. The observations took place during the first two weeks of September 2007, and the research team were in frequent contact, exchanging notes and observations. The research was designed so that we could track where and how audience material was passed between newsrooms. This was of particular interest because of the organization of UGC management at the BBC. There is a central UGC Hub based in Television Centre in London, where viewers are generally encouraged to send material (texts and photographs), where a team of journalists moderate the *Have Your Say*[2] site (the dedicated news discussion board) hosted on the BBC News website, and where the same journalists pass useful material out to different programmes and newsrooms that might be working on a particular story in more depth. We wanted to observe the management of audience material among newsrooms.

As part of the observations, we completed interviews with 115 BBC journalists, from editors to broadcast journalists. Six months after the observations, once the first stage of analysis was completed, we interviewed ten senior managers, including the Head of Global News, the Editor of BBC News, the editor of the BBC website and BBC Head of Editorial Development for Multimedia, in order to understand more fully BBC policy regarding audience material.

Problematic nature of the term 'UGC' across the BBC

The term 'UGC' is a problematic one. As one senior editor noted 'it's an ugly phrase'. Not all BBC journalists were aware of the term, and even if they

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

were aware of it, many tried not to use it as they felt it inadequately described the types of material the BBC receives or uses. Concerns about the term 'UGC' stretch from senior editors to newly qualified journalists, and when the question was posed about how UGC could be defined, everyone gave a different answer, underlining the absence of one clear BBC-wide definition

> I think it would be wrong to assume that there's a pan-BBC policy as to how we do user-generated content in these different things. People tend to get involved with particular initiatives and particular individuals. (Broadcast journalist)

Some journalists were not sure how to answer:

> I'm not sure we have a fixed definition of UGC.

> Well, to be honest with you, I'm not comfortable with the term user-generated content. It's very clunky.

Others attempted answers which they admitted were off the top of their head:

> [UGC is] the totality of information and comment that we receive from the public, that can be a contribution to our journalism.

> I think it's any material or content; that might be pictures or video or it might simply be information, which is originated and generated by the public rather than by professional journalists.

Many journalists admitted they didn't like the term as they felt that it didn't accurately describe what it was, and it also failed to recognized the different 'types' of audience material which exist.

> I just get a bit bothered by the whole UGC pot; the bandwagon we all seem to have jumped on which can be anything from an email to something which can be considered narrative. But they're not the same thing, you know. (Broadcast journalist)

Considering the term is not universally accepted, it seems sensible to attempt a change in overall terminology from 'UGC' to 'audience material'. In addition there is a need to acknowledge the different types of audience material being received and used by the BBC.

There are different types of audience material, and it is necessary to consider each of these different types separately. Our research demonstrates that: (1) audiences have different opinions about the different types,[3] (2) journalists have different opinions about the different types, (3) different journalists use different types in different ways, (4) different types play different roles within the BBC and (5) different types ultimately provide different opportunities and suffer from a variety of weaknesses. The different types of audience material can be considered using the typology shown in Figure 1:

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

FIGURE 1
A typology of audience material

AUDIENCE CONTENT	AUDIENCE COMMENTS	NETWORKED JOURNALISM	COLLABORATIVE CONTENT	NON-NEWS CONTENT
Audience footage Audience experiences Audience stories				

Within the 'Audience content' category, there are three main sub-categories: 'Audience footage' (breaking news photographs and videos), 'Audience experiences' (case studies contributed in response to a BBC news story) and 'Audience stories' (story tip-offs from the audience which are not on the BBC news agenda). 'Audience comments' are opinions shared in response to a call to action: a radio phone-in, a presenter request on a television news programme, or a *Have Your Say* debate. 'Collaborative content' refers to material which is produced by the audience, but with training and support from BBC journalists and producers. This could be a digital story, a *Video Nation* short film, or a radio piece produced by a community reporter. 'Networked journalism' is a term coined by new media commentator Jeff Jarvis and:

> takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product.[4]

