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Barbarians at the Gate or Liberators in Disguise?

Journalists, Users and a Changing Media World

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Journalists spent roughly the first ten years of their time online dealing with and learning to make use of one of the key characteristics of the internet: the fact that it is digital.

Being digital, as Nicholas Negroponte (1995) put it in the early days of the Web, means that all forms of content are just bits and bytes, which can be seamlessly blended in all kinds of ways. For journalists, this translates to an ability to accommodate "multimedia" content -- digital versions of text, photos, video, audio, animation and more, often in combinations never before possible in any single medium. Creating such content requires new technical and journalistic skills, as well as cultural adaptation. Newsroom processes and perceptions have had to change along with storytelling techniques.

But significant and sometime stressful though it continues to be, that transition is actually much simpler than the one on which I will focus here. Although multimedia content draws on complex and perhaps unfamiliar formats, it still is made up of stories controlled by journalists.

In the Web's second decade, a different characteristic of the internet has become central. It is not just digital but also a network. In a network, all communicators and all

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communication are connected. The media space and control over what it contains are incontrovertibly shared.

The network thus demands a dramatic conceptual and practical shift by journalists, who face a rapid, radical decline in their power to oversee the flow of information. The professional and cultural consequences are likely to be even more significant than those stemming from the digital nature of the medium.

This report highlights three recent or ongoing studies of what working in a shared space means for journalists and the newspapers for which they work. An overview of the implications follows, including a suggestion of ways in which the challenges might offer a rare opportunity for fresh thinking about what journalism is and does. I conclude with a few ideas about preparing students for the media world they are about to enter.

scotsman.com: Democratic discourse in the 2007 Scottish election

In May 2007, Scotland held only its third national election in modern history. Although part of the United Kingdom, Scotland also has its own national parliament, created in the late 1990s after a vote for “devolution.” The Scottish Parliament has the power to set laws affecting the nation’s residents but not those who live in other parts of Britain; examples include issues involving local roads, schools, and various administrative matters.

In the 2007 election, a big issue was the promise made by the Scottish National Party (SNP) leader that if elected First Minister – which he ultimately was, with the SNP gaining power by the margin of a single parliamentary seat -- he would hold a national referendum on independence within four years. He pledged to let Scots decide by 2011 at the latest whether to break out of the United Kingdom and seek separate entry into the European Union¹.

For weeks before and after the election, users flocked to the shared website of three Edinburgh-based newspapers -- *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday*, and the *Edinburgh Evening News* -- to talk about the election and its implications. I focused on a single section devoted to the election, offering a total of 428 stories during the study period, from one month before to one month after the May 3 voting day (Singer, 2008). Those stories attracted 39,300 comments from Scots and thousands of other people around the world, serving as a springboard for a fascinating conversation about Scottish politics and the nation’s future.

Various bodies of academic literature fed into the study. Relevant ideas include:

* *Political efficacy*. Researchers have found that online interaction helps satisfy personal identity needs and boost feelings of political efficacy. The gains seem to come in part from the fact that the internet can put users in contact with, or at least demonstrate the existence of,

¹ In 2008, First Minister Alex Salmond announced a timetable that would lead to holding such a referendum in 2010. Proposed options include full independence from the United Kingdom, increased powers for the Scottish Parliament, or no change in the current political structure (politics.co.uk, 2008; scotsman.com, 2008). However, as of this writing, the economic turmoil of autumn 2008 was casting doubts on the process, as much of Scotland’s financial strength comes from its troubled banking sector (Carrell, 2008).

people like themselves who are articulating political views (Garrazone, Harris & Anderson, 1986; Kaye & Johnson, 2002). There is evidence that people who talk frequently about politics online increase their civic engagement, apparently through the discourse (Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004).

* *Online social interaction*. A couple of ideas drawn from a considerable amount of work in this area are especially relevant. One involves the issue of civility in the discussion threads of political newsgroups. For example, Papacharissi (2004) found that while conversations were often impolite, they were rarely uncivil; people frequently insulted one another, but they did not impede the free exchange of ideas. A second key avenue of exploration is exemplified by the work of Norris (2002), who argues that online communities fulfill both bridging roles -- they bring different sorts of people together -- and bonding roles, bringing similar people together and strengthening ties among them. She found that the bonding functions were generally stronger.

* *Mediated political community*. A large and growing amount of work has explored media roles in creating and nurturing online political communities. In the United States, for example, journalists are increasingly providing information-rich tools to enable users to tailor political content to their own needs (Singer, 2006), though there are many lost opportunities for audience interaction (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007). More broadly relevant is Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities and newspapers' role in forming and sustaining them, an idea that others have directly applied to the Scottish context (Law, 2001; Higgins, 2006).

* *Virtual public sphere*. This is the magical unicorn among political theories in a digital age. If a space can be created for free and rational public debate on matters of political importance (Habermas, 1989), might that space be a virtual one? Some scholars say yes, some say no. Most say yes and no.

Dahlberg (2001) analyzed the normative conditions for such a public sphere, concluding that the internet met or supported some but not all of them. The medium provides space for a vibrant exchange and rational critique of positions; at the same time, "increasing colonization of cyberspace by state and corporate interests" limits expansion of a true virtual sphere. Papacharissi said that although the volume of online information enhances political discourse, inequalities of access and literacy compromise the representativeness of a "virtual sphere." Discussion can be geographically wide-ranging but also fragmented and easily dominated by a vocal few; moreover, patterns of global capitalism pose barriers to emerging political cultures. Nonetheless, "people who would never be able to come together to discuss political matters offline are now able to do so online, and that is no small matter" (Papacharissi, 2002: p. 23). Dahlgren (2005) aptly summarizes the themes of interest, including pluralisation and destabilization, and considers how the medium both extends and restricts deliberative processes. He concludes that "the Internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, and if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political

communication system, specific counter public spheres on the internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics" (p. 160).

