

The politics of online journalism

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Last week saw the last of the current series of the Future of News seminars. They have taken us on a tour of the New Media landscape, via the (postponed) funeral of newspapers, past the growth of Independent Online Journalism and on to a discussion of the Politics of Online Journalism.

We were trying to get to the point where we could discuss the *effects* of Online Journalism but ended up having a much more interesting debate about the politics of actually *doing* the thing.

In my presentation I asked what happens to journalism when it goes online. Does it lose its moral compass as it becomes fragmented and commercialised? Or does it create a more 'democratic' media with so much public participation? How can online journalism retain the classic functions of editing, reporting, and being accurate and fair? How can journalists cope with the new functions of being a multi-platform facilitator? And how does this work under the extraordinary pressure of events like the London Bombings?

Rachel North (Rachelnorthlondon.com) began blogging in response to being subject to the London Bombings and as part of her online (and mainstream media) campaign for a public inquiry in to how 7/7 happened:

"I got in to blogging by accident. At the beginning I didn't know what a blog was. I first posted on a notice-board and it went from there. The difference from the point of view of a consumer and producer of news is that online the audience is different. You become part of a team dynamic in order to produce content. People online always know what you've written before, and if not can look for it and pull it right out."

But **Ros Taylor of Guardian Online** said there was a danger of universalising

Online reaction to events like 7/7, a kind of "Internet imperialism", when in fact access to the internet is limited:

"It is a fantastic medium if you speak English, have the bandwidth, and are articulate. I would argue that online the most articulate are at the forefront of the content to the exclusion of others. We are English/UK/American centric in our discussions and we need to remember that there is a whole world that is not online."

And as Ros and her colleagues have found, those who go online such as the posters on the Guardian's own *Comment Is Free* op ed pages, can often indulge in a very uncivil level of discourse. So is internet journalism only a place for rich Westerners to be rude to each other?

Ruth Hogarth from BBC World Service New Media said that the digital divide is not as great as the numbers may suggest as people find different ways to access the internet. And her colleague, **Kate Goldberg, Assistant Editor at BBC World Service Online** said we should trust the public more:

"There are clear boundaries between citizen journalism and our own journalism, but we need to trust citizen reports more and at times we have to get together"

And **Steve Herrmann, Editor of BBC News Interactive** described how that happens when there are major stories. He acknowledged that on 7/7 there were times when his news operation could not cope with the flow of information and got behind the public's own communication online. He says that they learnt valuable lessons in what user generated content to trust:

"We receive information from fantastic sources but it is a monumental task to filter and verify it and turn it into trusted journalism. We are learning."

Partly this can be done with the help of technology, like the email cruncher that BBC News Online now uses to sift through public emails. It sorts the emails according to key words and turns photographs into thumbnails for journalists to check for news value.

But as **Adrian Monck (City University)** pointed out, judgements will still be made by editorial figures that can be manipulated by online 'flash mobs' who can distort the filtering process.

Becky Hogge from the Digital Rights Group said that at least online journalism allows for correction in a more practical and transparent manner than traditional journalism, so it can be more accurate. Becky argued that this might be why during the Virginia Tech shootings many bloggers resented journalists emailing them to follow up on postings. Steve Herrmann thought it was an interesting problem that some people wanted to report their experience

online but didn't want it treated like journalism. Ruth Hogarth felt that anyone who blogs should accept that they are in the public domain. But is there a danger that we mistake the process for the content? Virginia Tech was in danger of becoming an online 'Diana' moment, said **Richard Ayers of Magic Lantern**:

"At these times you can get people who are essentially cultural bloggers putting up information that they don't see as journalism but which journalists want to use. What is worrying is if we are looking at the outpouring online and making a story out of that. That means more time analysing the reactions than telling the story. It can distract journalists from being journalists."

This started an interesting debate about applied journalism in these circumstances and the different ways that TV or print/online journalism sites incorporate citizen journalism. Sky News ended up running rather crass text excerpts at the bottom of the screen during the Virginia Tech shootings while websites were able to physically separate the emotional comments from the news and analysis. As **Adrian Monck** said:

"Online the two strands can be divorced from each other while being run simultaneously whereas television can't really do two things at once. Watching television is a social experience and so you can't separate out the emotion from the factual reporting."

