

Critical citizens online:

Adding to or subtracting from conventional
media regulation?

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Summary

The UK has a rich tradition of media journalism and, online, UK news organisations demonstrate a range of accountability and transparency techniques. Most media organisations provide public information on company ownership. Others issue mission statements, but while the regulator's 'codes of conduct' are published online, many outlets do not provide 'in-house' codes.

There is room for improvement especially in terms of their production transparency. Although by-lines are generally used in newspapers and magazines, explanations as to how stories have been generated are rare. Despite the growth of online news, there remains a lack of references and links to sources in reports.

Many news correspondents do have their own blogs, through which some communicate with their readers. The BBC also has staff blogs which are used to explain editorial decisions.

More and more journalists use Twitter and Facebook, although very often this seems to be as a source for stories, especially about celebrities. There has been criticism of such use of social media, and journalists' failure to discuss their work and decisions with the public, preferring instead to announce stories and link to their own websites.

The broadcast regulator Ofcom and the self-regulatory Press Complaints Commission have extensive websites and provide an online opportunity for members of the public directly affected by a programme or story to make formal complaints. Nonetheless the PCC is often criticised as weak even by journalists, and trust in print journalism remains low. There are now only two ombudsmen or Readers' Editors listed with the international Organisation of Newspaper Ombudsmen (ONO).

There are a variety of media accountability initiatives outside news organizations, including charities, academics and individuals. Media criticism in the blogosphere is vivid and appears to be influential. Social networks have also begun to play an important role in holding the media to account. Several recent controversies have increased public interest in challenges to the credibility of some news organisations.

1. Context factors

1.1 Social context

Public trust in journalism

In 2010, Ofcom published a report¹ on media literacy which also included a comparison of the public's trust in radio news, TV news, news websites and newspapers. Newspapers were by far the least trusted and the most distrusted. Radio news was the most trusted:

Figure 1: When I watch TV news / listen to radio news / visit news websites / read newspapers I tend to trust what I see / hear / read or see

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Don't know
TV News	54%	21%	24%	1%
Radio news	66%	19%	15%	0%
News websites	58%	24%	16%	2%
Newspapers	34%	23%	43%	1%

Source: UK Adults' Media Literacy, Ofcom, 2010, p.74

These results were echoed in a public trust poll conducted by YouGov and published in September 2010.² 83% of people said they had little or not trust in red-top tabloid journalists:

<p>BBC News journalists Total trust: 60% (81% in 2003) Total not much/no trust: 34%</p>
<p>ITV News journalists Total trust: 49% (82% in 2003) Total not much/no trust: 43%</p>
<p>Journalists on 'upmarket' newspapers Total trust: 41% (65% in 2003) Total not much/no trust: 51%</p>
<p>Journalists on 'mid-market' newspapers Total trust: 21% (36% in 2003) Total not much/no trust: 71%</p>
<p>Journalists on 'red-top tabloid' newspapers Total trust: 10% (14% in 2003) Total not much/no trust: 83%</p>

¹ Ofcom, *UK Adults' Media Literacy*, Ofcom, 2010 (see: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/adults-media-literacy.pdf>)

² Who Do You Trust?, YouGov, 2010 (<http://today.yougov.co.uk/life/who-do-you-trust>)

Between 2004 and 2008, the Committee on Standards in Public Life conducted three public attitude surveys³ which asked members of the public about their ‘perceptions and expectations of standards in public life.’ The survey listed seventeen professions and asked the public who they trusted to tell the truth. The results, over the three surveys, were as follows:

Figure 2: Trust in professions to tell the truth over time

	2004	2006	2008
	%	%	%
Family doctors	92	93	94
Head teachers in schools	84	84	83
Judges	80	81	82
Local police officers	77	77	79
Senior police officers	68	69	67
TV news journalists	49	51	46
Your local MP	47	48	46
Local councillors	41	43	45
Senior managers in NHS	44	43	44
Top civil servants	37	37	39
Broadsheet journalists	38	39	36
Senior managers in local councils	35	36	35
Government Ministers	24	23	27
MPs in general	27	29	26
People who run large companies	24	24	24
Estate agents	20	24	21
Tabloid journalists	7	9	10

Source: Standards in Public Life Public Attitude Survey 2008, p.22

In 2008⁴ the Committee on Standards in Public Life noted:

People have a relatively positive view of the way in which TV, broadsheet newspapers and radio cover political news, but a predominantly negative opinion of coverage in the tabloid press. This negativity towards tabloids is not restricted to non-readers, but extends to those who read only these newspapers.⁵

This was echoed in a YouGov poll for the *British Journalism Review* in March 2008⁶ which showed that 68% of red-top newspaper readers didn’t trust (very much or at all) journalists from ‘red-top’ newspapers:

³ [www.public-standards.org.uk/OurWork/Public Attitude Surveys.html](http://www.public-standards.org.uk/OurWork/Public%20Attitude%20Surveys.html)

⁴ www.public-standards.gov.uk/Library/SOPA_bookmarked.pdf

⁵ Committee for Standards in Public Life, *Standards in Public Life Public Attitude Survey 2008*, p.54

⁶ Steven Barnett, On the road to self-destruction, *British Journalism Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008, pages 5-13 (see: www.bjr.org.uk/data/2008/no2_barnett)

Figure 3: Trust and newspaper readership: % of readers who, in each category, don't trust journalists "very much" or "at all"

	TOTAL (all papers)	Readers of up- market papers	Readers of mid- market papers	Readers of red- top papers
BBC news journalists	34	23	36	38
ITV news journalists	43	44	41	43
Channel 4 news journalists	39	32	42	42
Journalists on up- market papers	49	32	49	55
Journalists on mid-market papers	75	89	65	70
Journalists on red-top newspapers	83	96	89	68
Journalists on local papers	55	58	49	54

Source: Table adopted from Steven Barnett, On the road to self-destruction, British Journalism Review, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008, pages 5-13 (see: www.bjr.org.uk/data/2008/no2_barnett)

1.2 Media legitimacy and existing MA institutions

The Press Complaints Commission (PCC)⁷ considers itself to be an independent body, set up by newspaper and magazine proprietors to examine complaints about the editorial content of UK newspapers, magazines and their websites. Ofcom⁸ is the statutory communications regulator of the TV and radio sectors, fixed line telecoms and mobiles, plus the airwaves over which wireless devices operate. The BBC has its own complaints procedure⁹ but complaints about the BBC can also be lodged with Ofcom.

The PCC, Ofcom and the BBC all provide an online form for those who wish to complain, which makes complaining very accessible but can lead to mass complaints. In the Jan Moir, Sachsgate and *Jerry Springer – The Opera* cases, for example, it has been much easier to file complaints with the relevant regulators because filling in a few details on a website takes much less effort than writing and posting a letter. During the furore over Jan Moir's article about the death of Stephen Gately (see page 20) a link to the PCC's online complaint form was distributed around Twitter.

While the PCC has moved to be more transparent about its procedures and have made some welcome reforms, 'these improvements alone have been insufficient to reverse the scepticism of

⁷ www.pcc.org.uk/index.html

⁸ www.ofcom.org.uk

⁹ www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/homepage/

journalists and members of the public alike about the independence and effectiveness of the PCC.¹⁰ The Governance Review Panel report of 2010 is unlikely to reverse that scepticism either.¹¹ Although the PCC website has improved, and there is now a separate website for the Editor's Code Committee¹², the PCC does not, for example, publish a list of publications that fall within its remit.

Polls on the work and role of the PCC tell conflicting stories. The Media Standards Trust (MST) commissioned a survey in 2010 which was conducted by Ipsos Mori.¹³ The 2010 Public Attitudes survey¹⁴ commissioned by the PCC was conducted by Toluna – a company which, unlike Ipsos Mori, is not a member of the British Polling Council. Traditionally the PCC has concentrated on satisfaction of the users with the attitudes of staff and their compliance with formal procedures, rather than the conclusions reached by the Commission.