The research questions for this study looked at the nature of the online discourse about the Scottish national elections, focusing on what users did within that space and exploring interactions between journalists and users.

Users: Who were the people who posted 39,000-plus comments about this election? My sample of around 4,800 comments (roughly 12 percent of the total) came from 1,211 unique users, or at least unique screen names. Of those, slightly more than half posted only one comment in the sample; as in most such forums, a minority of the participants were active posters. And, again typically, those active posters dominated the discourse. The top 10 percent of posters contributed more than 2,600, or 55 percent, of the comments.

Also typically, most of them were men, or at least chose male screen names. Fewer than 8 percent of the posters presented themselves as women by posting under a clearly female name - for example, "sarah b." or "a working mother." Even more troubling, only six were among the most active contributors, making up not even 5 percent of that group, while two-thirds of female-presenting posters contributed just one sampled comment.

Users were not required to identify their location, though nearly two-thirds did. A majority - about 70 percent overall, and just over half the most active posters -- claimed to be in Scotland. The rest of the comments came from, literally, all over the map. The most heavily represented areas were Britain and the United States, followed by Australia, New Zealand, and Canada - the core of the Scottish diaspora. But there were also users from Asia, Africa, and South America, as well as elsewhere in Europe, including one man in the sample from Portugal.

Comments: Despite the reputation of such boards to quickly go off-topic, about 60 percent of the comments were directly related to politics and civic issues raised by the 2007 Scottish elections. I violated standard content analysis guidelines in this study because I did not use exclusive categories for topics. I wanted to see the breadth of the conversation, so rather than identifying a single primary topic for each comment, I coded all the topics it included. For instance, a post that was mostly about politics but also referred to the media and to another user was coded as being about all three: politics, media, user.

A wide range of political views were expressed on a wide range of topics. While the majority sentiment leaned in favour of the pro-independence Scottish National Party, there were energetic debates about candidate positions, government policy, the viability of independence, and more.

A majority of comments referred to other users in some explicit way, typically by referencing a previous comment, and there were many examples of conviviality among the group -- even as they hotly contested each others' views and, yes, called each other names. For instance, one Scottish man who had been a frequent contributor died in early April, eliciting

condolences from as far away as New Zealand. There also were moves to get together in a pub for face-to-face conversations on election night, explicitly including those who disagreed online.

Most of the rest of the comments dealt with media content. About 38 percent referred to the story to which they were attached; while most discussion threads started out with comments about the story, the conversation typically soon veered away. About 9 percent of the comments referred to the media outside the *Scotsman* family and about 6 percent to *The Scotsman* itself – unfavorably, for the most part. There were lots of accusations of liberal media bias and a number of highly critical comments about *The Scotsman* perverting the course of democracy, selling out its own country and the like. However, there also was some praise for particular stories and for at least one writer, the *Scotland on Sunday* political editor. The highest praise: “You’re actually not too bad compared to some.”

Journalists: How did the newspapers’ journalists support, encourage and share in this robust discourse about the future of the country? That’s the thread linking these three studies: the journalists’ reaction to user-generated content.

The answer: They didn’t.

There was virtually no direct participation by the journalists in this discourse at all, at least not in any official capacity. (It’s possible they were posting under some other name, though I doubt it.) Neither the criticism nor the praise was acknowledged or addressed by newspaper employees, with only two exceptions in the 4,800-comment sample. Both were from *Scotland on Sunday* writers -- including, perhaps not coincidentally, that same political editor. Otherwise, the journalists simply did not engage with users in this format.

Much has changed at the *Scotsman* website since 2007. The website has a new editor, other new staff, new formats, and new approaches. But at the time of this study, the online discourse of journalists and users did not meaningfully intersect. Journalists provided the stories, but nothing more. Users provided the commentary, but they talked only amongst themselves. Perhaps the political nature of the topic made the journalists uncomfortable. Perhaps they over-generalized and wrote the users off as one-dimensional nationalists. Perhaps they were too busy or lacked guidance into how to manage the task of interacting. Quite likely, all those things and more came into play.

Journalists did participate in the conversation indirectly, however, by removing comments deemed abusive. Liability for what users post on their site is a significant concern for media companies. Every comment on scotsman.com, like a great many others, comes with a little icon inviting users to report anything they find “unsuitable.” Any comment that users flag is then reviewed by the online staff, who determine if it should be removed. In my sample, only 1.5 percent of the comments were removed. This low figure provides additional evidence that while online political discourse may not be for the thin-skinned, even a conversation that attracted the most ardent of supporters rarely became completely uncivil (Papacharissi, 2004). In fact, when it

started to head in that direction – when some rabid user started verbally foaming at the mouth – other users quickly put a stop to it, in no uncertain terms.

In summary of this study's findings, the newspapers provided a wide range of stories about the election, and those stories formed the basis for a robust online conversation. Most of that conversation was explicitly about national politics and civic issues. Users engaged with one another directly, informed one another and even expressed a desire to extend their online community into the real world. Differing positions were freely offered and debated, so this discourse did contain some elements of that elusive public sphere -- the unfettered nature of the discussion, for instance, relatively unimpeded by the newspaper as a controlling agent. But there were other indications, such as the near-invisibility of female posters, that the ideal of a virtual sphere is still elusive.