The term is included here because it is being used by senior executives at the BBC to describe initiatives which explicitly attempt to tap into expert communities within the audience to improve the quality of journalistic output. 'Non-news content' refers to photographs of wildlife, scenic weather or community events. On the BBC Local sites, it would also refer to online restaurant reviews, recommendations for walks or local events. Journalists display markedly different attitudes towards the five types of audience material, and this was clearly evident in the newsroom observations and interviews with BBC journalists. 'Audience content' and 'Audience comment' are not new, and as a result the BBC already has editorial procedures in place to handle issues of authority, quality and trust. The most significant challenge is how to handle effectively the significantly increased levels of material they receive. 'Collaborative content' and 'Networked journalism' present two different challenges to the BBC. 'Collaborative content' clearly fits neatly within the BBC's public service ethos but comes at a heavy financial cost.

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Ideas related to 'Networked journalism' are concentrated among a small number of editors and senior managers, and there is some uncertainty about how it would work in practice. The unspoken issue was that both of these types of audience material would require journalists ceding some element of editorial control.

Roles played by audience material at the BBC

Different types of audience material play very different roles at the BBC. There are six clear roles which different types of audience material play at the BBC:

finding *news sources* (within existing agenda, e.g. looking for case studies and sources);
generating *news stories* from tip-offs (breaking news footage, new story ideas);
providing space for public discussion and debate;
strengthening the relationship with the audience;
finding material for *non-news*[5] segments; and
audience empowerment and skill development.

Table 1 illustrates how different types of audience material play different roles within the BBC.

TABLE 1
Role played by the different types of audience material at the BBC

Type of audience material	Role played at the BBC
Audience news footage	Generating news stories through footage of developing stories
Audience news stories	Generating news stories from tip-offs
Collaborative content	Audience empowerment and skill development Strengthening relationship with the audience Non-news content (digital stories, *Video Nation* pieces)
Audience experience	Finding contextual information, providing sources for quotes, finding guests for programmes
Non-news audience content	Non-news content (e.g. images of weather which can be used in magazine news programmes)
Audience comment	Providing space for discussion and debate (on message boards, and in radio call-in programmes)
Networked journalism	Strengthening relationship with audience, by building links with established communities of expertise on the web Providing space for public discussion and debate (and reflecting these comments in the journalistic output)

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

UGC as another news-gathering tool

As one regional news journalist told us when asked if an increase in the use of UGC had changed his role:

> There isn't much difference. We don't think of it as something different. You're [the researcher is] around this week, and I'm conscious of it. I'm thinking that's UGC, and that isn't. But normally it's just another story that's come in, and stories have always come in different ways, you know. They might come in on the email, they might get phoned in, they might come from an idea at a morning meeting, and then they all go into that pot and we'll look at them and think, right, 'Is that worth doing?' News values apply. It doesn't really change what you do, there's just more of it coming through in that way from members of the public.

This view of UGC as a continuation of conventional journalism practice is understandable, of course. There is no denying that using eye-witness UGC can, and often has, enriched the quality of BBC news output in many ways. And BBC news journalists are paid to produce the news, not think about the effect of audience participation on media democracy or democracy more generally. UGC is always submitted and published or broadcast within a wider editorial context, which should not be ignored, and journalists' insistence that audience interaction enhances editorial content is entirely sensible. As Robin Hamman, who used to head up the BBC's blogging network has written on his own (very successful) blog: 'Our efforts to engage with audiences have to be part of the production process rather than something extra that we simply add on the finished product' (Hamman, 2007).

But often, the dominant way of understanding UGC among BBC journalists involves seeing it as little more than another news source. Audience content is seen by most news journalists working 'at the coal face' as material to be processed, rather than as an opportunity for the public to retain creative control over their output, or a chance to for journalists to truly collaborate with the public in jointly producing content. This is somewhat at odds with the new media values which have underpinned the rise of citizen participation in creating the news.

