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CHAPTER I

Journalism, public service and BBC News Online

STUART ALLAN AND EINAR THORSEN

In the months leading up to the launch of BBC News Online in the autumn of 1997, warning bells were sounding in journalistic circles – not least within the BBC itself – with respect to the impact of the Internet on news reporting. For every voice of optimism highlighting its transformative potential, it seemed, there were several others expressing their grave misgivings. Firmly aligned with the latter end of the continuum was the respected BBC foreign correspondent Fergal Keane. Delivering the prestigious Huw Weldon Memorial Lecture to the Royal Television Society in September that year, he argued that journalism's integrity was in danger of being compromised, if not irrevocably harmed, by the arrival of new challenges to its defining principles (broadcast on BBC1, 20 October 1997). Pointing to the 'hundreds of conspiracy theories floating around about the death of Diana' in cyberspace, he expressed his concern that 'calm and considered reportage' was at serious risk of losing out to 'the sensational and the spectacular', especially where 'the generation growing up on a diet of *The X-Files*' was concerned. At issue, he maintained, was a 'dangerous retreat from rationality', whereby 'truth-telling' that is 'artful, fearless and intelligent' all but disappears into the swirl of 'trivia, gossip and celebration of the banal'. Growing technological pressures – compounded by those from the market – must be resisted, he reasoned, in order to better protect the interests of truth. 'I am worried about the potential of the Internet to devalue the role of the reporter,' Keane revealed, before wondering aloud about what the future might portend. 'What a pity,' he mused, 'if technology, far from pushing us into another age of enlightenment, was to return us to the rumour-ridden gloom of the Middle Ages.'

Uncertainties about the promise and peril of change, where principles such as 'forensic accuracy' and 'intellectual rigour' – to use Keane's words – long

associated with the best of BBC journalism were being recast anew, underline the tensions this chapter seeks to explore. It takes as its principal focus the emergent journalistic ecology of BBC News Online, from its inception in November 1997 to the tenth anniversary of the site in 2007 (see also Allan, 2006, 2009; Thorsen, 2009a). Specifically, it traces how BBC News Online has gradually evolved in reportorial terms – its forms, practices and epistemologies – in the course of becoming one of the most popular news websites globally. The discussion draws on the experiences of individuals directly responsible for the project so as to elucidate key tenets of the strategy informing the practical implementation of the BBC's move online. It shows that the website represented a significant initiative within the Corporation's attempt to reaffirm its public service ethos in a fledgling web environment, and thereby to better secure its place to ward off competition from commercial rivals in an increasingly converged media landscape.

In the course of highlighting a range of formative developments, special attention will be devoted to the ways in which the conventions underpinning an emergent ecology of online news reporting gradually began to consolidate. Here it is important to acknowledge from the outset that a number of ad hoc initiatives – including a Budget website in March 1995, one for the Olympics in 1996, an election site in the spring of 1997 (with some content syndicated from the BBC's Ceefax service) and a Death-of-Diana site in August 1997 – helped to set down precedents of form, but also reportorial craft, in ways which are more apparent in retrospect than they were at the time. Indeed, to this day, recollections by those involved in the launch of BBC News Online even differ over the precise time the site went live. 'We've talked to the original editor and the original product manager and nobody can put a finger on when exactly we switched to the new content system and started producing pages in the way that we have done ever since,' Pete Clifton, current head of BBC News Interactive, recently stated. 'We know that it was some time [during the first week of November 1997], but as for which moment of which day – we were probably just knackered at the time so nobody looked up to see what time it was' (cited in *Press Gazette*, 1 November 2007). Moreover, precisely what should count as 'online news' – as we discuss below – proved to be a controversial subject of considerable debate, inviting searching questions about how best to realise the potential of the Internet to deliver alternative types of coverage.

In seeking to contribute to efforts to trace this history, this chapter adopts a twofold strategy. First, we examine the actual launch of BBC News Online, devoting particular attention to the ways in which the Corporation's public service commitments shaped its remit, in general, as well as its concep-

tion of online journalism, in particular. Second, we proceed to discern a number of the interactive features associated with this rapidly growing news provision over the first ten years of the site's operation. In offering an appraisal of the guiding imperatives of interactivity – not least with regard to user-generated content – we aim to identify for purposes of elaboration several issues warranting further investigation.

