

# **A CLASH OF CULTURES: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines how national UK newspaper websites are integrating user-generated content (UGC). A survey quantifying the adoption of UGC by mainstream news organizations showed a dramatic increase in the opportunities for contributions from readers. In-depth interviews with senior news executives revealed this expansion is taking place despite residual doubts about the editorial and commercial value of material from the public. The study identified a shift towards the use of moderation due to editors' persistent concerns about reputation, trust, and legal liabilities; indicating that UK newspaper websites are adopting a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC. The findings suggest a gate-keeping approach may offer a model for the integration of UGC, with professional news organisations providing editorial structures to bring different voices into their news reporting, filtering and aggregating UGC in ways they believe to be useful and valuable to their audience. While this research looked at UGC initiatives in the context of the UK newspaper industry, it has broad relevance as professional journalists tend to share a similar set of norms. The British experience offers valuable lessons for news executives making their first forays into this area and for academics studying the field of participatory journalism.

**Keywords:** blogs, British newspaper websites, citizen journalism, online journalism, participatory journalism, user-generated content

## Introduction

The Internet is increasingly being defined by new digital technologies that empower users to develop, create, rate, and distribute Internet content and applications (O'Reilly, 2005). Websites such as YouTube, MySpace, and Wikipedia provide platforms for so-called user-generated content (UGC), where citizens can publish their own comments, photos, videos, and more online. According to Paul Saffo (quoted in: Economist, 2006), in this new media culture the public is no longer a passive consumer of media, but an active participant in the creation of the media landscape.

2006 saw the purchase of MySpace by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation for US\$580 million and Google's acquisition of YouTube for US\$1.65 billion, leading some commentators to state that UGC was the "paramount cultural buzz phrase of 2006" (Pareles, 2006). Indeed, such quantitative evidence as exists does seem to show that websites based on user participation generate significantly more usage than sites not based on this concept.<sup>1</sup>

The response of the British public to the July 7 2005 underground and bus bombings in London showed how visitors to online news sites were ready and willing to contribute content. The BBC received 22,000 e-mails & text messages, 300 photos, and several video sequences on the day of the attacks.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic stills and video led BBC TV newscasts—the first time, according to Torin Douglas (2006), that such material had been considered more newsworthy than professional content.

The emergence of online tools that allow for broad participation in the creation and dissemination of content has repercussions for the role of journalists as conveyors of news and information. Gillmor (quoted by Lasica, 2003) argues that "people at the edges of the network have the ability to create their own news entries". UGC may be instigating a fundamental shift in established modes of journalism, undermining the "we write, you read" dogma of modern journalism (Deuze, 2003).

This study seeks to understand how established news organisations in the UK are responding to the emergence of UGC. We examine UGC as a process whereby ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications. It builds on research by Neil Thurman (2008) in 2004–2005 that quantified and analysed the distribution of user-generated content initiatives (UGCIs) at ten leading UK news websites and examined editors' attitudes to citizen journalism and participatory journalism.

In the first section of this study we examine the range of formats used to solicit material from readers, and the progressive adoption of UGC by UK newspaper websites. The second section explores senior news executives' attitudes towards UGC within professional news organisations. We analyse: (1) the reasons behind the adoption of UGC initiatives, (2) its editorial and financial value, and (3) editors' concerns about brand identity and reputation. More widely, our study examines the relationship between professional journalism and amateur content, and how UGC challenges the traditional gate-keeping role of journalists. The study comes as news organisations across the world are experimenting with ways of integrating UGC into professional journalistic models.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

A combination of an online survey and in-depth interviews were used to examine the adoption of UGC by UK news organisations and to investigate the internal debates taking place in newsrooms over the publication of user media. The study focuses on the online experiences of the leading national newspapers in the UK, and, therefore, does not include the BBC, which is a publicly funded national broadcaster.

A survey was undertaken in November 2006 to measure the adoption of user-generated content initiatives (UGCIs) by 12 UK newspaper websites. The websites were studied over a period of 48 hours and visited a number of times at random during the day. For the assessment of the UGC functionality of each site, the unit of analysis was a web page. All sections of the websites studied were examined to see if they contained any UGCIs.