We observed this dominant attitude in most of the newsrooms we spent time in, and it is also shared by some senior BBC editors. Peter Horrocks, head of the BBC's new integrated newsroom, was very clear about the need for editorially useful audience content when speaking at an academic conference in Leeds at the beginning of 2008. Talking about some of the less savoury opinions expressed on BBC *Have Your Say* forum discussion about the death of Benazir Bhutto, he said that editors briefly considered switching off the opportunity for the public to comment because of the potentially offensive nature of some of the audience comments. He continued:

> Might some readers believe that such views as 'most recommended' represented an editorial line by BBC News? I suspect not, but there was at least that danger. But

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

> our real question concerned the editorial value of the comments and how far they should influence our coverage more widely. And the answers to that were: very little and hardly at all. (Horrocks, 2008)

It is telling that the 'real' or primary concern here is expressed in terms of the editorial value the comments might have for the BBC's news operation. This is further illustrated when Horrocks goes on to imply, with refreshing candour, that most of the comment pieces in the long debate about Bhutto were inconsequential when compared with the few examples of eye-witness (and other newsworthy) material that were also posted:

> The top 20 or 30 recommended posts all had variations on the theme, attacking Islam in comprehensive terms. Most of them weren't making distinctions between different aspects of Islam, they were simply damning the religion as a whole. To be honest it was pretty boring wading through them and wouldn't have added much to anyone's understanding of the causes or consequences of the assassination. Buried among the comments however, rarely recommended by others, were insights from those who had met Benazir or knew her. And there were valuable eye-witness comments from people who were at the scene in Rawalpindi. Our team that deals with user content sifted through the chaff to find some excellent wheat.

In common with most of those journalists we spoke to in newsrooms across the country, then, this senior editor is keen to separate out the kinds of audience content that can lead to new stories or add to the reporting or analysis of events already being covered (the wheat), and that material, usually opinion-based, which neither tells us or the BBC anything new, and does not add to our understanding in any significant way (the chaff). An analogous point was made to us by a regional journalist who characterized herself as a 'UGC-sceptic':

> Somebody spending 10 minutes writing a comment that will almost certainly not even be read let alone published, and if it is published won't make any difference anyway, is a waste of that somebody's time; somebody spending 10 minutes alerting the BBC to an event which has a chance, even a small chance, of very substantial and influential coverage is an effort worth making.

UGC: just another news source?

Despite UGC being described by some commentators and practitioners as ushering in a revolution in journalism practice, this case study suggests that rather than changing the way most journalists work, 'Audience comments', 'Audience content' and 'Audience stories' are firmly embedded within a traditional news-gathering process, and in most cases are being used as just another journalistic source. UGC, to most news journalists in the BBC, is usually characterized as one source of information to be processed among many. It is the raw material that gets turned into journalistic output. Of course,

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

technology has speeded up the process of garnering information from the public considerably. But whether it is a member of the audience emailing information about a breaking news story, providing eye-witness footage or offering comments about a story, these relationships with the audience have always existed. As one hub reporter put it: 'You have to put all of this in context: there have always been eye-witnesses, it's just we can get to them quicker now.' Another told us: 'We're there to help journalists and producers and to provide additional content; to help them do their jobs better and more efficiently.'

There is no doubt that the BBC does aspire to the noble aim of providing more opportunities for collaborative content. This aim is expressed by a number of high-profile BBC editors, and, to a limited extent, it is evident in its output. There are certain types of audience material ('Collaborative content' and 'Networked journalism') which have the potential to significantly revolutionize journalism. And the BBC has always been at the forefront of championing these forms. In terms of 'Collaborative content' it has pioneered projects like *Video Nation* and *Digital Storytelling*. In terms of its networked journalism, in some sectors of the contemporary BBC mediascape (blogging, social networking and other social media) it is not an exaggeration to talk of the public, as one BBC social networking enthusiast does, as 'the people formerly known as the audience'. The potential of such a democratization of the media needs to be championed, and these formats need to be further harnessed by the BBC. This process has already begun, and the BBC is increasingly embracing such social media; for instance in the summer of 2008 it published an internal 'Social Media Strategy' looking into the further potential of just such developments. But so far the examples of good practice in 'Collaborative content' and 'Networked journalism' all too often occur on the margins of the BBC's news operation.

