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How Newsrooms Use User Generated Content

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Abstract

Social media provides a wealth of content for reporters and newsrooms, but most important eyewitness-access in traumatic events/crisis via user generated content (UGC). Approaching eyewitnesses through social media is a growing reality for journalists in today's digital age. Best practices used for interacting with a source are not the same as they were before social media.

This paper looks at the standards which international newsrooms follow when engaging with user-generated content (UGC) and social sources. It also considers the best practices to protect not only the source but all hands who interact with UGC. The study examines engagement with UGC capturing traumatic events and featuring violence, crisis and tragedy. Empirical evidence is sought through a literature review and structured interviews with UGC experts operating in or in conjunction with newsrooms both in the U.S. where private media ownership is prevalent and in the UK where public service media is well-funded a cornerstone of the media ecosystem.

The findings show that while engaging with UGC is treated on a case by case basis, there are common best practices shared amongst experts and journalists. Ultimately, a newsroom that successfully engages UGC will build community trust, which in turn could encourage audience members to share their content. Finally, this study discusses the need for agreeing on a set of standards to protect social sources, reputation and trust in journalism.

Keywords

User-generated content, social media, eyewitness, journalism practice, ethics

Introduction

As an active shooter moved through the halls of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, a captive student tweeted his experience from a hiding place. The freshman posted on Twitter photos from inside the school, which was on lockdown. The images were accompanied by a caption: “My school is being shot up and I am locked inside. I’m f-cking scared right now.” In

response to his tweet were to his retweets of prayers from other twitter accounts as well as messages from reporters trying to get Minoff to speak with them.

“We now live in a world where students in active shooter scenarios have to deal with the press, while hiding from a potential killer,”¹ a reporter for the *Orlando Weekly*, a newsweekly distributed in Florida, wrote during the mass shooting as he tracked all media requests for sourcing and interviews publicly tweeted at Minoff. Onlookers chastised these reporters, at best calling them insensitive, although many of the media requests offered best wishes for the source’s safety.

Contrary to that reporter’s belief, we’ve lived in a world where eyewitnesses have had to “deal with the press” for as long as the practice of reporting has existed. “The phenomenon of appearing in a news story is, in purely quantitative terms, extremely common. Thousands of ordinary Americans wind up in print and broadcast news every year, as witnesses, experts, criminals, victims, heroes, community representatives, and freaks.”² However, in today’s digital mediascape, a journalist’s job is more visible and public than ever before. There is no right way to communicate with someone who is in real-time experiencing a traumatizing event. Yet, reporters have been doing it for decades—door knocking to get interviews with the bereaved, interviewing survivors outside a burning house or And while journalists can’t prevent such an

¹ Wolf, Colin. (2019, August 10). Media outlets are currently bombarding Florida students stuck in an active shooter situation through Twitter. Retrieved from <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2018/02/14/media-outlets-are-currently-bombarding-florida-students-stuck-in-an-active-shooter-situation-through-twitter>

² “Victims of the Press?” *Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight*, by RUTH PALMER, Columbia University Press, New York, 2018, pp. 1–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/palm18314.5.

occurrence from happening or completely avoid traumatizing or endangering sources, they can lessen harm for their sources, as provided by the Society of Professional Journalists ethical guidelines.³

The advantage of UGC is speed and access. Doubly, its implementation in newsrooms could very much legitimize participatory or citizen journalism, the process by which non-journalists generate news. For example, when the fatal police shooting of Philando Castile in his car was live recorded via Facebook by Castile's fiancé Diamond Reynolds, the footage was shared by numerous news outlets including ABC, NBC, BBC and The Guardian⁴. This event occurred around the time when police body cams was a major public concern. Another example: as the Syrian army descended upon Aleppo, civilians posted their goodbye videos via social media and these posts were pieced together into social video content for Quartz⁵ and CNN⁶. These firsthand accounts provided access to an otherwise inaccessible place.

Integrating the practice of using UGC and engaging social sources into the news making process still needs to be ironed out. In this digital age when speed is prioritized in obtaining and sharing information, the harm done to all those who interact with UGC capturing traumatizing material,

³ SPJ Code of Ethics - Society of Professional Journalists. (2014) Retrieved from <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

⁴ FirstDraft. (2016, December 14). How did news organisations handle the Philando Castile Facebook Live video? Retrieved from <https://medium.com/1st-draft/how-did-news-organisations-handle-the-philando-castile-facebook-live-video-549ff9a1da36>

⁵ Mohdin, A. (2016, December 13). The slaughter of Aleppo is being recorded in real time on Twitter, by its own victims. Retrieved from <https://qz.com/861710/the-slaughter-of-aleppo-is-being-recorded-in-real-time-on-twitter-by-its-own-victims/>

⁶ Mackintosh, Eliza. (2017, January 12). Syrians post 'goodbye' messages from Aleppo. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/13/middleeast/syria-aleppo-goodbye-messages/index.html>

including violence, crisis and tragedy isn't clearly defined--which makes it difficult to avoid if not decrease. Individual media organization have their own guidelines, many of them internal-facing. While there has been growing dependence of UGC and the consistent growth of uploaders (source proof), there are no established rules of engagement among practitioners. The objective thus of this paper is not to state the right or wrong way to engage with UGC, but to *aid* in the decision-making process given guidelines from editors and head of UGC at global news organizations. This study assesses cases illustrating the best and least harmful methods of engagement. In doing so it offers a novel approach to the treatment of UGC and engagement with those who generate it i.e., the social media publics. Overall, the evidence here can help to rethink and enhance current practices in the field.