Rewriting the rules

The BBC News Online service officially launched on 4 November 1997. The design of its webpages at the time might have looked 'bleak and amateurish from the vantage point of today', admitted Bob Eggington (2007), but the 'site got off to a cracking start'. Eggington, first head of the service, recalled that staff were facing a 'nightmare' of a challenge from the outset. 'The price of building the content production system at such speed was six months of technical instability,' he stated. 'The bloody thing kept crashing.' It took a dedicated team, willing to experiment with new ideas, to ensure that logistical problems were soon resolved. While the question of which news stories featured on the front page on Day One lacks a ready answer (evidently no one thought to preserve them at the time), memories of technical challenges remain vivid:

A distinguishing feature of the launch site was three clocks on the front page banner, indicating different world times, with the UK in the middle. 'Good evening, San Francisco,' the left clock would say. 'Good morning, Tokyo,' the right. It was a charming illustration of the instantaneous global reach of the web. Unfortunately, in a world with Netscape Navigator and 14.4k dial-up modems, it was also the single biggest reason the website would not load. The clocks quickly found their way into the Trash. (BBC News Online, 13 December 2007)

Similar recollections invite further consideration. 'What we didn't have was an abundance of text skills,' Eggington (2007) remembers. 'Broadcast scripts were not suitable for repurposing as text news stories. It became clear everything had to be written specifically for the web. The team quickly developed a style for the new service.' The team itself – with twenty editorial and six technical members – had been put together in a hurry, and was effectively made to revolve around a shared commitment to 'making it up as we went along' in a spirit of innovation. 'The only thing that mattered was momentum,' Eggington stated. 'We felt that if we didn't do it quick, someone would stop us' (cited in Connor, 2007).

The new website represented a significant initiative within the Corporation's strategy to reaffirm its public service ethos in a multichannel universe, and thereby be better placed to challenge commercial rivals such as CNN, MSNBC, EuroNews and News Corp. 'We are this autumn only at the starting block,' stated Tony Hall, chief executive of BBC News, the day before the launch. 'My ambition is, first, to ensure that we preserve and build a public service in news for the next generation. And, second, to ensure that BBC News develops as a global player' (cited in the *Guardian*, 3 November 1997). Widely perceived to be late on to the scene, arriving long after both British and international competitors had established their online presence, the initiative nevertheless represented a bold move. 'Our basic aim is to extend our public service remit on to the Web,' Eggington said at the time. 'The design is simple and it is easy to use.' The decision to proceed was justified, in his view, 'because that's where young people are going[.] We have to be there because the Web audience is increasing by 10 per cent every month' (cited in *The Times*, 5 November 1997). Much of the press commentary was focused elsewhere, however, namely on the other initiatives being unveiled around the same time. Easily the most significant of these was the Corporation's 24-hour rolling news channel, BBC News 24, which went to air with considerable fanfare the following week. Where the online commitment was generally regarded as being overdue, this venture invited a far more sceptical response. In the words of Damian Whitworth writing in *The Times*, 'dear old Auntie, always regarded as a little dotty, appears to have gone completely bats. As she celebrates her 75th birthday, she has suddenly decided to embark on some new adventures. The question is: is she up to it?' (*The Times*, 7 November 1997).

Not surprisingly, this question was answered rather emphatically in the affirmative by senior managers in the Corporation. 'This has been the most significant month in the history of BBC News,' Hall declared at the BBC News Online launch (cited in *European Media Business and Finance*, 17 November 1997). 'BBC News Online will, for the first time, put the entire wealth of BBC journalism at your fingertips,' he maintained. 'You will get the news you want and the news you need 24 hours a day' (cited in *Electronic Media*, 17 November 1997). The BBC, then as now, is one of the largest news gathering organisations in the world. Where rival sites – both television and newspaper-based – typically relied on copy from the wire services to provide breaking news, BBC News Online could draw on the expertise of over 2,000 members of staff and 250 correspondents across the globe. The online news team was composed of some forty journalists in addition to technical staff and graphic designers preparing news stories on the basis of reports provided by

these correspondents. Staff members joined the site from other divisions within the BBC, as well as from other news sites outside the Corporation. 'It is easier to teach old media journalists new tools than to teach techies journalism', observed one of the site's reporters (cited in Perrone, 1998). A range of experiments was conducted to determine how best to present and package stories, a sense of standard practice being the subject of daily renegotiation. Journalists – in contrast with those at some of the major US sites – were expected to be multiskilled; that is, to package their stories up to and including the post-production stage, in addition to writing copy in the first place. As conventions gradually evolved through the trialling of ideas – new and borrowed ones alike – efforts were similarly made to incorporate feedback from users via devices such as online questionnaires to help shape form and practice. 'We don't have a set of rules because we're learning as we go along,' Smartt commented. 'I don't think anybody in the business knows precisely how to do this' (cited in Perrone, 1998).