The interviews were semi-structured and did not set out to test any specific propositions. Instead the authors set out to investigate attitudes to user media, with use of prompts and follow up questions (McCracken, 1988). The following news executives were interviewed:

- Richard Avery—Internet Development Controller, Northern and Shell.
- Peter Bale—Editorial Director, Times Online.
- Alistair Brown—General Manager, Scotsman.com.
- Richard Burton—Editor, Telegraph.co.uk.
- James Montgomery—Editor, FT.com.
- Pete Picton—Editor, TheSun.co.uk.
- Steve Purcell—Editor, Mirror.co.uk.
- Alan Revell—COO, Associated Northcliffe Digital.
- Annelies Van den Belt—New Media Director, Telegraph Group.
- Simon Waldman—Director, Digital Publishing, Guardian.co.uk.
- Richard Withey—New Media Strategies, Independent Digital.

The participants were selected as representatives of a particular position in the social system in question (Lindlof, 1995): in this case as very senior editors and managers at the most popular newspaper websites in the UK. As such the findings have relevance to other established news organisations seeking to integrate UGC into their products and services, because journalism professionals tend to have a common set of norms and values (Weaver, 1998). While the number of participants in a typical qualitative research study is too small to be representative of the general population, the number of interviewees in this study exceeds the quantity that McCracken (1988) believes is sufficient for qualitative research based on in-depth interviews. A modified version of the issue-focused method recommended by Weiss (1994) was used to analyse verbatim transcripts of the interviews.

## **(I) Findings**

### *New Formats Introduced*

The website analysis identified nine generic formats used to encourage contributions from the public: ‘Polls’, ‘Messageboards’, ‘Have your says’, ‘Comments on stories’, ‘Q&As’, ‘Blogs’, ‘Reader blogs’, ‘Your media’, and ‘Your story’ (see: Thurman, 2008).

'Polls' are defined as topical questions where readers are asked to make a multiple choice or binary response. They provide instant and quantifiable feedback to readers and are easy to set up and run automatically, being inexpensive and risk-free. But they offer very limited interaction: restricted to 'yes' or 'no' answers, or a multiple-choice response.

'Messageboards' are areas that allow readers to engage in threaded online conversations or debates on topics often initiated by readers. They are usually reactively moderated.<sup>4</sup> They are structured so that users can reply to any of the posts rather than just the original one. The discussions remain open for weeks or months.

'Have your says' resemble 'Messageboards' but with significant differences. These are areas where journalists post topical questions to which readers send written replies. A selection is made, edited, and published by journalists, with the submissions either fully or reactively moderated. 'Have your says' usually remain open for a limited number of days. This format has proved popular with readers.<sup>5</sup>

The 'Comments on stories' format allows readers to submit their views on a story. These comments are usually submitted using a form at the bottom of an article. This format may or may not require a reader to register with a news site.

'Q&As' are interviews with journalists and/or invited guests, with questions submitted by readers. By their very nature, 'Q&As' are moderated. But since they are usually webcast in audio or video, or transcribed, as live, they offer a sense of interactivity and immediacy.

'Blogs' are a relatively new addition to news websites in the UK. These have posts laid out in reverse chronological order and most allow readers to comment on the entries. Blogs are explicitly authored by one or more individuals, often associated with a set of interests or opinions, and can include links to external websites.

'Reader blogs' are a new format launched in 2006 by the website of the UK's best-selling daily newspaper, *The Sun*. *TheSun.co.uk* allows readers to create a blog and have it hosted on the news organisation's web servers.

'Your media' are galleries of photographs, video and other media submitted by readers and vetted by journalists. 'Your stories' are sections where readers are asked to send in stories that matter to them. These then are edited by journalists for publication on the website.

### *Opportunities for Reader Participation*

The survey of 12 UK newspaper websites conducted in November 2006 revealed that only one, *Independent.co.uk*, was not providing any tools for reader participation. The results showed wide variation in the opportunities users have to contribute to the professionally edited publications studied. Three sites, *Guardian.co.uk*, *TheSun.co.uk*, and *Scotsman.co.uk* required users to register in order to participate. There were also variations in the use of moderation, with most of the sites (n=8) exercising a high degree of control on contributions by fully moderating content.