The MST survey asked whether the self-regulatory body should investigate when there is evidence of inaccuracy or should wait until there is a complaint. 48% said it should investigate pro-actively, and 5% said there should be a complaint from someone in the article first. In the PCC's 2010 survey, 61% said complaints should be dealt with when they arise, against 30% who said everything should be monitored.

On the question of sanctions, the MST survey found 85% favoured fines for serious breaches. The PCC poll found only 23% favoured fines, although their leading question compared a 'quick apology' to a 'fine after a lengthy legal process'.

On 17 November 2009, *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger resigned from the Editor's Code of Practice Committee – the body that devises and oversees the Code of Practice policed by the PCC.¹⁵ He said:

The PCC is a valuable mediator. It needs to ask itself whether, as presently constructed and funded, it is a very effective regulator...

If you have a self-regulation system that's finding nothing out and has no teeth, and all the work is being done by external people, it's dangerous for self-regulation. If you have a regulator behaving this uselessly, I suspect MPs will start saying this is not regulation...

I believe in self-regulation because I cannot imagine a country in which the government regulates the press, or there is statutory regulation. But the press is in a very weak position today because its own regulator, its self-regulation, has proved so weak.

Almost every year, the PCC receives more complaints than it did in the previous twelve months. In their 2008 Annual Report, which revealed an 8% rise in complaints compared to 2007 to 4,698, the PCC said:

¹⁰ M. Jempson, 'Getting it right for now', MediaWise, 2010

¹¹ 'The governance of the Press Complaints Commission: an independent review' (July 2010)

www.pcc.org.uk/assets/441/Independent_Governance_Review_Report.pdf

¹² <http://www.editorscode.org.uk/>

¹³ <http://mediastandardstrust.org/mst-news/strong-public-support-for-press-regulatory-reform>

¹⁴ www.pcc.org.uk/assets/111/PCC_Survey_2010.pdf

¹⁵ www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/nov/17/guardian-editor-resigns-pcc

We are confident that it is not a sign of dramatically falling standards in the industry, but of increased awareness and accessibility of the PCC.¹⁶

The PCC's public attitudes survey for 2010 showed 19% of people had 'never heard of' the PCC and only 23% felt they knew it 'very well' or a 'fair amount'. While the PCC may argue standards are not falling, an ever-increasing number of complaints does not suggest standards are dramatically improving, either.

One of the problems the PCC faces is convincing people that its sanctions are serious. Most complaints are resolved through negotiations between the complainant, the PCC and the newspaper/magazine – the result can be a printed clarification and/or apology, a right-of-reply letter, the removal of material from websites and the marking of archives. If the complaint goes to adjudication, and the PCC upholds it, the only sanction is to force a correction to be printed.

By contrast, Ofcom has, for example, fined the BBC £150,000 (for the 'Sachsgate' telephone calls), Channel 4 £1.5m (for misconduct while running phone-in competitions) and GMTV £2m (for 'widespread and systematic deception' in viewer competitions).

According to Steven Baxter, a local newspaper journalist, blogger for *The Spectator* and author of the media watch blog *Enemies of Reason*, the PCC is

a self-regulator which many people feel is not sufficiently detached from the industry it sets out to regulate. This leads to cynicism as to whether it is serving the interests of consumers or producers. The internet can put pressure on the PCC to be more effective and show up those instances in which it is not effective.

Jamie Thunder, who writes the media watch blog *Exclarotive*, interviewed the PCC's Public Affairs Director Will Gore in 2010. He wrote:

One common criticism of the PCC is that it has no power to fine newspapers for serious or repeated breaches of the Code of Conduct, but Gore says that this "massively underestimates" the impact of the PCC's adjudications on newspapers and editors.¹⁷

Can the internet help? According to Thunder:

For the PCC the main problem is a lack of speed and a lack of sanction. The internet can hardly help with speed because it's the procedure that often takes up the time, and even with email it can take time. The sanctions are a policy issue, so the possibilities created by the internet don't do much there either.

Kevin Arscott writes the media watch blog *Angry Mob* and is also a Learning Advisor at Coleg Gwent, in Wales. He says:

It pays to write bad journalism, there are no penalties for being caught. It is that simple. The media is funded primarily through advertising and a great story generates money. Once this money has been pocketed it does not matter if 6 months later the PCC rules it was rubbish and asks them to print some miniscule apology on page 18, the money has been made and the size of the apology ensures that future sales will not suffer either. If PCC complaints would matter, the Daily Mail wouldn't still be the

¹⁶ www.pcc.org.uk/assets/111/PCC_Ann_Rep_08.pdf

¹⁷ <http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2010/11/15/pcc-is-effective-but-faces-massive-issues-of-perception-says-public-affairs-director/>

media force it is today, given that they are the most complained about newspaper in circulation.

The internet can help disseminate information and bypass or supplement established complaint procedures. At least media watch blogs are highlighting just how systematic misinformation and disinformation has become and how even 'respectable' broadsheets are not much better than the tabloids. It has made it easier to see just how pathetically inadequate the PCC is.

But, he adds:

The internet – due to the need to generate increased traffic to a newspaper site whatever it takes – has actually made journalism worse. It also allows articles to simply be deleted, rather than the need for a correction to be published. This makes the media less accountable than they were before – there is a big difference between reading a 404 error page and an admission that the newspaper got something badly wrong.

The ineffectiveness of the PCC seems to have been a very important factor in making some citizens begin media watch blogs. For example, the Tabloid Watch blog began because of:

Frustration, really. There didn't seem to be an outlet to challenge the lies and misinformation that was pushed out on a daily basis. The PCC clearly doesn't work. Private Eye's Street of Shame only comes out every two weeks and is then rather old news. [The Guardian's] Media Monkey does it a little bit, but it's more jokey and doesn't tackle the serious issues. There didn't appear to be anywhere which challenged this stuff quickly (and quick is important).¹⁸

The author of Five Chinese Crackers also believes that:

Complaining to the PCC is no good... So what I'm going to do is take one or two stories a week, mainly from the tabloids, and show how it misleads or distorts to give a false impression of the story to bolster one of its odd prejudices.¹⁹

Further question marks were raised about the effectiveness of the PCC in February 2011 when it was announced that four national newspapers – the *Daily Star*, *Daily Express* and their Sunday versions – were no longer under its remit. The newspapers' owner, Northern and Shell, had ceased paying its voluntary fee to PressBoF, the body which funds the PCC. By paying this fee, newspapers are signing up to the system of self-regulation policed by the PCC. No other major national newspaper group has withdrawn from the PCC before. N&S had withheld the fee previously (for one year in 2008-09) but on this occasion the PCC and PressBoF ruled that the newspapers will no longer fall under their jurisdiction. This means any complaints about these papers will now have to go direct to the papers, although it is not clear how (or, indeed, if) these complaints will be handled.

Soon after this announcement was made, the website Full Fact, which says it is 'promoting accuracy in public debate' asked for help in 'keeping tabs' on N&S publications:

...drop us a line about any Express (or other Northern & Shell publication) report you think needs a fact-check. That way not only can we flag up what they get wrong, but also build up a better picture of how a publication acting outside of the PCC deals with complaints, and from this assess what it tells us about the need for reform system of

¹⁸ www.ejc.net/magazine/article/Keeping_tabs_on_British_tabloids

¹⁹ www.fivechinesecrackers.com/2006/09/i-back_3152.html

press regulation. So if you see thing you know to be inaccurate, or feel merits further investigation, get in contact.²⁰

This is a good example of an innovative online system of accountability although it remains to be seen how successful or influential Full Fact will be in holding these newspapers to account. It also highlights the ‘hit and miss’ nature of do-it-yourself media accountability instruments. However, it is not without significance that such techniques appear to have been ignored in current Government consultations about the future of regulation in converged media markets.