UGC is often characterized as a democratizing force, allowing the audience to have an input into news production and eroding the traditional distinctions between producers and consumers of the news. One current barrier preventing fuller participation from the audience is a dominant 'journocentric' mindset among news journalists that too often sees audience material only as a news source. We do not wish to suggest that UGC should not be integrated into the news production process, or that using audience material should not be thought of as editorially useful. But we do suggest that seeing UGC only or even mainly in terms of news-gathering, as most news journalists do, limits the possibilities offered by the upsurge in submissions of audience content. For most BBC news journalists there has been no radical upheaval in the way they work, and no great change in the structural roles played by traditional producers and consumers of the news. Overwhelmingly, journalists have remained journalists and audiences have remained audiences. Until this mindset is challenged the possibilities for truly collaborative and networked journalism at the BBC will remain on the margins.

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Re-evaluation of traditional journalistic values?

The incorporation of audience material into journalism is not new. Letters to the editor, radio call-ins and the use of vox pops on television news have a long history. The rapid technological developments of domestic broadband and cheap mobile phones have provided even greater, and equally importantly, faster opportunities for audiences to provide immediate feedback, as well as breaking news footage and tip-offs to news organizations.

While there are many questions to ask about these developments, as Head of Global News, Richard Sambrook points out:

> It's here to stay. It's assimilated into news-gathering processes and conventions of news coverage. Technology will continue to evolve and more of it is going to be simpler and easier to do, I think. But the big jump we've made.

Ultimately the vast majority of the journalists interviewed for this research articulated their approach to working with UGC using the lens of traditional journalistic techniques and values. For most news journalists at the BBC, UGC refers almost exclusively to what we identify in our typology as 'Audience content' (audience footage, audience experiences and audience stories). Interviews with, and observation of the work of, journalists demonstrated that most are aware on a daily basis of the need to 'filter everything through the BBC journalism lens', and if this is done properly there should be no concerns about authenticity, reliability and representativeness. As the senior online editor Hugh Berlyn argues, technology might have changed, but the fundamental tenets of journalism have not.

> Journalists still have to do the good old fashioned news-gathering job of checking out sources, getting out there, getting the story themselves and then using the UGC material as added value, as extra stuff that can help them do their job but not do the job for them.

Peter Rippon (editor Radio 4 *iPM*) articulated similar views:

> We have to apply the same things we do in all our non-user-generated content journalism: to use our own wits to decide whether we think the story that we are developing with user-generated content's help is going be the kind of story that would interest our wider audience.

These attitudes are unsurprising considering BBC journalists' determination to preserve the quality of the corporation's news output, through its emphasis on ensuring authenticity and maintaining the trust of the audience in the face of increasing use of material that is, ultimately produced by unqualified professionals. However, the over-riding and widespread view among journalists that UGC is no more than grist to the editorial mill, another source of raw material among many to be processed by them into journalistic news

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

output, might limit the possibilities offered by certain kinds of audience material.

Overwhelmingly the research supports the work of previous scholars who have examined the introduction of UGC in print newsrooms, that adoption of these principles has been sluggish (O'Sullivan Heinonen, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008). At the BBC, the creation of the UGC Hub in 2005, which grew out of the News Interactive section of the newsroom, signalled that central BBC decision-makers were taking 'Audience content' and 'Audience comment' seriously, and the UGC Hub has allowed the BBC to do two things: (1) filter breaking news footage very quickly, and to encourage the filtering of material – which could be sent in to any of the newsrooms across the country – at one central location before it is sent back to newsrooms, dependent on need and interest, and (2) have a central place where discussion boards comments can be trawled for news-gathering purposes (looking for case studies and sources). The UGC Hub however does now encourage more innovative ways of collaborating with the audience and, as Örnebring (2008) underlines, the power dynamic at the BBC (apart from a few notable exceptions) still lies clearly with the producer. In some cases, journalists were excited by the prospect offered by audience participation, for example on Radio 4's programme *PM*, as well as collaborative journalism initiatives in Wales. But for the most part, journalists – when interviewed as part of the newsroom observations – made it clear that they perceived UGC to be another news-gathering source, and were quick to add that the same checks to do with authenticity, reliability and objectivity had to be carried out (thereby underlining how entrenched journalistic values remain).