By early 1998, BBC Online had been confirmed as the leading British Internet content site, with BBC News Online recording 8.17 million page impressions in March according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (BBC Online overall recorded some 21 million page impressions from direct requests by over 900,000 users that month). Considered to be a 'strong driver of traffic', the news site was fast gaining a reputation for its immediacy – where the deadline is 'always now' – and the depth of its coverage. By June that year, BBC Online offered over 140,000 pages of content, some 61,000 of which consisted of news. Considered a great achievement by most commentators – and begrudgingly acknowledged as the leader in the field by rivals – its growing provision steadily improved, albeit not without the occasional instance of technical teething problems. 'We have found that [producing online content] is not as simple as we thought,' Dave Brewer, managing editor for the site, observed. 'The Web audience is sophisticated and will not stand for a simple reversioning of what was put on the TV or radio. We needed to learn to write for the Web and that meant starting from scratch' (cited in *The Australian*, 1 September 1998). This commitment to thinking afresh clearly played a significant role in defining the site's distinctive approach to public service, as well as the cultural authority of the journalism it sought to embody.

Breaking news

A number of instances emerged over the following months that helped to cast this distinctiveness in sharper relief. In August 1999, for example, BBC News

Online was relaying eyewitness reports from an earthquake in the town of Izmit in western Turkey before television news crews had arrived at the scene. Evidently the decision to post a message requesting information from anyone near the scene had been rewarded with four e-mails within the first ten minutes, followed by hundreds more over the following 24 hours. Jane Robins, citing this example of interactivity – and how it gives news on the site ‘an immediacy which traditional media would find hard to match’ – suggests it helps to explain why ‘The industry is talking about BBC News Online as a working example of the journalism of the future.’ Her description of the production process is revealing:

Being the BBC, the News Online journalists are equipped with sophisticated desktop equipment that allows them to monitor a host of feeds from BBC correspondents and radio stations. They identify a story, write it into an established template, and write their own headlines.

Unlike a newspaper reporter, the Online journalist then selects his [or her] own still photograph, crops it onscreen and adds it into the story. The self-editing process continues into audio and video material. Both can be selected and edited at the desk – the individual journalist becomes a writer, editor, picture editor, radio producer and video producer – his [or her] final product is checked by one of nine desk editors before going live on the site. (Robins, 1999)

She then proceeds to quote Alf Hermida (formerly a BBC foreign correspondent, and the output editor for the site at the time) to further discern the medium’s qualities. ‘In my experience it’s more exciting than other sorts of journalism,’ he states. ‘In radio you might be restricted to sending a three-minute package – here you cover every aspect of a story, take a story and it [sic] explore it from a number of angles – and the deadline is always now’ (Hermida, cited in Robins, 1999).

This heightened sense of immediacy afforded by online news recurrently figured in press commentary concerned with the relative advantages and limitations of the BBC’s initiative (a watchful eye being kept on the Corporation’s growing presence on the web, with concerns about the financial support derived from licence fee payers being a simmering matter of debate). Reinforcing perceptions that the BBC was leading the way in journalistic innovations in this regard was the glittering array of prizes the site was earning, including two Baftas, the British Press Award and the Prix Italia, by early 2000. In February of that year, BBC News Online was heralded as ‘the world’s best news site’ at The Net Awards. The citation for the award praised its success, stating that in ‘blending the many facets of multimedia with the

old-fashioned simplicity of a strong layout and exclusive online features, the site has quickly become an essential bookmark'. Expressing his gratitude to the judges for the award, then-Project Director Bob Eggington stated: 'Maintaining this huge news site is a tremendous task and it's wonderful when the staff get some recognition for their efforts.' The hard work of maintaining the quality of the service would continue, he promised. Matthew Bingham, editor of *The Net* magazine, believed the award duly recognised the site's role in 'giving us a glimpse of the future' where headlines were being posted within minutes of news happening. 'It is the best for breaking news, unlike newspaper sites which might only have a few updates during the day,' he remarked. 'BBC News Online is a genuinely interactive Internet experience, managed as an Internet enterprise, not just some offshoot of a print or other media company' (cited in BBC News Online, 8 February 2000).