I think the good news for democratic engagement is that thousands of people from all over the world -- but, importantly to the local newspapers, mostly from Scotland -- gravitated to the scotsman.com website, from among plenty of other options, to talk about politics, elections and the future of their country. That is what democracy is all about, and the fact that they came to the newspaper site suggests that in their view, the paper remains central to the process.

But an opportunity for the media company to extend its relationship with those users in new directions was ignored. The users were deeply engaged with the papers and their content. The papers as an institution declined to reciprocate. The users created a thriving online community whose explicit purpose was engaging in a political conversation. The institution, having created the space for that community to exist at all, then chose to remain outside it. Instead, the newspapers stuck to their traditional role, in a comfort zone that accommodated seeding the conversation with information – but not becoming part of the ensuing discussion about that information.

It can be argued that creating separate zones is appropriate. Yet the internet is not an environment that tolerates boundaries of the sort that have become routine in traditional media formats. It is a space in which, again, all communication and communicators are interconnected. That includes journalists and audiences -- and a mutual adjustment to a shared world.

guardian.co.uk: Norms and the network

One of the aspects of journalists' adaptations to change that most interests me is how they see it affecting their norms and ethical practices. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper is especially interesting in this context for a couple of reasons. One is that it has been a UK leader in seeking to engage readers in its website – itself a traffic leader -- particularly through the Comment Is Free section, launched in 2006. The other is the unusual nature of its ownership structure. The *Guardian* is owned by the Scott Trust, named for one of the crusading editors of the paper when it was still the *Manchester Guardian*.

The Scott Trust explicitly sets a normative framework for how the paper, and the journalists who work for it, are to operate. Comment Is Free, *Guardian* editor CP Scott wrote in 1921, but facts are sacred. He outlined a set of norms to go along with that proposition, including the mandate that the paper should provide a platform for a diversity of voices to be heard – friends as well as foes.

In this study, co-authored with my colleague Ian Ashman at the University of Central Lancashire (Singer & Ashman, forthcoming), we focused on three key norms starting, in English, with the letter A:

- * *Authenticity*, which in this context is an “A” word mostly for credibility.
- * *Autonomy*, or that precious norm of journalistic independence.
- * *Accountability*, which is not quite a synonym for responsibility but is closely related.

The folks at the *Guardian* love that “Comment Is Free” mantra so much that they named their primary comments section of the website just that. The section offers commentary by *Guardian* columnists, commissioned writers, and bloggers -- and, mostly in the form of comments, from users worldwide. Two-thirds of the site’s users are from outside Britain, making the *Guardian* -- one of the smallest national papers in print – the online UK traffic leader.

This study rests mainly on interviews with 11 primarily print and 22 primarily digital journalists at the *Guardian* and its website. But we also gave them a brief questionnaire asking them to identify up to three words or phrases associated with four constructs: credibility, responsibility, autonomy, and overall competence. The idea was to get a benchmark for how they defined these core professional norms.

Accuracy was a key concept for these journalists, who mentioned it most often in connection with credibility, responsibility, and competence. Other repeatedly mentioned values included independence, honesty, and balance or fairness. This suggested that journalists, at least at the *Guardian*, see a relatively few key norms as underpinning what they do.

The questionnaire also asked them about key ethical issues related to user-generated content. Although only 15 bothered with this item, those who did focused mostly on credibility and civility – essentially, “We’ve got it, users don’t,” at least not necessarily. They thought free speech was a great thing, in general and in theory, and several talked about the inherent value in dialogue itself. But they were concerned that the lack of credibility and civility from users would harm the *Guardian* brand -- a theme that comes up again in the interviews.

The interviews attempted to probe more deeply into how these journalists saw our three ethical constructs – authenticity, autonomy, and accountability – in a networked environment. Of the three, *authenticity* is probably the most complex, full of loaded meanings. For journalists, this idea seemed to be connected with three closely related things: credibility, journalistic authority, and that over-arching norm of accuracy.

As the questionnaire responses suggested, journalists were concerned about the effects of user-generated content on credibility. Our interviewees felt that while they took adequate steps to ensure what they wrote was credible, they could neither assess nor affect the credibility of what users provided. They worried how that might reflect on the *Guardian* and on them personally.

This idea was closely connected to concerns about authority. There was general agreement that users posed a challenge to journalistic authority, but they disagreed about whether that was a good or a bad thing. Some saw the democratization of discourse as inherently healthy. They saw enormous vitality in the ongoing online debate and saw their own role as, increasingly, to enable that debate rather than to provide “definitive answers,” as one editor said. But others didn’t think the open discourse was essentially beneficial. They saw a crucial ongoing role for, quoting another editor, “the expert journalist who can interrogate and understand and all those sorts of things in a way that the citizen reporter just can’t.”

And of course, user-generated content challenges journalistic authority in a direct way: Users are in journalists’ faces all the time. The interviews suggested this took three forms: personal attacks, disagreement over opinions, and disputes about facts.

Personal attacks were both easiest and hardest to deal with. They were easiest because ignoring them was seen as the optimal response. But they also were hardest because ignoring a personal attack takes a lot of self-restraint -- more, some interviewees confessed, than they possessed.

Differences of opinion drew mixed reaction. Most journalists said they appreciated cogent – and civilly expressed – disagreement, and several said that it nudged them and their colleagues out of complacency. But they also said that how the disagreement was expressed mattered. As another editor put it: “When users are just saying ‘I think this is crap,’ what can you say to that? ‘Sorry, but I don’t?’”