Previous research focuses on engagement with UGC (sourcing, verifying and *clearing*), its integration into the newsgathering process and its overall value to newsrooms. This paper looks at the adoption of user generated content in newsrooms as it pertains to traumatic events featuring violence, conflict and tragedy. It draws on the assessment of published editorial standards and seven structured interviews with practitioners in the U.S. and U.K, selected for their leadership roles in well-developed, international newsrooms. Research was led by the following questions:

- 1) How are newsrooms integrating UGC in its news delivery process?
- 2) How are UGC and those who work with this material managed?
- 3) What are the ethics in practice when it comes to engaging with UGC?

Definitions

The terms used within this research span across various cultures, years of professional experience and expertise of the subject matter. Therefore, certain recurring terms have been defined for clarity and consistency.

UGC

In the past UGC encompassed “nine generic formats used to encourage contributions from the public: ‘Polls,’ ‘Message boards,’ ‘Have your says,’ ‘Comments on stories,’ ‘Q&As,’ ‘Blogs,’ ‘Reader blogs,’ ‘Your media,’ and ‘Your story.’”⁷

These types of UGC were specific to a news organization’s audience, providing a public space for them to share content. However, the methods of managing content then (comment sections and calls for submission) doesn’t comprehensively apply to how newsrooms manage content today.

“The term UGC has been used in the past to refer to all types of material from the audience, including, for example, comments on internet-based discussion strands; comments, images and video shared on social media platforms; and images and videos uploaded directly to platforms hosted by news organizations.”⁸

Because UGC is no longer coming from your audience alone, but from anywhere given the reach of social media, the process involves more monitoring than managing.

⁷ A CLASH OF CULTURES

The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780802054538?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
(page 4/345)

⁸ Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study

https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_publications/20/

UGC could also be called audience material. When Claire Wardle conducted research on UGC at the BBC, she proposed the term “‘audience material’ should be used instead of UGC, because the latter fails to capture adequately the range of phenomena it describes: breaking news footage, audience comments, audience experiences, collaborative journalism (community reporters, digital stories), networked journalism (BBC journalists tapping into expert communities online), and non-news content included in news output.”⁹ But UGC as audience material is limited definition because with social media you don’t have to be an audience member to contribute or have your content distributed. Most UGC uploaded to the internet is done by accidental witnesses.

Overall, what is agreed upon when it comes to the definition of UGC, in a news context, is that the content is in the public domain and offers news value, whether informational or not.

UGC used by news organizations is not limited to informational content, and informational content can hold entertainment value. As elaborated in the report, “User-Generated Content and the News,” UGC exists on a spectrum and can be categorized into three types: “information-oriented content, entertainment/popular culture-oriented content, and personal/social/expressive-oriented content...These conceptual pairs are better thought of as end points on a continuum rather than an absolute dichotomy...much media content can actually fairly easily be placed on either side of this continuum (an article about an election outcome

⁹ **Beyond user-generated content: a production study examining the ways in which UGC is used at the BBC**
Claire Wardle
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0163443710373953>
(page 781-782/1-2)

would be more information-oriented, an interview with a celebrity would be more entertainment-oriented, and so on). News/informational content and popular culture content have one thing in common: both content types are based on events and persons in the public domain.”¹⁰

While UGC generally includes content from non-news sources such as blogs, forums, comments sections to social media video and images, in this paper, UGC will be defined as eyewitness media, newsworthy images, animated image and audio captured via smartphone, published via social media by a non-professional journalist and used by a news organization.

