Participatory journalism in the mainstream: Attitudes and implementation at British news websites

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Abstract

Established Internet news media have been criticized for an alleged reluctance to react to 'grassroots' and 'citizen' journalists who via websites, blogs, and wikis are publishing and promoting alternative current affairs journalism. This paper contends that the adoption of user generated content initiatives by mainstream news sites is as much a function of local organizational and technical circumstances as it is of any adherence to traditional editorial practices. The study employed qualitative research interviews with senior journalists at national and regional news websites in England and Scotland to examine the editorial, commercial, legal, technical, and personnel issues involved. For scholars of interactive media and journalism it offers case studies on the changing patterns of news consumption and production.

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Introduction

The development of user-friendly, low-cost online content management tools like *Movable Type*, *Blogger.com* and *Manila* have helped facilitate a rapid growth in the number and popularity of independently published websites that overlap the space traditionally occupied by the mainstream news media (see Thurman and Jones, 2005). Matheson (2004: 449) has written of the "many news-related weblogs maintained by people who are not journalists", estimating that perhaps half of all weblogs deal frequently with public affairs. With nearly nine million weblogs—or blogs—indexed by the search engine *Technorati.com*,[1] there is no doubt that those who have traditionally consumed news are increasingly ready and willing to produce content. This so called 'citizen journalism' is not restricted to self-published blogs: *Wikinews*,[2] a collaborative news publishing experiment, has sites in thirteen languages.

The established news media are also providing space for news consumers to contribute, and readers are doing so in considerable numbers: *OhmyNews.com*, a South Korean online newspaper, has more than 37,000 registered contributors, and is expanding into the English language[3] market; Britain's second most popular news website, *Guardian.co.uk,* hosts a 'News' message board to which readers have contributed 647,798[4] messages or 'posts' since 1999; in response to a single news event[5] the *BBC News* website have received more than 35,000 emails in a single day; and the ten most popular topical polls hosted by *ThisisLondon.co.uk,* the website of

London's best-selling newspaper, *The Evening Standard*, average 48,000 votes apiece (Williams, 2004).

For the mainstream news media, participatory journalism provides an exciting opportunity to re-engage with their readers, but also presents challenges to existing ways of working.

News organisations' adoption of interactive publishing technologies has previously been characterised as shallow and slow: Katz (1997, quoted in Matheson, 2004: 444) criticised US newspapers for remaining "insanely stagnant in an interactive age"; Matheson (2004: 446) believes the mainstream media have a "rather static core set of news practices" and that they place "other journalistic practices at its margins"; Gillmor (2004: 114) attributes the slow adoption of the blog by the mainstream media to its "innate conservatism" and holds the view that "when big media companies consider having a conversation with their audience, they tend not to push many boundaries" (op. cit.: 112).

In the case of the mainstream British online news media, although this study revealed some evidence of conservatism in the maintenance of established editorial standards and "reactive, defensive and pragmatic traits" (see Boczowski, 2004: 173) in editors' and managing editors' attitudes to user generated content, there were wide differences in practice. These differences are consistent with Boczowski's (2004: 4) view that innovations in newsrooms unfold in a "gradual and ongoing fashion" and are "shaped by combinations of initial conditions and local contingencies". Take these examples drawn from **table 1**:

- The *Guardian.co.uk*'s network of six blogs publishes readers' comments unedited and without preselection. At the time of writing no other mainstream British news website was providing this facility.

- The *BBC News* website publishes selected reader contributions—in the form of diaries, 'blogs' and photos essays—indistinguishable in length and format from its professionally produced content. Most other sites were publishing relatively short readers' comments—usually running to less than 100 words.

- The range and depth of reader debate varied greatly. The *DailyMail.co.uk*'s message boards had over 123 times more posts than the *FT.com*'s equivalent, 'Discussions', and over 10,000 more than the *Telegraph.co.uk*'s only message board.

This paper relies heavily on qualitative research interviews with participants—the editors and managing editors of nine leading British news websites.[6] In the sections that follow evidence will be presented to show how the journalists who participated in this research were seeking to defend established editorial practices while, at the same time, exploring the possibilities that user generated content offers; and how local dynamics helped shape how they were adopting, to varying degrees, the technologies and processes required to integrate user generated content into their publications.

Part (I) analyses the conflicts between editors' and journalists' traditional editorial roles and their awareness of and experiments with user generated content.

Part (II) examines the legal, commercial, human and technological factors that have shaped how news websites adopt user generated content initiatives.

Table 1: User generated content initiatives at a selection of British news websites

Web site	Polls	Have your say	Chat room	Q&A	Blogs with comments enabled	Message boards Moderated Pre	Post	Posts	Other
Guardian.co.uk				✓	✓[1]		✓	1,221,054[2]	
DailyMail.co.uk	✓[3]			✓			✓	1,165,000[4]	
ThisisLondon.co.uk	✓[5]		✓	✓			✓	389,000[6]	✓[7]
FT.com	✓			✓		✓		9,432[8]	✓[9]
Telegraph.co.uk		✓		✓		✓		116[10]	✓[11]
Independent.co.uk									
TheSun.co.uk	✓[12]	✓[13]							✓[14]
TimesOnline.co.uk		✓		✓					✓[15]
Scotsman.com					✓[16]				✓[17]
News.bbc.co.uk	✓	✓		✓					✓[18]

Definitions:
'Polls' are topical questions to which readers are asked to make a multiple choice or binary response.
'Have your say' refers to features where journalists post topical questions to which readers send written replies. A selection is made, edited and published.
'Q&A' refers to interviews with journalists and / or invited guests, the questions for which are submitted by readers. The interviews are Webcast in audio or video or the transcription published in textual form.
'Post-moderated message boards' publish users' comments without initial moderation. **'Pre-moderated message boards'** vet posts before publication.