**TABLE 1: User-generated content initiatives at a selection of British newspaper websites, November 2006**

News sites	Polls	Message boards	Have			Q&As	Blogs	Reader blogs	Your media	Your story
			Your says	Comments on stories						
<i>DailyExpress.co.uk</i>			X				X			
<i>DailyMail.co.uk</i>	X	X		X*	X		X*			
<i>DailyStar.co.uk</i>			X				X			
<i>FT.com</i>	X	X			X					
<i>Guardian.co.uk</i>		X		X*	X		X*			
<i>Independent.co.uk</i>										
<i>Mirror.co.uk</i>	X	X					X			
<i>Telegraph.co.uk</i>	X	X	X*	X*			X*		X	
<i>TheSun.co.uk</i>		X*	X*		X		X*	X*	X	
<i>TheTimes.co.uk</i>	X*		X	X	X		X*			X†
<i>ThisisLondon.co.uk</i>		X		X*			X*			
<i>Scotsman.com</i>				X*			X*		X	X*

\* New since April 2005. Three websites, *DailyExpress.co.uk*, *DailyStar.co.uk*, and *Mirror.co.uk* were not included in the previous survey by Thurman (2008).

† Platform to showcase readers' travel stories.

Our study revealed substantial growth in the opportunities for readers to contribute compared to the analysis by Thurman (2008) in April 2005 (see Table 1). In particular, we identified significant growth in three formats: 'Blogs', 'Comments on stories', and 'Have your says'. The number of blogs jumped from seven to 118 in the 18 months from April 2005 to November 2006 (see Table 2), although there were wide variations in the nature of the blogs and how often they were updated. The largest increase was seen at *Telegraph.co.uk*, which introduced 37 blogs; and at *Times.co.uk*, which created 39 blogs. *TheSun.co.uk* also introduced blogs for readers, with comments enabled.

**TABLE 2: Progressive adoption of blogs at a selection of British newspaper websites**

News site	April 2005			November 2006		
	Blogs	Comment Moderation		Blogs	Comment Moderation	
		Full	Reactive		Full	Reactive
<i>DailyExpress.co.uk</i>				1	x	
<i>DailyMail.co.uk</i>				7	x	
<i>DailyStar.co.uk</i>				2	x	
<i>FT.com</i>						
<i>Guardian.co.uk</i>	6		x	12		x
<i>Independent.co.uk</i>						
<i>Mirror.co.uk</i>				2 *		
<i>Telegraph.co.uk</i>				37	x	
<i>TheSun.co.uk</i>				12 *		
<i>TheTimes.co.uk</i>				39	x	
<i>ThisisLondon.co.uk</i>				5	x	
<i>Scotsman.com</i>	1	x		1	x	
TOTAL	7			118		

\* Comments not allowed.

Most of the newspaper blogs allowed comments, though they were almost all vetted by journalists before publication. Only one site, *Guardian.co.uk*, allowed users to post comments directly to a blog, but readers had to register and confirm their e-mail address first.

The 'Comment on stories' format also saw rapid expansion in the 18-month period between surveys (see Table 3). The number of UK publications adopting this feature rose from one to six. Two-thirds of the sites were moderating comments, while those that did not required registration.

'Have your say' sections grew more slowly than 'Comments on stories' (see Table 3). The number of UK newspaper websites using this format rose from three to five. Four of these were fully moderated, with only *TheSun.co.uk* adopting the use of registration and reactive moderation.

**TABLE 3: Progressive adoption of 'Have your says' and 'Comment on stories' at a selection of British newspaper websites**

News site	April 2005				November 2006			
	Have your says		Comment on stories		Have your says		Comment on stories	
	Full	Reactive	Full	Reactive	Full	Reactive	Full	Reactive
<i>Dailyexpress.co.uk</i>					X			
<i>Dailymail.co.uk</i>							X	
<i>Dailystar.co.uk</i>					X			
<i>FT.com</i>								
<i>Guardian.co.uk</i>								X*
<i>Independent.co.uk</i>								
<i>Mirror.co.uk</i>								
<i>Telegraph.co.uk</i>	X				X		X	
<i>TheSun.co.uk</i>	X					X*		
<i>TheTimes.co.uk</i>	X		X		X		X	
<i>ThisisLondon.co.uk</i>							X	
<i>Scotsman.co.uk</i>								X*

**Note:** 'Full' and 'Reactive' refers to the type of moderation employed.

\* **Registration required**

## (II) Attitudes to User-Generated Content

### *The Fear of Marginalisation*

The interviews with senior news executives revealed some of the factors that influence editorial attitudes towards audience participation. Our findings suggest that the growth identified in the survey is partly the result of editors' and executives' fear of being marginalised by user media. Richard Burton (2006), editor of *Telegraph.co.uk*, suggested that "the idea of becoming a forum for debate was an area that newspapers had to get into, otherwise they'd get left behind". Richard Withey of *Independent.co.uk* suggested user media is a "phenomenon you can't ignore", even though the newspaper group he represented did not provide platforms for participation:

The whole idea of the newspaper proprietor and his editors telling people what was going on in the world and the world neatly reading that ... that self-perpetuating

oligarchy has been broken down very rapidly, and user-generated content now forms quite a big part of national newspaper websites (Withey, 2006).