Citizen Journalism/participatory journalism

UGC is the process whereby everyday people can participate with or contribute to news.¹¹ In addition to citizen journalists, these sources are accidental witnesses, uploaders, social sources, among others. The terms were used interchangeably by UGC experts in interviews and refer to the individuals behind UGC with whom newsrooms come into contact. This active audience is citizen/participatory journalism whereby “in recent years, the increasing availability, uptake and

¹⁰ USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND THE NEWS: Empowerment of citizens or interactive illusion?
Anna Maria Jönsson and Henrik Örnebring, 04 Sep 2010
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155>

¹¹ A CLASH OF CULTURES
The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780802054538?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
page 3/344)

use of social media has enabled and empowered news and information consumers, the now famously described ‘people formerly known as the audience by Professor Jay Rosen.’¹²

Participatory journalism is argued to represent the highest form of engagement, a behavior that news organizations most desire.¹³ Not all UGC is created intentionally by citizen or audience members who seek to participate in the news process. For example, as argued in the report “Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output,” there exists “accidental journalists”—people with a camera or smartphone on hand, who happened to be in the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) time. Rarely do these people recognize the value of their footage. Instead of contacting news organizations directly, they want to share what they have seen with friends and family via the social web.”¹⁴

Vicarious trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Given the prevalence of social media in today’s newsrooms, journalists engaging with UGC should be considered a regular occurrence. Any trauma resulted by this engagement is worth noting as it could affect a practitioner's ability to do their work.

¹² Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study
https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_publications/20/

¹³ Lewis, S. C. (2012). The tension between professional control and open participation: Journalism and its boundaries. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(6), 836-866.

¹⁴ Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output
http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf
2014
Claire Wardle, sam Dubberley
(page 3)

According to “Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline,” in “the most recent edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the American Psychiatric Association has been updated and now concludes that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can be brought on vicariously through the viewing of video or images of a traumatic event if this viewing is work related. DSM-V now states: ‘Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)’ can lead to PTSD or PTSD-related symptoms. This ‘does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.’”¹⁵

Social media

In this report, social media refers to sites predominantly used for social networking, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Flickr, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Methodology

Seven qualitative interviews were conducted with media practitioners and researchers to discuss the issues raised by the engagement with UGC. The in-depth interviews highlighted the themes that materialized in the literary review.

¹⁵ **Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline**
https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/trauma_report.pdf

The empirical data presented in this paper are based on a qualitative study of literature examining UGC and its value, integration and management in global newsrooms. This literature review drew on academic and industry-sponsored research about the emergence of UGC, its challenges and impact.

The scope of this research focused on UGC capturing traumatic events and featuring violence, crisis and tragedy. There are various types of UGC content, however, the type consistently requires consideration as well as ethical judgements, is content that has a potential to cause, if not only involve, harm. The interviewees selected for this report either work directly with UGC or have conducted considerable research in this area (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of Interviews	
Editorial Management	
1	Mark Frankel, Former Editor, UGC Hub, BBC UK
1	Hazel Baker, Global Head of UGC, Reuters UK
1	Caroline Bannock, Community Editor, Guardian Witness Project, The Guardian
Industry Expert	
1	Bruce Shapiro, Executive Director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism US
1	Gavin Rees, Director, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, UK The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a resource center and think tank for journalists who cover violence, conflict and tragedy around the world.
1	Sam Dubberley, Co-founder, Eyewitness Media Hub Supporting the creation, discovery, verification and publication of eyewitness media
1	Claire Wardle, Executive Director, First Draft First Draft undertakes practical journalism projects in the field, to research effective methods for tackling information disorder online. It also provides practical and ethical guidance in how to find, verify and publish content sourced from the social web.

Literary review

Overview of literature review

Early research of UGC is centered on integrating the phenomenon into the newsgathering process. The question asked by much of this research, conducted up to a decade ago, was why UGC should be used in the newsgathering process. Then, over time, the question shifted to a matter of how UGC is used, with special focus on verification. Where there once was an option, there is now an imperative. The overall focus on the institutional implementation of UGC in newsrooms occupies much of current research. A trend in the literary review showed extensive research on verifying UGC as the furthest extent of engagement.

UGC over time

User-generated content is not new, but has transformed with time, technology and culture. In Tony Harcup's "Journalism Principles and Practice," point outs that UGC once included "a reader's letter published in a newspaper or a magazine" and other examples such as "historical photographs sent in by readers, the reports of flower shows, and sporting events contributed by non-journalists, radio phone-ins." However, "digital communication has transformed the phenomenon in terms of both speed and volume so that it is now a major part of the thinking of most journalist operations."¹⁶

¹⁶ Journalism Principles and Practice, Second Edition, Tony Harcup 2009 Sage Publications (174)

The “explosion” of UGC is largely attributed to global mobile phone penetration and development in domestic broadband,¹⁷ providing an environment for audiences to engage with traditional news organization, providing feedback, tips-offs and eyewitness footage.¹⁸

As mobile devices and smartphones increase in accessibility and technological developments, so does the popularity of social media apps that open up a new pathway to news gathering and news distribution.¹⁹ “News has become ‘a shared social experience as people exchange links and recommendations as a form of cultural currency in their social networks.’”²⁰ And if the goal of journalism is to inform society and makes public that which would otherwise be private,²¹ then both journalists and citizens engaging with UGC are aligned.