Notes:
[1] Since September 2004, readers have been able to post comments to the *Guardian.co.uk*'s blogs 'live', without preliminary selection or editing. There are six blogs—'Electionblog', 'Gamesblog', 'Guideblog', 'Onlineblog', 'The Observer blog' and 'Newsblog'. Although the *Guardian.co.uk* published a 'Weblog' (http://www.guardian.co.uk/weblog/) from July 2001 until September 2004 it was a different interpretation of the form, focusing on providing "the best links from around the web" rather than providing what Matheson (2004: 460) describes as a "new personalized democratic space".
[2] These figures were collected on 28 and 29 April, 2005 and represent the total number of archived posts since the Talkboards were launched in 1999. The posts are spread over 10 'Talkboards', each divided into 10–30 'Topics'. Each 'Topic' has between 1–227 'Discussions'.
[3] The editorial director called polls a "phenomenally popular" feature that "can get 10,000 votes at a time" Williams (2004).
[4] Posts are spread across seventy-three boards grouped under twelve themes and date back to 2002. The boards predate the launch of the *DailyMail.co.uk* having previously appeared as part of its forerunner *femail.co.uk*.
[5] The ten most popular polls average 47,975 votes each.
[6] Posts date back to 2001 and are spread over 29 boards grouped into eleven themes.
[7] Additionally *ThisisLondon.co.uk* carry a small number (214) of 'reader reviews' spread across eight topics including books, computer games and restaurants.
[8] These posts are spread over 110 so-called 'Discussions'. These figures were collected on 20 April, 2005 and represent the total number of posts archived since 2000.
[9] Readers can submit 'Letters to the editor' via the website and columnists' email addresses are printed alongside the articles to encourage reader feedback.
[10] This message board appears in the Travel 'channel' of *Telegraph.co.uk*. The posts date back to 2003.
[11] *Telegraph.co.uk*'s Wine 'channel' invites and publishes readers' recipes.
[12] Only run occasionally.
[13] Occasional comment pages are run when the editor "has a spare reporter". Popular topics will receive "hundreds" of emails (Picton, 2004).
[14] *TheSun.co.uk* invite and publish letters and a selection of the 'top 20 viral emails'.
[15] *TimesOnline.co.uk* provides forms at the end of some articles which readers can use to submit comments. A selection are published.
[16] An annual 'Photoblog' coinciding with the Edinburgh Festival.
[17] *Scotsman.com* run occasional features involving user participation. For example during the 2003 Scottish election they recruited a focus group who were sent a detailed survey. The results were published online.
[18] *News.bbc.co.uk* publish regular selections of readers' photographs—'Your Pictures'—as well as longer, single-authored photo essays, diaries and articles. They also carry special features. The editor gave an example: "We did a voters' panel for the US election where . . . we built up twelve people who we'd go back to on a monthly basis for their view of how the campaign was going and whether their view of who they were going to vote for changed" (Clifton, 2004).

(I) Lines of defense: professional standards under fire?

> This idea with blogs and particularly wikis that you can go in and edit stuff and
> all join the party. It is a load of fun but it just detracts from what a traditional
> idea of journalism is. I think we have to be quite careful.
>
> (Richard Burton, editor *Telegraph.co.uk* [7])

In the light of the pornographic content the *LATimes.com* unwittingly published during their brief experiment allowing readers to co-write the site's editorials using a wiki (see Glaister, 2005), Burton's comments, made six months before, were prophetic. They exemplify the concerns that editors and managing editors interviewed for this study had about the ways that non-professionally produced content challenges journalism's professional norms.

Particular concerns were expressed over: the news value of some user generated content; its standards of spelling, punctuation, accuracy and balance; and the influence of blogs on the mainstream news media.

News values and standards

A belief in the need to control, moderate or sub[8] users' submissions so that they met the standards of professionally produced output was strongly held. For example, editors at the *BBC News* website wanted to "provide . . . users with a good *edited* read" (Smartt, 2004), by "correct[ing] bad spelling and put[ting] capital letters in where there should be" (Clifton, 2004).

Some participants suggested that editorial intervention should extend beyond grammar to the selection of what was published in the first place. The editor of *theSun.co.uk* believed strongly that there was "a premium to be paid for editing experience" and that readers wanted him "to sift out content for them". He suggested that the reason why people buy newspapers and magazines or view websites is to "read a well-crafted news story or feature by someone who is trained and experienced in that field":

> Even when readers write it, I think I have a duty to my other readers to sift through the insults and the rubbish . . . to pick out some really well written letters. Because I always have to think: well is somebody going to read this? Are they going to be interested in what this person has to say? And readers write some fantastic things but that doesn't mean they should be hidden between [contributions from] readers who haven't written some good things. So yes it is great that people can write, but my number one priority is my readers and what they read (Picton, 2004).

The founding editor of the *BBC News* website suggested the duplicative nature of user contributions provided a strong justification for editorial intervention:

> On any user-invited feedback, most people are making the same point. You'll find that there will only be maybe ten points of view . . . hundreds and hundreds will all be making the same points in different ways or the same way (Smartt, 2004).

Having worked in newspaper or broadcast environments where the amount of space or time available for content is limited, most online editors seek out content that has a broad appeal. The niche audiences reached by most bloggers and other citizen journalism initiatives are very different. This disparity helps explain why the managing editor of *TimesOnline.co.uk* believed that "ninety-nine per cent" of blogs were "extremely dull or . . . of very marginal interest" (Bale, 2004) and why the head

of BBC News Interactive said, "there are a lot of very mediocre blogs out there" (Deverell, 2004).