New technology has enabled viewers to send breaking news material, emails, text messages and discussion board comments in unprecedented numbers, and the enthusiasm for this type of material from senior BBC management has meant newsrooms across the organization have been encouraged to request and use material submitted from the audience. On closer inspection however, the most frequently used of the four news-related types of material is overwhelmingly 'Audience comment'. (Our content analysis of one week of requests and uses of audience material on selected radio and television programmes at network and regional level, found 70 percent of the material was 'Audience comment'). 'Audience content' (particularly 'Audience footage', but also to some extent 'Audience experiences' and 'Audience stories') are used less often, and arguably not in any greater numbers than a decade ago. The BBC has always looked for audience footage of major news stories, looked for witnesses to talk about their own experiences and received tip-offs for story ideas.

It would take a significant psychological shift for BBC journalists to embrace 'Networked journalism' and 'Collaborative content'. Those who are using it have been convinced that it can significantly improve the quality of the output, and there are senior managers who are very enthusiastic about exploring ways

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

of embedding these types of journalism in the journalistic culture. The everyday routinization of news-making, means these types of shifts will need significant support from senior management, in terms of training, setting up initiatives and disseminating successful practice across the BBC.

Some key members of senior management are enthusiastic about embracing initiatives which are two-way, and require journalists to listen to their audiences, involve their audience and ultimately cede some of their editorial power. To date, BBC newsrooms across the country have been perfectly willing to embrace the use of audience material when it simply meant using technology to get footage, comments and content from audiences in larger numbers, and more quickly. For the BBC to truly embrace participatory journalism, and to think about collaborating regularly with the audience, will require resources and training, but more fundamentally journalists would have to significantly change the way they perceive their role.

Conclusion

Boczkowski, in his research on the adoption of interactivity and multimedia in online newsroom, raises the question: 'whether news workers' vision of their audience as either consumers or also co-producers shapes the adoption of multimedia and interactivity in online newsrooms' (2004a: 200). This is a critical question and moves us beyond simply counting the types of UGC being used, or even observing behaviour in the newsroom. From senior management to the broadcast journalists, the perception of the audience and whether or not they believe the audience has the ability to enhance journalistic output, is key. Attitudes were very mixed and this demonstrates the ways in which individual agency has a significant impact. The presenter and producer of the Radio 4 programme *PM* have clearly adopted the position that, on any given story 'the audience knows' more than the programme makers, and have used this expert knowledge to create innovative journalism products on the radio show and related website. The UGC Hub provides a platform which enables audiences to share comments and engage in discussions, but its primary role is as a powerful information filtering tool, which allows the BBC to pinpoint the most useful audience footage, comments and case studies from the audience. While the creation of the UGC Hub means it is positioned as the centre of UGC activity at the BBC, it is important to note that in individual newsrooms, both at the network and regional level, certain editors have developed and maintained strong links with their audience, both with and without technology.

Williams warned that: '[i]n a world where everyone can be a publisher, journalists are vulnerable to losing their franchise as gatekeepers of news' (1998: 34). Some news workers are excited by the possibilities enabled by technology which makes participatory journalism at a major broadcast organization possible. Others struggle to believe it could work, and question

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

whether it should be made to work. In an organization the size of the BBC, it is unsurprising that a range of views were expressed, but it is significant that senior management are actively looking at ways that collaborative and participatory journalism could become engrained in daily news routines. Only time will tell whether the BBC can become a pioneer in participatory journalism, but it is in a unique position to do so.

And for journalism studies scholars, it is time to move beyond the limiting term UGC and to recognize the complexities which exist within this umbrella term. This would allow improved analyses of these specific types, to further understand the relationship which exists between audiences and media producers in terms of 'Audience comment', 'Audience content', 'Collaborative content' and 'Networked journalism', as well as non-news material.