This commitment to breaking news was the subject of considerable discussion within the BBC in the months leading up to the general election in June 2001. In formulating its online strategy, careful consideration was given to the possible impact of the Internet on campaigning. 'This will be the first full Online election', the *Guidance for All BBC Programme Makers during the General Election Campaign* announced. A key feature of the strategy was the BBC's *Vote 2001* site, intended to provide several animated interactive features, and two key sections for civic engagement in the form of *Talking Point* and *Online 1,000* (see also Thorsen, 2009b). The site promptly proved to be a success, registering about 500,000 page views every day throughout the campaign, with a significant surge to 10.76 million on polling day, 7 June, and results day, 8 June (Coleman, 2001). Events later in the year see these figures overshadowed in comparison, with the attacks on 11 September proving to be a 'tipping point' of sorts – figuratively and almost literally – with regard to the sheer volume of traffic to the site. BBC technologist Brendan Butterworth (2007) described how the surge in traffic initially appeared to be the work of a malicious hacker:

I was sat in an operations meeting when the pager went off and didn't stop: something big was happening. There was a massive influx of traffic to the site – a DoS [denial of service] attack, it seemed. Damion called us back: 'there was this plane . . .' We turned on a TV and saw a burning World Trade Center Tower. Then another plane. Ops worked on keeping the servers happy, raising the webmaster and News to agree sheddable load. This was the first time, so it took a while to get a new light home page in place. Our New York server farm was two blocks from the WTC site; it survived but suffered as power failed. The dust eventually clogged the generators and there were problems getting in fuel. The only outage

was in the days after; we covered that by moving all traffic to London. The sites were designed to operate as hot spares for each other. We had planned around London suffering at some point, but it was the opposite. (Butterworth, 2007)

The template for the BBC homepage was not designed to cope with a breaking news story of this magnitude, and ‘all that could be done was to edit the three promotional slots on the page to carry news of the unfolding events’ (Belam, 2007). Eventually, the technical team bypassed the content management system altogether and uploaded small HTML updates via FTP. Content was reshaped to focus on the single story, as Mike Smartt, BBC’s new media editor-in-chief at the time, recalled:

We decided to clear everything off the front page, which we’ve never done before and concentrate all our journalists on the story. We work hand in hand with the broadcast teams but don’t wait for them to report the facts. It works both ways. . . . Most important to us were the audio and video elements. It was among the most dramatic news footage anyone has ever seen. The ability to put all that on the web for people to watch over again set us apart. (Cited in Allan, 2006, p. 64)

The BBC’s servers experienced hits in the millions, far surpassing the record set during the election earlier that year. The efforts made by staff to maintain its presence online were truly remarkable.

Interestingly, with regard to the coverage of the crisis, the BBC elected not to capitalise on the array of material – firsthand accounts, photographs, video clips and so forth – being posted online by ordinary citizens using forums, weblogs and personal websites. That is, while the BBC later acknowledged that it had received thousands of e-mails from individuals to the events, only two of these e-mails led to live news interviews being held with people in New York (Wardle and Williams, 2008, p. 2).

Blurring boundaries

The importance of online news as a source of breaking news and ongoing story updates is particularly noticeable during times of crisis. A case in point was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which came after ongoing negotiations for a peaceful resolution had, in the eyes of the US administration, broken down. On 17 March 2003, US President George W. Bush issued an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein and his sons: leave Iraq within 48 hours. ‘Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict commenced at a time of our choosing,’ Bush

announced in a televised address to the nation (cited in BBC News Online, 18 March 2003). As the deadline for war grew ever closer, online news websites witnessed a surge in traffic from people wanting to keep up with the latest developments. In the case of the BBC this amounted to an increase of about 30–40 per cent, with servers struggling to cope with the unprecedented demand (see Timms, 2003). Evidently the BBC's news site received the greatest share of 'hits' – numbering into the millions – from US users looking abroad for alternative perspectives (see also Allan, 2006; Matheson and Allan, 2009).