Challenges to factual statements – to accuracy, in other words -- generally were valued. Journalists said they were more careful about publishing something because they knew if they got it wrong, they’d get slammed for it, which would embarrass them and undermine their credibility. But there was concern, especially among some veterans, that users were challenging what one called “basic assumptions,” and dealing with such challenges was tedious and time-consuming. Users do not necessarily see the world in ways that journalists take for granted – something of a shock, apparently.

In challenging those basic assumptions, users are challenging professional *autonomy* as well as authority. Most *Guardian* journalists we talked to felt they had a great deal of personal autonomy, and they loved that about their jobs. This was especially true for online staffers, who had fewer editors to get through en route to publication than their print colleagues had.

But there were misgivings about the fact that online, it is so easy to see what people are interested in, through hit logs and comment counts. Journalists were wary about using that information to guide story judgment. More than wary, actually – a number said they abhorred the very idea. One online writer said he was appalled at what you’d have to do for popularity. Another said she would feel slummy if she abandoned in-depth stuff just to get comments.

They also saw this issue in terms of safeguarding the *Guardian* brand so it didn’t head down-market. Celebrity gossip and weird animals were OK for the cheesy tabloids, but not for the *Guardian* – no matter how many hits such material might generate. Our interviewees were universally supportive of what they saw the *Guardian* as doing and standing for. Ironically, they saw user contributions as simultaneously embodying those values -- Comment Is Free – and potentially undermining them.

Our third “A” concept was *accountability* or, broadly, responsibility. As part of their accountability to users, our interviewees highlighted both the quality of the content they provided -- “my responsibility to the community is to put up good quality stuff that is interesting and accurate,” one said -- and the quality of discourse about that content. “There’s a responsibility to maintain civilized discourse,” said another journalist. “It’s a problem for everyone.”

They also felt their willingness to publicly admit they had made a mistake was vital and in fact differentiated them from users who, in their view, had few if any such obligations. “They can opt out at any moment, and I can’t,” an editor said. A writer put it this way: “With citizen journalists, it’s all rights and no responsibilities.” They also highlighted attributes such as honesty and transparency in this context. Users expect them to step out from behind their articles, they said, in order to discuss and defend their own ideas.

Anonymity was another big issue. Users can be anonymous but journalists cannot, a framing that is the reverse of credibility and closely connected to it in interviewees’ eyes. Journalists saw anonymity as enabling users to be abusive. “People feel licensed to say things, in content and style, that they wouldn’t own if publishing as themselves,” an editor said.

Clearly, the tone of the online discourse bothered these journalists. “Comment Is Free” sounds great in theory – all that good democracy-in-action stuff. But the reality was a bit more ... challenging. Similarly, the development of new relationships between users and journalists seemed valuable as a rather abstract concept but often proved difficult in real life.

Indeed, almost all the interviewees not only saw but also seemed to deeply believe in the benefits of open discourse. But although this was not universal – some people were more comfortable than others, and some interviewees worked in relatively uncontroversial areas -- most expressed dismay over the disturbingly confrontational nature of Comment Is Free, in particular. Several characterized it as blatantly sexist. One called it a big boy’s playground; it was seen as rude to the point of being abusive, hurtful, and upsetting. “You get really, really

depreciative comments,” an online writer said. “Whatever kind of maxims you repeat to yourself about how anything good always has haters – it subconsciously works away.” (Incidentally, they also tended to see those abusive users as Not *Guardian* Readers – not the “real” readers, the newspaper readers. Instead, they characterized them as people who hated the left-leaning *Guardian* and came to the website for the sheer enjoyment of bashing it.)

All of this means that a new relationship with the public is evolving. That takes time and a lot of trial and error, as well as bruised egos along the way. But unlike the people at the *Scotsman* in 2007, these journalists *were* engaging. They were wading in and having conversations with their users. Although when we were in the newsroom, the *Guardian* had no set policy for how to negotiate those relationships, what seemed to be emerging was a sense that the best approach was a carrot rather than a stick. They were learning to encourage the more cogent contributions rather than trying, futilely, to discourage the hostile ones.

But working out the best approach, and adapting it to a wide range of personalities takes time and patience, not to mention the growth of a thicker skin than many have now. As one interviewee pointed out, the transition from professional discourse to a far more personal discourse will take some negotiating, as journalists move from a role that is no longer to simply inform or entertain but also to engage and interact with an enormously diverse range of unseen but definitely not unheard people.

In conclusion, we found that *Guardian* journalists are mostly incorporating the ethical issues raised by user-generated content into an existing framework of occupational norms. Yet I think that this networked environment, with its inescapable interconnections, is going to create new wrinkles. Ultimately, it comes down to issues of control. The journalists no longer have it – not in the way they once did, in any case. There are wonderful things about that, and others that are frankly not so wonderful. This environment is one based on different sorts of relationships between journalists and non-journalists, and those relationships will continue to shape what journalists do and how they do it.

Participatory journalism in 10 Western democracies

The last of the three studies discussed here is a joint effort of eight researchers studying 10 different countries, most of them in Europe but also including the United States, Canada, and Israel. We are exploring how the leading newspapers in each country are handling user-generated content and, through interviews with top online editors, the rationales behind their approaches and decisions.

It is a rapidly moving topic, with innovations appearing constantly. To try to get a handle on it, we divided the process of creating or making news into five stages. We looked at how open each stage was to user-generated content at each paper in our study (Domingo et al., 2008):

* *The access or observation stage.* Can users report stories themselves or serve as sources?

* *The selection or filtering stage.* Can users decide what journalists are to cover or otherwise influence their news judgment?