1.3 Internet user cultures

Estimates on the number of internet users in the UK vary widely. A July 2010 report by Internet World Stats put the number of internet users in the UK at 51,442,100 – 82.5% of the population.²¹ A May 2010 report from Ofcom put the figure at 73%.²² The Office of National Statistics reported in August 2010 that there were 38.3m adults who were internet users and 60% of adults (30.1m) used the internet every day.²³

Eurostat figures²⁴ on demographics of internet users show:

Figure 4: Percentage of individuals accessing the Internet daily (2009)

Age	Gender	Level of education
16-24 years: 83 %	Female 16-74 years: 56 %	Low: 30 %
25-54 years: 65 %	Male 16-74 years: 64 %	Medium: 61 %
55-74 years: 37 %		High 79 %

Source: Eurostat, December 2009 (see: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>)

Ofcom said 40% of the UK were part of social networking sites.²⁵ According to Socialbakers.com, the UK has the third highest number of Facebook members in the world – 28.9m in March 2011.²⁶ Sysomos claim the UK accounts for 7.87% of all Twitter users²⁷ and estimate the number of registered users in the country is approximately 930,000. But comScore claimed that 12.9% of the UK population was using Twitter in December 2010 (which equates to nearly 8m).²⁸

According to Eurostat, 19% of UK citizens contribute content produced by themselves to the Internet. Ofcom’s The Communications Market 2010 report claimed that in May 2010, the

²⁰ http://fullfact.org/blog/express_pcc_withdrawal_factcheck-2436

²¹ www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe

²² <http://consumers.ofcom.org.uk/2010/05/uk-internet-users-becoming-more-security-conscious>

²³ www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=8

²⁴ Eurostat, December 2009 (see: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu>)

²⁵ Ofcom, The Communications Market 2010, <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/753567/UK-internet.pdf>

²⁶ www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics, facebakers.com, March 2011

²⁷ www.sysomos.com/insidetwitter, Sysomos, December 2010

²⁸ www.comscore.com/2011/02/the-netherlands-leads-global-markets-in-twitter-reach

number of UK visitors to Blogger was around 8 million and to WordPress sites 3 million. 40% of adults accessed social networking sites in 2009 (up from 20% in 2008). 27% of people said they had contributed comments to someone else's blog in 2009. In 2009, 12% had set up their own blog (up from 10% in 2007).²⁹

Sysomos³⁰ says the UK blogosphere makes up 6.25% of the world total, although these figures have been questioned.³¹

Developing citizen participation in the internet has been a stated goal of both the previous and current UK governments. In July 2010, Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt said:

Today, there are around 40 million internet users in this country, including 30 million who use it every day. People with broadband at home now value it more highly than their land line, mobile phone or digital TV. Most say that they couldn't do without it. Yet there are still 10 million people in this country who have never used the internet. That's one adult in every five. And, of these, four million are not only digitally excluded, but socially or economically excluded too.³²

Hunt said that plans by the previous government to have 2-meg broadband available to everyone in the UK by 2012 may not be attainable but:

while we will keep working towards that date, we have set ourselves a more realistic target of achieving universal 2 Mbps access within the lifetime of this Parliament [by 2015].³³

Ofcom's research on Citizens' Digital Participation in March 2009 had reported:

The internet makes citizen participation easier. This is partly because it saves time, which is one of the main reported barriers to participation, and it seems that the internet is both supplementing and replacing traditional channels for citizen participation. But this may mean that a proportion of the population may become disenfranchised as digital citizen participation and other online related citizen activity grows.³⁴

1.4 Evolution of online media

Most national newspapers have invested heavily in their websites over the last five years. The five most visited newspaper websites³⁵ receive around 6.5 million visitors per day. There has been an increase in such features as video clips, blogs, podcasts and user feedback on these sites. The website of the *Daily Mail* is the most visited, gaining 56m visitors in January 2011, far ahead of second-placed *The Guardian*, with 39.5m. In April 2011, it became the second most-visited newspaper website in the world.

²⁹ Ofcom, The Communications Market 2010,

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/753567/UK-internet.pdf>

³⁰ www.sysomos.com/reports/bloggers

³¹ <http://julianhopkins.net/index.php?archives/292-Which-country-blogs-the-most.html>

³² www.culture.gov.uk/news/ministers_speeches/7245.aspx

³³ www.culture.gov.uk/news/ministers_speeches/7245.aspx

<http://dberr.gov.uk/policies/business-sectors/telecommunications/broadband/bduk>

³⁴ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/main.pdf>

³⁵ www.guardian.co.uk/media/abce

But critics of the Mail website argue that the focus on celebrities, particularly pictures of scantily-clad female celebrities, drives much of this traffic, rather than the website's news content. In 2010, it opened a bureau in LA to boost its American showbiz coverage, and now advertises a US telephone number for people who 'have a story about a celebrity'. The January 2011 ABCes showed that only 37.9% of the Mail's traffic comes from the UK.

One significant development in online news in 2010 was the decision of News International to put *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *News of the World* - the biggest selling Sunday national daily - behind a paywall. Although the *Financial Times* has been behind a paywall for some years, it had more specialised content than, for example, the *Times*. In March 2011, News International it had 79,000 monthly subscribers to *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (figures included websites, Kindle and ipad apps).³⁶

2. Online practices initiated by the media

2.1 Actor transparency³⁷

Actor transparency involves practices where media organisations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories.

Public information on company ownership is available from most of the largest media owners, including the Guardian Media Group,³⁸ Independent News and Media,³⁹ Trinity Mirror,⁴⁰ News International,⁴¹ Associated Newspapers,⁴² Northern and Shell,⁴³ BBC,⁴⁴ ITV,⁴⁵ and Channel 4.⁴⁶

Mission statements are also available from organisations including the BBC,⁴⁷ *The Guardian*,⁴⁸ *The Independent*,⁴⁹ and *The Evening Standard*.⁵⁰

³⁶ <http://paidcontent.co.uk/article/419-uk-times-claims-79000-digital-subscribers>

³⁷ The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

³⁸ www.gmgplc.co.uk/Ourbusinesses/GuardianNewsMedia/tabid/129/Default.aspx

³⁹ www.inmplc.com

⁴⁰ www.trinitymirror.com

⁴¹ www.newsinternational.co.uk

⁴² www.associatednewspapers.com

⁴³ www.northernandshell.co.uk/media/express.php

⁴⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/index.shtml

⁴⁵ www.itvplc.com

⁴⁶ www.channel4.com/about4

⁴⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/purpose

⁴⁸ www.gmgplc.co.uk/ScottTrust/TheScottTrustvalues/tabid/194/Default.aspx

⁴⁹ www.independent.co.uk/news/media/press/the-newlook-print-edition-a-newspaper-and-a-views-1948988.html

⁵⁰ <http://bit.ly/9lUYSm>

Codes of conduct/practice are all published online. These include: BBC Editorial Guidelines,⁵¹ the Editor's Code of Conduct (for newspapers),⁵² Ofcom Broadcasting Code,⁵³ the Advertising Standards Authority Codes,⁵⁴ the National Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct,⁵⁵ the Chartered Institute of Journalists' Code of Conduct,⁵⁶ and *The Guardian's* Editorial Code.⁵⁷

Phil Chamberlain, a journalist, trainer and lecturer in journalism at the University of the West of England, says published codes of ethics give:

a clear idea of the outlet's approach and a standard by which people can judge stories. However, loose wording might mean that most activity could be allowed. Nonetheless, it is a clearly visible standard and a good starting point.