In marked contrast to the challenges of reporting on the deliberate unfolding of a governmental resolution to wage war was the sudden, horrific crisis engendered by the Indian Ocean Tsunami on 26 December 2004. Generally considered to be one of the most powerful ever recorded, it left over 283,000 people dead or reported missing in its wake. Few Western news organisations had reporters nearby, and many of those scrambling to the scenes of devastation found their access was restricted by the same logistical problems facing aid workers. Significantly, however, ordinary citizens – many of them tourists, who had the presence of mind to record what was happening with still and video cameras – provided the most visually compelling imagery used in the mainstream media (see Allan, 2006, 2009). While the BBC cleared its broadcasting schedules to make room for extended bulletins and special programmes, BBC News Online provided extensive contextual information, including graphics explaining why earthquakes occur and a seven-page animated guide to the tsunami. The BBC received thousands of e-mails containing eyewitness accounts, some including digital photographs and even video shot using mobile phones. Audiovisual material was used to illustrate news packages, while e-mails sent to the news website were read out on BBC News 24. The BBC News website also used its *Talking Point* section, now rebranded as *Have your say*, to help people establish contact with missing friends or relatives. The message board was incredibly popular, receiving more than 250,000 hits on the first day alone. Using the website in this way was new territory for the BBC. 'This has grown out of nothing – but we've managed to reunite six sets of people so far,' Matthew Eltringham, then an assistant editor on the site, explained. 'One Dutch man found his brother via a Vietnamese woman living in Stockholm' (cited in Price, 2005).

As the concept of 'citizen journalism' entered the journalistic lexicon in the aftermath of the tsunami, important lessons were being learned about audience interactivity. Once again, it was in preparation for covering a UK general election campaign that several important issues came to the fore. Following BBC News Online's tentative steps in 1997, and its more robust execution in 2001, the dedicated election provision was this time entitled *Election 2005* (see

also Thorsen, 2009b). Several sections were introduced to complement its reporting by offering users a more in-depth treatment of election issues. New to the site was the BBC's election blog, entitled *Election Monitor*, which announced on the main page that it was 'bringing you first-hand reports from around the country from our team of correspondents, as well as the best of the newspapers, choice morsels from the web, and your e-mails'. By the end of the campaign, the blog had presented 276 posts (in addition to the main holding page), of which 189 received one or more comments from members of the public, totalling 783 comments across all blog posts. However, the election blog was surpassed in popularity by the *UK voters' panel*. Created in collaboration with breakfast television, it consisted of twenty voters who had been asked in advance to contribute their views 'in text and in video, using 3G mobile phones', throughout the election. There were nine different debate topics with an average of six panellists publishing a response on each occasion. Users could discuss each of these entries – the section attracted some 524 comments in total. The election site was also supported by the *Have your say* section, which covered fifty-three topics across sixty-eight pages. Some 7,684 comments appeared, with a small minority of news and feature articles also containing comments posted by citizens. All in all, this level of interactivity on the *Election 2005* site was widely regarded as firm evidence that the BBC was facilitating spaces for public dialogue. Vicky Taylor (2007), the Editor of BBC Interactivity at the time, justified these features in terms of public service. She argued that it is 'much better if you're getting your audience telling you what they think than just the officials or people in power'. Moreover, she added, 'it's a form of democracy – more people get their chance to have their say about something'.

Echoing the sequence of events in 2001, the general election was followed a few months later by another terror attack, this time in London. At approximately 8:50 a.m. on 7 July 2005, three bombs exploded within a minute of one another on the London Underground. Initially it was not clear what was happening, with early news agency reports suggesting it could be a power-surge. At 9:47 a.m., a fourth bomb detonated on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square; an hour later the police formally announced that there had been a coordinated terror attack. For many Londoners, the principal source of breaking news, especially for those in the workplace, was the Internet. Ordinary citizens' firsthand reports, together with mobile telephone images and video clips (some of the more iconic of which were shot underground in tragic circumstances), were rapidly dispersing across the web. The BBC News website was among the first to break the story online. In contrast to 11 September 2001, the Corporation had put in place 'an established process of

handing control of the main picture promotional area of the homepage directly over to BBC News in the event of a major story breaking' (Belam, 2007). With the website receiving on average 40,000 page requests per second, it soon became clear that the technical team would have to reduce the content on the page 'in order to minimise the download footprint for each page view' (Belam, 2007). The solution was to deploy an experimental 'proof of concept' XHTML/CSS table-free version, which eased the bandwidth usage, thus allowing a greater number of connections.