For some editors, in order to make the grade, user generated content needed not only to be of more than "marginal interest" but also be balanced, something that the editors of *TimesOnline.co.uk*, *Independent.co.uk* and *FT.com* were concerned was not always the case. Bale (2004) believed that forums could "become just anchors for crackpots", a problem the editor of *Independent.co.uk* perceived with his, now defunct, message boards. He described the users as:

> . . . a bunch of bigots who were shouting from one side of the room to the other and back again without even bothering to listen to what the other side of the room were saying. If someone did try to put a reasonable, balanced view it was an exception (King, 2004).

King suggested that editors were "abrogating some of [their] responsibilities if [they] allow articles to appear on [their] product that have not been at least checked for decency, taste, let alone basic laws of international humanity".

The *FT.com* reported that "racist comments" in their message boards were a problem of sufficient import to prompt a move away from a 'straight-to-air', post moderated model to a system of pre-moderation where journalists publish a selection of readers' contributions. The editor said, "we are slightly more comfortable" now that "we are not putting things on the website which we are not happy to have there" (Corrigan, 2004).

Blogs as a vehicle for reader contributions

Blogs represent the best-known form of invitation that writers use to initiate conversations with readers online. A common feature of blogs facilitates these

conversations: the ability users have to send in 'comments', which are published alongside the blogger's original 'post'.

As noted elsewhere (Thurman and Jones, 2005), blogs in the mainstream news media, where they exist, often "fail to conform to some of the social conventions of the blog", lacking "the functionality [such as reader comments] that the blogging community has come to expect". As shown in **table 1**, amongst the mainstream British online news media, only the *Guardian.co.uk* allows comments to be posted to its blogs without pre-moderation.

The reasons for the scarcity and non-conformity of blogs in the mainstream, with the resultant lack of opportunity for user contributions, has been attributed (see Boyd, 2004) to a bias against the form fed by an alleged perception of the typical blogger as a "naive and inexperienced" amateur. This paper argues that there are other reasons, specifically: journalists' reactions against the claims of novelty made on behalf of blogs; and the manner in which blogs emphasise the personality of the author.

Firstly Boyd's claim that some in the journalism profession, and the *New York Times* in particular, have been prejudiced against blogs as a form because they believe bloggers lack professional journalists' knowledge and experience. Although it is true to suggest that those outside the profession have largely driven the blogging movement,[9] this study shows that editors of mainstream news websites, at least in the British context, *do* recognise the merits of independently published blogs. The editor of *Telegraph.co.uk* commented that "you can get a very good blog" (Burton, 2004). The head of BBC News Interactive recognised that there are a "number of very good ones" (Deverell, 2004) and the editorial director of *TimesOnline.co.uk* agreed that "some of them are really superb" (Bale, 2004). Indeed Richard Deverell has been sufficiently impressed by some blogs to have looked at whether "it is possible to

provide links to relevant blogs from stories" in the same way that the *BBC News* website links to other news sites via their 'newstracker' software.[10]

Cult of personality

Rather than naivety, inexperience or their non-professional status, comments made by the editor of *Telegraph.co.uk*, Richard Burton, suggest that the emphasis blogs typically give to the personality of the writer—the messenger rather than the message—may have contributed to their slow adoption by mainstream news sites. Such an emphasis challenges a strongly established tradition in the journalism profession that most reporting is written anonymously.

Burton (2004), also a visiting lecturer at the University of Westminster, recounted telling journalism students of his who were learning to write features that, "the message is the only thing that is important. No one knows you, no one cares about you. The reader wants information", and spoke to them of the "traditional journalist who is a fly on the wall and will be delivering information"—very different in concept from the tone of most blogs, and a reason why he said, "blogs worry me".

The 'overselling' of blogs

Some journalists reacted against claims—such as that made in the following extract—that blogs are revolutionary: "[Blogs have] resulted in a revolution in journalism in which subcultures of bloggers are continually posting and commenting on news stories of particular interest to them, which are in turn found, read and re-published by the global media" (Kahn and Kellner, n.d.). Their reactions to the perceived "overselling" of blogs are shown below, and reveal a subtle distaste for the form which, it is argued, has contributed to the slow up take of blogs by mainstream online news sites.

The editor of the *Scotsman.com* questioned whether blogs were actually any different from previous forms of writing on the web:

> The whole blog craze has been a bit oversold and it is really just people with websites. It is very hard to tell the difference between someone who kept an online journal back in the mid 1990s and someone keeping a blog now. It is still 'put your words on a website' (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

He added that "we already have a mechanism for publishing the thoughts of the journalist, it is the website and the newspaper".

The editor of *theSun.co.uk* went further, questioning whether blogs were any different from existing forms of print journalism:

> What's the difference between a blog and a column? What's the difference between a blog and a colour piece as we used to call it? We used to do '24 hours in the life of a nurse' and that's the same thing. I'm not against them I just don't understand why they are called anything different. You could almost say that the columnists write a blog and they write one every week and it goes in the paper (Picton, 2004).

Although blogs have been characterised by their emphasis on the provision of hyperlinks (see Blood, 2000), for the editor of *Telegraph.co.uk* the essential characteristic of blogging is the production of text—no different from the traditional role of the journalist. "Blog is just a word. They are still writing copy. I am keen that we don't get lost in the language" (Burton, 2004).