Notes

1. This article focuses on the production elements of the study, although forthcoming publications also feature audience research, which developed from a nationally representative survey, an online survey on news.bbc.co.uk and ten focus groups.
2. See: www.bbc.co.uk/haveyoursay
3. The research is part of a much larger project which also explored audience responses to UGC.
4. See: www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/ (consulted May 2010).
5. We imply no value judgement in using the term 'non-news'; it is used to differentiate between photographs not related to any news event (for example family pets, the weather, etc.) and photographs with a specific news focus (for example eyewitness photographs of breaking news stories).

References

Avilés, J.A.G. and M. Carvajal, M. (2008) 'Integrated and Cross-media Newsroom Convergence: Two Models of Multimedia News Production. The Cases of Novotécnica and La Verdad Multimedia in Spain', *Convergence,* 14(2): 221–39.

Allan, S. (2006) *Online News: Journalism and the Internet*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.

Belanger, P. (2005) 'Online News at Canada's National Public Broadcaster: An Emerging Convergence', *Canadian Journal of Communication* 30: 411–27.

Boczkowski, P.J. (2002) 'The Development and Use of Online Newspapers: What Research Tells Us and What We Might Want to Know', pp.270–86 in L. Lievrouw and E. Livingstone (eds) *The Handbook of New Media*. London: Sage.

Boczkowski, P.J. (2004a) 'The Processes of Adopting Multimedia and Interactivity in Three Online Newsrooms', *Journal of Communication* 54(2): 197–213.

Boczkowski, P.J. (2004b) *Digitizing the News: Innovation in Online Newspapers*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Breed, W. (1955) 'Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis', *Social Forces* 33: 326–55.

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Bromley, M. (1997) 'The End of Journalism: Changes in Workplace Practices in the Press and Broadcasting, in the 1990s', pp. 330–35 in M. Bromley and T. O'Malley (eds) *A Journalism Reader*. London: Routledge.
Chung, D.S. (2007) 'Profits and Perils: Online News Producers' Perceptions of Interactivity and Uses of Interactive Features', *Convergence* 13(1): 43–61.
Cottle, S. and M. Ashton (1999) 'From BBC Newsroom to BBC Newscentre: On Changing Technology and Journalist Practices', *Convergence* 5(3): 22–43.
Cottle, S. (2003) *Media Organisation and Production*. London: Sage.
Cottle, S. (2007) 'Ethnography and News Production: New(s) Developments in the Field', *Sociology Compass* 1(1): 1–16.
Deuze, M. (1999) 'Journalism and the Web: An Analysis of Skills and Standards in an Online Environment', *Gazette* 61(5): 373–90.
Deuze, M. (2003) 'The Web and its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of Newsmedia Online', *New Media & Society* 5(2): 203–30.
Domingo, D. (2008) 'Interactivity in the Daily Routines of Online Newsrooms: Dealing with an Uncomfortable Myth', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13: 680–704.
Domingo, D., T. Quandt, A. Heinonen, S. Paulussen, J. Singer and M. Vujnovic (2007) 'Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond: An International Comparative Study of Initiatives in Online Newspapers', paper presented at the Future of Newspapers Conference, Cardiff, September 2007.
Erdal, I.J. (2007) 'Researching Media Convergence and Cross-media News Production', *Nordicom Review* 2: 51–61.
Ericson, R., P. Baranek and J. Chan (1987) *Visualising Deviance: A Study of News Organsation.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
Gans, H. (1979) *Deciding What's News*. New York: Pantheon.
Garrison, B. (2001) 'Diffusion of Online Information Technologies in Newspaper Newsrooms', *Journalism* 2(2): 221–39.
Gillmor, D. (2004) *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly.
Golding, P. and P. Elliott (1979) *Making the News*. London: Longman.
Hamman, R. (2007) 'Visitors from Belgium at the BBC', URL (consulted February 2008): http://www.cybersoc.com/2007/12/visitors-from-b.html
Horrocks, P. (2008) Speech at the Broadcast and Active Citizen Conference, Leeds University, 7 January.
Kim, E.G. and J.W. Hamilton (2006) 'Capitulation to Capital? Ohmynews as Alternative Media', *Media, Culture & Society* 28(4): 541–60.
Lowrey, W. (2006) 'Mapping the Journalism–Blogging Relationship', *Journalism* 7(4): 477–500.
Matheson, D. (2004) 'Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism', *New Media & Society* 6(4): 443–68.
MacGregor, B. (1997) *Live, Direct and Biased? Making Television News in the Satellite Age*. London: Arnold.
McIntosh, S. (2008) 'Collaboration, Consensus, and Conflict', *Journalism Practice* 2(2): 197–211
McNair, B. (1998) *The Sociology of Journalism*. London: Arnold.
Örnebring, H. (2008) 'The Consumer as Producer – of What? User-generated Tabloid Content in *The Sun* (UK) and *Aftonbladet* (Sweden)', *Journalism Studies* 9(5): 771–85.
O'Sullivan, J. and A. Heinonen (2008) 'Old Values: New Media', *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 357–71.
Paterson, C. and D. Domingo (eds) (2008) *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Paulussen, S. (2004) 'Online News Production in Flanders: How Flemish Online Journalists Perceive and Explore the Internet's Potential', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 9(4), URL (consulted May 2010): http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol9/issue4/paulussen.html