Baxter thinks:

this is tremendously important so that consumers know the standards by which a particular media outlet is performing, the standards it expects from its journalists, the red lines it has in terms of ethics and generally how it expects to behave, so it sets out its stall in terms of how it wants to produce its content and how ethically it expects to do so – consumers can have confidence in this code and can hold the producers up to scrutiny if they feel they are not meeting it. Sadly I don't really know of many media outlets that have this.

Arcott argues that many media organisations would not see it as in their interest to have them:

Mission statements and ethics codes could negatively impact upon the daily practice of tabloid newspapers. They would only be setting themselves up to fail if they dared to publish a code of ethics.

Profiles of journalists are not widespread but the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* websites, for example, do include short biographies of most of their journalists and columnists. This practice is less common among tabloid newspapers.

Thunder says all these practices are important because:

it gives the public confidence that a newspaper is, at least in theory, following a particular set of guidelines. It also allows for comparison of the actual journalism produced with the guidelines. Profiles of media company or individual journalists help to break down the sense of inaccessibility and secrecy that can otherwise exist. There's no excuse for not publishing it.

Baxter agrees:

I think this is important because there's a transparent process behind how things get put together and consumers know the structure of the organisation, how things are determined, what underlying principles e.g. ethical principles are behind it, and so on. It's important to know who's saying what and why they're saying it.

⁵¹ www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines

⁵² www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html

⁵³ <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/>

⁵⁴ www.asa.org.uk/Advertising-Codes.aspx

⁵⁵ www.nuj.org.uk/innerPagenuj.html?docid=174

⁵⁶ <http://cioj.co.uk/code-of-conduct/cioj-code-of-conduct.html>

⁵⁷ www.guardian.co.uk/guardian/article/0,,642387,00.html

Although print editions could not run profiles of journalists every time one of their stories is published, the internet could make this a regular practice. Arscott argues this could help explain “what qualifications and experience” a science writer may have, for example.

Chamberlain considers:

published mission statements, codes of ethics, profiles of journalists, public information on company ownership to be all vital as part of fostering a contract of trust between media outlet and consumer. Regular correction columns and independent ombudsmen are vital aspects of trust as well. It helps media to be accountable and to be seen to be accountable. People need quick access to these documents and to be able to reproduce and refer to them. The internet allows this.

He also suggested a register of journalist’s interests (much like the one MPs must complete) might be useful. The MST created a website, Journalisted⁵⁸ to do just that, although it is far from comprehensive.

2.2 Production transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organisations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news.

Bylines are generally used by newspapers in the UK, although articles based on agency copy are usually published under a generic byline (for example, 'Daily Mail Reporter'). In TV news, reporters will almost always sign off reports with their name. In both print and broadcasting, the journalists’ position is also stated, whether it be ‘Business Editor’ or ‘Cricket Correspondent’. The MST’s website Journalisted⁵⁹ allows searches for stories by outlet, subject, or by-line.

The BBC runs several blogs about production issues such as The Editors blog⁶⁰ and the Sports Editors blog.⁶¹ While many of the main news correspondents on the BBC, ITV and Sky⁶² have their own blogs, these give more information about topical issues rather than discuss production.

The Guardian has experimented with strategies for collaborative story writing with citizens with the Guardian Data Store⁶³ and Data Blog⁶⁴ where, for example, data on MPs’ expenses was posted. The paper explains:

We want to know what you think, what great data visualisations you’ve seen (or produced) and what you want to know. This is a place to discuss data and what we can do with it. It is not comprehensive – there will always be things we’ve missed – but we

⁵⁸ <http://journalisted.com>

⁵⁹ <http://journalisted.com>

⁶⁰ www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors

⁶¹ www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/sporteditors

⁶² <http://blogs.news.sky.com/editors>

⁶³ www.guardian.co.uk/data-store

⁶⁴ www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2009/mar/10/blogpost1

want you to help us with that, by posting your requests to see if anyone out there knows how to find it.

Another website Help Me Investigate,⁶⁵ a collaborative tool to ‘investigate questions in the public interest’, was co-founded by Paul Bradshaw, a journalist, blogger and academic.

There are a growing number of citizen journalism and ‘alternative’ news sites,⁶⁶ and mainstream publishers are encouraging ‘non-professional’ local on-line editors to populate hyperlocal news sites to attract new advertising revenue streams and local online readers.

Thunder and Baxter argue that production transparency is important because it helps to break down the seemingly impenetrable barrier between audience and media. It allows the audience to see how and why decisions were made and so increases accountability. Thunder suggests that:

if running a particularly controversial story, a blog can go up at the same time explaining why it’s being produced, or the authors can engage in a live chat of some sort.

Baxter thinks production transparency:

can explain how decisions are reached and why they were reached so consumers know the rationale behind them. It can explain dilemmas for journalists eg whether to make certain things public or to keep certain details out of the public domain, what stories to cover, what stories not to cover, what techniques are acceptable in order to get a story (eg whether entrapment is legitimate or not) and so on... the internet helps with this transparency by providing a location in which media are more than just their ultimate product. We are used to seeing companion websites for TV shows and ‘behind the scenes’ discussions on blogs of the mechanics of newsgathering.

Chamberlain agrees but suggests that production transparency is only of interest to a small number of people and mostly those already in the media. He argues that the general public does not have the time, inclination or skills to wade through this extra material and that this kind of real-time conversation is ideally suited to social media.

Arcott says there is a great difference between theory and practice. “In theory it would be wonderful to have transparent journalistic practices, but in reality we never will.” He highlights Nick Davies’ *Flat Earth News*, which claims that eighty percent of current newspaper journalism is ‘mainly or partially constructed from second-hand material, provided by news agencies and by the public relations industry.’ Arcott questions why newspapers would want to share this practice with their more naive readers, although he thinks it “would be interesting seeing journalists explain how they produce stories”.

The most important MA practice to almost all the UK experts interviewed was precise references and/or links to sources in stories. The BBC often includes ‘related internet links’ on

⁶⁵ <http://helpmeininvestigate.com>

⁶⁶ <http://talkaboutlocal.org.uk>; <http://pitsnpots.co.uk>; www.sheffieldforum.co.uk; www.saddleworthnews.com; <http://ventnorblog.com>; www.hu17.net; www.guardian.co.uk/leeds; www.guardian.co.uk/cardiff; www.guardian.co.uk/edinburgh; www.falmouthpeople.co.uk; www.bidefordpeople.co.uk; www.cliftonpeople.co.uk

their website to link to organisations or reports mentioned in articles. *The Guardian* website usually provides hyperlinks in their articles too, but these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Thunder says references and links to sources in stories are

not innovative in any technological sense, but including references and links marks quite a shift for newspapers from 'gatekeepers', which might actually be why relatively few use them. They act as a really important form of transparency and certainly make people more likely to trust them as a news source. It shows they're comfortable with others checking their facts. It's not usually hard to find a specific document referred to through some Googling, but it's a helpful gesture. It's only really the BBC and Guardian that use this at the moment.

Arcscott is more scathing, arguing:

The only reference most journalists could make right now would be to the Press Association or the newspaper they are nicking the story from.

Baxter thinks providing references is crucial because:

Instead of being told what the source material is, the consumer/reader can just find out for themselves instantly with one click. This is transforming the way people see and receive news, how sceptical they are of unsourced or unattributed quotes or stories, and so on.

On 19 May 2011, *Guardian* journalist Ben Goldacre asked 'Why don't journalists link to primary sources?'⁶⁷ He argued that linking to sources, especially original press releases or academic studies in science reporting, allows readers to check the information, to find out more and to show production transparency. He added:

linking sources is such an easy thing to do, and the motivations for avoiding links are so dubious, I've detected myself using a new rule of thumb: if you don't link to primary sources, I just don't trust you.

