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The rise of social media and its impact on mainstream journalism:

A study of how newspapers and broadcasters in the UK and US are responding to a wave of participatory social media, and a historic shift in control towards individual consumers.

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Summary

The aftermath of the Iranian elections (June 2009) provided the latest example of how powerful new internet tools like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are changing the way media are produced, distributed and consumed. User-generated picture or video scoops regularly lead television bulletins and the front pages of newspapers, whilst a new category of opinionated blogging is redefining the frontiers of journalism itself. This study explores how mainstream media organisations are responding to this wave of participatory and social media, linked with a historic shift in control towards individual consumers. The paper examines how journalists at leading news organisations in the UK and USA are increasingly involving audiences in the way they research and tell stories. It explores the dilemmas and issues raised by greater audience engagement through case-study interviews with leading practitioners and managers, as well as drawing on previously published interviews and research. It looks at how mainstream media coverage of breaking news events is changing, using topical cases studies from the G20 London summit and Iranian street protests. There are six core conclusions from this study:

1. There has been an explosion of participation over the past two years (2007–9), driven by user-friendly internet tools, better connectivity and new mobile devices. Social Networking and UGC have become mainstream activities, accounting for almost 20 per cent of internet time in the UK and involving half of all internet users. This dramatic change has forced traditional news organisations to take note.
2. Social media and UGC are fundamentally changing the nature of breaking news. They are contributing to the compression of the 'news cycle' and putting more pressure on editors over what to report and when. News organisations are already abandoning attempts to be first for breaking news, focusing instead on being the best at verifying and curating it.
3. Journalists are beginning to embrace social media tools like Twitter, Blogs and Facebook, but very much on their own terms. 'Same values, new tools' sums up the approach in most mainstream organisations as they marry the culture of the web with their own organisational norms. Guidelines are being rewritten; social media editors and twitter correspondents are being appointed; training and awareness programmes are underway.
4. Social media, blogs and UGC are not replacing journalism, but they are creating an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion. Most people are still happy to rely on mainstream news organisations to sort fact from fiction and serve up a filtered view, but they are increasingly engaged by this information, particularly when recommended by friends or another trusted source.
5. Historically, participation in mainstream sites has focused on self-standing message boards and blogs. With resources tight, most are looking to focus their investments on richer engagement with the most trafficked areas of their websites, whilst increasing involvement with conversations around their content in third-party networks.
6. Social recommendation has begun to play a significant role in driving traffic to traditional news content. Most organisations are devoting significant resources to exploit social networks to drive reach. Over

time, social media sites could become as important as search engines as a driver of traffic and revenue.

The issues and conclusions are framed within a wider debate about the importance of these developments to the changing shape of mainstream media organisations, to levels of civic engagement, debates about quality, trust and accuracy, and to discussions about the practice and future of journalism itself.

KEYWORDS: social media; social networks; blogs; user generated content; online; newspapers; broadcasting; future journalism; Facebook; Twitter

1. Framing the debate

Ten years ago, an influential McKinsey report¹ concluded that new technologies were set to increase our capacity to interact by a factor of between two and five. They argued that our enhanced interactive capacity would 'create new ways to configure businesses, organise companies, and serve customers'. These developments are not just playing out between businesses, they are profoundly impacting almost every sphere of life – with journalism on the front line.

In developed societies the adoption of email, instant messaging and mobile messaging has been rapid and widespread. But in more recent years, there has been a rise in popularity of powerful new tools, associated with the improved capacity of the internet to handle two-way interaction – message boards, blogs, wikis and social networks.

These tools are sometimes grouped by the phrase 'Social Media',² and often they are associated with 'Web 2.0',³ popularised by the internet entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly to make the case that the internet only reaches its true potential when people take advantage of its interactive capability and the power of the network. Web 2.0 advocates argue that the internet should not be just another form of distribution for big media companies but is an opportunity for a flowering of new creative expression (the read-write web).

In the news and information sphere, the dramatic street protests, following the Iranian elections of June 2009 provided just the latest example of how these new internet tools like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have begun to change the way media is produced, distributed and consumed. The role of participatory and social media in Iran and earlier examples such as the Mumbai attacks in 2008 have caused New York academic and blogger Jeff Jarvis to argue that 'the witnesses are taking over the news',⁴ that we are witnessing a historic shift of control from traditional news organisations to the audience themselves.

The one-way nature of the media so far has been an unnatural state, argues Jarvis, due to limitations of production and distribution. He says that, properly done, news can be a democratising force and that it should be a conversation between those who know and those who want to know, with journalists in their new roles as curators, enablers, organisers, educators – helping where they can.⁵

¹ Patrick Butler, Ted W. Hall, Alistair M. Hanna, et al., *A Revolution in Interaction* (McKinsey Quarterly, 1997).

² Wikipedia definition: 'At its most basic sense, social media is a shift in how people discover, read and share news, information and content . It's a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologue (one to many) into dialog (many to many) and is the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. Businesses also refer to social media as [user-generated content](#) (UGC) or [consumer-generated media](#) (CGM).'

³ Tim O'Reilly: 'Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use the harnessing of collective intelligence.' (http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web_20_compact.html)

⁴ Jeff Jarvis, *Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/dec/01/mumbai-terror-digital-media>).

⁵ Jeff Jarvis, foreword to Charlie Beckett, *Supermedia: Saving Journalism so it can Save the World* (Blackwell, 2008).

On the other side of the debate, former Silicon Valley entrepreneur and author Andrew Keen says the 'cult of the amateur' is undermining great companies who have consistently created value through imparting quality information and education. Keen says that we need to fight back, to retain the structures and profession that are in danger of dying out, taking with them concepts such as quality and trust:

*The Web 2.0 revolution has peddled the promise of bringing more truth to more people ... but every week a new revelation calls into question the accuracy reliability and trust of the information we get from the internet.*⁶

Although issues such as accuracy and standards are at the heart of the current debate within journalism, scholars and commentators see these issues as part of a much wider change in the media landscape. Futurologist Paul Saffo talks of the shift from mass media to personal media. He believes many traditional publishers will fall by the wayside in the process:

*The Mass Media revolution 50 years ago delivered the world to our TVs, but it was a one-way trip – all we could do was press our nose against the glass and watch. In contrast, Personal Media is a two-way trip and we not only can, but also expect to be able to answer back.*⁷

For academics like Clay Shirky, the key change is the internet's ability to support 'many to many' conversations, in addition to the 'one to many' broadcast model. Now he says, members of the former audience can talk directly to each other, leading to the 'largest increase in expressive capability in human history'.⁸ Sociologist William Dutton at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) argues that we are witnessing the emergence of powerful new voices and networks which can act independently of the traditional media. He has termed these developments the emergence of the 'Fifth Estate':

*Highly 'Networked individuals' (helped by new platforms like social networking and messaging) can move across, undermine and go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions. This provides the basis for the pro-social networks that compose what I am calling the Fifth Estate.*⁹

Although it is early days, Dutton believes that the Fifth Estate could be as important to the twenty-first century as the Fourth Estate has been since the eighteenth. From influential bloggers to community networks and activists, this new sphere of activity offers new competition for the mainstream media. These groups are becoming an alternative source of news, as well as another option for politicians, businessmen or other public figure to bypass them and take their message – unmediated – to their supporters or followers. And as if to add insult to injury, these new networks and individuals are also now

⁶ Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture* (Broadway Business, 2007).

⁷ Paul Saffo, 'Farewell Information, it's a Media Age', 2008 (http://www.saffo.com/essays/essay_farewellinfo.pdf).

⁸ Clay Shirky, 'How Social Media can Make History', TED conference address, 2009 (http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html).

⁹ William H. Dutton, *Through the Network of Networks: The Fifth Estate* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2007).

acting as a check on the traditional media, questioning their accuracy and standards, and forcing a new transparency.

Against this background, it is not surprising that this study has found mainstream media organisations engaging hard to try and understand the technical and social challenges raised by the rapid growth of personal and social media. And in resolving the underlying strategic dilemmas there are a number of practical issues to be addressed: editorial control; scalability; ownership of intellectual property; the blurring of professional and personal spheres; as well as concerns about the representative or unrepresentative nature of the networks shouting for attention.

All of this is leading to some high-profile changes to standards, guidelines and training across the industry as well as a reassessment of how to balance broadcast and interactive capabilities. This paper argues that we are mid-way through an era of experimentation, but that hard choices will soon need to be made around the value that should be attached to participatory and social media and how it should be integrated into journalistic practice and culture.

2. Mainstream media motivations, doubts and dilemmas

2.1 Definitions and motivations

'Social media' is an extraordinarily difficult term to pin down. Sometimes it refers to an activity (a journalist blogged); sometimes to a software tool (Blogger); sometimes to a platform (you can blog on Facebook). It incorporates the term user-generated content (UGC) and yet much of this content is not really social at all.

Social media is also constantly mutating and evolving; just when you think you have nailed it, a new combination emerges, changing perceptions again. But whatever the precise definition, there are three underlying reasons why mainstream media organisations are taking social tools and networks increasingly seriously.

- Telling better stories: Building on Dan Gillmor's insight¹⁰ that there is always someone who knows more than you do, news organisations are crowdsourcing comments, pictures, videos insights and ideas. This supplements and complements their own newsgathering sources and enriches their output.
- Making better relationships: Engaged users tend to be more loyal and spend more time, making them more valuable to advertisers or for promoting and selling other company services.
- Getting new users in: With audiences spending more and more time with social networks,¹¹ these have become the obvious place to look for the 'hard to reach' or reconnect with former loyalists.

The following five company profiles and the case studies in Chapter 3 explore these motivations in more detail, and include examples of how different organisations are approaching this area.

2.2 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Since the Asian Tsunami and the London bombings¹² when audience footage led the main news bulletins for the first time, the BBC has invested heavily in encouraging audiences to contribute direct experiences of major events. It established a well-staffed user-generated hub,¹³ to process and authenticate audience material as well as to engage more deeply with audience members to co-create content, write articles and shoot photo series.

In an average week, the team processes over 10,000 email comments, 1,000 stills and up to 100 video clips; considerably more on a significant story such as the dramatic snowfalls in February 2009 (65,000 pictures submitted). The hub also acts as a broker and adviser to television and radio programmes

¹⁰ The San Francisco-based blogger and technology correspondent was one of the first to evangelise about the possibilities of working with audiences in his book *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (O'Reilly Media, 2004).

¹¹ Nielsen blog: 'Time Spent on Social Sites Soars', 2 June 2009 (http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/time-spent-on-facebook-up-700-but-myspace-still-tops-for-video).

¹² The BBC received 22,000 emails and text messages, and more than 300 photos, in addition to a number of video sequences shot on mobile phones on the day.

¹³ The UGC hub is staffed by 23 people (author interview with Sam Taylor and Matthew Eltringham, June 2009).

looking for case studies and audience contributions, answering around 20 queries a day from across the BBC.



Figure 1. BBC user-generated hub solicits for stories, pictures and videos.

The BBC is careful to authenticate photos, videos and eyewitnesses before they are used in output. There are occasional exceptions, such as during the Burmese (2007) and Iranian (2009) protests, when it proved impossible to verify how and where some footage was shot. In these cases, an editorial judgement was made about the authenticity and the pictures were broadcast with caveats and appropriate labelling.

The BBC's user-generated initiatives have brought a number of scoops and new perspectives to its journalism. The BBC was contacted by an HBOS whistleblower (February 2009)¹⁴ and a regular series of City Diaries¹⁵ (blog-like contributions) brought extra texture to coverage of the credit crunch. On international stories, the activities of the hub unearthed powerful and rare voices caught up in the fighting in Afghanistan's SWAT valley (June 2009).¹⁶

The incorporation of user-generated material is valued both by the BBC and by audiences, according to a 2007 MORI survey. The survey, part of a wider study into UGC at the BBC, showed that 72 per cent approved of the use of this material, feeling that it improved the quality and authenticity of output, and 61 per cent agreed that it was good for the public to be involved in producing the news.¹⁷ However the same study (Cardiff University 2007) also found antipathy towards traditional message board debates which publish opinion-based UGC, as opposed to comments based on direct

¹⁴ BBC News, 'HBOS Risk Control Dumbed Down', Feb. 2009 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7892079.stm>).

¹⁵ BBC News, 'City Voices', June 2009 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8081484.stm>).

¹⁶ BBC News, 'Struggling for Survival in SWAT', May 2009 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8054143.stm).

¹⁷ The MORI survey was part of a study by Claire Wardle and Andrew Williams, *ugc@thebbc: Understanding its Impact upon Contributors, Non-Contributors and BBC News* (Cardiff University, 2009).

experience. Charles, who took part in the focus groups, expressed a typical view: 'I don't see the point. 99% of the people who call up or e-mail really don't add anything new to the debate.'

Within the BBC itself, there has also been frustration that debates can be dominated by a small number of users, whilst a perceived need to intervene and moderate has led to significant difficulties in processing the volumes of user-generated content. The BBC has reduced the number of comment-style debates, but Sam Taylor who manages the team, believes that particularly on big stories timely comments can still add useful perspective:

We never claim they have a scientific basis and we are fully aware of the flaws and the holes, but you do get an immediate and real sense of what is going on. It helps make an informed editorial judgement, in the way that you would with a tape full of vox pops.¹⁸

Indeed, on several occasions the strength and immediacy of reader opinion has influenced the BBC's wider editorial line. Matthew Eltringham, Assistant Editor at the user-generated hub, recalls how strong and consistent negative reaction to the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech on Sharia Law (9,000 emails) changed the agenda that afternoon, prompting the 6 o'clock news to 'feature the strength of reaction and lead on the story'.