Yet, as UGC picked up speed, adoption by traditional newsrooms was slow and cautionary. In terms of original types of UGC, such as blog posts and forums, “journalists and editors had some concerns about user contributions. They felt that there was a need to edit material in order to

¹⁷ **Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output**
http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf
2014
Claire Wardle, sam dubberley

¹⁸ **Beyond user-generated content: a production study examining the ways in which UGC is used at the BBC**
Claire Wardle
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0163443710373953>

¹⁹ **Reuters: Avoid the 'wolf pack mentality' when approaching eyewitnesses online**
<https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/reuters-avoid-wolf-pack-mentality-when-approaching-eyewitnesses-on-social-networks/s2/a574108/>

²⁰ (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010).
User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space
Jane B Singer March 15, 2013
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

²¹ Journalism Principles and Practice, Second Editions, Tony Harcup 2009 Sage Publications

avoid duplication, keep the standards of spelling and grammar high, select material that was newsworthy with broad appeal and ensure balance and decency.”²²

In a current context, UGC is employed by numerous media organizations whether on an institutionalized basis or in an individual news gathering process. And given this widespread implementation and concerns around verification, trustworthiness and ethics, there are now “flashy geolocation tools, social media aggregators, multi-search dashboards and browser extensions help us sift through UGC on breaking and developing news. Geofeedia, Echosec, Banjo, Dataminr, Storyful, Facebook Signal” among many others.²³ Time and resources are spent on UGC because it is worth it.

Value of UGC: access, engagement, empowerment and democratization

The benefits of UGC include access and audience engagement. “UGC is used when other content is not available to tell a story.”²⁴ For example, in “transitional societies,” such as Syria,²⁵ wherein the “limitations placed on journalists to enter the country or move around freely in this case forced even the most reluctant of journalists and editors to use UGC—because it was impossible to tell the story otherwise”²⁶

²² Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media
Neil Thurman
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444807085325> (page 16/154)

²³ #Paris: UGC expertise can no longer be a niche newsroom skill
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/fbb87059-ab13-4b79-b5ad-5a47a417fb8a>

²⁴ http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf
2014
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²⁵ Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study
https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_publications/20/

²⁶ Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output
http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf

On the matter of audience engagement, the use of UGC is centered around “user empowerment and democratization (e.g. Benkler, 2006; Chung, 2007; Gant, 2007; Gillmor, 2004; Shirky, 2008) and spoken of in terms of public journalism and citizen journalism.²⁷ A key result of engaging with UGC, academics argue, is providing audience members with power in the news process, rather than only subjects.

Including the public in the news process through UGC, is argued to be “a powerful way to spread journalistic values, train residents on reporting processes and foster user generated content that is more useful for newsrooms. Newsrooms are well positioned to become participatory journalism laboratories, helping more people navigate, verify and create powerful stories online and via social media.”

Empowering citizens and communities helps maintain a trusting audience, which is valuable in a time where trust in media is waning in an era of fake news and misinformation. Community engagement builds trust between communities and journalist, establishes an understanding of the journalism process, encourages diverse sources and stories, expands the reach of the newsroom, and strengthens reputation.²⁸

2014
Claire Wardle, Sam Dubberley
(page 4)

²⁷ USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND THE NEWS: Empowerment of citizens or interactive illusion?
Anna Maria Jönsson and Henrik Örnebring, 04 Sep 2010
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155>

²⁸ Josh Stearns, Director, Public Square Program @DemocracyFund @jcstearns
Why newsrooms should train their communities in verification, news literacy, and eyewitness media

Democratizing journalism creates a more inclusive news environment, especially considering today, anyone with a mobile camera and social media app can participate in the news process.²⁹ In light of these benefits, however, is the concern around authority. With the flow of information shifting from vertical (newsroom to audience) to horizontal (newsroom with audience), gatekeeping has been called into question by media researchers. “The ‘we write, you read’-principle still rules the newsroom and UGC is placed within this framework. Citizen participation and participatory journalism only allow for users to influence certain stages of the news production process, while other stages are closed for user involvement and/or controlled by journalists. Media professionals control the management of the production process, and this confirms the conclusion that media organizations are not willing (nor institutionally able) to release power over the production process to the user.”³⁰

As illustrated in a report about how audience participation opportunities redefined journalistic culture, values and practices, “The term ‘gatekeeper’”, used to describe a main task of journalists, indicates [journalists’] claim to be the ones who decide what the public needs to know, as well

Josh Stearns authored this article as a member of the First Draft coalition
<https://medium.com/1st-draft/why-newsrooms-should-train-their-communities-in-verification-news-literacy-and-eyewitness-media-e19f897fe9ba>

²⁹ **USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND THE NEWS: Empowerment of citizens or interactive illusion?**
Anna Maria Jönsson and Henrik Örnebring, 04 Sep 2010
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155>

³⁰ **USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND THE NEWS: Empowerment of citizens or interactive illusion?**
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as when and how such information should be provided. The gatekeeper role is maintained and enforced by professional routines and conventions that are said to guarantee the quality and neutrality of institutional journalism.”³¹

There is a clash between the cultural shift toward audience as co-producers and professional journalism norms, values and routines of journalists as authority figures.³²

Integrating UGC is the newsroom

The culture of traditional journalism and UGC-driven participatory journalism are inherently differently. One system is built on a top-down, vertical approach to information distribution whereas the other is horizontal and hierarchy-absent.