Putting into motion a strategy derived, in part, from previous experience with the tsunami reporting, the BBC quickly began soliciting eyewitness accounts and imagery from members of the public. Richard Sambrook (2005), Director of Global News for the Corporation, recalls the incredible response:

Within six hours we received more than 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages, and 20,000 e-mails. People were participating in our coverage in a way we had never seen before. By the next day, our main evening TV newscast began with a package edited entirely from video sent in by viewers.

The four people responsible for managing 'user-generated content' (then as now the BBC's preferred term for 'citizen journalism'), whose team had only been set up as a temporary measure for the 2005 election and then made permanent, were struggling to cope with the wealth of material arriving at such considerable speed. Audiences, as Sambrook explained, 'had become involved in telling this story as they never had before', providing contributions that were extraordinarily rich in quality. 'Our reporting on this story was a genuine collaboration,' he added, 'enabled by consumer technology – the camera phone in particular – and supported by trust between broadcaster and audience.' This impromptu collaboration signalled, in his view, that 'the BBC's news-gathering had crossed a Rubicon'.

Crossing the Rubicon

In recognition of this important shift, the BBC formalised the management of user-generated content through its 'UGC Hub'. Launched soon after the London bombings, it was designed to harness the power of the new, two-way relationship between the Corporation and its audiences. It was not long before events conspired to test its viability, of course, the first major one engendered by the explosions at the Buncefield fuel depot near Hemel

Hempstead in Hertfordshire on 11 December 2005. An oil tank had exploded at 6:01 in the morning and several others followed, causing a fire that was described by the Chief Fire Officer, Roy Wilsher, as potentially one of the largest in peacetime Europe. The BBC was quickly inundated by eyewitness accounts and amateur video footage, receiving its first photograph at 6:16, only minutes after the initial explosion (Eltringham, cited in BBC News Online, 11 April 2006). More than 6,500 photographs were reportedly sent to yourpics@bbc.co.uk on the first day, which was a new record for the site (Taylor, cited in BBC News Online, 13 December 2005). One of the photographs was taken by David Otway, who was on a flight to Ireland at the time and so able to shoot images from above the scene. 'I just happened to be in the right place at the right time with the right equipment,' he recalled. 'My first thought was that it was a really big news event and I wanted to share the experience and pictures with people' (cited in BBC News Online, 13 December 2005). The BBC collated the best of these contributions into image galleries on its website, which received 657,367 page impressions on the day of the blast – thereby reaffirming, as if any proof was needed, the remarkable popularity of such material with the audiences.

The speed at which the BBC UGC Hub was able to react to user-generated content was highlighted again on 30 June 2007 – three days after Gordon Brown was sworn in as British Prime Minister – when the UK was subject to an attempted suicide attack at Glasgow airport. Pictures taken by ordinary citizens quickly found their way into the public domain. Online editor Vicky Taylor explained that 'the pictures from bystanders arrived in the BBC central UGC Hub area 30 minutes after it first happened and were on air or on BBC sites shortly afterwards' (cited in Beckett, 2008, p. 81). Two hours after the incident, the BBC website was already featuring a gallery of such images, entitled 'Your pictures: Glasgow alert', together with a news report made up entirely of eyewitness reports and images. The relative ease with which this material was handled signalled the extent to which its use had been rendered almost routine in times of intense pressure. Further examples to emerge in the months ahead included 'amateur video' (taken by mobile telephone) of the execution of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on 30 December 2006. 'That video completely subverted the official version that the execution was dignified and that Saddam was treated humanely,' Peter Horrocks, head of television news at the BBC, argued. 'The most significant thing,' he maintained, was 'that the footage was shot in the first place' (cited in the *Independent*, 7 January 2007). The unofficial video also caused an extraordinary ethical dilemma for the Corporation. That is, how much of it should be broadcast, considering the video was already widely available to its audience on other

websites? The BBC ‘decided to show the noose around the neck on News 24 but not on BBC1 at a time when children might be watching,’ Horrocks explained, and it ‘would not show the moment of death’ – an ad hoc policy decision that was extended to the website as well.