One of the biggest changes in the last few years is the increased engagement with the BBC brand in third-party social media networks. In many cases, content from Flickr, Twitter and YouTube has been included in BBC output. The emergence of Twitter, in particular, as a source for breaking news has raised a series of new challenges around authenticity and representation. During the Mumbai attacks in 2008, the BBC was heavily criticised over the way it republished an unsubstantiated piece of information circulating on Twitter. Website Editor Steve Herrmann, who had to respond to complaints via the BBC Editor's blog,¹⁹ says lessons have been learned and processes and guidelines tightened up:

Audience feedback to my blog post showed three general reactions: a) Don't use Twitter and other informal sources – you are the BBC – we want solid gold facts and nothing else. b) Use social networks. It's intelligent to see what others know. c) Use both, but LABEL clearly, signpost, even keep them separate.

Herrmann believes the BBC needs to continue to monitor and work with third-party networks. The trick, he says, is to find a way of reflecting 'the unfolding truth in all its guises' without jeopardising the BBC's ability to get across the actual, verified facts.²⁰ It is a difficult balance to strike, but the user-generated hub has now extended its remit to social networks, checking tweets for authenticity before publication.

The BBC has expanded its use of live event commentary (mixing user comments with clearly labelled BBC facts and correspondent insights) on breaking news stories. In doing so, the corporation is building on the success of the live event pages pioneered by BBC Sport, which combine the latest

¹⁸ Author interview with Sam Taylor, May 2009.

¹⁹ BBC Editors Blog, 4 Dec. 2008

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/12/theres_been_discussion_see_eg.html).

²⁰ Author interview with Steve Herrmann, June 2009.

action from a sporting event with user-generated backchat from a variety of sources. In this way, a new style of journalism seems to be emerging around live events in particular, which takes the form of an unfolding conversation in partnership with audiences.

The BBC does not yet have a social media editor, but has published guidelines for blogs, which are being extended to Twitter. Head of Global News Richard Sambrook has been a great evangelist for the use of these tools, but accepts that rules and guidelines are now essential:

Social media sites are the new towns, or cities or neighbourhood bars, the places where the public gather and discuss things. Just as you wouldn't take a conversation from the neighbourhood bar and broadcast it as the truth, you need to do your own checking and verification and all those things still need to happen in your use of social media too.

The recent debates over Twitter in many ways mirrored those over the adoption of blogging in 2005 and 2006. For several years, the BBC had been extremely suspicious about the blog format, like many other mainstream media organisations, regarding them as 'amateurish, filled with errors and not credible'.²¹ Veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie famously described some blogs as 'egotistical nonsense' and suggested that 'journalists shouldn't have any time to blog, there are too many stories waiting to be told'.²²

However, by 2006, the BBC had launched almost 50 blogs including those of some of the BBC's best known reporters, including political correspondent Nick Robinson whose informal style and understanding of the medium won over the sceptics.



Figure 2. Political editor Nick Robinson is one of the most read bloggers in the UK.

²¹ Mark Tremayne, 'Harnessing the Active Audience: Synthesising Blog Research and Lessons for the Future of Media', in Tremayne (ed.), *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media* (Routledge, 2007).

²² Michael Mullane, 'Why Kate Adie Hates Blogs' (http://multimediametradio.typepad.com/ebu/2007/06/why_kate_adie_h.html).

Following the Hutton report,²³ the BBC also wished to find new ways of connecting with audiences and demonstrating transparency, and a series of 'editor's blogs' emerged explaining editorial decisions. By 2008, the blog of business editor Robert Peston was moving markets and led some commentators to question whether blogging was compatible with the BBC's traditional notions of impartiality and neutrality, by integrating unmediated, subjective commentary in its traditional news.²⁴

Alf Hermida, who wrote a detailed academic study of the BBC's approach to blogging,²⁵ says that in many ways the BBC has adapted and normalised blogging by integrating it within existing practices. He says that they have taken to the new style and format readily enough but been reticent about losing editorial control or engaging in risky conversation:

*The BBC has been able to embrace the informal and the personal side of blogging; on TV and radio they have traded on informality and blokieness for some time and worked out how to combine that with authority. They have been less successful with the conversational aspects of blogging, which is harder partly because it doesn't scale on such a huge stage.*²⁶

Today's issues are increasingly practical. Some of the early pioneers have become disenchanted by the venom of the comments left on blogs, despite the heavy use of moderation.²⁷ There is a growing focus at the BBC on finding ways to improve the quality of interaction, whilst at the same time managing ever increasing volumes. Production teams support star bloggers by picking out interesting comments and adding pictures and links to articles, but in a climate of increasingly tight funding, the resource dilemmas are likely to grow, with hard choices needing to be made over the value of different types of participation.

2.3 British newspapers: Guardian and Daily Telegraph

In contrast to the BBC's focus on user-generated newsgathering content, British newspapers have tended to concentrate on creating spaces for debate and comment, a strategy that is consistent with wider brand values and strategy. Both the Guardian and Telegraph have run message boards, comments on stories and journalist blogs. But in 2007 the *Telegraph* went much further launching My Telegraph, a space for readers to publish their own blogs and profiles. Shane Richmond was the driving force behind these developments:

The values of the Telegraph and way its audience thinks have pushed us into certain space and whilst we experimented with citizen journalism and UGC, we have not detected much appetite for it. On the other hand, we knew that

²³ Critical report (Jan. 2004) of the BBC's journalistic standards in the wake of the death of David Kelly and the row with No. 10 over a 'sexed up' dossier.

²⁴ Stephen Glover, 'We can't Expect our Columnists Always to Predict the Future', *Independent*, 20 Oct. 2004 (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/opinion/stephen-glover/stephen-glover-we-cant-expect-our-columnists-always-to-predict-the-future-966652.html>).

²⁵ Alfred Hermida, 'The Blogging BBC', *Journalism Practice* (2009).

²⁶ Author interview with Alfred Hermida, May 2009.

²⁷ BBC Political Editor Nick Robinson has given up reading blog comments because they are so often rude and intemperate (<http://memex.naughtons.org/archives/2009/06/16/8060>).

*Telegraph readers had views and wanted to debate the issues of the day ... and that they had many more views than we can publish.*²⁸

The My Telegraph section happened in the face of internal resistance but ultimately went ahead because of the enthusiasm of the Editor Will Lewis, who has consistently championed community and social media developments at the Telegraph – and because a large advertiser, Cisco, had contacted the sales department looking to support a news site with a social networking proposition.

Although some journalists remained sceptical, believing the low quality of some content was devaluing *Telegraph* brand values, Richmond argues that the real question in a social media context is not whether content is good or bad, but whether it is relevant to the audience. Two years on, the numbers are still relatively modest²⁹ but Richmond believes that it has still been a valuable experiment:

What it has shown is that it matters to our readers to identify themselves as Telegraph readers. In a world when loyalty to newspapers is going away, when you can read one story and click off to the next, it is really important to readers to identify themselves that way.

In many ways, the My Telegraph readers have become super-advocates for the brand, not just within the community but within their other networks and daily lives. Shane Richmond has encouraged this role by inviting them to *Telegraph* headquarters to meet journalists, which exposed staff members directly to their audience sometimes for the first time.

At the *Guardian*, Editor Alan Rusbridger was pursuing a different course to build a debating chamber packed with diverse voices. Rusbridger had travelled to the USA, where he observed the success of the Huffington Post, which aggregates non-traditional opinion and commentary. He returned to create 'Comment is Free' in March 2006, a site that brings together the best of regular columnists on the *Guardian* and the *Observer* with other writers and commentators who are offered a blog, a profile and access to a lively and active community.

Rusbridger admits the move was partly to prevent a Huffington Post equivalent being set up in the UK, but he believes the *Guardian* will never go back to a small coterie of staff commentators:

*For the last 10 years or so we lived with this notion that we knew everything ... and handed out the pearls of wisdom to the people lucky enough to receive them. If you can invert that and actually say that the expertise lives outside the newspaper, on some many subjects they know more than we do. The moment that you can get that thought in your head, then you realise that there is great treasure in these commentaries.*³⁰

The *Guardian* admits that building an effective community has not been without its difficulties. Like My Telegraph and the BBC's Have Your Say message boards, the comments are often dominated by an unrepresentative

²⁸ Author interview with Shane Richmond, June 2009.

²⁹ Around 30,000 active users.

³⁰ Alan Rusbridger, event at the Institut für Medienpolitik in Berlin, April 2009 (<http://vimeo.com/4359127>).

group. Meg Pickard, who until recently ran communities at the *Guardian*, says a vocal minority can end up decimating the conversation and sometimes putting journalists off contributing. But Pickard says there are things that can be done to improve the quality of debate:

We encourage journalists and contributors to respond to comments across the board not descending into arguments with individuals, but only respond to constructive comments, reward good behaviour. You have to show that it may not be the loudest voice, but the most constructive that gets the attention.

The *Guardian* is considering a range of other innovations and is planning to enlist users to help tag and classify comments, to enable them to be filtered more effectively.

Over the past twelve months one of the biggest changes at the *Guardian* has been the increased integration of social media tools like Twitter into journalistic workflows and audience facing output. The developments at the G20 are analysed in detail in Chapter 3 and a case study of Guardian Journalist Jemima Kiss's use of social media tools can be found in Chapter 4, but a measure of the shift in emphasis has been the appointment of Meg Pickard as the *Guardian's* first Social Media Development Editor. The *Guardian* has already published internal best practice social media guidelines and is one of the first newspapers to publish a directory of correspondents on Twitter. An important part of the new role has also been to evangelise and train 200 *Guardian* journalists about how to use these tools most effectively as part of the production process.³¹ Pickard argues that journalists of the future will increasingly use these social networks to find and maintain interesting contacts and sources:

Journalism has traditionally built relationships and networks with rolodexes and long lunches. Now Twitter and Facebook and blogs and RSS feeds are the long lunches of today's world.

Even more fundamentally, *Guardian* journalists are encouraged to see the publication of a story not as the end of the process, but as the start of a new set of possibilities; the start of a conversation with the audience:

We are using user generated content not as a primary source but to extend the life of stories, as a way of adding more perspective and insight, not just as way to let people talk amongst themselves, but actually with a purpose to generate more leads and more insight.

One recent example of this was during the MPs' expenses scandal when audience members were enlisted to trawl through hundreds of thousands of receipts to help uncover new leads.

³¹ Author interview with Meg Pickard, June 2009.

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Figure 3. The *Guardian's* experiment in 'networked journalism', in partnership with audiences.

In another example of working with audiences, user-submitted picture messages for President-elect Barack Obama were turned into a feature in the popular G2 section of the newspaper and also led to a spin-off book.



Figure 4. Crowdsourced pictures in conjunction with Flickr the photo-sharing network.

The *Telegraph* has also been at the forefront of experiments with social media, many successfully breaking new ground, but not everything has gone according to plan. During the UK budget in May 2009, the *Telegraph* published unfiltered tweets, 140 character short comments, directly on the website. It wasn't long before some users had started to abuse this, adding offensive comments in place of the expected insight on the economic debate. The experiment was pulled.

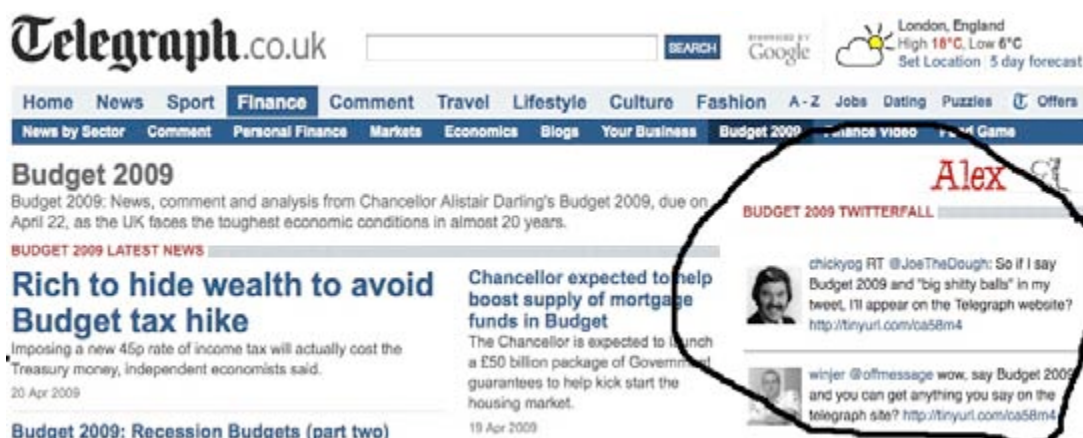


Figure 5. Telegraph experiment with Twitter.

Julian Sambles, head of audience development at the *Telegraph*, says the experiment was ‘a disappointment’, but argues that at this stage it remains important to take risks to understand what works and what does not.³² The incident did, however, affect *Telegraph* strategy in this area as the paper cannot afford the extra costs that would be required to moderate live events – so there will be no repeat.

As social media moves out of the experimental phase and into regular production, it will need to demonstrate its value to editors, advertisers or both. There is a growing body of evidence that advertisers no longer see the quality of core content itself as sufficiently attractive and are becoming increasingly interested in engagement,³³ as well in as targeting specific demographics. Newspapers which are able to build up information over time through a strong relationship with audiences may be able to charge a premium as new advertising models emerge.

In the meantime, the *Telegraph* has detected a significant upsurge in the importance of social networks as a form of distribution. Over 8 per cent of all page views to the Telegraph Online now result from recommendations in networks like Digg, Facebook and Twitter.³⁴ Indeed Julian Sambles believes that it is the content generated by mainstream media organisations that has increasingly become the lifeblood of social networks:

The Telegraph has rich and diverse content, but we have to ensure that content can be found ... The percentage of traffic from Social Networks will grow. How far can that go? It could be a third. It could be a half. I don't know, but few people predicted ten years ago that Google would be as successful as it is today.

In this way, Sambles believes that perhaps the most important message of social media for mainstream media organisations is to continue to invest in quality content that people want to talk about and share.

³² Author interview with Julian Sambles, June 2009.

³³ Social media spends in UK are expected to grow 17% in 2009 (eMarketer, March 2009). Marketers are increasing online spends on social media (77%), search (76%), mobile (75%), behavioural (70%), and decreasing spends on display (45%) and research (23%) (Ad Media Partners, Jan. 2009).