“To make sense of this fluid and confusing new online dominated ecosystem that journalists find themselves in,” media studies academics have tried to “define journalism’s core values. These are:

- Public service: journalists provide a public service (as watchdogs or ‘news-hounds’, active collectors and disseminators of information);
- Objectivity: journalists are impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible;
- Autonomy: journalists must be autonomous, free and independent in their work;

³¹ **Participatory Journalism Practices In The Media And Beyond**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780802281065?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

³² **A CLASH OF CULTURES**

The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780802054538?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

- Immediacy: journalists have a sense of immediacy, actuality and speed (inherent in the concept of ‘news’); Ethics: journalists have a sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy.”³³

Standing firm in these values, journalists attempt to remain unwavering in this time of UGC and the opening gates of journalism. “News organizations still act as gatekeepers, filtering and aggregating UGC in ways they believe are useful and valuable to their audience.”³⁴

Additionally, argued by Jane Singer in a report about quality control and UGC, “if there are no gates, there is no need for anyone to tend them, unless the notion of gatekeeping, and therefore the value of the role, is reconceptualized as being less about story selection and more about news judgment, norms and practices such as verification to determine the merit of what is disseminated. In this newsroom-centric view, everyone can be a publisher, but not everyone can be a journalist.”³⁵

Meanwhile, “proponents of participatory journalism call for a radical change in professional journalism in order to meet the principles of citizen-generated media. It is argued that professional journalists will increasingly have to share their control over the news production process with their users, who are becoming more and more actively involved in the creation of content. This could not only result in an

³³ <https://centreforjournalism.co.uk/content/changing-identity-war-reporter>

³⁴ (2017, November 9). Amateur Footage - A Global Study of User-Generated Content in TV and Online News Output. Retrieved from <https://firstdraftnews.org/amateur-footage-global-study-user-generated-content-tv-online-news-output/> (page 30)

³⁵ **QUALITY CONTROL**

Perceived effects of user-generated content on newsroom norms, values and routines

Jane B Singer, 2009

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780903391979?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

increased use of user generated content by journalists, but it could also stimulate collaboration between professional and amateur journalists. In other words, journalism will fundamentally shift from a top-down lecture to an open conversation.”³⁶

In a 2010 report about integrating UGC in British newsroom, editors tended to perceive this phenomenon as complementary to professional and not as a substitution.³⁷ But given the time it takes to verify, source and clear UGC, there was a concern that the need for moderating this content would take resources away from what is called the good side of news, i.e. reporting.³⁸

If UGC isn't simply characterized as raw material in journalistic output, but rather the foundation of a new form of journalism (participatory/citizen),³⁹ “journalists themselves seek to differentiate between publishing, which anyone can do, and journalism, a patch of occupational turf (Lowrey, 2006) they say relies on news judgment, norms, and practices such as verification to determine the merit of what is published.” This differentiation boasts a higher quality product whose hallmarks include credibility, trustworthiness, and civility of expression. Yet despite using such criteria to differentiate themselves from users, journalists have implemented policies with the goal of narrowing the perceived gap.”⁴⁰

³⁶ **User Generated Content in the Newsroom: Professional and Organisational Constraints on Participatory Journalism**

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.459.8314&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Paulussen, S. and Ugille, P., 2008.

³⁷ **A CLASH OF CULTURES**

The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780802054538?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

page 8/349)

³⁸ **A CLASH OF CULTURES** (page 11/352)

³⁹ **Beyond user-generated content: a production study examining the ways in which UGC is used at the BBC**
Claire Wardle

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0163443710373953>

(page 791/11)

⁴⁰ **User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space**
Jane B Singer March 15, 2013

Throughout the literature review, transparency was cited as the best way to converge the two cultures of traditional media and non-professional journalism.