Gradual adoption

Richard Burton's worry that blogs—a novel form of publishing that can facilitate reader contributions—might detract from traditional journalistic standards was not made without qualification. So it is to illustrate the unresolved nature of these debates within the mainstream media that this section concludes with a final quote from

Burton (2004). He acknowledged that the mainstream media will adapt to evolving technologies and readers' expectations and believed that, despite his reservations, blogs can "look quite attractive". They were, he said, "something that I want to examine".

(II) Commerce, courts, personnel and process: reader participation in the real world

Time and resource issues rather than any deeply engrained professional socialisation explain why editors like Burton have not more fully experimented with new forms of participatory journalism such as blogs. "It is a question of time, resource and putting it on the agenda really. . . .There are so many things going on, there are so many areas: for example we're looking at music downloads" (Burton, 2004).

Resource issues lay behind the fact that there are no user generated content initiatives at the *Independent.co.uk*. The editor believed that users could bring a new "depth to our stories", and gave the following example:

> . . . it would be fascinating to hear about day-to-day life in Baghdad. Is it worrying to go out and get your milk and newspaper? What do you do about dropping your kids off at school? Are there days when you don't go out because you think it is too dangerous? (King, 2004).

The fact that he had not "got the resources" to try an idea like this is easily understood when you compare the total size of the *Independent.co.uk*'s eleven-strong team with the 10–12 journalists dedicated solely to user content at the *BBC News* website (Deverell, 2004). These resource issues are discussed in this section: both the costs incurred by user generated content initiatives and their revenue generating

potential. Other local factors that influence publications' adoption of user generated content initiatives are also examined, specifically:

1. The legal environment in which publishers operate when hosting open forums for users.

2. The management and professional preparedness of the journalists involved with initiatives involving user generated content.

3. The information systems involved in processing and publishing user content.

Moderation and incentivisation: counting the costs

> We really are victims of our own success. When John Peel [a popular British radio presenter] died we had, in total, over 100,000 emails. On the first day we had 35,000. Because our approach is to read and sub everything that we put up, we just couldn't cope. We must have delighted about fifty people by publishing their comments but the other 34,500 must have thought, 'I've spent all this time crafting this beautiful poem and you've just ignored it'.
>
> (Pete Clifton, Editor *BBC News* website [11])

Just a few years before John Peel's death in October 2004, big stories at the *BBC News* website drew "several hundred" emails at most, and "one or two people, not even doing it full time" was all that was required to "decide what to publish" (Smartt, 2004). By late 2004—even with an average year-on-year budget of £12.16 million (Graf, 2004: 35)—the speed and volume of correspondence from their rapidly-growing and increasingly vocal audience meant that the BBC found it impossible to read the "10,000 or more" (Clifton, 2005b) emails they received on a weekly basis. The day John Peel died, perhaps one in thirty readers wrote in.[12]

The *BBC News* website's approach to moderation—reading and subbing everything they put up—was typical of the websites studied and explains why user generated content initiatives can be expensive to run.

The *Scotsman.com* reported finding that "the great problem with any kind of public involvement is that you have to moderate it and that is very, very resource-heavy". Their Edinburgh Festival Photoblog has required "quite a lot of work" to take out the "obviously obscene" (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

The *FT.com* "cut down on the number" of user generated 'discussions' they published because, said their editor, "if you do lots and lots of them then it is quite resource intensive". She justified the decision by saying that:

> Our readers don't have lots of time either so they are more likely to want to look at a couple of really good [discussions] on subjects that are really interesting to them and where they'll learn something rather than a kind of general rant (Corrigan, 2004).

Reader remuneration

User generated content initiatives, as currently managed by most of the mainstream British online news media, are resource intensive due to editorial intervention rather than any remuneration paid to contributors. Most readers contribute without the expectation of any financial reward. They are motivated, the founding editor of the *BBC News* website suggested, "because they just want to write their experiences . . . the question of getting paid isn't a major issue" (Smartt, 2004). However, as the BBC sought to expand the range and depth of user generated content, they were starting to pay for contributions. The editor of the *BBC News* website outlined a likely scenario: "If we've got an aid worker stuck in the middle of nowhere who started writing a bespoke diary for us over a number of days then a discussion might come up about

payment" but, Clifton (2004) continued, "it hasn't been an area where we have started to spend shed loads of extra cash". For the most part user contributions at the *BBC News* website were treated in "a traditional news gathering way. We interview them, thank them and that would be the end of that".

Paying contributors no more than a nominal fee has not prevented South Korea's *OhmyNews.com* from becoming one of the most successful and influential examples of a publication written, largely, by its readers. According to *OhmyNews.com*'s[13] founder and chief executive Oh Yeon-Ho, "when someone writes an article he gets paid only 1,000 Won (about 85 US cents), whether he writes ten pages or 100 pages"[14] (Yu, 2003). Despite the low remuneration, 37,000 people have registered as contributors of whom "15,000 have published stories under their bylines" (Gillmor, 2003).

Commercialising content, syndicating submissions: income and benefits

Ultimately, at commercial publications, the bottom line will determine the future place of user generated content. This article has described how current levels of moderation make such contributions expensive to integrate—not in itself a problem if sites can make money from the products that emerge. This study revealed that although publishers are exploiting this new source of content in various ways, commercialising user forums has been problematic.

The editorial director of Associated New Media, publishers of the *Daily Mail* website and *ThisisLondon.co.uk*, believed that the areas of her sites featuring reader contributions attracted her "most loyal audience". "People love it. They are very loyal to it". That loyalty, Williams (2004) reported, has resulted in "the number of pages per visit for those people [being] very, very high", with "about 40–50 per cent of the *DailyMail.co.uk*'s traffic . . . made up of the [message boards]".