* *The processing or editing stage.* Can users contribute content to the newspaper website?

* *The distribution stage.* Can users disseminate stories produced by journalists?

* *The interpretation stage.* Can users discuss journalists' stories once they are published?

This last stage is where most of the action was among the leading national papers in our study at the time of our content analysis in late 2007 and interviews in early 2008; there was considerably less user participation in other stages although, again, things are changing fast.

The things the *Guardian* is doing, for instance, are virtually all at the “*interpretive*” stage. Indeed, comments can be found almost everywhere now; examples from Portuguese newspapers include *Publico*, *Expresso* and the *Jornal de Noticias*. As suggested earlier, most journalists seem to see comments as serving a democratic function, similar to what we saw at the *Scotsman* website, and as fitting nicely into the journalistic mission to provide a forum for civic debate and discourse. As one Finnish editor put it: “What could be more proper journalistic work than acting as a medium for social debate?”

However, as the other studies indicated, comments pose various management issues and raise concerns about legal liability. One of the biggest issues relates to moderation. As the *Guardian* journalists pointed out, too much of the discourse is not really what one might hope – it’s rude, it’s offensive, and in addition to the legal issues, it potentially casts a negative light on a brand that has been built up and nurtured for decades if not centuries. One concern is whether to pre-moderate the conversation – to read everything before it is published – or to publish first and see if anyone objects. The latter option terrified some editors, such as the one in Germany who described unmoderated forums as “like a seven-headed snake that cannot be tamed.”

Another issue is whether to handle the moderation in-house, as the *Guardian* does, or outsource it; the latter appears to be the more common option, since it takes a significant number of people to stay on top of comments as the volume grows. “The problems with forums are the same as with letters to the editor,” said a Belgian editor. “But while we used to receive about 50 letters a day, we now host debates with 5,000 reactions per day.” At the papers in our study, most of that discussion was about national or international topics: the war in Iraq, climate change, immigration. To get a good public debate going appears to require some sort of critical mass of people interested in participating, and it is hard to generate that interest with localized topics. Research suggests that only 1 percent of a website’s users will be active participants, and only another 9 percent will ever contribute (Nielsen, 2006).

Nonetheless, the volume of discourse is far larger than in a print-only past, and it means that media organizations are relying largely on users themselves to police, or at least help police, their own contributions -- primarily by flagging problematic posts, as at scotsman.com. However, the final decision about suitability rests with the journalists or with whomever they have hired to do their moderation.

There's less to say about user contributions in our other stages. Can users serve as sources for stories, part of our "*access and observation*" stage? Yes, journalists did talk about getting tips by scanning user material and then contacting individuals for more information. But is that giving users more control -- or expanding the journalist's source file? Probably the latter.

Users also can report information themselves, though most of what they report has a strong personal and/or local focus: It is about my friends, my wedding anniversary, or my pet cat. This is a clear contrast with the bulk of user input at the "interpretation" stage, in which users discuss what journalists have written. At that stage, as described above, user-generated content, mostly in the form of comments, relates primarily to national or international topics. Very few users have the ability to provide original information on those topics themselves. They do, however, have the ability to provide information -- to access and observe it, to use our terminology -- that is *not* easily available to the journalists: information of relevance close, sometimes very close, to home. This contrast has interesting implications for both national and local newspapers, ones well worth exploring in further research.

The closely related "*processing and editing*" stage, in which users can submit their own news stories, is another area experiencing rapid change. National papers are increasingly likely to make whole sections of their sites open to user contributions. This takes various forms, from hosting user blogs to enabling users to publish their own complete stories. And "news" can be broadly defined. For example, opportunities to contribute "news" about travel destinations -- places I visited, restaurants I liked -- seem more prevalent than opportunities to cover events of general civic importance, a core journalistic franchise.

That said, there is a growing trend toward relying on users to provide, in particular, local news and sports information. Users can cover things the nationals don't have the resources to handle, at least not in the depth of detail that people who live there can provide. And in some cases, still somewhat sporadic, that local content is indisputably news. An example comes from *Le Figaro*. For the 2008 French municipal elections, lefigaro.fr created 38,000 pages, one for each of the nation's local *communes* or municipal units. In addition to obtaining hyperlocal information about the *commune*, users could make their own contributions, for instance by ranking their mayor or submitting ideas for municipal projects. A series of debates, spanning two months, enabled users to discuss a range of issues in a local context; eventually, this turned into a mini-forum for every town in France. Political candidates also had space on the sites to present their programs and summarize their accomplishments. In short, *Le Figaro* used its website to

cover elections at a hyperlocal level that the newspaper itself, based in Paris, could never do -- and not incidentally, to compete effectively on the story, arguably for the first time, with the strong French regional press.

This area of hyperlocal news coverage is likely to continue to develop as tools such as Twitter become more pervasive and as more users become comfortable both contributing and receiving content through their mobile phones.

User participation also is rapidly increasing in our "*distribution*" stage as sites add widgets for services such as digg or newsvine. Internal recommendation systems also are gaining popularity, with software that turns traffic data into a display of at-a-glance information about the most popular, most-commented or most-emailed stories. For example, *expresso.pt* provides a home-page box showing stories with the most comments and the most traffic; users also can recommend stories using *digg.com* and *del.icio.us*. Newspapers also are developing their presence on social media sites such as Facebook, which enable communities of users to form around the media outlet or particular content components.