In a recent study, it was found that “overall, all news organizations regularly failed to label or describe content as UGC and crediting was rare. The majority of news organizations, both online and on television, rarely described where the pictures had come from, acknowledged that people unconnected to the organization had filmed them, or gave credit to the uploader.”⁴¹

When UGC is treated as any other source, then it isn’t made transparent how and why the content is being used, who captured it and what were their intentions, and how it was verified and trustworthy.⁴²

Managing UGC in the newsroom

Once UGC has made it through the doors of a media organization (though has been referred to as “gate-opening”),⁴³ the next step is managing its presence. To do so, “journalists have

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

⁴¹ Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output
http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf
2014 (page 11)

⁴² **Amateur Footage: A Global Study Of User-generated Content In Tv And Online-news Output**
http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/80458_Tow-Center-Report-WEB.pdf
2014

Claire Wardle, sam dubberley

⁴³ **User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space**
Jane B Singer March 15, 2013

responded largely by emphasizing normative practices, such as pre-publication verification, and principles, such as post-publication accountability. Despite internal pressures created by resource constraints and external pressures created in part by the increasingly widespread use of social media, journalists have claimed that the cultural understandings informing their occupational function as gatekeepers safeguard the credibility and quality of the content they create.”⁴⁴

Normative practices are set in place by editorial management, which in the context of determining the quality of UGC, confirms the journalists as a gatekeeper. “A journalist’s gatekeeping role is about determining not just the quantity of information that reaches the public but also its quality according to particular definitions, shared among members of an interpretive community, of what news is or should be.”⁴⁵

This process of curating news is not as organized when UGC is included in the mix. While UGC was previously managed by a dedicated team or reporter who was close to the story, today it is managed by multiple hands because of its volume and speed. At Reuters, for example specific roles were created for people working majorly with UGC, which includes “sourcing news,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2010.501155?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

⁴⁴ **User-generated visibility: Secondary gatekeeping in a shared media space**

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⁴⁵ **QUALITY CONTROL**

Perceived effects of user-generated content on newsroom norms, values and routines

Jane B Singer, 2009

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780903391979?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

assessing the veracity of materials, obtaining permission to use it and then packaging it into a news story.”⁴⁶

Yet, while there is a reality for better management, a set of best practices for in-depth newsroom workflows is yet to emerge.⁴⁷

According to Fergus Bell, AP’s International Social Media and UGC editor, managing UGC comes down to establishing guidelines before it is too late. These standards need to address issues such as transparency and ethics.⁴⁸ A centralized production could institutionalize such standards, however, would conflict with the reality that some newsrooms do not have the resources for dedicated UGC investigation teams.

Ethics in UGC engagement

A journalist’s job is to inform but also protect. This responsibility becomes a challenge in the new media landscape where harm done is either unrecognized by a journalist or newsroom that lacks a standard for using UGC; unchecked by a journalist or newsroom that lacks the time or ability to

⁴⁶ **Reuters: Avoid the 'wolf pack mentality' when approaching eyewitnesses online**
<https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/reuters-avoid-wolf-pack-mentality-when-approaching-eyewitnesses-on-social-networks/s2/a574108/>

⁴⁷ **Deciphering User-Generated Content in Transitional Societies: A Syria Coverage Case Study**
https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_publications/20/

⁴⁸ **Juggling ethical dilemmas of user-generated content in the newsroom**
Julie Posetti, Jessica Sparks and Alice Matthews | October 23, 2014
<https://ijnet.org/en/blog/juggling-ethical-dilemmas-user-generated-content-newsroom>

access UGC; or unavoidable because a journalist or a newsroom lacks control over the outcome of using UGC.

Given the speed and viral-ness of social media, UGC can take on a life of its own within an instance, leaving journalists without much control in this area. Therefore they need to set priorities, the top being accuracy. Newsrooms stand to maintain public trust by delivering accurate news, despite how long it may take, but are jeopardize that trust seeking to adhere to the increasing speed of news and providing inaccurate information to the public.⁴⁹

In light of recent events whereby UGC was employed and eyewitnesses were put in harm's way, there has been a call to question the duty of care journalists uphold when soliciting and engaging with contributions from members of the public. "Just as we have outlined editorial standards and guidelines for our TV, radio and online journalism, is it time to adopt a code of conduct for news organizations handling eyewitness media too?"⁵⁰

Research Findings

Seven in-depth interviews from US and UK journalism leaders in editorial, ethics and business, conducted for this research were originally organized in an effort to find an industry-wide

⁴⁹ **Juggling ethical dilemmas of user-generated content in the newsroom**

Julie Posetti, Jessica Sparks and Alice Matthews | October 23, 2014

<https://ijnet.org/en/blog/juggling-ethical-dilemmas-user-generated-content-newsroom>

⁵⁰ **#Paris: UGC expertise can no longer be a niche newsroom skill**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/fbb87059-ab13-4b79-b5ad-5a47a417fb8a>

standard for engaging with UGC. However, as one of the interviewees, Claire Wardle, stated in a report about engagement, “There are no hard and fast rules about using information and materials sourced from the social web.”⁵¹

Nonetheless, recurring themes, case scenarios and editorial recommendations prove there is shared understanding of the following categories:

- establishing value of UGC in newsroom,
- integrating UGC into the news process, and
- managing UGC, both organizationally and ethically.

Establishing the value of UGC in newsrooms

Access remained the highest value of UGC in newsrooms. Hazel Baker, Global Head of UGC at Reuters UK attributed this value of UGC to empathy and engagement in delivering the news: “[UGC] brings people into the moment and I think it really helps them understand how terrifying some news events are. And, and I'd like to think that that gives a greater degree of empathy and a good degree of engagement in the news.”