When the *Independent.co.uk* hosted message boards they too found that they "were getting very substantial page impressions. Something like 20–30 thousand page impressions a week from just the Middle East chunk".

So far so good; but can readers be too loyal? The editor of the *Independent.co.uk* believed so. When he analysed the number of regular users of their Middle East message board he found that there were no more than "about 220" (King, 2004). Readers like this, viewing over 100 pages per week, are unlikely to have the time or inclination to participate in any commercial opportunities provided, making them a drain on resources rather than revenue-generators.

The *DailyMail.co.uk* have tried a number of strategies to earn money from their message boards including advertising overlays in the message areas, sponsorship and integrated advertising. They have used "intelligent hyperlinks within postings. So if someone writes 'Weller' then that 'Weller' would become a link to the 'Weller' website". It was, according to their editorial director, the price users had "to pay for their message boards" (Williams, 2004). Although "a couple of years" ago there were some complaints about this type of commercial intrusion—Williams commented that the "strange thing about community is that they believe it is their website"—she thought that there was now an acceptance that because "you are providing them with a service with the associated server costs, design costs, and staffing costs" publishers were able to "act and behave like it is their brand".

In his review of what "Big Media companies" are and should be doing to have a "conversation with their audience", Dan Gillmor (2004: 112) comments on the insular nature of some bulletin boards:

> The *New York Times'* forums frequently contain valuable insights, but it is doubtful
>
> that many (if any) of these ideas ever reach the actual journalists inside the *Times'*

newsroom. If the staff isn't part of the discussion, it's just readers talking with each

other—and they can do that without the *Times*.

Williams admitted that "it's difficult, it's really difficult to get them out of message

boards". One strategy that her and her staff had tried was to go into the message

boards when a big story broke to post messages alerting users to the

DailyMail.co.uk's coverage and providing a link to the story. They also had, on many

pages, news feeds linked to the main site, which Williams said had "made a really big

difference".

Value to the parent

Although publishers have not been entirely successful in generating revenues from

user generated content initiatives, for online news websites with a print or broadcast

parent, users have provided a useful new source of exclusive content. The

DailyMail.co.uk "sometimes invite people's comments and . . . publish them in the

paper". According to their editorial director, "the paper love[s] it. *You Magazine* in

the *Mail on Sunday* quite often run a page of readers' comments taken from the

website" (Williams, 2004).

> The *FT.com* have done similar things:

> Last year was the 25th anniversary of the *Financial Times* publishing in continental
>
> Europe and we asked 'who is the most influential European of the last 25 years and the
>
> most influential European business person of the last 25 years?' It was all done on the
>
> web and the results were published not only on the web but in a special edition of the
>
> Saturday magazine (Corrigan, 2004).

The Sun's online editor reported that some news desks were "pulling in five or six

or seven stories a day" from the website and loved "the direct communication" with

readers. Picton (2004) reported that the newspaper was "getting more stories from our

readers via the website on something called 'talkback' than . . . on phone-ins which is a great thing so they certainly appreciate it".

"On a daily basis" journalists at the *BBC News* website were feeding back user generated comments and details including "contact numbers for people who are at stories that other parts of the BBC are chasing". "It can be quotes, it can be a phone number, it might be a still picture", said the editor Pete Clifton (2004). User comments were making the news too. According to Clifton, journalists from the BBC's 24-hour rolling news operation, *News 24,* had visited his newsroom to watch users' comments arrive and feature them in their own coverage:

> When John Peel died they were up here regularly that day to just read out loads of gushy comments, which is fairly low grade, but sometimes it's a useful way for them to reflect general opinion. For the Madrid bomb *BBC World* were up here doing the same thing. Just reading out a range of comments from either people in Madrid or from people around the world (Clifton, 2004).

The head of BBC News Interactive gave another example of how users' interactions can benefit news sites' print or broadcast parent:

> When the bomb went off in Jeddah and we immediately got an eyewitness account contact us through the website, which we then put on. That individual ended up being interviewed, I think, on *BBC World*, *Radio 5 Live* and *World Service* (Deverell, 2004).

The *BBC News* website's editor believed that news gathering at the BBC was "just waking up to that fact that [the website] isn't a bad way of getting additional information on a story" saying that he would "like to invest a bit more effort into that in the coming year. I think that's an interesting area for us" (Clifton, 2004).

Legal liabilities

The fear of legal action resulting from libelous comments posted to unmoderated user forums was an important contingent factor explaining the sometimes-wary attitude to user generated content initiatives at some of the sites studied. The case of LORD ROBERTSON v THE SUNDAY HERALD played on the mind of the *Scotsman.com*'s editor Stewart Kirkpatrick. In March 2003 *The Scotsman* reported that Lord Robertson (the then Secretary General of NATO) would be suing the *Sunday Herald*, alleging that a post to a message board hosted by the newspaper was defamatory (Denholm, 2003). Although the *Sunday Herald* claimed that a maximum of thirty-seven people could have seen the comment, and that they were unaware of its presence—a defense of 'innocent dissemination'—they decided to settle out of court for £25,000. The case has not helped to resolve in editors' minds what it means in law to publish a libellous comment. Editors like Kirkpatrick (2004) were worried that even if a message "appears on the bottom of page 173 of a message board thread, technically you have still published something that is defamatory". Questioned about allowing users to add comments to blogs, Kirkpatrick said that the libel laws are "holding publishers back and certainly give me cause for concern". If the person submitting a message to a bulletin board rather than the publisher carried legal liability, the *Scotsman.com*'s editor would, he said, be "a lot more relaxed" about unmoderated user forums.