The Media Standards Trust Transparency Initiative, 'looks at ways of making the provenance of news more transparent online, particularly through the use of metadata'. Together with Associated Press, MST developed hNews,⁶⁸ a news microformat which allows searchers to discover who wrote a specific article; who published it and when; whether and when it has been changed since publication; what source organization, if any, it came from; what rights are associated with it; and what journalistic codes of practice it adheres to, if any. It is now being used by over 500 news websites in the USA.'

2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organisations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance.

⁶⁷ www.badscience.net/2011/03/why-dont-journalists-link-to-primary-sources

⁶⁸ <http://mediastandardstrust.org/projects/transparency-initiative>

Blogs

The internet has enabled the media organisations to have more direct contact with their audience. However, this is more common among broadcasters than print media. For example, the BBC has used staff blogs to explain their editorial decisions, notably *The Editors*, which shares their 'dilemmas and issues'. Presenters and journalists at Channel 4 News, Sky News and ITV News also write their own blogs.⁶⁹

However, although the BBC blogs usually generate lots of comments, many of the ITV News blogs appear to attract no comments at all.

Channel 4 has broadcast some of the toughest TV feedback shows on journalism. 'The TV Show' appeared monthly in 2007 but continues now only in blog form, alongside comments from the station's Readers' Editor.⁷⁰

Meanwhile the National Union of Journalists' (NUJ) Ethics Committee has wrestled with questions about whether the union's Code of Conduct should apply to comments made by members who also blog in a personal capacity. Ironically non-NUJ member media bloggers attending a workshop organised by MediaWise as part of the MediaAct project, suggested that acknowledging adherence to the NUJ Code would be one way of assuring readers of their best intentions in seeking to publish accurate information.

Twitter and Facebook

Similar Journalists and newsrooms use Twitter rather than Facebook to communicate with the public. Many journalists use Twitter accounts to debate with people about issues and stories.

Some newspapers and media outlets, however, use Twitter solely to announce new stories on their website and never engage with the audience or reply to questions. For example, the *Daily Mail* - the most visited UK newspaper website - does a 'broadcast only' Twitter-feed⁷¹.

MediaUK provides lists of journalists and organisations on Twitter, covering radio, TV, magazines and newspapers, including numbers of followers.⁷² Journalists from BBC, Sky and the broadsheet newspapers seem to use Twitter most – and many will discuss, and answer questions about, stories and engage in debate with their audience.

⁶⁹ See <http://blogs.channel4.com/news>, <http://blogs.news.sky.com/editors> and www.itv.com/news/newsblogs

⁷⁰ Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 - 130

⁷¹ <http://twitter.com/mailonline>

⁷² For example: www.mediauk.com/newspapers/people/twitter and <http://www.mediauk.com/radio/people/twitter>

Responding to audience criticism on Twitter

On 8 November 2010 the *Guardian's* G2 section published an interview with singer Lily Allen, which was conducted shortly before she suffered a miscarriage and was diagnosed with septicaemia. She was still in hospital at time of publication and many people complained on Twitter that it was insensitive to run the article.

The Guardian (G2) replied via Twitter:

"Some unhappy with our Lily Allen interview. We felt it was written with warmth and sympathy; her PR fully supported it too."*

"We contacted her PR yesterday to see if Lily would rather we didn't publish. He supported publication of interview, thanked us for asking."**

* <http://twitter.com/guardiang2/status/1683491985039361>

** <http://twitter.com/guardiang2/status/1684514623463424>

Some newspapers - mainly the broadsheets - post Twitter lists on their website.⁷³ It appears that the *The Guardian's* Alan Rusbridger, who has argued that 'Twitter matters for media organisations',⁷⁴ and *The Independent's* Simon Kelner are the only national newspaper editors who tweet regularly. Although the *Telegraph's* Editor-in-chief Will Lewis is on Twitter, he has not posted anything since 2009. The *i* paper, a concise version of *The Independent*, includes a daily comment from the editor or other senior person on the paper, sharing thoughts and requesting feedback and it is the only national daily to do this every day.

Journalists do not appear to use Facebook to discuss production or respond to criticism, However, many media outlets use Facebook to find pictures of people in the news, and may run stories about groups that have been created to praise or criticise something.

Online petition

More than 11,000 people signed an online petition criticizing the *Scottish Sunday Express* for a front page story 'Anniversary Shame of Dunblane Survivors' based on information gleaned from the social networking sites of young people now over 18 years old who had survived the shootings at their primary school in 1996 which left 17 dead. The article was heavily criticised on several media watch blogs and was also widely circulated on social network sites. The paper took down the offending article and apologized, long before the PCC found against the paper, noting the impact of this online response.

⁷³ www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/4437400/Telegraph-Twitter-feeds-The-latest-news-reviews-and-pictures-straight-to-Twitter.html

www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/tools_and_services/twitter/

www.guardian.co.uk/users/2009/may/07/find-us-on-twitter

www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/the-independent-on-twitter-977700.html

⁷⁴ www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/nov/19/alan-rusbridger-twitter

Chamberlain argues:

Journalists use social networks for, primarily, story-chasing and, secondly, professional networking.

While some journalists engage with their audience on Twitter, the social networking site is commonly used as a source for stories, particularly about celebrities. Journalists will follow famous people on Twitter and then use a joke, a comment, a disagreement or a picture as the basis of an article.

In 2011, several journalists 'trended' on Twitter as people objected to articles they had written, including Melanie Phillips, Richard Littlejohn, Liz Jones (all from the *Daily Mail*) and Joe Mott (*Daily Star Sunday*).

On the day following a nationwide strike by public sector workers, the *Daily Mail* trended on Twitter after its website had headlined a tragic story: 'Girl, 13, crushed to death by a branch as she sat on a park bench after teachers went out on strike'. (Friday 1 July 2011)

Almost immediately this was changed to: 'Girl, 13, crushed to death by a branch as she sat on a park bench because teachers went out on strike'. By this time there were hundreds of comments on the story, many critical of the headline. It was changed again to 'Girl, 13, crushed to death by a falling branch as she sat on park bench on the day her teachers went out on strike. Complaints had been made to the council about 'dangerous' tree'.

When the story appeared in the next day's printed edition (Saturday 2 July 2011) it read: 'Tears for girl, 13, crushed to death by a falling branch as she sat on park bench. Complaints had been made to the council about 'dangerous' tree'.

Power of Twitter

In May 2010, actor Danny Dyer, the 'agony uncle' of weekly men's magazine *Zoo*, was criticised for telling a recently single man that he should "cut his ex's face, so no one will want her" in his advice column. This comment was posted on Twitter by Sarah Ditung and quickly spread before being picked up by the mainstream media, such as the *MediaGuardian*. Dyer said he had been misquoted, while the magazine apologised and blamed a 'production error'. Within a week, the magazine announced Dyer's column was to be dropped. This is a more swift and decisive form of a redress than the PCC might have negotiated.

When a film starring Dyer was released a month after the controversy, it took just £205 in its opening weekend. An online fundraising campaign was launched to show 'more people care about domestic violence than about seeing Danny Dyer's films'. It raised over £800 in a week.

Comments

Dozens of message-boards have increased opportunities for audiences to 'have their say'. The majority of national newspapers allow comments from readers on stories, editorials and comment pieces. Although some columnists may react to reader comments (for example, Roy Greenslade and Peter Hitchens), most do not and this very rarely happens on news items.

Like other broadcasters the BBC logs comment about any of its programmes that are phoned or written in. The log is shared with producers/directors as a form of quality control.⁷⁵ The BBC also runs a series of blogs⁷⁶ and message boards⁷⁷ that allows for viewer feedback.

An error in a Guardian film blog⁷⁸ posted at 10:55 on 28 June 2011, was spotted by two readers who posted comments at 11.39 and 11.51. |the article was corrected and a footnote added to explain what had happened. A simple example of good practice in transparency and accountability, which could easily be emulated by others.