³⁴ Author interview with Julian Sambles, June 2009.

2.4 New York Times

Despite its well-publicised financial difficulties, the *New York Times* has been consistently one of the most innovative and successful websites in the United States. Like the other organisations studied for this survey, it has been quick to spot the potential of new social media tools and networks for driving online reach. It has embraced an open approach to content through RSS feeds and a well developed API.³⁵ This has helped its high-quality content to sweep through the social web on the back of a wave of recommendation.

The *New York Times* ranks No. 1 as a news source in blog aggregator Technorati, and is one of the leading news sources in Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Jon Landman, Deputy Managing Editor of the *News York Times*, says increasing numbers of people are 'finding our work not by coming to our homepage or looking at our newspaper but through alerts and recommendations from their friends and colleagues'.³⁶

This central insight was behind an ambitious plan to develop its own social network, Times People, first launched in 2008.³⁷ This allows registered users of the website to recommend articles to other members of the community and it also integrates with existing networks on Facebook. The *Times* also hopes to use such networks to build up more information about its users, which it hopes to monetise through advertising or selling other services from the *New York Times* group.

Only a minority of *Times* readers have so far signed up for the new service, but the paper is talking to news organisations in many parts of the world to try to build a bigger and more powerful network for recommendation of high-quality content.

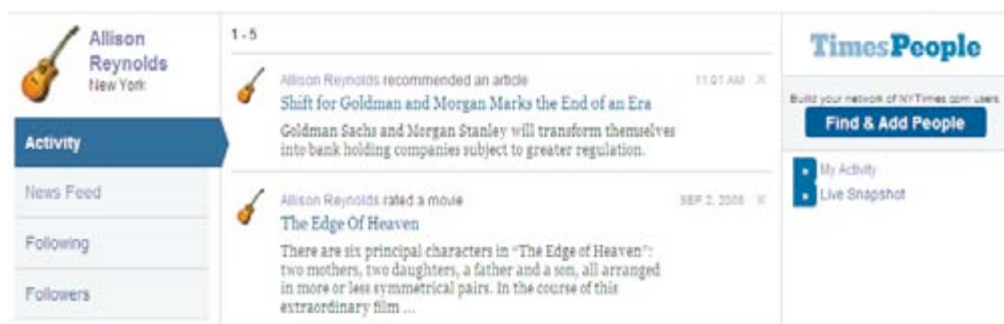


Figure 6. Times People, a social networking add on to nyt.com

The *New York Times* is not just interested in the potential for driving reach. It is putting more effort into understanding how these tools can improve its journalism. Jennifer Preston is the paper's first Social Media Editor, an appointment that created a considerable stir, not least because as a print veteran she has little experience in digital media.

Until now, use of social media by journalists has been very much bottom-up, driven by the personal interest of individuals like columnist Nick

³⁵ RSS = a format for Really Simple Syndication; API = Application Programmable Interface.

³⁶ Jon Landman, internal NYT email to staff announcing new social media editor, June 2009.

³⁷ There is a growing trend for site-based social networks, but most pivot around TV programmes and music, not news: myNBC launched 2007, Hulu Friends 2009, Yahoo Music (2009), Last FM (2002). The BBC will also be launching social media functionality in 2009.

Kristof.³⁸ Preston's role is to work closely with editors, reporters, bloggers and others to use social tools to find sources, track trends and engage in conversation, wherever they are taking place:

*We are going to hold some events to bring journalists together with early adopters and excite the newsroom to participate in the conversation. Part of my role is to identify best practices and we are not going to take a top down approach because we think it is important to experiment. We won't do what other news organisations did and strike the fear of God into them.*³⁹

Bloomberg and the *Wall Street Journal* recently published guidelines for journalists, which aim to put limits around the type and nature of engagement with audiences in social networks.⁴⁰ The *New York Times*, in contrast, aims to build on extensive and longstanding guidelines and ethics policies, which apply to all areas of output including print and online. These were updated a few years ago for blogs, and standards editor Craig Whitney also issued additional guidance for Facebook at the time of last autumn's election reminding reporters and editors not to join a Michelle Obama fan club on Facebook, in the same way that you wouldn't put an Obama sign on your lawn or bumper sticker on your car. Preston says much of this is plain common sense: 'Don't say anything on your Twitter or Facebook page that you wouldn't say on TV or radio.'

The *New York Times* started its community-building initiatives in the late 1990s with Forums, adding a new more flexible commenting platform in October 2007. In between, they have developed some of the most highly trafficked blogs in the USA and have also opened up the ability to comment on running news stories, says Newsroom Web Editor Fiona Spruill:

For ten years at least we've wanted to think of NYT.com as a community, there is a lot of value in our readership and wanting to open up the readers to each other, but also to share their intellect and interesting stories with other readers, to get value from the content that they generate on our site.

The newspaper has often found it hard to compete with broadcasters in generating a critical mass of UGC on running news stories, but Spruill says they have had success elsewhere in tapping into the creativity of their readers. They had an overwhelming response to recent requests for pictures around the Obama inauguration and the comeback tour of the Grateful Dead. On both occasions, she says, users had to go to 'scan pictures and write elaborate captions', enriching the subsequent coverage.

³⁸ Nick Kristof has a popular blog on NYT.com, and has also evangelised about the value of Twitter and Facebook

³⁹ Author interview with Jennifer Preston, June 2009.

⁴⁰ <http://gawker.com/5266146/bloomberg-forbids-mentioning-competitors-or-linking-to-them>

<http://beatblogging.org/2009/05/14/wsj-looks-to-the-past-for-new-social-media-policy>

The Dead Live On

The Dead are reuniting for a tour beginning on April 12. NYTimes.com readers are sending in their photographs from past Grateful Dead concerts. Images are organized in the order they were received. [Submit your photos.](#)



Figure 7. Crowdsourcing pictures around feature stories on nyt.com

There are series of other examples where NYT.com has partnered with audiences to co-create content. In many cases, the *Times* has deliberately lowered the barriers to participation, in an effort to get more people engaged. On election day, they asked readers to enter a single word to describe their mood. Website users could sort between Obama and McCain supporters to get a different visual display. The same technique, explains Spruill, has been applied to the recession to map the trends and thoughts of employed and unemployed Americans:⁴¹

We are trying to think about creative ways to move beyond just article comments so I would say that part of the spirit of the time is to think about how to engage readers but in a way that is up to our standards but doesn't just allow for ranting and uninteresting back and forth.

The *New York Times* is applying the same filtering and selection aspects of the core brand to user-generated content and social media. Pretty much everything at the *Times* is checked and moderated. Whilst this does create problems of scaling, it is another example of how the culture of mainstream newspapers is blending with the norms and traditions of the open web, to create something else again. As Spruill says: 'in some ways we are trying to adjust those old standards to the new world and figuring it out as we go along'.

2.5 Cable News Network (CNN)

Like other leading news organisations in this study, CNN has been on a journey in its attitude to user participation. One of the first to adopt message boards, CNN closed them down when it found that the low quality of the discussion was undermining its reputation. Today it allows users to 'sound-off' about stories and blogs, but in a way that is strictly controlled through moderation.

From the beginning, CNN has focused on the newsgathering potential of its worldwide audience, regularly soliciting for videos, pictures and comments on breaking stories such as the Virginia Tec shootings (2007) and

⁴¹ 'Living with Less' section is heavily infused with user-generated content (<http://projects.nytimes.com/living-with-less>). Author interview with Fiona Spruill, June 2009.

California wildfires (2007). These UGC initiatives were initially grouped together within CNN under an iReport label, but over time the burden of moderating and verifying each item proved overwhelming, with over 10,000 video items received each month. So in 2008, CNN decided to split the brand from CNN and turn iReport into a separate UGC platform, where the quality and content of the contributions was managed by the community.

iReport.com⁴² still provides CNN with a regular stream of user-generated content for its main TV output, but only those that have been vetted and verified will be used on air. This brand separation is considered essential to protect CNN's reputation for trust and accuracy and is taken very seriously. Onscreen, user-generated content is clearly labelled iReport, whilst the community gets the kudos of an 'on CNN' label if an item is used. Every week, the numbers contributing to iReport are growing, with around 1000 submissions a week, of which around half are responses to assignments suggested by CNN; the other half are defined by the community itself.⁴³



Figure 8. With iReport, CNN has developed a separate brand and website to handle UGC.

Whilst the big news events have made the headlines, iReport senior producer Lila King says some of the most memorable moments have focused on more personal news stories, which she says have helped change the way CNN reports stories:

One of the things that we saw during the 2008 election was an outpouring of support in terms of artistic expression for Obama ... we started to see a trend from students posting portraits built out of the words of their speeches; extremely beautiful imagery and helped us present people's passion and interest in the election in a different way to we were used to seeing on CNN.⁴⁴

King also points to the outpouring of emotion following the death of Michael Jackson. People opened up their photo albums and used iReport to share pictures of the moments they had spent with Jackson or how his music had influenced their lives. She says these personal testimonies helped paint an entirely new kind of obituary for CNN.

Another key development for CNN has been the engagement with social networks like Twitter. It was used extensively during the US election and the cable channel has incorporated its use directly into its marketing (see

⁴² Other US networks have similar initiatives including ABC's i-Caught, Fox's uReport and MSNBC's FirstPerson.

⁴³ 250,000 submissions since Feb. 2008, 16,000 approved for CNN. 93% growth June 2008–2009

⁴⁴ Author interview with Lila King, July 2009.

Figure 9). Early adoption by anchors like Rick Sanchez, supported by heavy on-air integration, helped Twitter go mainstream in the United States during the autumn of 2008. Sanchez in particular has become an excellent brand ambassador for CNN in social media circles with thousands of fans and followers on Twitter, Facebook and You Tube. One of the driving motivations at CNN has been the desire to engage audiences in new ways, but there is no high-profile social media editor. CNN views social media as 'everyone's job', and have engaged staff members across the organisation with training and awareness programmes to arm them with the tools to be successful in the digital age.



Figure 9. CNN has contributed to the widespread adoption of Twitter and Facebook in the USA.

The crowdsourcing of questions for major world leaders and debates has been a strong strain in CNN's news coverage for many years but in the 2008 election the network moved beyond email to stage the first YouTube/CNN debates with presidential candidates. For CNN, the debates offered a chance to tap into the popular mood and change the formulaic nature of these events. For YouTube co-founder Chad Hurley the use of audience-generated video questions changed the nature of the debate: 'We are bringing a level of authenticity to politics, and it is bringing transparency and access to voters in a new way.'⁴⁵ For social media theorists and academics however, the debates created a storm of criticism over the choice of gimmicky videos;⁴⁶ and a perception that CNN was paying little more than lip service to genuine engagement and discussion. The debate did allow questions to be put on subjects like gays and lesbians in the military, health care and Iraq, in a more direct and authentic way than would have been possible for a moderator, and yet Rod Carveth, an associate professor at Marywood University, says that the CNN's old media role limited how much new ground the debate could break:

45

<http://www.informationweek.com/news/internet/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=19990458>
7 June 2007.

⁴⁶ Including a person singing asking for a pardon for a parking ticket and a snowman asking about global warming.

*It is not all of a sudden we are in an entirely new era. You're talking about new media being filtered through old media. There is going to be something modified in the translation.*⁴⁷

For the inauguration of President Obama, CNN teamed up with Facebook to offer opportunities to debate and comment on the live stream with a global community or just with friends. It is not yet clear whether these experiments will increase civic and political engagement, but they certainly offer the possibility of generating more electronic conversations between individuals. They may be less successful in overturning the laws of physics. A President or Prime Minister will still only have a limited amount of time to engage with individuals. Filtering and moderation will remain an important part of the mix.

2.6 Comparisons of activity

Table 1 sets out the range of participatory UGC and social media being used by five news organisations. It takes language from interviews with the five subjects of this study but also draws on previous work by Neil Thurman and Alf Hermida in their assessment of UGC in British newspapers.⁴⁸

Figure 10 represents an assessment of the activity levels from each organisation against this categorisation. The scores are based on content analysis of observed activity levels and interview. They should be treated as indicative rather than scientific.

Table 1. Types of user-generated content and social media initiatives in surveyed websites (BBC, Guardian, Telegraph, New York Times and CNN)

Format	Description
Message boards	Self-standing message boards with or without threads, e.g. Have your Say, 606
Comments on stories	Publication of comments at the bottom of specific stories
News UGC	Direct request for and publication of pictures, videos and text eyewitness on major news stories, e.g. Iran elections
Non-news UGC	Direct request for and publication of pictures, videos and text/reviews for say weather, sport, film, food, travel, etc.
Blogs	Publishing or commissioning 'professional' authored

⁴⁷ YouTube/CNN presidential debate gets mixed reviews, July 2007 (<http://www.computerworld.com/action/article.do?command=printArticleBasic&taxonomyName=Web+2.0&articleId=9027799&taxonomyId=169>).