Our final stage involved "*selection or filtering*": Can users decide what journalists cover? Essentially, the answer is "no, they cannot." Just as we saw in our more in-depth look at the *Guardian*, journalists are very protective of their own autonomy, particularly when it comes to news judgment. It is OK for users to comment on what journalists have already written. It is OK for them to provide coverage in areas that journalists cannot reach. But telling journalists how to go about doing their own jobs? No, thanks. Journalists for the most part do not seem to see what they do as a collaborative enterprise. Trying to make it into one would be like "200 people changing a light bulb," as an Israeli editor said -- it just won't work! That central role of journalists in a traditional media environment -- guarding the gate, deciding what is news and what is not -- is not a role they are going to let go of easily.

Again, this is a rapidly changing aspect of contemporary journalism, making it both fascinating and difficult to study. Newspapers, particularly the national ones we are looking at here, are constantly adding new applications in most of these areas, as well as increasing the sophistication of existing ones so that they work more smoothly and look slicker.

However, I think it is safe to say that the largest chunk of content coming from users is still coming after the fact -- after the underlying information has been created and published by journalists. The most common form of user-generated content involves commenting on or discussing the stories that the journalists have created. In comparison, the other stages remain relatively closed to users. Those stages are not completely closed and not even as closed as they were just a few months ago. But the relative amount of control that journalists continue to exert over reporting, editing, and publishing content -- especially news content -- is significant. Users have little input into determining what gets covered, what gets published or how it gets disseminated. While some media outlets are providing tools and space for users to create their

own content, much of it remains in clearly “ring-fenced” areas, mostly feature-y ones set off from the news site. With some exceptions, such as our municipal elections example from *Le Figaro*, most of these areas are distinctly not ones on which the newspaper is staking its own brand or reputation, such as anything to do with hard national or international news.

Where users of national newspaper websites are gaining input is primarily -- not exclusively, but primarily -- at the hyperlocal level, including with hyper-personal contributions about things important to the individual but not to a more broadly conceptualized public. This may gratify the ego of the user, and it may benefit the newspaper by creating a local presence it otherwise couldn't have. But it is still a considerable distance from the “pro-am” collaboration or “citizen journalism” that some prognosticators have envisioned (Rosen, 2008).

Barbarians at the Gate or Liberators in Disguise?

These studies suggest that large numbers of journalists today see users as akin to barbarians. As individual voices begin to separate themselves from the aggregate -- the traffic numbers -- of a web 1.0 world, a lot of those voices are proving quite rowdy. And many that are not rowdy do not have anything to say that journalists classify as especially interesting.

Users, it turns out, don't talk the same way or say the same things as journalists. In theory, most journalists seem to think that is, more or less, a good thing. But how to cope with the reality is harder than I believe they thought it would be. We are all for an open marketplace of ideas when we are the ones selling the goods in that marketplace. A truly open market is scarier, both economically and professionally. If the gates are open and anyone gets to enter -- anyone gets to trade in this marketplace -- new relationships with different kinds of people will be necessary. We currently are seeing tentative steps toward acknowledging those relationships and making them work as, somehow, they must in this networked world in which we live.

But let me offer a completely different interpretation. At least on my optimistic days, I see all this open channel activity as a huge opportunity for journalists and the media industry, at both the local and national levels. What do reporters and photographers spend way too much time doing? Dealing with, let's face it, trivia: covering routine meetings, checking police logs, rewriting press release or maybe covering events those releases announce. Those sorts of things happen at outlets large and small, though perhaps especially at the local newspapers where most journalism school graduates land their first jobs.

Such tasks waste journalists' time and their employers' money, not to mention that of their readers and subscribers. Users and other sources can handle them adequately, perhaps with guidance by our recent graduates. Media companies have a tremendous opportunity to free up those expensive resources, the veteran journalists on their staffs, to do what they should be doing.

What they should be doing is what they - and not, by and large, these users - have the time, training, and talent to do. Investigating stories that need investigating. Pursuing leads, following up tips and ideas. Telling complex stories well in the multiple formats that the digital network facilitates. In short, journalists should be providing not only basic information but the context, the analysis, the explanations, and the sense-making that the community or the nation needs to make sound decisions about how it is to work, how it is to move forward, how it is to be governed. That, after all, is what journalism is for in a democracy (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

It is frustrating, to journalists and to readers, to pick up a newspaper and see it filled with short and essentially meaningless items derived from press releases or official pronouncements -- and that are old news by the time they appear in print. It is frustrating, too, to know that people who could be providing a far more valuable service to their community cannot provide that service because all their time and energy is going to feed this beast -- with junk food.

And the beast, of course, now has multiple mouths all demanding to be fed -- one or more print mouths, an online one, maybe a mobile one and so on -- by the same stressed-out people or, as is increasingly likely, by fewer and fewer of those people as newsroom layoffs pick up steam.

Not only do we as members of the public not derive much nourishment from these space-filling but not very nutritious tidbits, but media companies don't either. It's a losing game for everyone. Revenues are plummeting, as are readerships, ad lineage and stock prices of public companies. All are in free fall in the United States and heading that way elsewhere for many.

I do not have a stunning new business model to offer. But I am pretty sure that the status quo isn't going to work any more. Even setting aside the pressures created by a cyclical economy that is on a downward curve at the moment, the media market has become far more fluid, with far more options for fickleness. A revenue model historically based on advertising faces unprecedented pressures. For advertising to work, media companies must be able to deliver to advertisers a definable and relatively stable audience, one that wants - or at least is willing - to see advertisements within a media product. Websites deliver neither a stable audience nor one receptive to ads. This open, networked environment is well on its way to destroying the business model that has worked for 200-odd years, in an industrial-age system in which information proceeds along a version of an assembly line and the news media stand at a pivotal point by the conveyor belt.