Jempson and Powell state

The arrival of online editions and the option to comment directly about news articles, features and opinion columns has changed the rules completely. An editor who decides to moderate comments before displaying them online is automatically deemed to have condoned its publication, and thus may be considered liable for any consequences; but unmoderated feedback opens the door to the bigot and the unstable, requiring post-publication gate-keeping to remove comments that other readers find offensive.⁷⁹

Mechanisms to report abusive comments are in place on most media organisation's website. However, a case published by the Press Complaints Commission in February 2011 showed how a 'report comment' complaint against the *Daily Mail* website had been ignored until the complainant had taken the matter to the PCC.⁸⁰

It remains to be seen whether any UK news organisations will follow the *Washington Post* or *NRC Handelsblad*, a Dutch quality paper, in providing feedback forms via a 'mail the editor' button where the audience can highlight not just spelling and grammatical flaws, but also factual errors in stories and provide additional information.⁸¹

Reporting errors directly to the editorial team is certainly something Kevin Arscott would like to see introduced but he argues that:

if the newspapers cared about accuracy they wouldn't be making such mistakes in the first place. Most are examples of purposeful disinformation to maintain and perpetuate media narratives.

Jamie Thunder thinks:

responsiveness is vital, although it's also important that the newspaper gives reporters time to engage. Many newspapers provide email addresses of journalists, but it is not always easy to get a response, especially when your comment is critical. Although journalists might regard it as a hassle, it's very important as it helps build trust, and acts as an initial watchdog. If journalist knows they will likely have to

⁷⁵ Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). *Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond*. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 - 130

⁷⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/blogs

⁷⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/messageboards

⁷⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2011/jun/28/harry-potter-warner-bros-deathly-hallows-2>

⁷⁹ Cfr 70

⁸⁰ www.pcc.org.uk/case/resolved.html?article=NjkyOQ==

⁸¹ www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/interactivity/corrections; <http://www.nrc.nl/>

defend a controversial story, they're more likely to ensure it's not only true but that it can be supported.

Phil Chamberlain agrees:

that the ability to feedback comment and suggest corrections is vital. However, all the feedback buttons in the world are pointless without a person and a procedure at the other end able to do something about it. Some complaints are going to be wrong, superfluous or vexatious and not everyone is going to be satisfied. But people should be given as many different ways of responding as possible. This should make the media outlet stronger by increasing conversation and decreasing mistakes, through learning from past ones.

Baxter says:

It's important that there is interaction in this way so that consumers feel they are able to correct errors and have their say, although journalists are within their rights to reject criticism if they feel it's not warranted.

The internet creates a climate in which people are used to having their say, for example in the comments under a story or blog, or being able to write in and complain instantly via a form or via email.

One system of accountability for media organisations is the ombudsman. Only two UK reader's editors - from *The Guardian* and its sister paper *The Observer* - are now listed as members of the Organisation of Newspaper Ombudsmen: Chris Elliott (*Guardian*)⁸² and Stephen Pritchard (*Observer*).⁸³ However, *The Independent* runs a weekly 'Errors and Omissions' column, written by Guy Keleny and, uniquely among British national newspapers, has a link to its online corrections page on the homepage of its website.⁸⁴ *The Guardian* also run a daily 'Corrections' column in the op-ed section.

Chamberlain says an ombudsperson with online presence gives:

an independent, accessible and transparent avenue for people to complain. Decisions are published online and the reasoning is transparent. It frees up time for newspapers to get on with the job of reporting.

As a journalist Baxter would like to see a greater use of ombudsmen by media organisations:

They are not used nearly enough. At their best, they show that the newspaper is not only willing for other people to check its facts but also that they're prepared to accept and act on criticism. However, that ombudsman needs to be genuinely independent and able (and willing) to criticise the newspaper if/when that is deemed necessary. I think it would take a lot of time and some quite critical adjudications before any trust was reached. There would also need to be a requirement for the newspaper to implement particular changes following criticism.

⁸² www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/page/readerseditor

⁸³ www.guardian.co.uk/observer-readers-editor

⁸⁴ www.independent.co.uk/news/corrections

3. Online MA practices outside media

3.1 Media bloggers and social media

Media watch blogs are a recent development in MA in the UK, with most starting within the last five years.⁸⁵ There are around ten which are active and regularly updated. Jempson and Powell gave an overview.⁸⁶ There has been no study of the effects, reach or readership of these blogs. However, they do attract attention. For example, Anton Vowl's Enemies of Reason blogpost about the Jan Moir article on Stephen Gately was linked to by Stephen Fry on Twitter and sent to his million-plus followers.

Power of blogs and social networks

Daily Mail columnist Jan Moir wrote an article about the death of singer Stephen Gately, which was published in November 2009 - the day before his funeral. She claimed the singer's death was 'not a natural one' despite the fact he died of pulmonary odema. The column was discussed on blogs, on Facebook and on Twitter, where Stephen Fry sent his million-plus followers a link to comments on the media watch blog Enemies of Reason. A link to the complaints form was distributed around Twitter. Eventually, 25,000 people complained to the Press Complaints Commission - the most complaints about a single British newspaper article ever. This demonstrated the power and speed of the 'blogosphere' in challenging the media and eliciting responses.

Moir and the *Mail* dismissed the complaints as a part of a 'mischievous online campaign'. However, the *Mail* changed the headline (from 'Why there was nothing 'natural' about Stephen Gately's death' to 'A strange, lonely and troubling death...') and removed all adverts from the online version of the article when people started contacting the paper's advertisers. Marks and Spencer were reported to have requested their ads be removed from the page.

The PCC rejected all the complaints against Moir's column, including one from Gately's civil partner. In a lengthy judgment the PCC said upholding the complaints would mark a 'slide towards censorship' as they emphasised matters of taste and decency were outside their remit. Although a post-mortem had ruled Gately had died from natural causes, the PCC ruled that Moir's claim the death was 'not natural' could 'not be established as accurate or otherwise'. The PCC's decision led to another outpouring of criticism online.

Jempson and Powell:

With a potential readership ranging from the miniscule to the mindboggling, bloggers have many new ways of holding the news media to account. Via the 'blogosphere', individuals can instantly tell their own versions of events they have witnessed,

⁸⁵ www.enemiesofreason.co.uk; <http://tabloid-watch.blogspot.com>; www.butireaditinthepaper.co.uk; <http://exclarotive.wordpress.com>; <http://5cc.blogspot.com>; www.mailwatch.co.uk; www.minority-thought.com; <http://the-sun-lies.blogspot.com>; <http://primlystable.blogspot.com>; <http://pressnotsorry.blogspot.com>; <http://nosleeptilbrooklands.blogspot.com/>; <http://themediablog.typepad.com>; <http://atomicspin.wordpress.com>

⁸⁶ Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). Mapping Media Accountability - in Europe and Beyond. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 - 130, footnote 97

comment on the news presented by the mainstream media, critique the analysis of other 'experts' or simply offer their opinions. (...)

One of the first of the 'citizen-blogs' looking at the mass media was Mailwatch, which focussed on the mid-market tabloid Daily Mail, celebrated for its concern with the values and anxieties of the mainstream middle-classes. (...)

On its home page Mailwatch reminds visitors 'We are not here to hate readers of the Daily Mail. We are here to show them they are being lied to.'⁸⁷

Mailwatch mixes researched articles deconstructing mainstream media stories and discussions about the front pages of both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. The Mailwatch Forum, which started in 2006 to increase the range of articles and subjects discussed, has a relatively small number of very active members.

Five Chinese Crackers also began his blog in 2006 and since 2007, several more 'citizen blogs' have emerged to highlight and deconstruct the stories, attitudes and actions of the mainstream media. According to Steven Baxter, writer of Enemies of Reason:

A lot of debate is closed off to the likes of me and you; we're not allowed to 'have our say', even though there's a veneer of being allowed to. And that's frustrating. And that was another motivation for starting a blog up about the media – to try and provide another voice. Not to correct, or to change, anything. Just to provide another voice.