But **Tony Curzon-Price (Opendemocracy.net)** warned that we are in danger of mistaking online groups such as those who reacted to the Virginia Tech shootings for real communities:

"In a blogosphere consumers need to be citizens and this is impossible – we are promised authenticity and what we given in reality is a perversion. Where it works is when you judge that you are in an online presence of a community that knows what it is talking about. This works when the community is small and specific but when you broaden the content it is much harder to pick out comments that represent the community or reality. What people want fro global voices is something that is almost impossible. We want a community of citizens but we don't have a global community of citizens, we have separate communities of interest."

So how do bloggers such as **Clive Davis (Spectator blogs)** relate to their audience?

"There is an audience but it is a fickle community that is easily offended. Most of the comments are poor because people are looking chat rather than to make grand statements".

Steve Herrmann felt that the more specialised the blogger the better the debate. While **John Owen (Newsxchange)** pointed out that blogs have different roles in different contexts, internationally. As Ruth Hogarth said:

"This is not just about the Guardian or the Telegraph. In many countries blogs are an arena – the only arena for dissent. This should be a global conversation".

So how reliable is all this blogosphere content? As Becky Hogge pointed out blogs are driven by the subjects that interests communities of interest and is as much about discourse – any discourse – as it is about 'facts':

"Blogging is not news breaking or news gathering. It's about opinion, so there's a tendency to blog about gossip."

Which means that some professional journalists operating online feel disillusioned with the reality. As Ros Taylor said:

'there is a sense that blogging gives us access that was not there in the past, but some of us are feeling disillusioned in the blogosphere. There can be a sense of us against them – a number of bloggers feel their job is to hold Mainstream media to account or to try to undermine our authroit

. that's a worthy aim as there's a lot of arrogance in journalism. But we were hoping that they would give us more insights into subjects we don't know enough about'

In effect, Ros was pointing out that blogs have reduced the cost of taking our opinions out in to the public sphere and that in turn has diluted the quality of those opinions – let alone, the reporting value of public online interventions.

Nico Macdonald, New Media Consultant (Spy.co.uk) felt that there was the potential for civil discourse online but that online journalism puts an almost unmanageably high burden on the news media:

"The challenge is that the only place to connect today is to the media, Politics are not meaningful. The media has an enormous burden and a tremendous challenge. One solution is to try to think about how you can have an online conversation like the conversation we are having here tonight rather than the model of a public meeting. We haven't mapped these models of debate of civil societies online yet. Most likely the best solution is for people to comment in their own space which is then transported or mediated through other

avenues – a threaded debate might work, for example.”

Eclectic conservative blogger **Ellee Seymour (Elleseymour.com)** ploughs on regardless. She manages to combine personal blogging with political activist blogging, philosophical commentary and a campaign to highlight missing children. She retains the original spirit of the blogosphere:

“It’s supposed to be about fun. I have so much fun sharing information and meeting people. I even love the ranters, send all your ranters to me.”

Conclusion:

Next autumn POLIS will publish a report looking at the practical and policy implications for Networked Journalism. The mixture of journalism and online interactivity opens up an unprecedented resource for public debate, citizen expression and journalistic creativity. But as this seminar shows it also raises a range of real and moral problems. What is impressive is the way that journalists, bloggers and other media practitioners are grappling with these issues.

What we must not do is to try to find a universal solution. There isn’t one. We have to get used to the idea of plurality, of diversity and of inconsistency. Experienced Media organisations like the BBC and The Guardian will have to continue to deal with a tidal wave of citizen interaction. But the blogosphere has its own life, too. It is creating communities that will exist separately or alongside ‘mainstream’ journalism. I think that is an incredibly exciting prospect that offers greater empowerment for all concerned. And as our BBC World colleagues showed, that is a global prospect, not just for the West.

This was the last in the current series of Future of News seminars. Next autumn POLIS will publish a think-tank report on the policy implications of online news media that will attempt to set out the possibilities and problems of Networked Journalism.

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