As editors jumped on board because of the perceived need to offer greater levels of interactivity with readers, they acknowledged that they were “latecomers to the party” (Burton, 2006) and that newspapers need to be in the business of interactivity. Alan Revell (2006) of Associated Newspapers said:

We firmly believe in the great conversation. These businesses are about interactivity and it's about it being a two-way street and people joining the conversation rather than being lectured to or talked to. They do want to respond, not all of them, but people do want the ability to respond instantly and contribute and add.

### *Retaining Staff*

The widespread adoption of blogs—a common vehicle for initiating the conversation with readers—at mainstream newspaper sites cannot be attributed solely to editors' fear of marginalisation. Interviews showed that news executives were also motivated by a desire to retain control of journalists who may have otherwise created their own blogs. At *TimesOnline.co.uk*, leading *Times*' and *Sunday Times*' correspondents were offered blogs as an attempt to “give them a piece of property on the internet themselves, within our site” (Bale, 2006). At *Telegraph.co.uk*, blogs were first offered to foreign correspondents, as these were the journalists “most frustrated about not having their articles published in the paper” (Van den Belt, 2006). Blogs also allow journalists to target a different audience, perhaps one they are more comfortable with, as this quote from the editor of *Mirror.co.uk* shows: “Our science editor is keen to take a blog because he can address an audience in a way which he feels more comfortable with rather than having to dress everything up as a tabloid idea” (Purcell, 2006).<sup>6</sup>

### *Evolving Attitudes*

While UK news sites have added UGCI features, there remained some concern (see: Thurman, 2008) that the trend has been over-hyped (Purcell, 2006). Editors tended to view these initiatives as complementary to professional journalism, rather than replacing it. There was a common view that “a good story will beat anything”, as Pete Picton (2006) of *TheSun.co.uk* put it, implying the superiority of professionally produced content to that from readers. Steve Purcell (2006) also argued that “there's no substitute for a good story” and estimated that a story would receive “ten times” the amount of hits “than the comments attached to it”. Nevertheless he did agree that it was “still valid to give that feedback area.”

There has however been a shift in attitudes to UGC since Thurman's study. In 2004 some editors described blogs as “extremely dull”, “mediocre” or of “very marginal interest” (Thurman, 2008). Our research showed a recognition by editors that they may have been too dismissive of blogging and that journalists appreciated the “extra flexibility that the dialogue with readers have given them” (Bale, 2006). There was an acknowledgement that a newspaper's audience can be “very knowledgeable about certain areas”, as the editor of *FT.com* described his readers,

adding that he was “very interested in unlocking that information”. The *FT.com* was debating how best to tap into the knowledge of its readers. Montgomery (2006) suggested the newspaper was considering creating “niches” online to provide space for like-minded readers to discuss a topic, rather than “talking across a broad canvas.”

Questions remained however over the role of blogs within established news organisation. While endorsing blogs, Burton (2006) expressed reservations about the long-term value of blogs to *Telegraph.co.uk*, reflecting general concerns about how blogging fits within a traditional journalistic framework. Burton described blogs as “massively overrated” and as “a bit of fun”.

### **Shift to Gate-Keeping**

#### *Protecting the Brand*

Our study found that news professionals were still working out whether and how to integrate user participation within existing norms and practices. The potential that UGC has to damage a newspaper’s brand remained a prevailing concern among some editors. The idea of publishing a comment without checking it first was described as “very dangerous” (Avery, 2006), while Bale (2006) said that not to moderate content would be an inappropriate brand risk.

*The Scotsman* was among the few UK newspapers that allowed readers to post comments to its website without moderation. The general manager described this as a “work in progress”, deciding at an article level whether comments should be pre or post moderated. The site attempted to mitigate risk by requiring all users to register and by avoiding allowing unmoderated posts on contentious subject matters. Brown (2006) said *Scotsman.com* was “from an editorial perspective, quite careful about where we enable post-moderation”.