Baxter appears to be the only working journalist writing a media watch blog.

The Daily Quail, launched in July 2008, ran spoof articles to mimic the excesses of tabloids by producing 'a reactionary, sensationalist, misinformed, under researched, often xenophobic news article with the Express intention of inciting anger and intolerance', but ceased publication in April 2010. Meanwhile *The Sun – Tabloid Lies* which also started in July 2008, fields a team of bloggers, one of whom explained: 'I want to make *Sun* readers aware that they are being deceived, cheated or manipulated by the tabloid they trust'.

Two more 'blogs about bad journalism', Tabloid Watch and Angry Mob, began on the same day in February 2009. In a first anniversary post Angry Mob's Kevin Arcscott wrote:

I don't hold out a huge amount of hope that this blog will ever succeed in making a massive difference to the thought-patterns of beliefs of the average Daily Mail reader. However, I do think it helps to point out some of the most blatant lies or atrocious ideas or hatred published by the paper because this blog then forms part of a growing social media that rejects the values of the Daily Mail and the other tabloid newspapers.

Other media watch blogs that have appeared since 2010 include Minority Thought, Press Not Sorry, Exclarotive, Atomic Spin and Quotes from a Close Friend.

It is difficult to know how much influence these blogs have, and whether those within the media take them seriously. The writer of Tabloid Watch claims many journalists have reacted positively: "I have had contact from lots of journalists. Most have offered story ideas, or praised

⁸⁷ Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 – 130, p. 199

the blog for challenging the stuff that gives them all a bad name.”⁸⁸ Indeed, Roy Greenslade has linked to articles on Tabloid Watch several times on his MediaGuardian blog.⁸⁹

There are examples of journalists reacting to criticism on these blogs. The *Mail on Sunday* journalist and blogger Peter Hitchens reacted to a critical post on the Angry Mob blog with a sizeable number of comments, plus some reaction on his own blog.⁹⁰ The *Daily Mail* film critic Chris Tookey also reacted to online criticism of his review of the movie *Kick-Ass*, by writing a response and posting links to it on blogs that had discussed his original article. In April 2011, *Daily Star Sunday* showbiz editor Joe Mott made a remark about Ricky Gervais, who had been pictured having lost weight. Mott suggested ‘that were he gay, I would wonder if he had AIDS.’ After becoming a trending topic on Twitter, and subject to several critical media watch blog posts, Mott spent 596-words explaining his remark in his column the following week.⁹¹

Nineteen months after Kevin Arscott blogged angrily about the way the *Daily Mail* had reported⁹² that it was costing £1,400 a day to care for each child of 243 mothers allegedly from 72 different countries in one London hospital ward, his webhost received a lawyer’s letter on behalf of the *Daily Mail* and its Editor Paul Dacre, threatening legal action unless the post was removed. Arscott removed the offending piece, but posted an alternative version. This was a clear indication that mainstream is watching the media bloggers, and gave rise to an ongoing among media bloggers and their readers via comment and Twitter about freedom of speech, libel and hypocrisy.

Arscott wrote:

If freedom of the press exists then it should extend to all writers. As the Daily Mail – and most of the mainstream press – have demonstrated over-and-over again the informal code of ethics followed by most bloggers is incomparably superior to the moral vacuum in which most journalists exist, yet somehow the official label of being a ‘journalist’ somehow gives you the freedom without any of the responsibility.⁹³

In January 2011, the blog No Sleep ‘Til Brooklands published a guest post by Juliet Shaw, who explained her experiences of challenging a misleading and inaccurate article about her in the *Daily Mail*. The article was visited over 120,000 times within a month and elicited 275 comments.⁹⁴ By contrast, the *Daily Mail*’s website received over 3m visitors per day.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ www.ejc.net/magazine/article/Keeping_tabs_on_British_tabloids

⁸⁹ For example: www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2010/nov/19/dailymail-islam and www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2010/nov/01/sundayexpress-royal-mail

⁹⁰ www.butireaditinthepaper.co.uk/2011/03/13/how-to-lose-an-argument-by-peter-hitchens

⁹¹ <http://dailystar.co.uk/columnists/view/186564/Wrong-end-of-the-schtick>

⁹² www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1231150/Mapping-strain-NHS-How-London-hospital-ward-treated-babies-72-different-nations-world.html#ixzz1R8jPynLd

⁹³ See Kevin’s reaction: www.butireaditinthepaper.co.uk/2011/06/23/abuse-and-defamation and www.butireaditinthepaper.co.uk/2011/06/29/abuse-and-defamation-part-2

⁹⁴ <http://nosleeptilbrooklands.blogspot.com/2011/01/true-story-of-daily-mail-lies-guest.html>

⁹⁵ www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jan/27/mail-online-december-abce

According to Arscott the UK media watchblogs are good,

but still too disparate and individualist. Blogging lets you be writer, editor and publisher and this is very hard to give up in order to collaborate with others. Sites such as Mailwatch / ExpressWatch and The Sun: Tabloid Lies have a lot of 'Editors' (writers) but very few blog posts as each writer prefers to update his own blogs instead.

All the authors of these blogs are very active on Twitter and will highlight examples of bad journalism there and, in more detail, on their blogs. Steven Baxter has over 8,600 Twitter followers, Tabloid Watch over 7,500 and Kevin Arscott nearly 2,900.

Arscott thinks:

The internet can point out bad journalism and get that message across to many different people quite quickly. If you read an article now and you suspect it may be misleading, a Google search should return a media watch website and you can quickly establish that you were right to think the article was wrong.

With many newspapers putting their next day's hard-copy content on their websites after 10pm, media watch bloggers can deconstruct a story or a front page headline before the newspaper has even hit the newsstand.

Baxter says the blogs:

provide a kind of balance to the mainstream and a counterweight at times when the mainstream media titles do not wish to cover a certain story because of vested interests. It's also important to try and correct distortions where they appear and where those media are not willing or interested in providing any balance.

He believes they are:

an interesting and vital counterweight to the media outlets that exist, holding them up to scrutiny and challenging them where necessary. It's vital that people have somewhere to go to get an alternative view on their news and hopefully this will encourage media outlets to be more responsible.

Thunder argues that these blogs:

break the monopoly journalists have on getting out information, and when that monopoly is so easily and often abused it's important that there are other voices.

But, he adds, while they are an 'innovative and useful media accountability tool' they are

Not useful because they effect any real change in the newspapers' practices. But they make it far easier for other people to read a critical appraisal of an article they might have read and otherwise swallowed whole. So if accountability necessarily involves the ability to change practices, they've done little, but in allowing people to access contrary information they might not have previously, they've done a lot.

Chamberlain agrees and also questions their influence:

It shows that regulation is not down to a self-elected elite. It allows for a broader range of criticism; not one constrained through tortuous negotiation over codes. It gives a sense of power to people who might otherwise have felt that 'normal' regulatory bodies weren't paying attention to their concerns. The question is how much effect these new web sites have. At the moment I would suggest limited, but they have moved the debate on. Also, not all media criticism is the same. Even on 'the left' what and who gets criticised varies quite a bit. Not all criticism, targets or those championed are equal.

Arcscott also believes that there is little evidence that media watch blogs such as his are actually changing behaviour in the newsroom:

They're important in that they catalogue the disinformation being produced by the press, but not important in terms of making the newspapers change their practices or correct their narratives. Media watch blogs are valuable to the people who read them, but have very little value in improving the media, given that they largely preach to the converted.

He adds:

They are currently the only people daring to take on the press. They do not have any funding or financial reward for doing so, nor do they have any power to influence the press. They are essentially a reaction to the unacceptable state of modern journalism, and the complete lack of press accountability.