The *Sunday Herald* case brought home the "legalities" and consequent "responsibilities" of hosting forums to the editor of *Independent.co.uk* who, even before the Robertson case, thought that legally they "were on dodgy ground" with the message board they hosted. Although legal issues were not the primary reason for dropping the forum, looking back King (2004) felt "quite happy" to have abandoned

the forum "for a while". He didn't want the "distraction from your credibility and your time" that legal actions could cause.

It was, in part, the heavy legal responsibility that came with hosting bulletin boards that caused the editorial director of Associated New Media to "question", "a lot of times", the 'communities' that the *DailyMail.co.uk* hosts. Williams (2004) reported being "constantly anxious about our community" and said she would "be lying if I said it didn't make me think". She was "really committed to it" because she believed it to be "part of the unique nature of the *Daily Mail*" and she had confidence in her "well-trained people" and "really good tools and systems".

Time and temperament: how human factors influence reader participation

As was suggested earlier, the blog represents the best-known form of invitation writers use to initiate conversations with readers online. Although in his recent article about blogs Donald Matheson (2004: 444) suggests that "many journalists working online are enthusiastic about the potential to rearticulate practice in the new forms that are available online", this study revealed that some of their editors had concerns about the time commitment required as well as their journalists' preparedness.

The editor of *FT.com* said:

> Maybe we would do more blogs if we had lots of people who had time to write but I think it is difficult to get journalists to commit to doing very long-term blogs when they are doing full-time jobs as well. Jobs at the *Financial Times* are pretty demanding, you have to file stories every day. I think there are some publications, maybe on magazines, where you might have time to do a daily blog as well, but that is not really the case here (Corrigan, 2004).

The editor of *Telegraph.co.uk* worried that the blog may not suit his journalists professionally:

> What you can end up doing is forcing somebody into something by saying 'when you are out on this story we want you do a blog'. Reporters are trained in certain ways and they look for certain things, they work to certain deadlines. They work to a brief. Giving somebody an open-ended 'have a bit of a rant' brief doesn't necessarily suit them professionally (Burton, 2004).

These reservations reveal two further contingent factors explaining the variable degree of adoption of forums for user contributions at British news websites. The final factor concerns the information systems involved in processing and publishing user contributions.

Systems: from cut and paste to filter and rate

The system used at most British news sites to manage and publish user contributions can be summed up with one phrase, 'cut and paste'. Journalists cut readers' comments from email and paste them into publications' content management systems, usually making a selection and subbing on the run. There are exceptions: the *Guardian.co.uk*'s blogs and Talkboards, which allow readers to post 'straight-to-air'; and Associated New Media's bulletin board management system, which has a number of innovative controls used in an attempt to achieve a balance between allowing debates to develop spontaneously and maintaining standards of decency and legality. Currently Associated New Media's system is unique, at least in the British context, in its partial reliance on both unpaid moderators and software routines to manage users' contributions. This approach—which relieves pressure on the limited resource of

professional journalists—was also being considered by the *BBC News* website. Their plans are described later in this section.

The relatively laborious manner in which most British news websites deal with user content is not, in most cases, due to a lack of imagination or resource. It is often a result of a desire to retain, and in some cases reclaim, control over the editorial content of the publications in question. Dan Gillmor (2004: 114) recognises this tendency in his analysis of why 'true' blogs—those to which readers are able to freely post comments—have been slow to take off in the mainstream media. He believes 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.

He suggests that "this hasn't been an entirely wrong headed worry although it is overblown".

As discussed previously, the experience of *FT.com* and *Independent.co.uk* confirms publications have some cause to worry about the "objectivity and fairness" of users who submit content. The *Independent.co.uk*'s solution—dropping all user generated content initiatives—could be described as "overblown", leaving it without a forum for conversations with its readers. On the other hand, with a staff of just eleven to manage the entire site, their options are limited.

FT.com took a slightly less radical approach to worries about the quality of users' contributions, moving from a post-moderated bulletin board to publishing a lightly edited selection of readers' comments. This approach is mirrored at *TimesOnline.co.uk, theSun.co.uk, Scotsman.com* and *Telegraph.co.uk* for the same reason—to ensure quality and consistency in the editorial product.

The practice of manually reviewing and editing users' comments does not, in all cases, indicate that more open, technologically sophisticated systems have not been considered. The editor of *Telegraph.co.uk* considered an external "bulletin board structure", what he called "a technological beast in which people can write in and they can be published straight to the web or they can be filtered and monitored". In the end, "worried" that it would mean "going into an area that was just too complicated", Burton (2004) decided against it. "The monitoring worried me. The people weren't trained to any discernable standard to watch for problems", he said.

The *BBC News* website too currently relies on its journalists to pre-select and edit all contributions. Their system is no longer able to cope with the levels of users' contributions being submitted and, as a result, changes are planned.

Systems evolution at the BBC News website

The *BBC News* website's approach of "reading and subbing everything" they put up is, their editor said, "just going to get more and more unmanageable over time". So much so that Clifton (2004) believed that they "cannot carry on devoting the amount of effort that we do" to it, especially in view of the budget cuts that will result in the closure of twelve journalism posts in 2005 and total cuts of £4.3m to BBC News Interactive's total annual budget by the end of 2007 (Clifton, 2005a). In response they were planning a significant change to the systems they use to deal with user feedback:

> We are looking at a number of different software options that will allow us to change our approach to allow more comments to flow through to an area of the site without us having to laboriously check them all. Now for us that's a big step to take (Clifton, 2004).