⁴⁸ Neil Thurman and Alfred Hermida, 'Gotcha: How Newsroom Norms are Shaping Participatory Journalism Online', *Web Journalism: A New Form of Citizenship* (Sussex Academic Press, 2008).

	blogs + commenting, e.g. BBC Blog Network
Reader blogs	Allowing readers to publish blogs, have visible spaces with comments, e.g. MyTelegraph
User-generated data	Participation with low barrier to entry, e.g. rating, polls, films, sports players, NYT word train features
User questions	Crowdsourced questions initiated by news organisation for public figure online or via broadcast/webcast
Social network functionality	On-site social network elements, e.g. member spaces, friend recommendation, etc., e.g. Times People
Off-site engagement	Intervening and engaging in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, YouTube

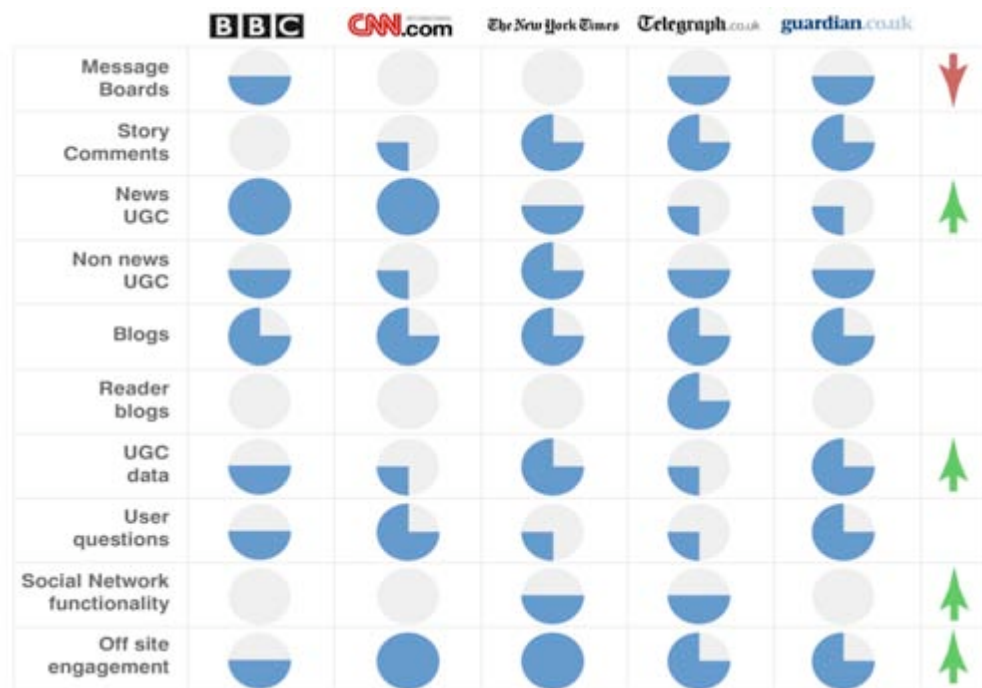


Figure 10. Activity levels for different types of participation. The arrows show areas of increasing or decreasing focus.

2.7 Lessons and conclusions

The data confirm the following suggestions gleaned from interviews.

1. UGC and social media are now considered strategically central to the development of these organisations. All have invested more resources – or are planning to invest more resources in this area. News UGC and off-site engagement are likely to see the most growth. Only message boards are likely to see a reduction in activity.
2. The BBC and CNN (broadcasters) place more emphasis on news-related UGC and the newsgathering benefits of being closer to

audiences. Newspapers tend to be more interested in engaging audiences over a wider range of non-UGC material in a way that can drive revenue.

3. Social media started in most organisations as a series of bottom-up experiments, but these are now being complemented with top-down initiatives and the allocation of specific roles to coordinate activity (for example the appointment of social media editors, Twitter correspondents, evangelists).
4. All those surveyed believe social media are valuable as a potential driver of new reach and most have specifically hired or allocated marketing or business development roles to maximise the potential of social networks.
5. All those surveyed recognise the dilemmas involved in blurring the lines between professional and user content in this space. They are all extending and developing existing guidelines and/or developing training programmes for social media.

3. Changing coverage

This chapter explores how social media are influencing the way news is reported through two examples: the G20 protests (April 2009) and Iranian street protests (June 2009).

3.1 Iranian election protests, June 2009

The aftermath of the Iranian elections in June 2009 provided further compelling evidence of the power of user-generated footage, but it also highlighted a battle of wills between a government determined to restrict access to information, and an alliance of newspapers, broadcasters and Iranian citizens equally determined to use new technology to get the story out.



Figure 11. The so called Twitter revolution as seen by cartoonist Mike Luckovich Used with the permission of Mike Luckovich and Creators Syndicate. All rights refused.

As in previous cases of so-called citizen journalism, it was mobile phones and other digital cameras that captured sometimes bloody street protests against election results, which the opposition said were rigged. Dramatic footage from all over the country was uploaded to video-sharing and social media sites, as well as to mainstream media organisations like CNN and the BBC, which at one stage was receiving up to five videos a minute.

For YouTube spokesman Scott Rubin, his site had become a critical platform for citizen journalism: 'Iranian citizens are having their voices heard, their faces seen and their story gets told around the world without filtering.' But it wasn't just the scale of upload, it was the speed of distribution and way in which social media sites fed and drove the agenda which really marked out this story.



Figure 12. Photographs and videos uploaded to CNNs' iReport

Much of this activity focused on Twitter, where #Iranelections⁴⁹ became the central aggregation point for those hungry for news and for those wishing to distribute new pictures or information. During the first week of the protest, a large proportion of outgoing links from Twitter and 60 per cent of all links from blogs were on the subject of Iran, according to an analysis by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a group that monitors news coverage.⁵⁰ In their analysis they found that whilst many of these links started off linking to citizen-generated video, they soon moved to a wider range of issues and concerns. There was extensive linking to commentary in the mainstream media, particularly to reports about the role of social media. And the role of technology was also a major theme, with links to articles such as 'cyberwar for beginners'⁵¹ aimed at telling users in Iran about how to get round internet censorship by setting up proxy servers and how to protect the identity of protesters from the authorities.

An interesting subtext of this story was the difficulties the authorities had in shutting down the flows of information. The government of Iran has one of the most sophisticated and extensive technical filtering systems in the world.⁵² The Revolutionary Guard plays an active role in enforcing internet content standards and during the election campaign they had experimented with the blocking of Facebook, which was being widely used by political

⁴⁹ A hashtag (#) is the convention denoted by the Twitter community as a way of pulling together tweets related to a particular subject.

⁵⁰ 'Iran and the Twitter revolution': PEJ, June 2009

(http://www.journalism.org/index_report/iran_and_%E2%80%9Ctwitter_revolution%E2%80%9D)

⁵¹ Article by a Scandinavian blogger based in Wales had huge influence being re-tweeted over 1,000 times and being reprinted on other blogs

(<http://reinikainen.co.uk/2009/06/iranelection-cyberwar-guide-for-beginners>).

⁵² Iran country report, Opennet initiative, June 2009

(<http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran>).

parties.⁵³ However, Twitter, unlike Facebook, is more like a multi-headed hydra, which does not operate through one set of internet addresses but from hundreds of different applications and interfaces. Close one down and another can open up within minutes. Many of the most dramatic user-generated clips were in fact sent outside Iran by email and then uploaded to social networks outside the country.

The dilemma for the authorities is graphically illustrated in Figure 13, which shows internet traffic out of Iran during the period in question. Connectivity was cut for one hour on 13 June but the authorities in Iran were not prepared to close the system down indefinitely. Stopping its citizens communicating with the outside world would also have stopped a significant amount of vital economic activity.

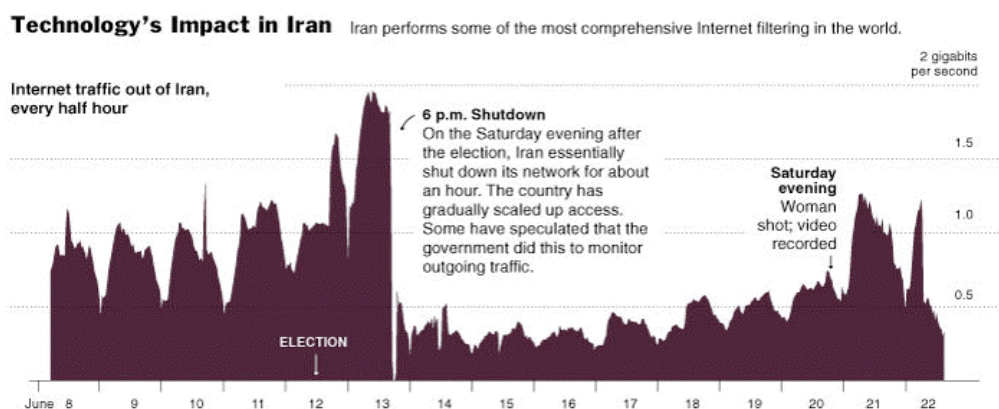


Figure 13. Iran performs some of the most comprehensive internet filtering in the world. Source Arbor Networks and OpenNet initiative (as reported in *New York Times*, June 2009)

With the internet difficult to block, and most people continuing to get news through traditional TV and radio, the Iranian authorities turned their attention to trying to restrict the flow of information coming out of Iran in other ways. The monitoring and harassment of Iran's active blogging community intensified, whilst the movement of Western correspondents was restricted. Many were confined to hotel rooms; others were thrown out of the country. But this had the effect of increasing the value of the citizen journalism and social networks as the protests continued for a second weekend, increasing further the dependence of the mainstream media.

Although news outlets acknowledged that they could not independently confirm these accounts, they became a major component of the overall narrative, according to PEJ, with around one in every twenty mainstream stories about Iran dominated by social media footage or news lines about social media.⁵⁴

BBC Persian TV found itself having to rely almost exclusively on user-generated footage, after the authorities threatened to throw out anyone supplying them with footage. Richard Sambrook, Head of Global News for the BBC, says this audience content had a double benefit:

⁵³ 'Iran's Facebook Access Restored', BBC News, May 2009 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8069038.stm).

⁵⁴ http://www.journalism.org/index_report/pej_news_coverage_index_june_15_21_2009

*UGC was valuable in helping report the story, but it goes beyond that because it gives a direct relationship between the service and the people of Iran and it gives them a level of engagement, a level of authenticity which you wouldn't get from conventional television coverage. So actually they've been able to turn a disadvantage into an advantage in that way.*⁵⁵

However, in assessing how to integrate user-generated content into their coverage, mainstream organisations were confronted with some significant dilemmas:

1. There was a huge amount of noise and false information generated by these networks, some of which was deliberately placed to influence the debate
2. There was very little balance on Twitter and other social networks: conversation was overwhelmingly in favour of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who tended to attract the support of younger, more computer-literate Iranians, as well as activists in the West.

On the question of accuracy, the webzine *True Slant* identified a series of errors which emerged on Twitter during the weekend of 12/13 June. These errors were then repeated and amplified by other social networks and blogs.

- Three million people were reported to have protested in Tehran. Independent assessments suggested the final numbers were a few hundred thousand.
- Opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi was under house arrest – he was fact just being watched
- The president of the election monitoring committee declared the election invalid. This turned out to be wrong.

Social media expert Clay Shirky says it is inevitable that 'you trade speed for accuracy' by getting updates from Twitter, but he argues that mistakes tend to be corrected quickly when other users contradict misinformation. In this way, corrections can be amplified as well as distortions.⁵⁶

The lack of balance was a particular issue for mainstream organisations. The BBC Persian service found great difficulty in identifying more than a handful of Ahmadinejad supporters for its popular interactive programmes from an inbox of thousands of emails. Turi Munthe, CEO of the citizen journalism website Demotix, spells out the dangers:

*All the blogging, the twittering, the Facebook activity ... is from a self selecting demographic – media switched on, westernised, reformist. We are getting the social media and user generated sites aiding and abetting the mainstream western media view of this as a massive liberal explosion in Iran.*⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Author interview with Richard Sambrook, June 2009.

⁵⁶ Reported by Sky News, June 2009 (<http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Iran-Election-Coverage-On-Twitter-Social-Media-Becomes-Vital-Tool-For-Iranian-Citizens/Article/200906315307209>)

⁵⁷ *Today Programme* interview, 16 June 2009 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8102000/8102226.stm).

From the Mousavi perspective this was sometimes seen as a straightforward and legitimate tactic; a corrective for a perceived lack of balance in the coverage within Iran. This tweet from a Mousavi supporter was typical:

*We have no national press coverage in Iran, everyone should help spread Mousavi's message. One Person = One Broadcaster. #IranElection.*⁵⁸

Such grass-roots involvement was supported by more party-based activity. One feed, mousavi1388,⁵⁹ was filled with exhortations to keep up the fight, in Persian and in English. Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page had over 100,000 members and included regular polls and links to videos and photographs of street protests.



Figure 14. Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page announces 'You are the Media, we are one!'

The mainstream media in its coverage took a mainly pragmatic approach to these issues. They felt outflanked in terms of speed, previously an area many had built their brands around, but all felt uncomfortable running unverified reports and made every attempt to find corroboration before publication or broadcast. Lila King, the executive in charge of CNN's iReport, said staff members tried to 'triangulate the details' of an event by corroborating stories with other contributors in a given area. CNN also employed Farsi speakers to listen to the chants of protest videos or identify locations in Tehran.⁶⁰ Where they couldn't be sure about the facts, but felt the pictures had the ring of truth, they labelled the pictures accordingly. In total CNN received almost 6,000 Iran-related submissions and approved just over 200 for use on television.

The *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, CNN and the Huffington Post made the information emerging from social networks a central part of their coverage, allocating specific resources to provide a filtered take of the activity on Twitter, Facebook and blogs. On the web, this technique is known as 'live blogging' or 'live text commentary', whilst on TV it involves allocating a social media correspondent to monitor and report directly on activity (see Figures 15 and 16). At the *Guardian*, Matthew Weaver spent ten days

⁵⁸ Tweet authenticated and published by the *New York Times*, June 2009.

⁵⁹ 1388 is the year in the Persian calendar.

⁶⁰ Author interview with Lila King, June 2009.

blogging the events. When rallies and conflicts occur, ‘first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the video and then the wires’, he said. ‘What people are saying at one point in the day is then confirmed by more conventional sources four or five hours later.’⁶¹

This activity caught the imagination of the White House, which controversially arranged for Huffington Post blogger Nico Pitney to ask a question at President Obama’s regular press conference. The question, asked on behalf of the people of Iran, was chosen by Pitney from a long list of crowdsourced questions from social media sources – the first time this has ever happened.