Citing the fatal Grenfell Tower fire of 2017, Baker pointed out that Reuters has access to live shots of the burning building from a bird’s eye view and on the ground, even as news camera teams were by police who set up designated areas for broadcasters to stand. Because Reuters was able to get a clear shot from a safe distance, UGC did not seem necessary—especially considering the content is typically filmed in portrait mode instead of wide, which is ideal for broadcast; and has bad picture quality. But “then you stick the headphones on and the difference becomes clear... You can hear the terror.” What’s more, Baker

⁵¹ First Draft page 9

said, is the” audio is unfiltered.” The residents are “not speaking to a news reporter. They're not speaking to a broadcast camera. They're speaking to each other and you're sort of a party to that conversation. And that brings its own ethical dilemmas about how much we want to make available considering the nature of the conversation.”

Caroline Bannock, Editor of Community at The Guardian, said, “UGC is incredibly useful in its time and space; in a breaking news story, when something amazing happens.”

A secondary benefit of UGC, as stated by Claire Wardle, Executive Director at First Draft, is the measurement of trust. “Who eyewitnesses will send [their UGC] to is who they trust,” said Wardle. When a member of the public wants to get the attention of a newsroom to share UGC, who do they primarily think to tag on social media or submit a link via the media organization’s submission platforms? A newsroom with a trusted brand will build community trust, which in turn could encourage audience members to share their content.

Mark Frankel, Editor of the BBC UGC Hub, listed “reach and engagement with the audience who turn to social media” as another value of UGC. Social media, he argued, “was never emerged and developed as a source of trustworthy news. It's always existed as a mechanism for people to discover, to share, to converse, and within it, there are trusted sources. But it doesn't mean that the environment itself is trustworthy.” For newsrooms and journalists who use UGC, the task then becomes a matter of maximizing opportunities to build an audience that trusts you enough to seek you out and engage.

The implications of UGC development

Wardle, who began researching UGC in newsrooms over a decade ago, said at the time “there were no standards; it was kind of wild west.”

Around that same time, Frankel, who was one of the leaders behind BBC’s UGC Hub, said UGC “felt like a new frontier of news journalism in a digital world that was fast evolving” and where social media was playing an increasingly prominent role.

About five years ago, The Guardian created a separate site for UGC and participatory journalism, or what Bannock referred to as “people first journalism.” GuardianWitness, a platform for readers to share their stories with journalists, came together during the rise of UGC, but recently shut down as “the methods became outdated.”

“Witness felt like an old fashioned way--having people come to us versus going to them,” said Bannock. “With the rise of people sharing on their own sites, they become publishers [whereas] before when they would come to a publisher who was asking [for their stories].”

Integrating UGC in the newsroom

Integrating the UGC in traditional news process, especially in cases capturing traumatic events and featuring violence, crisis and tragedy, involves a conservative approach. A journalist’s intuition and ethics should be considered crucial to assessment and implementation of UGC in the news gathering process.

According to Baker: journalists cannot rely on UGC completely. “It’s really important for organizations to consider what they need to get and what UGC can provide. The biggest thing we

need to make sure is: has Reuters got another way of covering this or is this [UGC] vital to the storytelling because it's involved?"

Furthermore, Baker explains the “need to make sure we were throwing our efforts at the right story,” and thus requiring the UGC team to be alert to material coming into the newsroom. “And that can be quite challenging because we don't always know exactly what's coming in. We don't know what we're going to see. We don't know how good they're going to be, and we're staking reputation on this.”

Baker called this process of integrating UGC into the news process “a daunting task” that proved necessary because “if we don't go through this forensic process and these videos will either never see the light of day or they'll just stay on social networks without any sort of story around them.”

This process, however, in a fast-paced, digital-first news environment, makes this process less feasible if a news organization lacks a strategy for integrating UGC. According to Claire Wardle, who during the rise of UGC examined and trained multiple newsrooms, the problem faced by newsrooms is that the decision-making process happens during big breaking news events and a newsroom would lack the time to address a code of principles because the priority was fast news for higher views.

At the BBC, the integration of UGC in the news process was prioritized as the newsroom offered multiple ways for the audience to get in touch with journalists. “We're offering a variety of

methods so that we're not excluding a cross section of the audience who might have access to something but not access to something else.”

According to Bannock, The Guardian is on the side of caution when conducting UGC investigations.

“We’d rather be right than first,” explained Bannock who said the Guardian's name and reputation was built on trust. As UGC rose in newsroom, Bannock said there were multiple people separately dedicated to this aspect of the news process. Today, however, UGC at the Guardian “part of the whole newsroom culture. It sits within our journalism.”