Users were being considered as a potential resource to help grade other users' comments:

> We are looking at a piece of software [by] Jivesoft, which will help us present the feedback we get in different ways. . . . It would allow readers to access comments in different ways. We would still have, if you like, the BBC selection . . . but in addition you could invite other readers to rate each comment . . . on how interesting or useful they found it. Then the best ones would rise to the top so you could look at all the comments with the most highly rated ones at the top of the list or you could just look at all of them either by the name of the person who posted them or the time they were posted (Deverell, 2004).

Clifton (2004) characterised the proposed system as "a much bigger dustbin where there are loads and loads of comments" which "haven't been moderated". Opening the gates in this way would, he admitted, mean that the *BBC News* website were:

> . . . probably going to have to be a bit more relaxed about the fact that there will be several hundred comments coming in. We're not going to undertake to clamber in 24 hours a day to moderate. We are going to have to be more relaxed about people raising the alarm but be able to withdraw comments as soon as that alarm is raised.

Publishing users' comments in the quantities the *BBC News* website received at the time of the death of John Peel—35,000 in the first day, 100,000 in the week that followed—would, Clifton recognised, present some usability problems:

> [on] a day like that when we were getting tens of thousands [of emails] we may have to have some other way of limiting the sheer volume. We are unlikely to have a vat of 100,000 comments. It would be completely unusable and we probably couldn't realistically expect anyone to go through them and help us grade them (Clifton, 2004).

So, although not every reader could expect to see their comment published, the proposed system would allow a greater percentage of user contributions to appear. "At the minute a tiny percentage of the ones we get are actually making it to the site which cannot be right", said Clifton.

Clifton suggested that users would be encouraged to "raise the alarm" if they spotted offensive comments. Amongst the BBC's rivals opinion on this approach was split. The editor of the *Scotsman.com* thought that getting "users to moderate it is fantastic. Certainly to my mind the best model for that kind of moderation is something like *Slashdot.org* where you get 'karma points' for a post and that reflects how prominent your comments are" (Kirkpatrick, 2004).

In contrast the editor of the *Independent.co.uk*, still smarting from his bad experience with message boards, was skeptical that the number of "dodgy" comments would remain small once the system went live. "As soon as the 14 year olds in their bedrooms discover there is a part of the BBC that they can submit a dodgy email to, and it will appear on the site, then what are they going to do?", said King (2004). Even the proposed registration system, he maintained, was unlikely to be a deterrent: "I just see that sort of thing open to abuse, malicious users could login five times under five different names."

The head of BBC News Interactive intended that the *BBC News* website would minimise the risk of "dodgy" comments by restricting the type of debates their new platform would host:

> We would do a couple of things. We would use it mainly for the more light-hearted topics, we wouldn't do it on very controversial 'Talking Points'—debates on the Middle-East or Northern Ireland, on those very sensitive issues. Secondly we would still have a process where we dipped into comments frequently, every hour or two hours, which is the process that lots of other BBC sites use: post-moderation. So I don't think it would be a complete free-for-all for both of those reasons (Deverell, 2004).

To what extent the *BBC News* website will be able to rely on users to alert their paid journalists to potentially libellous or indecent comments remains to be seen. The experience of the *DailyMail.co.uk* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk* offered some pointers.

Associated New Media's bulletin board system

Associated New Media's bulletin board system offered some indication of the issues involved in running, with the help of users, a relatively open system for publishing readers' contributions. They used a combination of professional moderators (three in total), 35–40 unpaid 'hosts' and software tools to monitor the message boards hosted by the *DailyMail.co.uk* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk*. When the boards were launched "three or four years ago", the editorial director thought that she would be able to depend on the unpaid hosts "much more" than she has been able to:

> However well you legally train them, you are not paying them and they are not as effective at policing as we hoped that they would be. At the end of the day we are the publisher, so we have our own team in house and they are our backup team if you like (Williams, 2004).

One of the problems was that the hosts were themselves part of the community and found it difficult to police their peers—according to Williams there had been "an awful lot of cyber-bullying".

A specialised software moderation tool, which alerted them to posts containing key words that were legally sensitive, assisted the human moderators. In addition they had the option to turn off boards that were being "inundated" with messages, and for topics that were "particularly legally worrying" they used a "trusted system": users could only post live if they had previously posted a certain number of acceptable messages. Out of hours, when no moderators were working, messages were placed in a queue to be moderated and published at a later date.

In spite of these "seven or eight really good tools" Associated New Media used to protect themselves, Williams admitted that "it's tough, it's not easy. It's been quite a challenge for us, particularly on the *Daily Mail*, to manage that load and to moderate it effectively".

Discussion

Users of mainstream British news websites are sending in unprecedented amounts of content—thousands of emails a week is common. In the face of this enthusiasm some sites have a problem. They are unable to read, much less publish all the submissions they receive. Fortunately readers seeking to express themselves online seem only partly motivated by the possibility that their work will appear. This trend is forcing publishers to reconsider their traditional newsgathering and filtering roles and to ask themselves whether and how they should elicit content from users, provide forums for debate and publish readers' comments on stories; and to what extent 'traditional' editorial standards need to apply in this new world.

Although there is a conservative inflection in the ways that debates around these issues are voiced, the conclusions reached and the strategies adopted display a surprising degree of variation, reflecting the importance of initial conditions and local contingent factors in the ways in which user generated content initiatives are appearing. It is no coincidence that the sites that are most open to readers' contributions and generous with resource and space allocation have a public-service ethos. The *Guardian.co.uk* hosts the best used and most editorially integrated message board to be found in the mainstream British online news media. Its traditions are underpinned by values expressed by CP Scott, whose son JR Scott established the Scott Trust as the sole shareholder of the *Guardian* in 1936. CP Scott (1921) believed

that a newspaper should reflect and influence "the life of the whole community", have a "sense of duty to the reader" and that "the voice of opponents no less than that of friends" should be heard. The *BBC News* website, although for the moment more cautious about unmoderated contributions, seeks to meet its public obligations, made in the Royal Charter, to "support fair and informed debate at local, regional and national levels" and produce programming that reflects "the lives and concerns of both local and national audiences" and serves "the tastes and needs of different audiences" (BBC, n.d.). The result is an unmatched selection of edited user contributions, fully integrated into the editorial sections of the site and heavily promoted.