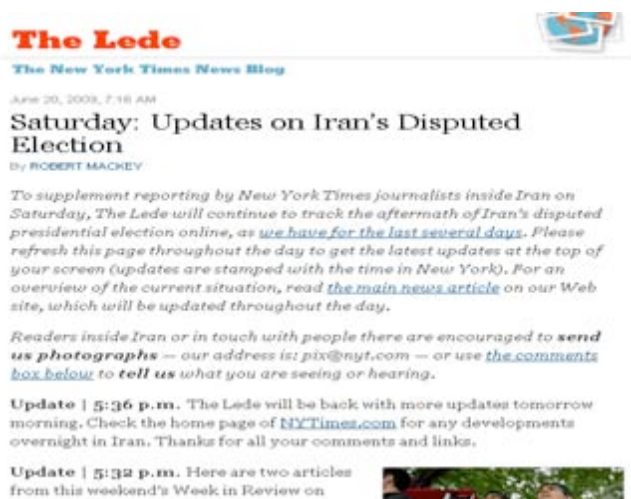


Figure 15. The Lede Blog at NYT.com kept a running commentary on events.



Figure 16. CNN’s Josh Levs in the role of Twitter correspondent (June 2009).

By engaging in this activity, mainstream organisations saw a number of direct benefits during the Iran crisis:

⁶¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>

1. Extended newsgathering possibilities mainly pictures, but also including leads on stories, usually through live blog reporters engaging directly with networks.
2. A single copy-tasting function for social web activity, saving time elsewhere in the organisation and reduced scope for mistakes.
3. An accumulation of credit within communities like Twitter, including a significant number of links back to their websites or broadcasts

These benefits were demonstrated when shocking footage emerged of the death on camera of teenager Neda Agha-Soltan, an apparently innocent bystander to the protests. The footage was identified and edited/sanitised to make it suitable for a mainstream audience. Although verification was difficult, the pictures were published/broadcast with appropriate caveats. Finally, the journalists used crowdsourcing techniques, and their credit within networks like Twitter, to find out more about Neda and her background. Robert Mackey who writes the Lede Blog for the *New York Times* interviewed correspondents and contacts in Iran to build up a picture, which made it into the main paper and a separate item on New York Times TV.⁶² In turn, these follow-up items were heavily recommended via links on Twitter, where a separate #neda tag was set up.

Despite headlines about how Iran had become the first Twitter revolution, there is little evidence (as in Moldova⁶³ and G20) that it was used as a primary tool for organising protests. Twitter was mainly used to share information around the world, to link to and highlight mainstream media reports and user-generated content. In a sense, Twitter became the real-time glue for highlighting and filtering all of the activity on other websites and social networks. Andrew Keen, author of the critical book *Cult of the Amateur* says the lesson of the Iranian elections is that:

*Twitter is a great real-time tool for distributing opinion, but it is no replacement for curated media coverage of the crisis.*⁶⁴

Indeed, it remains the case that most people still saw the protests through the lens of the mainstream media, either via the websites of major news organisations or particularly via TV bulletins.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is significant that, as the PEJ has demonstrated, the social media elements were so prominent and so vital for effective storytelling.

Mark Jones, Head of Communities for Reuters, says that stories like Iran demonstrate that the role of a traditional news organisation in a breaking story is changing significantly:

Our job now is packaging raw feeds from many sources and filtering it to provide audience big enough to make a difference. It is all becoming much

⁶² A young woman's fate resonates (<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2009/06/22/world/1194841118796/woman-s-death-a-symbol-of-iran-s-crisis.html?hp>).

⁶³ Twitter was reported to have played a role in organising mass protests against the results of Moldovan elections in April 2009, even though the network had only a tiny number of active users in the country.

⁶⁴ <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Iran-Election-Coverage-On-Twitter-Social-Media-Becomes-Vital-Tool-For-Iranian-Citizens/Article/200906315307209?>

⁶⁵ BBC 10 o'clock news averaged over 5m viewers in the week 12–20 June. The BBC website also saw increases in traffic with average daily user counts of 5m during the same period.

*more complex, for journalists who need to monitor a huge number of sources, and more complex for consumers too.*⁶⁶

In future, news organisations are going to need to get used to the fact that they will always be running behind the social networks. Social media evangelists will need to recognise that there will always be a deficit of trust, context and perspective within these networks. Ultimately, consumers will decide how they wish to balance these factors and where they wish to place their trust and their eyeballs.

3.2 Protests and the rise of real-time accountability

In April 2009 world leaders gathered in London to try to bring the global financial system back from the brink of disaster. On the streets, events were also moving quickly as protest groups battled police, while half a mile away, bankers in Levis sipped Chablis in a bar overlooking the Bank of England.

This was the type of fast-moving, multi-faceted story which has traditionally challenged both broadcast and print media. But this was also a story where powerful new social media tools helped usher in a new era of real-time coverage, and where a chance video taken by a New York investment banker helped hold the authorities to account.

The G20 was the first major news event which saw mainstream news organisations trying to harness tools such as Twitter,⁶⁷ Audio Boo,⁶⁸ and Scribble Live⁶⁹ in an organised way. *The Times*, *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, Sky and the BBC all had reporters sending multimedia updates from the streets and the results were then displayed back on a Google or Microsoft map interface, which helped to lay out in a visual way what was going on in different pockets of London – Bishopgate, the Bank of England and the G20 conference centre. Janine Gibson, Editor of Guardian.co.uk, felt social media tools helped their coverage come alive in a way that had previously been difficult for newspaper sites to achieve by constantly updating a linear story:⁷⁰

*What you wanted to know, what you wanted to say to correspondents was ... What can you see? What are you doing? and that is of course what Twitter is. Microblogging, can often seem reductionist and absurd, but what it brought (to this story) was that tiny nip of information juxtaposed against somebody else's tiny nip of information, which helps you build a picture without a heavy handed editor coming in and saying I am reading it like this.*⁷¹

⁶⁶ Author interview with Mark Jones, Reuters head of global communities, June 2009.

⁶⁷ Coverage was aggregated around so-called hashtags such as #G20.

⁶⁸ A service that allows short audio blogs to be recorded and uploaded from a mobile phone.

⁶⁹ Twitter related aggregation service designed for live events.

⁷⁰ Guardian.co.uk/g20

⁷¹ Guardian Media Talk Podcast: *Twitter @ G20* – April 2009.

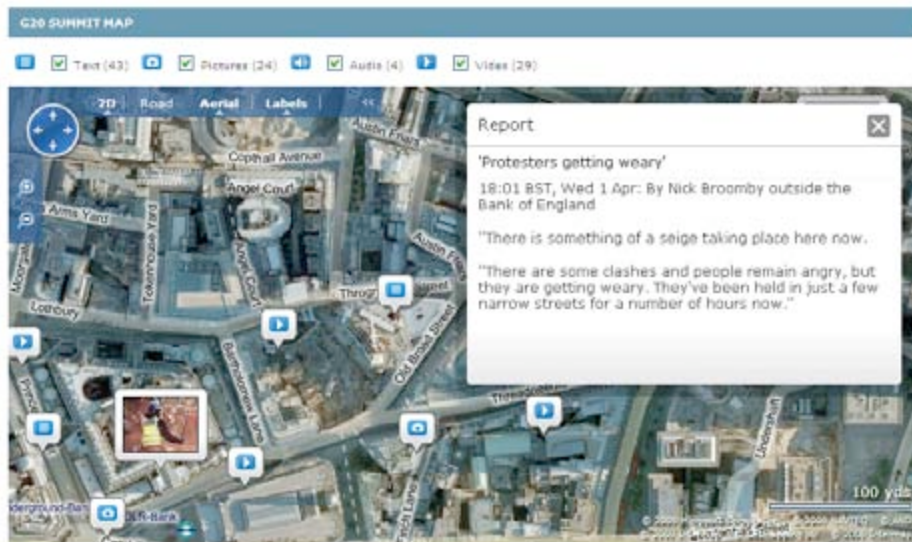


Figure 17. BBC News coverage showing pictures, videos and short text updates overlaid on a map.

Social media tools, because they are disaggregated, proved ideal for mainstream news organisations trying to tell the story of a disaggregated event. But they also speak to two other aspects of the changing news landscape:

- a growing audience interest in real-time news
- the increasing ease with which anyone can join in with news creation.

Broadcast consultant and commentator James Robinson argues it also puts more control in the hands of audiences:

It is almost part of democratisation of media: you decide which bits you believe; which bits you don't believe; which bit is relevant and make up your own view of the story. It is a great complement to other media, which have a trusted brand and great analysis and great writers. It is another part of the journalistic process.⁷²

The BBC also used newsgathering correspondents for the first time to file using Twitter, as well as SMS and email. Website Editor Steve Herrmann says that it changed the way the BBC covered the story, providing frequent updates that 'allowed us to build a nuanced, full picture of the protests in real time on a map'. But he points out that the BBC's coverage was, in this case, focused on experimenting with the format and tools, rather than embracing the user-generated possibilities of Twitter. Indeed, in practice, the BBC says that many contributions from users on Twitter during the protests proved difficult to verify and, like the *Guardian*, output mainly relied on BBC voices on the ground.

The issue of verification was made more difficult at the G20 as many of the key players were also to be found using the same tools to try to influence events, either directly or through the media. The story of how politicians, protest groups and bloggers used social media tools to get their own messages out was told by a group of students at City University and by BBC

⁷² Ibid.

technology correspondent Rory Cellan-Jones on his blog.⁷³ Stripping away the hype and the fog of battle, the conclusion seemed to be that Twitter was mainly used in broadcast mode, often just relaying messages from the mainstream media itself. It proved pretty ineffective as a tool for discussion, communication or as a way of organising protesters. This seemed to have happened via text messages, face to face meetings and the old-fashioned megaphone. And as the following tweet demonstrates, we should not underestimate the practical difficulties in getting phone, and especially data signals, out of a crowded area: 'Mobile coverage v bad prob due to number of anarchists also using iPhones'.

The second crucial aspect of the G20 media story was how a video shot by a bystander exposed apparently incomplete police explanations about the death of Ian Tomlinson. The video was made public, not directly on YouTube, but through a traditional newspaper, the *Guardian*. Steve Busfield, Head of Media and Technology coverage, says that the story saw the light of day through a mix of old and new media techniques:

*Paul Lewis, the reporter who got the story, spent a long time chasing it down, trying to find people who were there. There was a lot of footwork involved ... and yet the footage comes from the new era of citizen journalism where someone in the street with phone or camera can happen to catch the crucial moment for the story.*⁷⁴

The G20 has thrown up more evidence about how user generated activities complement – rather than replace – the mainstream media. In this case, the *Guardian's* traditional reporters were able to follow the story through, as well as provide the necessary mass audience to force a change of tack. But it is also interesting to note that *Guardian* was chosen to receive the video partly because they were already active in new citizen networks.⁷⁵

More widely, this story seems to have turned George Orwell's nightmare vision of a Big Brother society on its head. Now it is 'us watching them'. Author and journalist Nik Gowing argues that new information technologies and dynamics are together driving a new wave of democratisation and accountability:⁷⁶

The core implications are twofold. First, this new technical reality has dramatically foreshortened the news and information cycle from a few hours to often no more than a few minutes. Second, those cellphones and digital cameras of the proliferation of new 'information doers' have swiftly modified and broadened the assumed definitions of the media landscape in a crisis. The new, ubiquitous transparency they create, sheds light where it is often assumed officially there will be darkness.

The lessons from the coverage of the G20 and the Iranian street protests are being examined by authorities, media organisations and by journalism schools. All of the actors are reassessing how they need to respond to the

⁷³ Rory Cellan Jones, 'Do Anarchists Tweet?' BBC website, 2 April 2009 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/technology/2009/04/do_anarchists_tweet.html).

⁷⁴ Guardian Media Talk Podcast: April 2009.

⁷⁵ Author interviews with Guardian employees, June 2009.

⁷⁶ Nik Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans* (Reuters Institute, 2009).

shortening news cycle; how they can filter and authenticate more quickly the growing range of perspectives and sources; how they can influence events before they get pushed around by them. As Nik Gowing says:

Too often, the knee-jerk institutional response continues to be one of denial as if this new broader, fragmented, redefined media landscape does not exist. Institutional assumptions of commanding the information high ground in a crisis are from a different era.

But if, as Nik Gowing suggests, the instant scrutiny created by the new digital landscape can make or break reputations at breathtaking speed, the responsibilities of traditional media organisations will be more acute than ever. And that will require new skills and training in social media techniques as well as great judgement about when and how to reflect the information and conversation that is swirling around a story. Go too fast, and you risk undermining the credibility and trust of the brand, too slow, and you risk being left behind.

For mainstream news organisations, both these stories have shown that a new grammar is emerging of real-time news coverage – one which involves and reflects the work of bystanders with cameras, as well as drawing on professional news staff using microblogging tools. As the BBC, the *Guardian* and others draw up new guidelines for covering these type of events in the future, they stress this will appear alongside traditional analysis and provision of relevant background and context. This may be an alternative source of real-time news, but it will not replace rolling TV, or the proper considered analysis of an event, once the dust has settled. It is perhaps best to think of social media as a supplementary dimension to the coverage of real-time events. The direction of travel may be clear but the destination remains uncertain.

4. Changing journalistic practices

This chapter explores how social media tools and the growth of participation have affected the work of two journalists, at different stages of their careers, followed by a wider discussion about the impact on journalistic workflow.

4.1 BBC Business Editor Robert Peston

Robert Peston is the UK's most read blogger.⁷⁷ Regular updates from the former *Financial Times* journalist have become required reading during the current economic crisis. Indeed, the postings on his blog document the key moments in the collapse and subsequent rescue of the banking system over a two and a half year period. In most cases, such as the demise of Northern Rock, the pages of 'Peston's Picks' are where the stories have been broken. The blog was so successful that Peston was hauled up in front of a House of Commons select committee to explain the extraordinary influence of his reporting.