Media companies have to be open to major, not just incremental, change. I see various desperate efforts to come to terms with that reality but only rare glimpses, at better newspapers (and I count the *Guardian* in that group), of the only approach that I personally think will work: Recommitting resources to the one thing that they can provide better than anyone else.

What is that one thing? Solid, valuable - difficult and gutsy -- journalism.

A business strategy based on this sort of journalism involves considerable risk. Newspapers have been described as simultaneously a traditional enterprise -- a mature industry, doing what it has done for centuries, producing and delivering information -- and an innovative enterprise, an emerging industry needing and trying to do something new, or at least to do it in new ways (Rosenstiel, 2007). It is very hard to be both at the same time. A mature industry requires different approaches, behaviors and world views from an emerging one.

But some degree of risk tolerance is necessary, both by management and, importantly, by shareholders of public companies who have become too accustomed to newspaper stock being a safe investment consistently delivering a fat return. I believe recommitting to journalism is potentially profitable -- though clearly not as hugely profitable as the old newspaper business was. We are not talking about 30 percent profit margins. But they are gone anyway, and I do not think they are coming back, even when the overall economy recovers.

The journalism I am talking about is relatively expensive to produce. Good journalists, unlike bloggers or users, don't work for free. Moreover, this style of journalism is likely to appeal to a relatively small audience relative to the truly massive audiences of the past. But although it will be smaller, it also is likely to be a loyal audience, as well as a relatively educated one with relatively decent money to spend not only on the newspaper itself but also on advertisers' goods and services.

Newspapers must return to focusing on the value they can offer in a world in which the gates they are steadfastly trying to guard are wide open. Anyone can be a publisher. Around the world, millions of people already are. It is true that investigation, storytelling, sense-making, and analysis cost more in the short term. But at the end of the day, they are virtually the only thing journalists can provide that someone else cannot, and at lower -- or at no -- cost.

Of course, a great many people love fast food, in news as at the lunch counter. But here's where the user-generated content comes in. Media companies can have their cake and eat it too, so to speak, and so can their users. Again, those users can take a huge chunk of what is now the journalist's workload and beef up the media website with it, making it a portal for both the strong journalism and the press-release types of updates, as well as the hyperlocal, hyper-personal content they are already beginning to provide.

Users can supply the brief updates, a good chunk of the timely spot news, the local gossip, the events listings and routine coverage, much of the sports including the youth events, the traffic, the weather reports, the celebrity spottings. The basic crime stories? The police can provide much of that -- as they do now, but through the media. The upbeat business stories that make advertisers smile? Press releases -- same as now. The local council meetings? City councils all have their own websites anyway, not to mention their own PR spokespeople.

Even better, people will provide that information to the newspaper for free. Create a space that feels like a community, and people will want to belong. Give those with an agenda a

space to promote it, and they will. What's wrong with that? Nothing, as long as the source is clearly labelled -- which, at the moment, the press releases that run almost verbatim in print and online are not. This is the content that currently is costing media outlets money because they are paying their journalists to spend time churning it out.

A rethink is needed about what they bring to the party and, more fundamentally, what the job of the journalist is all about. The journalist's job is to keep the cops and the councillors honest. The journalist's job is to look out for the consumer who will frequent those businesses. The journalist's job is to keep an eye on those volunteer sources, too, because while some are nut jobs, others are not only sane but do actually know what they're talking about. Those in the second category provide a vastly expanded and readily accessible database of fresh sources to supplement the old standbys. Importantly, they also enable people to feel a part of the investigations that benefit them and their neighbors.

So yes, I do see this growth in user-generated content as an opportunity on two fronts. The first is that because of the enormously rich range of sources it provides, countless new voices can be brought into the journalist's work, by using them in traditional ways as sources and by incorporating their contributions, including multimedia ones, in larger stories that reporters are pursuing. Users even can work collaboratively with journalists on investigations, through the sorts of "crowd-sourcing" efforts that some newspapers are already encouraging.

The second reason why user-generated content is an opportunity is that these are people who can do many mundane parts of the journalists' job, parts that not just consume but frankly waste that most precious resource: the human beings in the newsrooms.

I read a piece recently that suggested what Web 3.0 might look like. If Web 2.0 is all about social networks and the power of ubiquitous communication and connection, then Web 3.0 will be all about cutting through the clutter. The next iteration of the medium will emphasize the tools, processes, and people to can help us grasp what is meaningful, important, and trustworthy amid all the noise (Jensen, 2007). That sounds like a journalist's job to me -- and a lot more fun than simply adding to the clutter!

Bringing It Home to Students

How might you begin to bring some of these ideas into the classroom, to help prepare students for this rapidly changing world they are about to enter? I'll end with just a few suggestions. Most of them have an ethical slant; I think that many of the key issues related to working with users are ethical ones, largely because of the emphasis on new relationships and new ways of engaging and interacting with people outside the newsroom. In addition, it can be hard to replicate the real-life situation in a classroom, where you may not have actual online interactions -- leaving you the opportunity to work through the issues in relative peace!

My suggestions fall into two groups, discussion topics and tasks. They are listed in Appendix A, but I'll briefly describe them here.