Another relevant example surfaced during the uprising by monks in Myanmar (formerly Burma, which is still the recognised name in the UK) in September–October 2007, also known as the ‘Saffron Revolution’. The BBC and other news organisations were forced to rely on reports, photographs and videos posted by bloggers from within the conflict zone to illustrate their stories. ‘With the Burmese authorities clamping down on information getting out of the country, we [the BBC] – like other news organisations – have been relying more than ever on what people caught up in the events are telling us,’ Steve Herrmann (2007) noted at the time. The BBC was able to publish daily reports and images, and occasionally audio and video, from eyewitnesses inside Myanmar, e-mailed directly to its website. ‘The pictures are sometimes grainy and the video footage shaky – captured at great personal risk on mobile phones,’ BBC News Online correspondent, Stephanie Holmes, commented, ‘but each represents a powerful statement of political dissent’ (BBC News Online, 26 September 2007). Vicky Taylor explained how social media networks, such as Facebook, also facilitated the Corporation’s efforts in actively seeking out relevant sources. As she later recalled:

When the Burma [Myanmar] uprising was happening, a colleague found the Friends of Burma [Facebook] group and through them got in touch with many who had recently left the country and had amazing tales to tell.

Journalists now have to know how to seek out information and contact from all sorts of sources and social network sites are key to this (Taylor, cited in Journalism.co.uk, 29 February 2008).

Social networking sites, it seemed, were rapidly coming into the frame as potential sources of news and information.

The level of audience material submitted to the BBC is such that the UGC Hub – a 24/7 operation – is staffed by twenty-three people to handle what on an average day typically amounts to 12,000 e-mails and about 200 photographs and videos. This commitment is intended, in part, to enhance the experience for users engaging in moderated debates in the *Have your say* section, although primarily it is intended to ensure that the Corporation is able to react immediately to news events as they unfold. These moves have resonated in positive ways, with BBC News Online routinely serving more than one billion pages per month (with some fourteen million unique users per week). This success has

been used by managers to justify their decision to restructure the BBC's news operations, merging radio, television and online news into a single, converged multimedia newsroom. Originally announced in late 2007, the move was said to be a pragmatic response to the licence-fee settlement, which required the BBC to cut costs in its news operations by some £155 million a year by the end of the Charter period. However, it also forced the Corporation to rethink and reform its approach to journalism in the light of the realities of a new media landscape. The first phase of the plans was executed in April 2008 and finalised when the online news teams merged with the rest in June 2008. Signalling the importance of audience material, the so-called UGC Hub was placed at the heart of the new multimedia news operations.

Conclusion

Speaking at an e-Democracy conference on 11 November 2008, the BBC's director of news Helen Boaden (2008) outlined what she perceived to be the main challenges at stake for its online provision. 'Our journalism is now fully embracing the experiences of our audiences, sharing their stories, using their knowledge and hosting their opinions,' she declared; 'we're acting as a conduit between different parts of our audience; and we're being more open and transparent than we have ever been.' The 'accidental journalism' performed by ordinary citizens during the London bombing attacks in July 2005 was a watershed, in her view, 'the point at which the BBC knew that newsgathering had changed forever'. Since then, the BBC has become much more proactive in soliciting this type of content from its audiences. In Boaden's words:

It's not just a 'nice to have' – it can really enrich our journalism and provide our audiences with a wider diversity of voices than we could otherwise deliver. As well as voices we might not otherwise hear from, there are stories about which we would never have known. ... For many of our audiences, this has opened their eyes to something very simple: that their lives can be newsworthy – that news organisations don't have a monopoly on what stories are covered. Indeed, that news organisations have an appetite for stories they simply couldn't get to themselves and they value information and eye witness accounts from the public – as they always have done. (Boaden, 2008)

In learning to accept the tenet that 'someone out there will always know more about a story than we do', the BBC has embraced citizen newsgathering as a vital resource. This newly forged relationship, Boaden is convinced, represents

a positive opportunity for journalism to improve in a way that reinforces informed citizenship. ‘Smart news organisations are engaging audiences and opening themselves up to the conversation our audiences clearly want’, she contends. In addition to helping to preserve the BBC’s core journalistic values of accuracy, fairness and diversity of opinion, she adds, this type of interactivity reaffirms a commitment to reporting in the public interest. ‘In order to survive,’ Boaden concludes, ‘journalism must be trusted.’