And yet Robert Peston's blog had humble beginnings, as a low-key email for internal communication, aimed at giving BBC staff 'more of a feeling for the language of business'. Even when it was launched to the public as a blog in January 2007, Peston had a dual purpose:

- to disseminate scoops, facts and ideas throughout the BBC, to inform output;
- to continue the work started by Jeff Randall,⁷⁸ to make the BBC the 'first resort' for people interested in business

It is clear that Peston primarily views his blog in a fairly traditional way, as another way of distributing content:

If you are an investigating journalist, as I have been for 25 years, you always find out more stuff than you can get into your broadcasts. Your ability to put out ideas, facts, scoops that won't quite work on bulletins or TV and radio is fantastic – because I feel I am making more use of the stuff I've found out.⁷⁹

But the blog has also had a number of other benefits, which speak more to the value of social media as a way of gathering better stories in the first place. He says it has established his credentials as a repository for the information that matters:

One of the things that helps you as a journalist is that you are seen as an authority on a particular subject, because if you are seen as an authority then people will come to you with ideas. And one of the ways that helps you become an authority and take ownership of a story is if you are doing more than the big exciting story but also doing the nitty gritty.

⁷⁷ There were 5–6 million unique users per week at the height of the financial crisis. Individual blog posts could receive up to 1 million page views per day. BBC server logs acquired June 2009.

⁷⁸ Jeff Randall, respected newspaper journalist, brought to the BBC after criticism of its business coverage.

⁷⁹ Author interview with Peston, May 2009.

Peston has not directly got scoops from the thousands of comments at the end of his postings, but he does read them carefully and he says that have helped him feel much closer to the audience:

The comments are fantastic, though you do get some that are fatuous and rude ... The key thing is that they give a sense of what resonates with people. And some people do have great ideas. It has certainly given lots of ideas angles to look at.

Two years on and Peston is still hugely enthusiastic about his blog. He thinks it has been instrumental in helping to explain a complex story to people who didn't think they were interested in business. The format, he says, allows breaking news and analysis to be handled with a speed and sophistication that wasn't possible before:

For me, the core of journalism remains the same things as when I started in 1983 – to understand the trends, work out who knows stuff, dig around, make contacts and win confidence in your primary journalism. That hasn't really changed but it is really fantastic in a fragmented world to get your information out to a maximum number of people and the combination of blog, radio, TV is unbeatable.

The only downside, he says, is the extra investment of time required to engage with readers. He is 'at the limits of his capacity to process information' and won't be moving on to Twitter any time soon. But he believes the blog and its interactivity is worthwhile and advises young journalists to engage with social media and blogs as early as possible in order to understand the full possibilities.

4.2 Guardian technology correspondent Jemima Kiss

Jemima Kiss has a burgeoning reputation as an influential technology journalist, not just for the stories she tells but for the way she tells them. A 'digital native', she is one of those that Editor Alan Rusbridger points to when talking about the future of journalism.⁸⁰

Jemima Kiss began experimenting with social media tools when she published a personal website, experimenting with new blog formats and linking with YouTube and other multimedia tools. More recently she has embraced Twitter, where she has over 12,000 individual followers. Two years after she signed up, she says it is a good time to reflect on its value to her as a journalist. She says Twitter can be difficult to get your head around but the key is to realise that it is about developing ongoing relationships:

It gives a voice and a face to my audience; it gives me a direct relationship with them. My 12,000 followers are the first people to read what I write and the first to comment on what I write. It is very valuable, you have a richness of connection that you don't have with people just passing through.⁸¹

⁸⁰ 'Always look to see what the technology journalists are doing. That is what we are all going to be doing in five years time', Institut für Medienpolitik, Berlin, April 2009 (<http://vimeo.com/4359127>).

⁸¹ Author interview with Jemima Kiss, June 2009.

She regularly asks her followers, who are mostly technology experts, for help. She calls it a 'brains trust' and gives the example of a recent piece on location-based iPhone applications. Within minutes, she had a list of suggestions as a starting point for her piece. She also regularly crowdsources questions for a technology podcast, which she helps to present:

When we were doing a series on 'start-up surgeries', we had a dozen good questions every time. It was a manageable good number. People really appreciate being asked, you feel more relevant and informed in putting together the piece and they feel more involved.

One of the interesting dilemmas around social media is the way in which it often blurs the professional and personal. Jemima Kiss's Twitter updates include regular details about the ups and downs of her pregnancy, her love of watching tennis, as well as the core technology side of her job. She accepts this might not be appropriate for all types of journalism but both she and her employer are comfortable with the mix. Kiss believes that a picture, a byline and some personal interaction help to break down the impersonal nature of electronic communication.

The formula certainly seems to be working. The *Guardian* technology section, of which Kiss is part, has more followers on Twitter than the number of people buying the print edition of the newspaper⁸² and these followers help drive a significant and growing percentage of traffic to the full stories on the website. In this way the newspaper has managed to persuade a committed group of people to act as unpaid advocates for the brand:

These are incredibly engaged people, they want to know first and be the ones to tell others, so they are the most valuable audience to have if you can get them to act on your behalf. They want to know the latest stuff as soon as it happens, real time.

Jemima Kiss accepts that Twitter can be seen as self-indulgent and it can sometimes be a time sink that diverts from more useful activity. On the other hand she finds that the brevity of short messaging can help with the filtering and processing of information and, as a technology journalist, she has no doubt that it is a good investment of her time. The trick, she says, is to be disciplined and to have an open mind about the possibilities.

4.3 Same values, new tools

As the case studies in this chapter illustrate, one of the consequences of social media – with its conventions of fans and followers – is to enhance the role of the star individual or correspondent. It is no coincidence that the following of celebrities has become one of the main attractions of Twitter. Now journalists can become global celebrities too.

In a recent speech, the *Guardian's* Director of Digital Content, Emily Bell, highlighted the case of Robert Peston as an example of how trust is now placed in people as much as brands. One of his blog posts can generate up to a million page impressions, as audiences look to have a personal relationship with a trusted source: 'He is a classic example of where the BBC, the country's

⁸² There were 675,000 followers in June 2009, compared with average UK sales of *Guardian/Observer* of 310,788 in April 2009. It is likely that a large proportion of the followers will be inactive and none of them directly contribute revenue.

largest journalistic employer, is moving from a bulletin-led model to a correspondent-led model.⁸³ This trend towards the star correspondent may not be completely new, but social media are exacerbating a tendency highlighted by Andrew Currah⁸⁴ to reward journalists for their personal 'clickstream' activity, rather than their contribution to the wider brand values. At the very least, a huge personal Twitter or Facebook following could increase the individual journalist's bargaining capacity over pay or bring the journalist to the attention of another publication.

The way in which personal brands work in this space is an increasing issue for many news organisations. Should all journalists be represented in this way, or just a selected few? How should these new demands be balanced with other commitments? The more informal nature of interaction, the always-on nature of these tools, and the frequent blurring of personal and professional content has led the *Wall Street Journal* and Bloomberg, amongst others, to draw up guidelines that place limits around their journalist's activity. BBC Director General Mark Thompson says that BBC journalists who are 'of interest to the public at large, because of the name and the title they've got', have to consider their use of social media carefully:

*There isn't really a Chinese Wall you can draw between personal opinion and what appears on the BBC – the same thing with the blogs and the tweets. What you can't do easily is take off the cloak of the BBC and put it back on at will.*⁸⁵

The BBC Technology correspondent Rory Cellan-Jones is acutely aware of these dilemmas. As one of the corporation's most high-profile bloggers and tweeters, he posts pictures and information about his dogs and children, alongside thoughtful opinion pieces and breaking news on technology. He says it is important to be aware of the dangers, but journalists need to understand it and to dip their toes in the water. For Cellan-Jones one of the key benefits of social media has been to help give a new status to specialist journalists, who would often struggle to get airtime under the old broadcast model:

*In Television for years you could **only** do the big stories. If there was a development in Lloyds TSB, you would go to the Editor of the 10 (o'clock news) and they would say sorry, but it is a bit obscure. A blog is place to satisfy your professional pride in between the big stories.*⁸⁶

A key challenge for many news organisations is to encourage more journalists to engage with these tools, and to use them for making contacts, for crowdsourcing and as a channel for their reporting. The BBC and the *Guardian* have embarked on, or have completed, training courses to raise awareness amongst all their journalists. The *Guardian* also relies on evangelists like Kevin Anderson, who try out new techniques and work with journalists over time to make the change:

⁸³ Emily Bell lecture to media students, Falmouth, May 2009

(<http://publicserviceblog.wordpress.com/2009/05/08/lecture-to-falmouth>).

⁸⁴ Andrew Currah, *What's Happening to our News* (Reuters Institute, 2009).

⁸⁵ Mark Thompson, speech at Charles Wheeler Memorial Lecture, June 2009

(<http://www.journalism.co.uk/2/articles/534512.php>).

⁸⁶ Author interview with Rory Cellan-Jones, May 2009.

The challenge for me is that there always has to be an editorial justification for this ... just to use shiny tools is not enough, it has to allow us to enhance the journalism, to do something that we couldn't have done before.⁸⁷

For the *New York Times* a key part of their strategy has been to target high-profile journalists and offer them support and encouragement. Soraya Durabi, who has worked with Pulitzer prize-winning columnist Nick Kristof, says the key is to find journalists with the right mindset:

There is a reason why somebody like Nick (Kristof) has hundreds of thousands of followers on these platforms. It is because he has a knack for it and the journalistic instinct to use them correctly. I think it is a mistake if you just give a blanket tutorial to your whole Newsroom and say this is Twitter this is how you should use it. That is a mistake.⁸⁸

In practice, visible and consistent use of social media by senior correspondents has been one of the most effective ways of driving change in companies like the *New York Times* and CNN. Rather than seeing it as a time-consuming add-on, the most successful practitioners have built social media into their journalistic workflows – and made it work for them. Social media has opened up new opportunities for some to widen the impact of their journalism; for others, it is making the sourcing of information and contacts easier and quicker. But so far at least, the use of new tools has not led to any fundamental rewrite of the rule book – just a few tweaks round the edges. As with so many aspects of the internet, social media are providing a useful extra layer of functionality, enabling stories to be told in new ways, not changing the heart of what journalists do. ‘Same values, new tools’, sums up the core thinking in most newsrooms.

⁸⁷ Author interview with Kevin Anderson, June 2009.

⁸⁸ Author interview with Soraya Durabi, June 2009.

5. The role and importance of social media networks

5.1 Popularity and usage

Social networks are not just useful tools for journalists, they are also powerful new aggregators and distribution networks, which threaten to further disrupt the already uncertain economics of the internet.

The 'click and link economy' has tended to work against traditional publishers, disaggregating content and allowing search engines and web portals to take a significant slice of the available revenues. Now, social networks like Facebook are becoming the portals of the twenty-first century: a key starting point for web journeys and a place where audiences are spending more and more time.

The 2009 *Internet in Britain* report⁸⁹ confirmed the extraordinary rise in popularity of social networking in the last few years; 49 per cent of internet users had created or updated a social networking profile, compared with just 17 per cent two years before. And this is a global phenomenon; Facebook has come from nowhere to become the world's second most popular website⁹⁰ after Google. Only a year ago, it had fewer users than a global news website like CNN. Today, it dwarfs CNN on the web, by 12–16 times (see Figure 18).

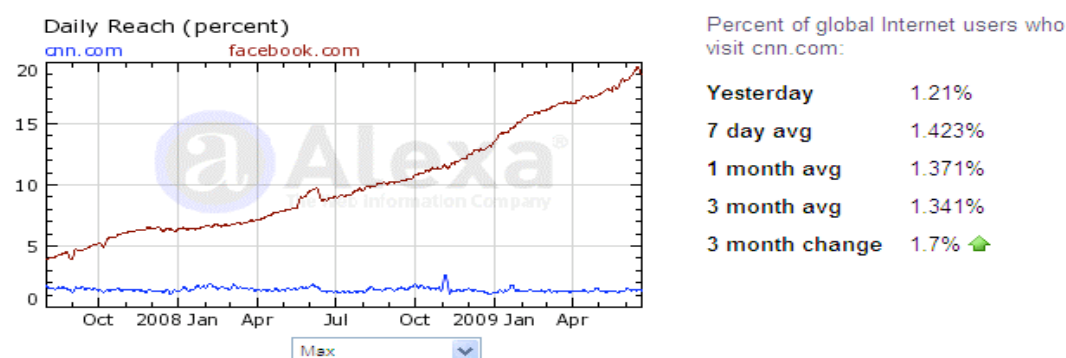


Figure 18. Global reach, Facebook vs. CNN Sept. 2008–May 2009.
Source: Alexa Research accesses via www.alexa.com (June 2009).

But the growth in popularity of social networks – and the resultant broadening audience – is only half the story. Social networks also outperform news sites in terms of engagement. Almost 20 per cent of all time spent on the internet is now spent on one of these sites.⁹¹ Average daily time spent on Facebook is 25 minutes, compared with around 5 minutes for a popular news site (Figure 19).

⁸⁹ William Dutton, Ellen Helsper and Monica Gerber, *Internet in Britain 2009* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2009).

⁹⁰ Hitwise top 20 websites (<http://www.hitwise.co.uk>).

⁹¹ Nielsen research shows one in six UK minutes (17%) spent with these sites, 10% globally (<http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/nielsen-news/social-networking-new-global-footprint>).