One approach adopted by *The Sun* newspaper has been to create different areas online for professionally produced content and for user media. In October 2006, *TheSun.co.uk* launched a second site—*MySun.co.uk*—that allowed readers to start a blog and contribute stories, pictures, and comments on breaking news. This site is editorially separate from the news site, making a distinction between professional and amateur content. Picton (2006) said *TheSun.co.uk* wanted to “encompass both spectrums” by “providing people with the ability to put their own personal journal out there”. *The Sun*’s main competitor in the tabloid marketplace, *The Mirror*, was adopting a different approach, and questioned the value of allowing every reader to have a platform. Instead Purcell (2006) suggested the newspaper may run a competition offering readers the chance to be a *Mirror* blogger, “and out of that, we’ll select those who actually can write and have something to say.”

#### *Controlling the Conversation*

Our research found widespread moderation of UGC by UK newspaper websites. Bale stressed that, as an organisation, *The Times* wanted to use a lot of UGC but “it’s got to be the right user-generated content and it’s got to fit with our brands”. Editors tended to want UGC that provided content that met their understanding of their readers’ expectations, both online and potentially offline:

In this world where many people feel that they've got something to say, to comment and be heard, we still want to give our *Telegraph* audience the best and therefore we need moderation ... What's the percentage of our readers who have time to read through 15,000 comments on any particular article? It's our job to display the most interesting ones. What we see more and more happening now on a particular topic is that we take the best and publish it in the newspaper the next day (Van den Belt, 2006).

Editors tended to view moderation in terms of the traditional gate-keeping role of journalists. This was considered to be one way of offering value to the audience:

We are an organisation that filters all the news and then compresses it. We do that partly because we serve a busy audience who don't have much time to read the paper, who don't have that much time to read the website, and they look to us to have done the filtering and the compression for them (Montgomery, 2006).

The notion of moderating UGC so that it fitted in with the identity of a newspaper came across in many of the interviews. Editors expressed apprehension at the "grey area" of the law as it relates to online content (Purcell, 2006), with newspaper lawyers themselves unsure on certain areas of the law:

The law's so unclear about who's published what, because there isn't really any case law yet. In my role as new media director both here and in my previous organisation, I've taken advice from very senior law groups who've not been clear about who publishes what and what your culpability is. Therefore moderation has to be the way forward for a group that has anything to protect (Withey 2006).<sup>7</sup>

### *The Cost of Control and the Role of Technology*

The gate-keeping model has cost and resource implications that have impacted on UGCs. Moderation is "a real pain, it's a real chore" Steve Purcell (2006) editor of *Mirror.co.uk* told us. He described a messageboard about Princess Diana they had hosted as "hugely successful", but explained how it was "invaded with abusers, and just ploughing through the number of messages every day became more effort than it was worth".

Newspapers are caught in a bind: the burden increases as the participation of users rises. Waldman (2006) said moderation becomes more difficult as blogs and other areas encouraging interactivity with the audience become more popular. He said that *Guardian.co.uk* had received so many comments on its World Cup blog that "it was almost too much". The experience has led Waldman to start looking at traffic calming techniques.

Technology is seen as one way of alleviating a laborious and time-consuming process. The volume of comments received by the *BBC News* website has resulted in the investment in software to process and publish content, enabling journalists to scan e-mails and publish them with a click of a button.<sup>8</sup> This technology still requires a team of journalists to moderate comments, which may be why *The Guardian* talked about potentially outsourcing the management of its comment areas (Waldman, 2006).

## Defining the Value of User Participation

### *The Cost-Benefit Analysis*

Our research found that news organisations were struggling to balance the resources needed to control—editorially—UGCIs with the commercial potential of user media. The cost of these operations is one of the reasons smaller news organisations like *Independent.co.uk* had no mechanisms for audience participation. Richard Withey (2006) of *Independent.co.uk* expressed concern that the need for moderation would drain resources away from what he called the good side of the newspaper model, meaning journalists researching and validating stories.

There remained a concern over the lack of a model to monetise these initiatives (see: Thurman, 2008). The editorial director of *TheTimes.co.uk* saw commercial potential in delivering niche audiences to advertisers. Peter Bale (2006) gave the example of a travel section, rich with UGC from a “good and interesting demographic”, which could offer a “very compelling proposition” for advertisers. But this was counterbalanced by a fear among editors that UGCIs were or could become what Waldman (2006) called “self-contained playgrounds”, catering to a niche audience of limited value to an advertiser. Purcell (2006) mentioned this as a concern he had about the forums of *Mirror.co.uk*, which “attract the same people all the time”.