Without the *BBC News* website's generous and predictable annual budget or owners, like the Scott Trust, who are constitutionally concerned no less with editorial independence and quality than with profits, other British news websites are following a more pragmatic line. Taking a more commercial position does not, however, necessarily lead to a lack of innovation. Associated New Media's message boards have pioneered the involvement of users and semi-automated software routines to help moderate discussions. We can expect to see this approach used elsewhere, including at the *BBC News* website. The BBC is unlikely to follow, however, Associated New Media's experiments with context-sensitive advertising links in message boards. It remains to be seen whether this is an isolated example or indicative of a trend for the line between user generated content and advertising to be softer than that between traditional editorial and advertising.

The need to commercialise the products that emerge from user generated content initiatives is obvious given the financial position of most sites. Very few newspaper "online editions are actually profitable solely from their own operations" (Crosbie,

2004). Moderation and control of user generated content was a major concern of the editors and managing editors who participated in this study. Illiteracy, duplication, mediocrity, bigotry, indecency and racism are real issues that sites need to manage and it is expensive to do so. Despite the loyalty user forums can generate amongst niche groups, it is still unclear whether there is sufficient wider interest to bring in significant revenues.

Because of the financial dependency that most of the sites studied have on their print or broadcast parent, it is perhaps unsurprising that user generated content initiatives are often justified in terms of what they can bring to the newspaper or broadcaster. At the moment there is a novelty value to user contributions that can result in "fairly low grade" uses (Clifton, 2004). For user generated content initiatives to achieve their full potential there needs to be a closer integration with the editorial product to allow, in Gillmor's (2004) terms, an evolution "from journalism as lecture to journalism as a conversation or seminar".

The online coverage of the 2005 UK general election by the British mainstream media was marked by a rush to blog. The blog, a form previously viewed with skepticism by many publications, found a place in the coverage of this big running story[15]. Of the products that resulted one, the *Guardian.co.uk*'s 'Election blog', allowed readers to add comments 'live'. It might seem a small detail, but it is a significant step for a traditional media outlet to allow its readers unmediated read / write access to its editorial pages. Although the *Guardian.co.uk* took this step alone, there are indications, amongst at least some of their mainstream rivals, of a more open attitude to reader contributions. Such a change is necessary if the enthusiasm with which readers are currently conversing with news sites is to be maintained, expanded and turned into a more permanent reengagement.

Acknowlegements

Notes

[1] Figures collected 18 April 2005.

[2] http://en.wikinews.org

[3] http://english.ohmynews.com

[4] These figures were collected on 28–29 April 2005.

[5] The death of the popular British radio presenter John Peel (Clifton, 2004).

[6] The editors and managing editors interviewed were selected to represent a range of publications: regional (the *Scotsman.com* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk*) and national (the others); publicly funded (the *BBC News* website) and commercial (the others); with broadcast (the *BBC News* website) and print (the others) parentage; and serving different readerships (in print terms *theSun.co.uk* is 'tabloid', the *DailyMail.co.uk* and *ThisisLondon.co.uk* are middle-market while the *Independent.co.uk*, *TimesOnline.co.uk*, *Telegraph.co.uk* and *FT.com* represent the 'broadsheet' sector). Although out of the scope of this study, there is potential for future research examining how practice and attitudes at publications such as these contrasts with that at Internet-only news sites like those published by *AOL* and others.

[7] Telephone call with Neil Thurman, 7 December 2004.

[8] Newsroom jargon for 'sub-edit'—the correction and rewriting of text by specialised journalists know as 'subeditors' or 'subs'.

[9] *Technorati.com*'s list of the 'top100' most 'authoritative' blogs—those with the highest number of links to them—includes many written by individuals, such as Glenn Reynolds and Lawrence Lessig, who, primarily, do not make their living through the practice of journalism.

[10] The software is described at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/3676692.stm

[11] Telephone call with Neil Thurman, 8 November 2004.

[12] This calculation is based on the fact that the *BBC News* website has an audience of some 22 million unique users per month (Nixon, 2005); an average of between 700,000–1,000,000 daily unique users.

[13] South Korea's *OhmyNews.com* launched in February 2000. Its readers write eighty-five per cent of the online edition. It has a staff of forty-eight reporters who review the 50–200 articles submitted every day, about seventy per cent of which are published. An average of about one million visitors per day visit the site, although peak traffic can be between two and three times greater.

[14] Although for most contributions this is the norm, *OhmyNews.com* pay more—about $20—for a front-page story and readers can 'tip' contributors. The maximum tip any reader can give is about $10. The record tip received was over $30,000 in two days for a story about the proposed relocation of South Korea's capital city.

[15] As part of their coverage of the 2005 UK general election the *DailyMail.co.uk* launched 'Inside Whitehall: Benedict Brogan's election blog', the *BBC News* website ran 'The Election Monitor our campaign weblog', the *Guardian.co.uk* had an 'Election blog', the *FT.com* a 'reporters blog', the *Telegraph.co.uk* a 'Westminster weblog' and 'Candidate's weblog' and the *TimesOnline.co.uk* an 'Election log'.

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