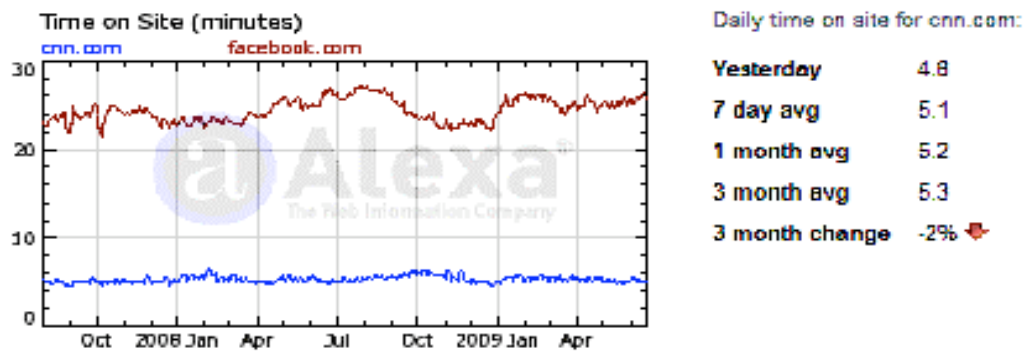


Figure 19. Global Time spent Facebook vs CNN Sept. 2008–May 2009.
Source: Alexa Research accessed via www.alexa.com (June 2009)

And social networks are significant in another way. They score well with young people, the demographic which newspapers fear will never buy their products and which is beginning to desert traditional broadcast news and current affairs programmes. Social networking is twice as popular with 16–34 years olds as with the general population.⁹²

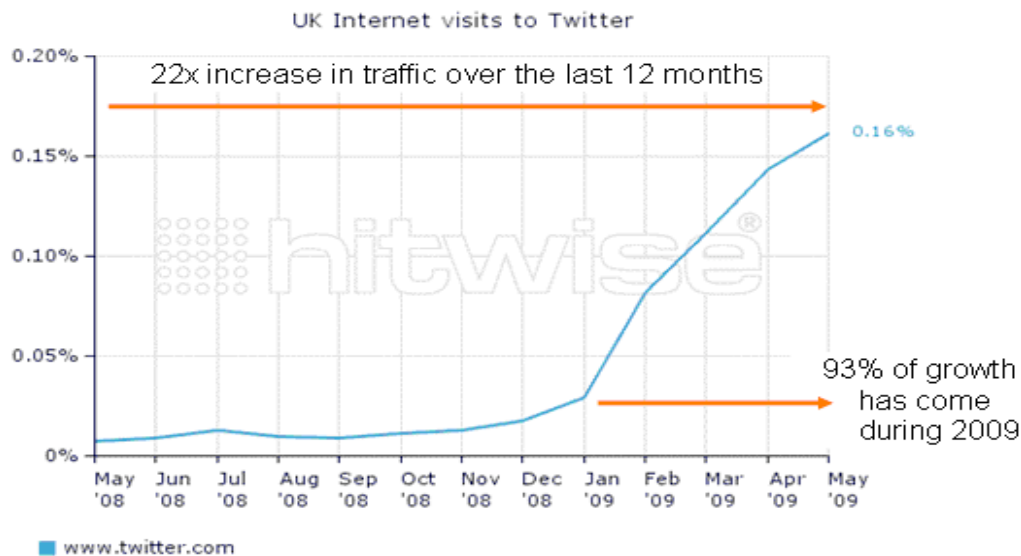


Figure 20. Growth of Twitter in UK.
Source: Hitwise research accessed via www.hitwise.com (June 2009)

Different social networks have different characteristics. Facebook attracts a more mainstream and slightly older audience but has also become the default for students. Twitter, the fastest growing social network (see Figure 20) – and the most talked about – is far smaller, but is used extensively for information and news sharing amongst professionals. Its audience is younger and more technically aware. News-related social networks like Digg, Stumbleupon and Reddit are popular in the USA but have made less headway in the UK. My Space and Bebo have a much younger demographic and are focused more around entertainment media.

⁹² TGI data (2008) showing 52% usage in 16–34 ABC1 and 36% 16–34 C2DE compared with 20% for general population (total audiences not just connected audiences).

Rank	Website	Domain	Market Share*
1	Facebook	www.facebook.com	37.57%
2	YouTube	www.youtube.com	17.05%
3	Bebo	www.bebo.com	9.11%
4	MySpace	www.myspace.com	5.01%
5	Yahoo! Answers	answers.yahoo.com	1.10%
6	Nasza Klasa	www.nasza-klasa.pl	0.72%
7	Gumtree.com	www.gumtree.com	0.65%
8	Taqqed	www.taqqed.com	0.64%
9	BBC h2g2	www.bbc.co.uk/dna	0.62%
10	MoneysavingexpertForums	forums.moneysavingexpert.com	0.57%
...
23	Twitter	www.twitter.com	0.24%

Figure 21. Top UK social networks, week ending 17 January 2009.

Source: Hitwise research accessed via www.hitwise.com (June 2009)

The popularity and time spent with social networking sites is changing the way people spend their time online and the way in which they share and interact in their daily lives. This is creating new challenges for the media and advertising industries. Social networks provide competition to traditional publishers for consumer attention and at the same time they are opening up new ways of engaging and connecting with audiences.

It is important to note that the usage of social sites is highly uneven. A recent Harvard Business School survey found that 10 per cent of Twitter users generate more than 90 per cent of the content and most people have only ‘tweeted’ once.⁹³ This suggests that many people are using Twitter more as a one-way publishing service than a two-way, peer-to-peer communication network.

This participation inequality should come as little surprise, as earlier studies of Wikipedia and other social tools suggest that active participation is almost always a minority sport (1:9:90 rule see Figure 22). Mainstream news organisations need to be extremely careful in suggesting that activity is representative or in thinking that feedback from these groups is in any way typical. None of this undermines the case for social media, as 1–10 per cent still represents a huge expansion in overall participation levels, with network effects leading to a disproportionate impact.

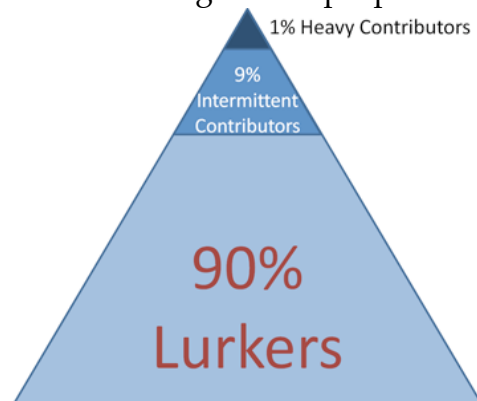


Figure 22. Participation inequality: Bell Communications research.

⁹³ Harvard Business School (May 2009) surveyed 3,000 users (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8089508.stm>).

5.2 Changing nature of recommendation

'He's dead. It's all over Facebook', was how the news of Michael Jackson's death (June 2009) was broken in the home of the author of this report. Another social networker wrote: 'I don't recall where I was when Buddy Holly died. But I'll recall where I was when Michael Jackson died. I was on Twitter.'⁹⁴ As we've seen in the case studies in Chapter 3, social networks are increasingly where news is broken, sometimes running hours ahead of traditional news organisations. Although most social networks did not start out with this intention, the sharing of news and information has become an increasingly important part of the mix. On Twitter 30 per cent of all the conversations related to Michael Jackson in the hours following his death; 15 per cent of conversations related to Iran a week earlier.

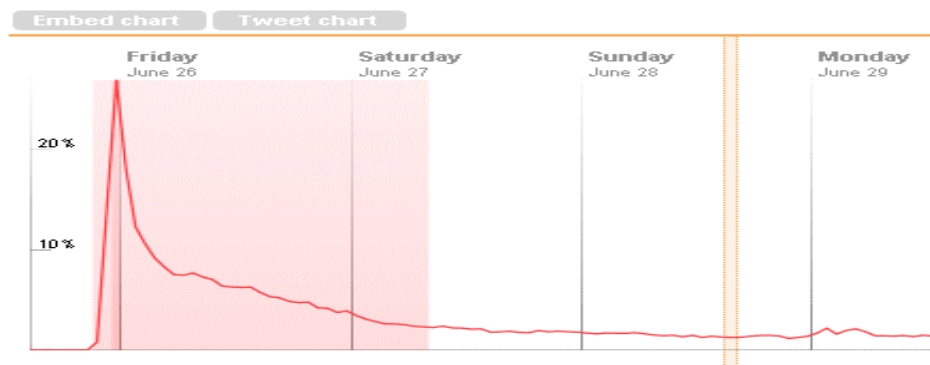


Figure 23. Hourly tweets containing words Michael Jackson June 2009.
Source: <http://twist.flaptor.com/>

Overall, the combination of Facebook, Twitter, Digg and others is beginning to provide an alternative source of traffic to Google. The *Telegraph* says that 8 per cent of its traffic now comes from links sent around in social networking sites,⁹⁵ the BBC figure is smaller but has grown by 150 per cent in nine months in the UK (September 2008–June 2009), with Facebook making the biggest contribution. The *Guardian* says that its technology section now gets more referrals from Twitter than from Google News. But these figures almost certainly under-report the true impact of these networks, because updates from mobile phones and widely used special Twitter desktop clients do not show up in log reports.

There are three key reasons for the growth of news and information in social networks:

1. Facebook created a news and activity feed in September 2006, which has become a default setting on a user's homepage. This has encouraged more linking to mainstream news sites. It has since made it easier to include links and recommendations from other news-related sites.
2. Mainstream audiences are now using social networks and they have brought their interests and preoccupations, including the sharing of

⁹⁴ Twitterer 'toomarrowous' quoted in *New York Times* (<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/michael-jackson-tops-the-charts-on-twitter>).

⁹⁵ <http://www.malcolmcoles.co.uk/blog/telegraph-traffic-social-sites/> and author interview with Julian Sambles.

- news. Facebook's dramatic growth in global audience (December 2007–December 2008) came from people aged 35–49.
3. Websites have provided icons or buttons to allow easy sharing and linking and otherwise promoted social networks (Figure 24). Audio video integration with YouTube has proved a huge boon because of the younger demographic; now news sites are doing the same.

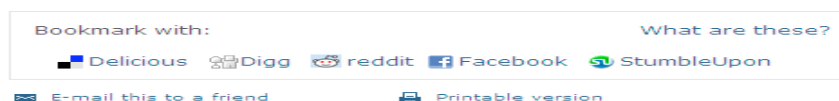


Figure 24. Social bookmark links at the bottom of BBC News stories.

Newspapers and media companies have started to establish specialist marketing groups to exploit and monitor the impact of content in these spaces. The *Telegraph* has focused its efforts on targeting specific networks, notably Digg, with which it has a close relationship and very high return click-throughs. The *New York Times* has set up a 'Buzz' marketing department⁹⁶ which pays particular attention to the different social networks and the different audiences they could attract.

The *New York Times* says that, month by month, referrals are increasing so steadily and so significantly that they are impossible to ignore. Now, the *New York Times* is developing applications, contests and fan pages for key correspondents⁹⁷ throughout the social web, selecting different content for each platform to attract the right demographic.



Figure 25. Nick Kristof Fan page on YouTube.

To understand the impact of these networks further, I worked with *BBC Click*, a weekly television programme on technology, which airs on the BBC News channel in the UK and also on BBC World TV. *Click* has over 1 million followers on Twitter, a function of being one of the default choices when users initially sign up to the service.

Each week, the staff at *BBC Click* post a number of tweets, along with links to stories on their own website or useful resources elsewhere.

⁹⁶ The idea of Buzz or viral marketing emerged from Yahoo in the 1990s.

⁹⁷ Nick Kristof offered a prize to a young journalist to travel with him to Africa, where the winner made videos for his YouTube channel.

Sometimes these tweets are picked up and passed on (re-tweeted) by others, creating a network effect. Figure 26 shows the path around the world of one tweet highlighting a story on speech recognition. The tweet was passed on (re-tweeted) nine times through four continents and a small percentage of followers in each network clicked on the link to the full story. The result was 4,012 additional click-throughs to the Click Online website, 33 per cent of the total page views (12,000) for this story.⁹⁸



Figure 26. The path of one tweet from BBC Click Online.

As this example demonstrates, Twitter can produce dramatic results as a viral marketing channel, but it is not yet clear that this success can be replicated outside the technology genre. Research suggests that traditional news publishers who pump out generic news feeds tend to have low click-through rates. Robin Goad, UK Director of audience specialist Hitwise says that, where journalists are authentically engaging with the Twitter community, they typically have more success:

Automated feeds get most followers but least click throughs. They tend to spit out three or four stories at a time and look a bit like spam. On the other hand if you have specific journalists, who are asking questions, retweeting, forwarding links, engaging properly, they will get much higher click through rate because they will be seen as a trusted source.⁹⁹

Hitwise research indicates that if you follow this approach, you can get click-through rates of up to 10 per cent. For an account with 5,000 followers, you might expect to get 200 click-throughs from your standard followers and perhaps 500 if you can trigger re-tweets.

⁹⁸ It was re-tweeted by amongst others a communications expert in New York, an entrepreneur in Niagara Falls, a speech recognition company in Cambridge, an Indian software engineer, a Iranian with a network of contacts across the Middle East and Aberystwyth Online, a hub for information about social networking and technology based in Wales.

⁹⁹ Author interview with Robin Goad, UK research director Hitwise (July 2009).

The *New York Times* is one company moving away from automated feeds, providing more of a human touch with the wording and selection of content. A team of three people work with the newsroom on a daily basis to tweak intros and select stories for Facebook, YouTube, Digg and Twitter. Going forward, Soraya Darabi believes that more effort will be required to tailor content for each network:

You need to understand each platform, who is fanning you, the demographics of who is fanning you, what kind of news you are creating, what kind of news you are creating that they may not know that you offer, that would appeal to them.

The *Telegraph* and CNN have similar sized teams doing similar work (often combined with SEO). A key element of their strategy relates to the ‘*personal brands*’ that tend to flourish in social networks. These teams (though based in marketing) also work closely with editorial and with correspondents like Henry Winter (*Telegraph*), Nick Kristof (*NYT*) and Rick Sanchez to manage and monitor brand pages in these networks.

Already, we are seeing the beginnings of an industry to advise and support media companies get the best out of social networks. In this sense, social media marketing (SMM)¹⁰⁰ looks set to join search engine marketing (SEM) as an essential skill-set for the modern publisher. However, as we’ve seen, key to success will be ensuring that these new techniques are fully and appropriately integrated into existing editorial processes. Marketing departments will need to work with journalists more closely than ever before to manage their content and brands successfully in so many different spaces.

5.3 Business models and the future of the social web

The social web is only a few years old; a period characterised by rapid innovation, experimentation and a certain amount of hype. But as these sites move into middle age, a series of issues are emerging around interoperability, privacy and the search for viable business models. Given the growing importance of social networks to modern news organisations, the way in which these issues are resolved could have a significant impact on the way journalism develops.

¹⁰⁰ SMM or social media marketing is not yet a widely used term but some SEO companies are extending their expertise in this area.