UGC offers some value to professional journalists as a source for stories. *TheSun.co.uk* was getting three or four stories each week from readers (Picton, 2006). In this case, editors value UGC as a digital form of newsgathering, rather than as a way of allowing readers to express themselves:

With user-generated content, people see it often in terms of what users write but quite often for us, it's in terms of the stories they bring. And users were doing this prior to the web. They were ringing newsdesks with stories. It's just a lot easier to do it online now. (Picton, 2006).

Although reader contributions can lead to stories, there was some doubt about whether this justified the cost of UGCIs. Burton (2006) acknowledged that at times a reader's comment might be passed on to the newsdesk, but disputed it justified the expenditure on UGCIs. He said this was “just a complete and utter journalistic by-product”.

### *Levels of Participation*

Our interviews revealed that editors doubted whether a large proportion of readers wanted to contribute. Withey (2006) argued “most people like to consume media as opposed to take part in it”. Quantitative data supports these views. Earlier research showed that although the *BBC News* website receives thousands of user comments on many ‘Have your says’, these contributions often come from just 0.05 per cent of the site's daily unique audience (Thurman, 2008).

For some editors, the number of people who contribute does not necessarily matter as a small number can still make a UGC forum “worthwhile” (Revell, 2006). *The Guardian* estimated that only 1 to 5 per cent of readers contribute. But Waldman

argued they had created a “vibrant community” at the heart of the site, which is of value to advertisers and other users:

As you look at strategies around user-generated content, you need to realise that only a small number are really going to communicate, engage at that level. But that small number make it much more interesting for everyone else (Waldman, 2006).

Several editors mentioned that the perceived quality of comments rather than the absolute number received was a factor in judging the value of UGC. Brown (2006) related an occasion at *Scotsman.com* when a story on a proposed tram system in Edinburgh generated a level of debate that was “quite remarkable”, including a discussion about the geography of the city by geologists worldwide.

### Discussion

Our study showed a dramatic increase in the opportunities for audience participation across all but one of the 12 national newspaper websites in the UK, building on Thurman’s 2005 survey of the adoption of UGCs by British newspaper websites (see Thurman, 2008). Four of the nine formats for UGC—‘Comments on stories’, ‘Reader blogs’, ‘Your media’ and ‘Your story’—were not sufficiently established to be classified by Thurman in 2005. The last three of these formats can be seen as the most radical departure from the traditional publishing model, as they seek to present ‘news’, and comment on current events from the point of view of the audience. However the ‘Your media’ and ‘Your story’ formats are still edited by journalists. By contrast, ‘Reader blogs’, offered by *TheSun.co.uk*, are not vetted before publication. But this area of the site is clearly segregated from the professional content, creating what Bowman and Willis (2003) argue is a “closed-off annex where readers can talk and discuss, as long as the media companies don’t have to be involved”.

In the rapid adoption of blogging editors seem to have accepted that blogging can play a role in journalism, although they see blogs less as a platform for a conversation with the audience (Gillmor, 2004) and more as a way of taking advantage of the “limitless newshole” of the Internet (Paul, 2006) to give staff an outlet for copy.

The expansion of UGCs is taking place despite editors’ residual doubts about the contribution UGC can make to professionally edited publications. Editors primarily judged the notion of value by balancing the resource needs of UGCs against their commercial potential. While there was a recognition that contributions from readers could help journalists identify and report on stories, the lack of a model to monetise these initiatives remained a pressing concern. Some editors talked about the potential of UGC to increase brand loyalty and some of the literature backs up this assumption. Bowman and Willis (2003) talk of the “inherent psychological value of the creative process to the individual,” while Saffo (1992) argues that what he calls *participation* is the “most powerful hybrid of communications and entertainment”.

While news organisations are opening their doors to the public, they are also retaining the traditional gate-keeping role of journalists, as witnessed by the shift towards moderation shown in our study. Only 12 out of the 118 blogs we identified allowed readers to post directly without a comment being vetted by journalists, and even then, comments were reactively moderated. Our findings are in line with other

research that shows that news organisations tend to expand their operations to the Internet based on their existing journalistic culture, including the way they relate to the public (Deuze, 2003).