Paulussen, S. and P. Ugille (2008) 'User-generated Content in the Newsroom: Professional and Organisational Constraints on Participatory Journalis,', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 5(2): 24–41.

Pavlik, J. (2000) 'The Impact of Technology on Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 1(2): 229–37.

Schlesinger, P. (1978) *Putting Reality Together: BBC News*. London: Constable.

Schultz, T. (2000) 'Mass Media and the Concept of Interactivity: An Exploratory Study of Online Forums and Reader E-mail', *Media, Culture & Society* 22(2): 205–21.

Singer, J.B. (2005) 'The Political J-Blogger: "Normalizing" a New Media Form to Fit Old Norms and Practices', *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* 6(2): 173–98.

Singer, J.B. (2006a) 'Partnerships and Public Service: Normative Issues for Journalists in Converged Newsrooms', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 21(1): 30–53.

Singer, J.B. (2006b) 'Stepping Back from the Gate: Online Newspaper Editors and the Co-production of Content in Campaign 2004', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83(2): 265–80.

Sylvie, G. and P. Witherspoon (2002) *Time, Change and the American Newspaper*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thurman, N. (2008) 'Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of User-generated Content Initiatives by Online News Media', *New Media & Society* 10(1): 139–57.

Tuchman, G. (1972) 'Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsmen's Notions of Objectivity', *American Journal of Sociology* 77: 660–79.

Tuchman, G. (1973) 'Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected', *American Journal of Sociology* 79: 110–31.

White, D.M. (1950) 'The Gatekeeper: A Case Study of the Selection of News', *Journalism Quarterly* 27: 383–90.

Williams, W. (1998) 'The Blurring of the Line between Advertising and Journalism in the On-line Environment', pp. 31–41 in D. Borden and K. Harvey (eds) *The Electronic Grapevine: Rumor, Reputation and Reporting in the New On-line Environment*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Claire Wardle is a digital media consultant, trainer and researcher, specializing in journalism, social media and UGC. She has developed, and is currently facilitating, a training programme on web tools and social media for the BBC College of Journalism. She was previously an academic at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, where she undertook funded research on user-generated content at the BBC, representations of disfigurement in the media and social issues on prime-time television. She remains an honorary lecturer at Cardiff University. [email: claire.wardle@gmail.com]

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011

Andrew Williams is a lecturer at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. His research interests are media convergence (including the political economy of convergence, the effects of multiplatform news provision on news quality and journalists' pay and conditions, and the rise of user-generated content), the role of news sources and public relations in the UK media, and media representations of science, health and the environment (particularly journalist-source relations and the relationship between science journalism and PR).

Downloaded from mcs.sagepub.com at Bournemouth University on February 9, 2011