Public trust can never be taken for granted, of course; instead, it must be earned each and every day, often under circumstances that defy easy comprehension. A case in point revolved around BBC News Online’s reporting of the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, when the sudden and dramatic influx of material from social networking sites – not least Twitter – provided material that posed unique challenges to process. Even before news of the attacks had begun to appear in the electronic media, Twitter was providing eyewitness accounts from users describing what was happening as well as they could manage under the circumstances. In the hours to follow, the BBC drew upon ‘tweets’ (messages limited to 140 characters) to supplement the information being provided by the Corporation’s correspondents, news agencies, Indian media reports, official statements, blog posts and e-mails. Steve Herrmann (2008), editor of BBC News Interactive, explained:

As for the Twitter messages we were monitoring, most did not add a great amount of detail to what we knew of events, but among other things they did give a strong sense of what people connected in some way with the story were thinking and seeing. ‘Appalled at the foolishness of the curious onlookers who are disrupting the NSG operations,’ wrote one. ‘Our soldiers are brave but I feel we could have done better,’ said another. There was assessment, reaction and comment there and in blogs. One blogger’s stream of photos on photosharing site Flickr was widely linked to, including by us. All this helped to build up a rapidly evolving picture of a confusing situation. (Herrmann, 2008)

Despite these advantages, however, Herrmann and others were aware of the risks associated with using material when its veracity could not be independently verified. One instance of false reporting, repeatedly circulated on Twitter, claimed that the Indian government was alarmed by what was happening on the social network. Fearful that the information being shared from eyewitnesses on the scene was proving to be useful to the attackers, government officials – it was alleged – were urging Twitter users to cease their efforts, while also looking to block Twitter’s access to the country itself. On the BBC’s Mumbai live event page, it was reported:

1108 Indian government asks for live Twitter updates from Mumbai to cease immediately. ‘ALL LIVE UPDATES – PLEASE STOP TWEETING about #Mumbai police and military operations,’ a tweet says.

The BBC was criticised by some commentators for reporting a claim that was later revealed to be untrue. Speaking with the benefit of hindsight, Herrmann responded to questions regarding the decision to post it:

Should we have checked this before reporting it? Made it clearer that we hadn’t? We certainly would have done if we’d wanted to include it in our news stories (we didn’t) or to carry it without attribution. In one sense, the very fact that this report was circulating online was one small detail of the story that day. But should we have tried to check it and then reported back later, if only to say that we hadn’t found any confirmation? I think in this case we should have, and we’ve learned a lesson. The truth is, we’re still finding out how best to process and relay such information in a fast-moving account like this. (Herrmann, 2008)

Bearing these constraints in mind, he believed it was justifiable for the BBC to be sharing what it knew as quickly as possible, even before facts had been fully checked, as a general principle. In this way, users gain an insight into how a major story is being put together, even when it entails having to accept some responsibility for assessing the quality – and reliability – of the information being processed.

Notwithstanding examples such as the news reporting of the Mumbai attacks, the everyday challenge engendered by the sheer volume of audience material received by the BBC is formidable in its own right. In February 2009, when the UK experienced its heaviest snowfall in eighteen years, the widespread disruption experienced across the country was newsworthy enough to generate a record amount of UGC material. According to Peter Horrocks (2009), head of the BBC Newsroom, more than 35,000 people submitted pictures and video of the heavy snow. ‘This was a record both for the sheer number of pictures,’ he argued, ‘and almost certainly for the size of the audience response to a news event in the UK.’ This popularity was also reflected in visitor statistics, with the BBC News website attracting some 8.2 million unique visitors (5.1 million from the UK) on Monday 2 February – which was also a new record. Meanwhile, the BBC News channel had a peak audience of 557,000 viewers, ‘no doubt boosted by huge numbers of people taking an enforced day off work’, as Horrocks points out. In a significant demonstration of convergence between the online and broadcast platforms, there were also 195,000 plays of the BBC News channel live on the website.

This example would suggest that convergence, long a buzzword within BBC circles, is rapidly becoming a reality, often in ways that underscore the contributions of 'the people formerly known as the audience', to use Jay Rosen's (2006) phrase. In any case, there can be little doubt that this type of ordinary news story highlights the dramatic journey of BBC News Online as effectively as the more extraordinary examples that tend to be celebrated in journalistic and academic accounts alike.

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