It is a terribly sad thought that a critical debunking from a good media blog probably carries more weight in terms of audience and reaction than an upheld adjudication from the PCC. It is even sadder to reflect that both the media blogger and the PCC have about the same power to prevent future repetition of bad journalism.

Chamberlain says:

Blogs are an open forum for discussing contentious news stories and aggregating information. They act as a supplement or check upon established regulators. Their power is limited but they do act to give a voice to people who might otherwise feel they have no way of addressing grievances. They can also help show where constant poor behaviour occurs as repeated transgressions are noted. This acts as a useful historical watchdog. The ability of anyone to be a publisher means that little money and only limited technical skills are required to run such blog; the biggest input is time. This makes it a medium which is fairly democratic. Watch blogs can also focus on specific issues (race or gender) meaning that they can drill down on stories and take a deep view not open to other regulatory bodies which only accept protests which meet a certain standard.

It is clear that with media watch blogs, Twitter, Facebook, other online discussions, messageboards, comments and online complaints forms, the internet has provided new outlets to criticise the media and attempt to hold it to account – and to distribute such criticism with others. Baxter thinks:

The internet certainly made it easier to complain en masse through social media like Twitter and Facebook which could create a place where people would find outlets for their frustration and to look for ways in which to complain. Anyone can set up blogs and media forums as well as discussions through Twitter and Facebook groups to monitor the output of various media and their accuracy.

Thunder says about the fostering role of the internet:

The media watch blogs wouldn't exist without it, nor would such easy access to other versions of a story or to statistics that underpin a story, but might have been misinterpreted. It also allows these things to be spread, and maybe even seen by people actually searching for the article or publication being criticised.

Chamberlain adds:

Blogs, a key form of this new oversight, could not exist without the internet. The ability for everyone to be a publisher is fundamental. The internet is not creating the anger, it is acting a vent for it.

Arscott thinks the media watch blogs can make a difference if they

can convince just a few people to cancel their subscription to a rubbish newspaper then it is all worthwhile. On the other hand, media watch sites generate increased traffic to newspaper sites and help them generate revenue. In financial terms it would be better to ignore bad journalism online. In ethical terms, it is still necessary to link to it and tackle it head-on even if it might give them a small financial reward.

This is one criticism that is made of media watch blogs, and people who highlight bad journalism via Facebook and Twitter - that they are providing visitors to that newspaper's website. This allows them to generate revenue through selling advertising space. During the Moir case, the *Mail* website eventually removed all advertising from the page the article was on after complaints to the advertisers. The *Mail* says 10% of its visitors come from Facebook, although it is impossible to tell how and why links are being shared.

Aware of the possible increase in visitors the blogs may provide, several of the media watch bloggers have now started using a proxy site called *istyosty.com* - this caches a story and means that people can read the article without giving the newspaper website a 'hit'. With such links being used by people on Twitter, that could deprive newspaper websites of hundreds, if not thousands, of hits.

According to Jempson and Powell

numerous mainstream journalists-turned-bloggers also use the web to cast an eye over media matters and misbehaviour. They are exponents of a new type of media accountability, using the blogosphere as a virtual mirror to reflect back instantly upon media products and assist audiences to draw their own conclusions about the veracity and motivation of their colleagues.⁹⁶

Bloggers investigate interviews by journalist

In June 2011 *Independent* journalist and commentator Johann Hari was accused of a special kind of plagiarism by self-confessed ultra-leftist bloggers the Deterritorial Support Group (DSG)* over an interview with Italian Marxist Antonio Negri. They alleged that Hari had included quotes that were taken from a 2003 interview by Anne Dufourmentelle

Brian Whelan, editor of Yahoo! Ireland, then looked at an interview with Gideon Levy and claimed Hari had lifted quotes from Levy's writings and used them as if they had been spoken during an interview.

Hari responded in print** but the controversy did not end there and was swiftly followed by allegations from other bloggers that these were not the only occasions when the Orwell Prize-winning journalist had used previously published quotes in this way. The revelations started a debate about the seriousness of Hari's actions and whether such techniques were widespread.

* <http://deterritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com/2011/06/17/hari-karihackery/>

** <http://johannhari.com/2011/06/29/my-response-to-yesterdays-allegations>

⁹⁶ Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). Mapping Media Accountability - in Europe and Beyond. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 - 130, p. 201

3.2 NGOs and academia⁹⁷

In February 2011, the Media Standards Trust launched the Churnalism website 'to help the public distinguish between original journalism and 'churnalism'. Research from Cardiff University, which informed Nick Davies' *Flat Earth News*, claimed 54% of news articles were based on PR. Churnalism.com allows people to paste in the text of a press release see if it has inspired a news article and if so, how much of it is the same.⁹⁸

Many organisations have been dedicated to improving media standards over many years, including MediaWise, Voice of the Listener and Viewer and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. There are also a number of media ethics outfits based at universities including Polis, the Centre for Freedom of the Media and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.⁹⁹

More rarefied accountability projects like Medialens, set up in 2001 to 'correct the distorted vision of corporate media', operate largely online, applying Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model of media control' to critique articles and suggest how activists might respond. Their two books (Edwards/Cromwell 2006, 2009) have excited controversy within the media, and they claim over 32,000 subscribers.

More academics and journalists formed Spinwatch, in 2004, to monitor the influence of corporate public relations on the media, to campaign for a register of lobbyists, and to promote investigative reporting. Their wiki-site cataloguing PR firms, activist groups and government agencies was shut down by its webhost amidst controversy in June 2010 but relaunched almost immediately as Powerbase.

As we have seen, the Media Standards Trust has been experimenting with a variety of similar online accountability and transparency initiatives. A similar scheme detailing the vested interests of journalists is the Media Standards Trust Transparency Initiative, which 'looks at ways of making the provenance of news more transparent online, particularly through the use of metadata. As part of the initiative the Media Standards Trust developed hNews – a news microformat – together with the Associated Press. hNews¹⁰⁰ allows searchers to discover who wrote a specific articles; who it was published by; what source organization, if any, it came from; when it was first published; where it was written; whether and when it has been changed since publication; what rights are associated with it; and what journalistic codes of practice it adheres to, if any. It is now being used by over 500 news websites in the USA.'

⁹⁷ Adapted from Jempson, M. & W. Powell. United Kingdom: From the gentlemen's club to the blogosphere. In T. Eberwein, S. Fengler, E. Lauk & T. Leppik-Bork (Eds.). Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and Beyond. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag 2011, pp. 115 - 130

⁹⁸ <http://churnalism.com>

⁹⁹ www.mediawise.org.uk; www.cpb.org.uk; www.vlv.org.uk; www.mediastandardstrust.org; <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>; www.polismedia.org; www.lincoln.ac.uk/mht/research-mh/csmpr default.htm; www.cfom.org.uk; www.spinwatch.org; www.mediawatchuk.org.uk

¹⁰⁰ <http://mediastandardstrust.org/projects/transparency-initiative>

Sources

Interviewees:

Kevin Arscott – writes the media watch blog www.butireaditinthepaper.co.uk and works as a Learning Advisor, Coleg Gwent, Wales.

Steven Baxter – journalist; writes the media watch blog www.enemiesofreason.co.uk.

Rob Campbell – lecturer in journalism at the University of Glamorgan.

Phil Chamberlain – freelance journalist; lecturer in journalism at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Blogs at <http://takingoutthetrash.typepad.co.uk>.

Tomas Rawlings – games designer and director of Auroch Digital Ltd, a games and media consultancy. Also doing a PhD on p2p technology and evolution. Blog: <http://agreatbecoming.wordpress.com>.

Jamie Thunder – student on the Investigative Journalism MA at City University, London; writes media watch blog <http://exclarotive.wordpress.com>.

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