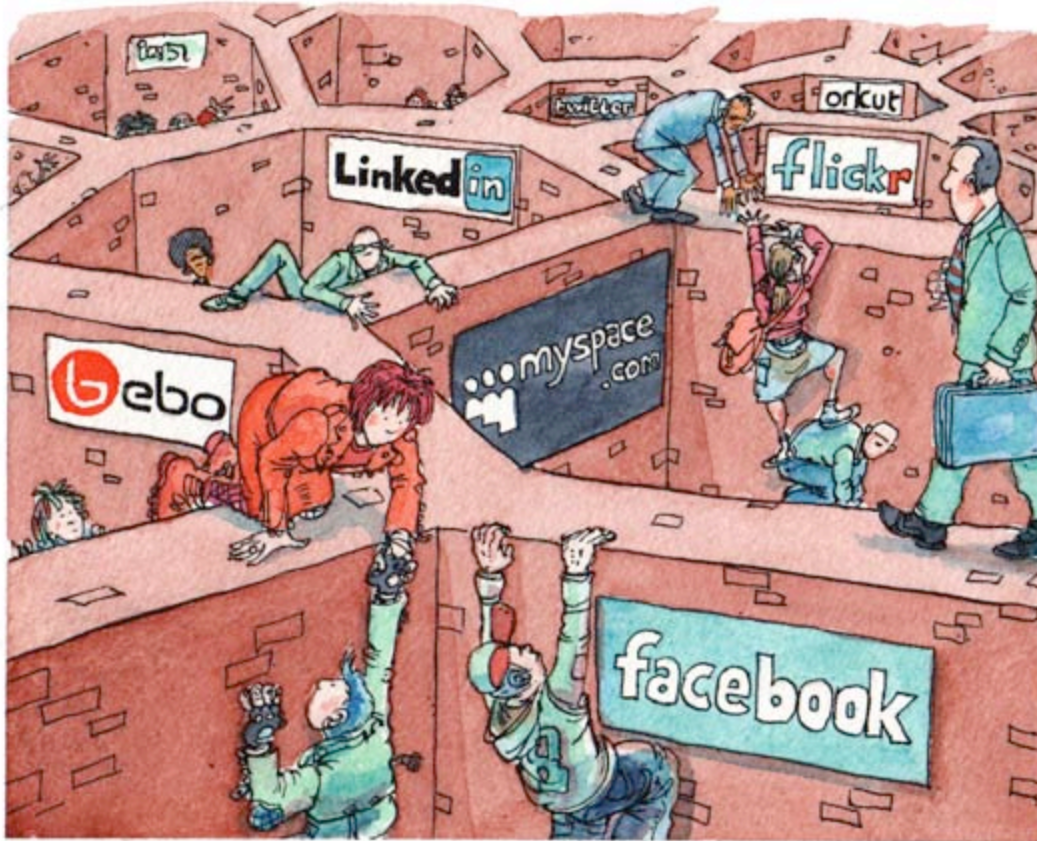


Figure 27. Consumer confusion with multiple networks and personas
Copyright David Simonds.

One of the biggest barriers to the use of social networks is the difficulty in handling multiple profiles, passwords and personas. This messy, inefficient and multi-siloed world is well-illustrated in Figure 27. Today's social experience is disjointed because consumers have separate identities in each social network they visit. One of the biggest changes over the next few years is likely to be the growth of interoperability, with the emergence of portable identity systems like Facebook Connect, Google and Open ID. In a report on the *Future of the Social Web*,¹⁰¹ Jeremiah K. Owyang argues that portable identities are just the beginning of this transformation, in which the web will evolve step by step from separate social sites into a shared social experience:

Consumers will rely on their peers as they make online decisions, whether or not brands choose to participate. Socially connected consumers will strengthen communities and shift power away from brands and CRM systems; eventually this will result in empowered communities defining the next generation of products.

Breaking of barriers between networks would fuel the growth and the value of all social networks, by effectively increasing the size of those networks, allowing news and information to be monitored, gathered and spread even

¹⁰¹ Jeremiah K. Owyang, *The Future of the Social Web* (Forrester Research, 2009) (<http://www.forrester.com/Research/Document/Excerpt/0,7211,46970,00.html>).

more effectively.¹⁰² We are already seeing networks linking together with initiatives like Google Friend Connect, Open ID and Facebook Connect.¹⁰³ Figure 28 shows the start of this process with an Obama press conference hosted on Facebook, but advertised on Twitter, and for many people the click-through would have been seamless, with no further login required. 10,000 people clicked the link within seconds were able to participate in a global conversation, as well as talk privately with their existing friends and contacts.



Figure 28. Obama press conference uses twitter to get an audience for a Facebook-hosted event.

Interoperability clearly brings benefits to audiences, but it raises deeply contentious issues over who should own an individual's online identity and, by implication, who should be able to profit from the information that surrounds this. If identity is too tied into a particular system (like Facebook or Google) there is a fear that this will give them too much power and influence. Many news providers would feel more comfortable with an open identity system like Open ID, which allows individuals to control all aspects of their own data and has been designed 'not to crumble if one company turns evil or goes out of business'.¹⁰⁴ Some mainstream organisations like the *New York*

¹⁰² This effect is known as Metcalf's law, which states that the 'value' or 'power' of a network increases in proportion to the square of the number of nodes on the network (<http://www-ec.njit.edu/~robertso/infosci/metcalf.html>).

¹⁰³ An initiative to allow any other website to link in with Facebook's publicly available profile information and other services.

¹⁰⁴ Open ID UK website (<http://www.openid.co.uk>).

Times and the BBC are also experimenting with their own social networks,¹⁰⁵ as a way of keeping some control of user experience and the interface with a growing number of networks.

Related to this is the economic viability and ownership of the social networking services themselves. Until now, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have found it difficult to monetise their considerable traffic. Audiences have become used to getting these services for free and until recently advertisers showed a preference for working with traditional media brands, rather than risk juxtaposing their trusted clients with questionable user-generated content.

Facebook lost advertisers in the UK in August 2007 when they found their advertisements (Vodafone, eBay and First Direct amongst others) running on a Facebook group page dedicated to the right-wing British National party.¹⁰⁶ A further setback came when they had to withdraw behaviourally targeted advertisements after user protest over privacy concerns.¹⁰⁷

Despite these setbacks, social networks are coming under intense pressure to find new revenue streams. They have success with their audiences, but almost all networks are running at a huge loss. With current business models unsustainable, the outlook remains volatile, and analysts believe social networks will move away from advertising and try to use the data they collect to help brands better target users.

Twitter founder Biz Stone recently confirmed this direction, when talking about premium services for brands. Whilst audiences are likely to continue to get social networking for free, mainstream organisations will need to be careful not to become too dependent on services which may end up costing money in the future.

Over the past decade, news organisations have seen their content disaggregated, and a significant proportion of the value taken away by Google, which has become a key gateway to mainstream news content. Now history may be about to repeat itself, with social networks reinforcing the trend towards disaggregation and putting further pressure on the funding of journalism in traditional news organisations.

¹⁰⁵ Times People launched 2008. BBC Spaces due to launch in 2009.

¹⁰⁶ 'Facebook Stink over Ad Placement', *Media Life Magazine*, Aug. 2007 (http://www.medialifemagazine.com/artman2/publish/New_media_23/Big_Facebook_s_tink_over_ad_placement.asp).

¹⁰⁷ 'Rough Seas Nearly Sink Facebook', CNET (http://news.cnet.com/8301-13577_3-9826664-36.html).

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the interviews for this study that social media and user-generated content is increasingly moving centre stage; influencing the strategic direction and practice of journalism – at least for the five publishers studied here. It is possible to see three distinct phases in the development of community and participation on mainstream websites: (1) the emergence of message boards and community-building (from 1995); (2) blogging (from 2001); (3) the rise of social media and social networks (from 2006). None of these have replaced the previous incarnations, which have continued to evolve in their own right. But in total, we are seeing an unprecedented growth in the amount of participation on mainstream websites, allied to an explosion in self-expression on third-party sites.¹⁰⁸

This activity is proving to be a useful extra layer of activity, which is opening up new possibilities for storytelling as journalism evolves. But the evidence in this report backs a growing consensus that citizen journalism and the networks that make up the 'Fifth Estate'¹⁰⁹ are not going to replace mainstream media, but will be complementary to it. A few years ago, discussions raged about whether you could trust new media, and whether they would destroy old journalism. Now the debate has become more practical and more constructive, says Charlie Beckett,¹¹⁰ formerly a journalist, now an author and academic: 'I think we've emerged out of that rather boring zero sum game and realised that it is inevitable and it is not a choice.' Making a similar point, Tom Armitage coined the term 'next media',¹¹¹ as a way of bridging the sterile debate about new and old media. He applauds the extra diversity and fresh voices on the web, but says they are not to be feared:

Blogs were never competition for conventional publishing: they were an adjunct to it. Blogging gave a printing press to anyone who wanted one; what the bloggers did with their presses – whether it was emulate journalism or something else entirely – was up to them. Conventional publishing companies have begun to realise this over the past 12 months.

Each party is beginning to understand its place in a complex new eco-system of news and information. The Fifth Estate is now providing a range of expression that didn't exist before and can discuss stories that news organisations have traditionally found hard to cover. The mainstream media monitors a wide range of sources, including those from the Fifth Estate. But as the timeline of breaking news is compressed, it can be argued that there is an even greater need for traditional journalistic skills of sorting fact from fiction; selecting the key facts for a mass audience.

Blogger Guido Fawkes gave his scoop (on Damian McBride's email indiscretions) to the *Daily Telegraph* because he recognised this was the best

¹⁰⁸ Social networking and UGC fastest growing sector in last two years: Dutton et al., *Internet in Britain*.

¹⁰⁹ Fifth Estate describes networked individuals and semi-professional groups that will live alongside traditional media. William H. Dutton, *Through the Network of Networks: The Fifth Estate* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2007).

¹¹⁰ Author interview with Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, forum for research and debate into journalism at LSE, June 2009.

¹¹¹ Tom Armitage, '2007 and the "Next" Big Media Thing', *New Statesman*, July 2006 (<http://www.newstatesman.com/200607310067>).

way of achieving maximum publicity.¹¹² Iranian citizens uploaded pictures to Persian TV or CNN, in the knowledge that mainstream coverage had the power to move opinion at the scale and speed required. And as for social networks, most of the information and links being passed around during the G20 and Iranian protests came from, or pushed people to, the work of the mainstream media itself.

As the Iranian crisis and the death of Michael Jackson have demonstrated, we are moving into an age where the tools of personal recommendation are going to be as important for the discovery of content as search engines like Google have been over the past decade. One of the most important lessons for traditional news organisations is to make sure they understand the full implications of this change. The technology is key, but more important is to keep making distinctive content that people want to discuss and share, as BBC social media expert Roo Reynolds says in this tweet:

Q: how do we get even more people to talk about our stuff? A: make really good stuff and share it while making it linkable and findable

Charlie Beckett detects, in all these trends, a sense that, despite the economic upheavals of the past few years, traditional organisations are beginning to see how their skills fit in again:

*Mainstream journalists are getting a sense of confidence back. They look at big stories like Iran and they see the value of what they do magnified, amplified and not contradicted by new media.*¹¹³

Out of this new confidence is coming a new language and new journalistic practices. Academics talk of a new style of 'networked journalism', where, as this study has shown, traditional news organisations engage in partnership with audiences to tell stories in new ways.

The *New York Times* and the *Guardian* talk about the creative opportunities of networked features and investigations. The BBC, CNN and the *Telegraph* are having success with crowdsourcing and user-generated content. Live blogging and live text commentaries are emerging as compelling real-time formats, in which journalists and audiences report events together, as they unfold.

But mainstream organisations are also coming up against the practical limitations of these ideas. How is it possible to filter and make sense of the vast range of sources now available to them? How is it possible to discern truth, amidst so much opinion, noise and sometimes misinformation? How is it possible to have a polite and effective conversation with audiences on sensitive issues on a mass scale? No one is pretending these problems will be easy to solve but every day they are being worked through with updated guidelines and the focus of senior editors, in the heat of major stories like G20 and the Iranian elections.

In dealing with these dilemmas, mainstream organisations are increasingly categorising the different types of participation in the ways indicated in Chapter 2, and trying to understand the costs and the value that it can attach to each. For Richard Sambrook in the BBC Global News Division, that might eventually mean shifting some resources from traditional

¹¹² Author interview with Guido Fawkes (real name Paul Staines), May 2009.

¹¹³ Author interview with Charlie Beckett, July 2009.

journalistic output to a more direct and engaged conversation with the audience:

I think we are still mid way in a period of experimentation and it is a good thing that we are experimenting, but at a certain point there will be a shakedown and we'll have to make the hard judgements about what is of value to us and what isn't.

Part of that consideration for the BBC and others is the extent to which social and participatory media can drive civic engagement. Here the pure percentages do not provide too much encouragement, but scholars argue that active participants are always likely to be in the minority. What matters is the opportunity for new and diverse voices to join the debate and help provide the catalyst for others. Adrian Monck at City University points out that we shouldn't be surprised nor expect everyone to take part in 'news as conversation':

People very often don't want a conversation. People's interest in media is very often as background. The earliest investigations into media going back to the foundation of Gallup indicate that people are not as absorbed in media as the creators of media. The 1% rule seems to stand up pretty well, but what exists and remains interesting is still the possibility of communication.¹¹⁴

So the practicalities of real-time production, the limitations of audience engagement, shortages of time, and other practical, cultural and financial considerations are likely to act as a check on the pure ideas of the technical determinists, who see a seamless path from one-way broadcasting to two-way networked journalism.

It is still early days in the social media revolution. Some mainstream media organisations are beginning to join the party and to take their audiences with them; others have yet to make their first move. There is much still to be learned, but overall there is new confidence in the underlying values of journalism and the role that social media might play in keeping those values relevant in the digital age.

¹¹⁴ Author interview with Adrian Monck, June 2009.

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