One interesting way to start might be to ask students what seems like a simple question: Who is a journalist? The answer, of course, is far from simple. The network blurs a great many boundaries, as mentioned earlier, and not least is the one around professional or occupational roles. There are various ways to get students thinking about this. One might be to consider concrete job duties. Reporters, photographers, and editors are obvious examples. But how about journalists who also are bloggers? Are they acting as journalists when they blog or doing something different? If it is different, what are the ethical implications of the difference, if any? How about the job of chat host? Of online community leader? Of comment moderator? Are those roles journalistic, or something else? Or you might come at the subject from the other direction, starting with those whom most students would say are *not* journalists, such as bloggers or contributors to hyperlocal sections. Are they journalists? Are they acting as journalists when they do certain things? Why or why not?

Another approach might be to think about broader journalistic roles. What are they in a traditional environment, and how, if at all, do they change? Is a journalist's role to be a recorder, a fact-checker, an analyst, a sense-maker? Is it a journalist's role to be a community leader or a discourse facilitator? How might that square with traditional norms and practices? More broadly, is the journalist a provider of information or a guide through it - or both? If both - my personal choice -- how do the two roles work together? Are the ethics of being a guide dog different from those of being a watchdog? Helping students think about those sorts of questions opens up numerous possibilities, and it will prepare them to enter an industry where they are likely to wear all these hats and new ones besides.

Another suggestion is to get students thinking about who the stakeholders are in a network. An interconnected environment entails considerations of a broader-than-before set of stakeholders. They are not just sources, local readers, your editors, and yourself. Stakeholders include a potentially much wider set of people who may see what the journalist produces and be touched by it in some way. How might those various constituencies be best served without becoming paralyzed by conflicting sensibilities?

On a different topic, what happens when you get direct criticism from users -- lots of users and lots of criticism, all at once? What do you do when that criticism goes viral: when one morning you come to work and a discussion of how stupid or venal or biased or arrogant you are is all over the blogosphere? It does happen, and not infrequently. How do you handle that, as an individual or an organization? What do you say to your users, what do you do - how do you respond without making it worse?

Even better, how might you have prevented it in the first place? The answer, I think, is largely about transparency, a crucial topic for you and your students to think about. There is an

argument to be made that transparency is the paramount norm in this environment (Karlsson, 2008; Plaisance, 2008). Telling people what you are doing, and why you are doing it, is something journalists do not tend to think is part of their job. But I think it very much is - especially now. In any case, it is an issue to invite students to consider. What information do you share, and how and when do you share it? How do you balance conflicting needs, such as protecting sources, with the goal of lifting some of the clouds that surround what journalists do?

Those are some things that might be useful to talk about with students. There also are more concrete tasks or exercises or activities you might try. One is to include collaborative decision-making exercises in as many classes as possible. Another is to have them come up with guidelines for user contributions to a shared media space. If you want to encourage contributions to a hyperlocal section of the site, say, what sorts of ground rules would you set up and why? This is a real-world issue, one that encourages students to consider the journalists' role in new ways -- ways that relate to the network and not just to information delivery.

Another real-world issue, even more pervasive at the moment, is how to handle user comments. What sort of guidelines do you want to put in place in an effort to foster a discourse that is civil and valuable? Who should be responsible for what goes into that discourse, and how might that responsibility be, dare I say it, enforced? Should users be responsible for that space? Should editors? Maybe both ... and how might that work?

A third would be to have students practice transparency in some fashion. You might have them write "notes to readers" explaining an ethical decision about running a controversial photo or printing sensitive information. Or have them come up with an editorial policy and explain it to readers. Some newsrooms, such as the one in Spokane, Washington, in the United States, are experimenting with live webcasts of their editorial discussions (Tompkins, 2006). What do students think about that? You might have them hold a mock news budget meeting, then discuss whether they would want it to be live for the world.

There are lots more options for structuring this material. In general, I'd look for ways to emphasize transparency and connectivity. Then let your creativity - and that of your students - take you from there.

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APPENDIX A: A FEW TEACHING IDEAS about JOURNALISM in a NETWORK

Some potential *discussion topics*:

- * **Who is a journalist?** You might ask students to consider this in terms of ...
 - **Concrete job functions or duties**
Reporter, editor ... blogger? Chat host? Comment moderator?
 - **Journalistic roles**
Information provider (gatekeeper) or interpreter (sense-maker) or both?
Watchdog or guide dog or both?
Observer or participant (for example, related to debate on a topic) or both?
... and how, if at all, does working in a network affect these roles?
... and who else, if anyone, shares them with the journalist?
- * Who are the **stakeholders** in a network, and how might varying obligations be met?
- * More broadly, what should the journalist's **relationship** be with others in the network?
 - What is the nature of the various relationships that networked journalists hold?
 - What practical issues do those relationships raise? How about ethical issues?
 - What happens when the relationship becomes strained (criticism, loss of trust ...)?
- * Is **transparency** a paramount norm in a network? How can journalists be more "transparent"?

A couple of potential *tasks* for students:

(In addition to a general emphasis on collaborative decision-making.)

- * Develop **guidelines for user contributions** to the media-affiliated website. For instance:
 - Guidelines for a hyperlocal content section.
 - Guidelines for comments on stories.
 - Issues to consider include:
 - Fostering / maintaining quality.
 - Encouraging inclusivity (as many participants as possible).
 - Encouraging civility of discourse.
 - Delegating (or not) responsibility.
 - Enforcing sanctions?
- * Develop **strategies for making journalistic work more transparent**. For instance:
 - Write "notes to readers" explaining potentially controversial decisions.
 - Develop editorial policy and present it to internal (newsroom) and external audience.
 - Hold (or simulate) public discussion of story identification and selection process.
 - Issues to consider include:
 - Figuring out how to cogently explain both what you are doing and why.
 - Maintaining necessary or desired safeguards, for instance re source identity.
 - Dealing with feedback from audience members.