The integration of amateur content presents challenges to news organisations' professional identities. Established media have an identity that is defined by professional content, while websites driven by audience participation serve as publishing platforms whose brand identity is defined by the nature of the user media. Editors are putting out a call for user content to be published under the masthead of a newspaper but perceive a need for it to fit the identity and values represented by the brand. Our study suggests that, in the longer term, established news organisations are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC. This fits in with the risk-averse nature of newspapers<sup>9</sup> and reflects editors' continuing (see: Thurman, 2008) concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues.

Our findings show that news organisations are facilitating user participation, by filtering and aggregating UGC in ways they believe to be useful and valuable to their audience. This response reflects a worry also shared by some US publications that offering tools for participation could become a "free-for-all that annoys readers instead of generating useful conversations," (Williams, n.d.). A gate-keeping approach may offer a model for the integration of UGC, with professional news organisations providing editorial structures to bring different voices into their news reporting. Postman (quoted in Fulton, 1996) said the problem facing journalism in the 20th century was an informational glut, whereas in the 19th century the problem was a scarcity of information. Postman argued the issue for journalism is how to decide what is significant, relevant information. As some editors said, the value in user participation becomes not just the content itself, but how it is sifted, organised and presented by professional journalists.

As this study shows, mainstream journalism's approach to UGC is largely framed by its shared norms and values. While this research looked at user-generated content initiatives in the context of the UK newspaper industry, it has broad relevance, as professional journalists tend to share a similar set of norms. The British experience offers valuable lessons for news executives making their first forays into this area and for academics studying the field of participatory journalism.

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## Notes

1. "The five UGC sites that ranked in the top 50 in the UK (measured by total visitors that month) - Wikipedia, MySpace, Piczo, YouTube and Bebo--generated an average of 4.2 usage days and 79.9 minutes per visitor, according to comScore. By comparison, sites in the top 50 that were not based on UGC saw far less usage". Quoted by Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery (2007).

2. Douglas (2006) described July 7 2005 as a turning point for the media. He wrote that it was the day user-generated content came into its own in Britain and that when there were four more attempted bombings in London two weeks later, the public knew what was expected of them and photos and videos flooded into the BBC.

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3. For example, on March 5 2007, USA Today unveiled a redesign of its web presence. In an editorial note published on the website, editor Ken Paulson (2007) and executive editors Kinsey Wilson and John Hillkirk said the newspaper's journalistic mission was to "help readers quickly and easily make sense of the world around them by giving them a wider view of the news of the day and connecting them with other readers who can contribute to their understanding of events."
4. 'Messageboards' are one of the oldest forms of participation, dating back to 1999 at *Guardian.co.uk* and 2002 at *Dailymail.co.uk* (Thurman, 2008).
5. On the day the popular British radio presenter John Peel died, in October 2004, the *BBC News* website received 35,000 e-mail submissions—rising to a total of 100,000—to the 'Have your say' that had been established in commemoration (Thurman, 2008).
6. Not all publications however had a rationale for selecting staff bloggers. At *DailyMail.co.uk* "the disarmingly honest answer is that it's those who stuck their hands up basically," said Alan Revell (2006). For Revell, the COO of Associated Northcliff Digital, it was important to have journalists who were willing to commit the time, rather than force people into it.
7. In 2003, the former British Member of Parliament and Secretary General of NATO Lord Robertson sued *The Sunday Herald* over a posting on a messageboard hosted by the newspaper that he alleged was defamatory. The case was settled out of court (see: Thurman, 2008).
8. Based on Alfred Hermida's personal experience as a senior member of the *BBC News* website editorial team from 1997 to 2006.
9. A study by the Readership Institute (2000) found that US newspapers fell into the following culture types: Constructive – 17 newspapers, Aggressive-Defensive – 27 newspapers, Passive-Defensive – 21 newspapers, Mixed Passive/Aggressive – 25 newspapers.

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Neil Thurman is a senior lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Publishing at City University, London. His work on online journalism also appears in *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, *New Media & Society*, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, and in Richard Keeble's *Print journalism: A critical introduction*. Together with Alfred Hermida he is currently writing a follow up to this article for Garrett Monaghan and Sean Tunney's forthcoming volume *Web Journalism: A New Form of Citizenship*, to be published by Sussex Academic Press.