When Bruce Shapiro, Director of the Dart Center US, began the work around vicarious trauma in the early 2000s, the rise of UGC via social media changed the structure of who engaged with the content. “What exploded in the past five years of UGC are the number of hands who are touching this stuff and the volume coming in...Suddenly newsrooms were flooded with graphic content ranging from police shootings to beheadings in war zones. This content must be verified, assessed, and edited, involving a much larger number of hands and often much younger, less experienced personnel.”

Integrating UGC into newsrooms, thus, calls for set standards and principles, which may contradict the speed of a newsroom, as observed by Wardle. “Speed, accuracy, transparency is in tension with the potential harm of the nature of social media,” explained Shapiro. Asking journalists to think twice or take a second in a breaking news event and evaluate their news judgement becomes crucial because “social media is an accelerant for the consequences of error.”

To this point, Rees proposes journalists have a plan before they engage with UGC. However, this management of UGC more often results as an individual responsibility for the journalist who has to choose between the immediacy of the news, the time-consumption of verification and the training required of preprofessionals to properly engage with UGC.

Managing UGC in the newsroom

Implementing a code of standard for UGC engagement starts with management. Newsrooms that were able to integrate UGC in all aspects of their newsgathering process had dedicated managers and teams overseeing the implementation.

When BBC established its UGC Hub in London in 2005, the idea was to help gather audience material, and evaluate its accuracy. There was a dedicated team and centralized process set up in the heart of the newsroom. Similarly, Reuters set up its own organizational structure to manage UGC. And, as aforementioned, The Guardian created GuardianWitness, their newsroom's UGC platform which recently closed after five years in operation.

Today, UGC still needs a defined position in newsrooms because, according to Frankel, "When you talk about citizen journalism and eyewitness media most of that is happening in concert with social media." With the synergic nature of UGC and social media, the two roles within newsrooms are often conflated. Journalists who work with social media are expected to understand how to engage with UGC. Baker argued that "[UGC investigation] is very much part of reporting and it's not social media. It's not putting posts on social media at all. If you work in social media, you can see more [UGC], but it's quite difficult to try and be a social media output producer as well as social media news gatherer."

According to Sam Dubberley, co-founder of the Eyewitness Media Hub, “UGC and discovery are very distinct things from putting stories on social and I think that really require different skills. It's short sighted for news organizations to lump the two together.”

Wardle argued that newsrooms “need a kind of forensic experts in disinformation, verification” but whether that need to be a specific UGC management role or overall training for journalists depends on the size of the organization and its resources.

Contrarily, Frankel argues that journalists cannot divorce the distribution of content from the collection of content. “This is what being a journalist in the 21st century is. It's not about saying we've got a team of UGC who are doing this on behalf of 7,000 journalists. It's every one of those journalists understanding that they have a responsibility both to themselves and to their audience in understanding how to verify, how to make sure they don't make mistakes. [UGC] shouldn't be the preserve of a clique in the corner of the newsroom. Ultimately, for the UGC to be successful every journalist working in news needed to be well versed in using it and understanding it.”

In agreement with Frankel, Bannock recommend hiring “journalists who can do social media.” “It's a bit controversial, but I think maybe a few years ago people felt that you had to hire a social media people. I think you hire journalists who could do social media.”

Bannock, who has trained investigative journalists in UGC investigations, explained journalists have to spend time performing the task of deep verification in order to become skillful. However, when it comes

to speed in a digital newsroom, time is not on a journalist's side when trying to integrate and manage UGC.

Assessing the ethics of UGC integration

All news organizations interviewed for this paper, acknowledged their own set of editorial guidelines and ethical policies when engaging with UGC. While I could not access these guidelines and policies, as they were internal-facing only, some conclusions can be drawn from analyzing case studies and past examples how these newsrooms were protecting its sources and journalists.

At Reuters, for example, Baker explained how during the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 during a musical concert, many of the concert-goers capturing the incident on their smartphones were very young. "Of the very key pieces of video, which is when you hear the moment the bomb went off inside the stadium, was filmed by a girl of 14. That's too young to sign legal terms. But it's also too young to distribute without some sort of parental consent because at 14 I just don't think you're mature enough to be able to make that decision about whether you want what you filmed sent around the world in news reports."

For reasons such as this, Baker's newsroom employed a standard by which journalists and editors engage with UGC in order to avoid ethical or legal dilemmas.

Wardle explains this approach demands journalists not to focus solely on the content that an eyewitness has created but consider the source herself because "most eye witnesses are witnesses for the first time, so if they get caught up in a terrible incident and I get abused by the media then for them that's a new experience."

According to Frankel, Shapiro and Rees, this ethical approach to UGC requires having a duty of care.

Bannock revealed her newsroom's ethical policies means making "a judgment for when is the time to ask people for content and when is the time to search for it. That is an ethical judgment. We tend to put the call-out there when the incident has reached the stability that we feel comfortable that we're not putting people at risk."

In terms of risk faced by journalists, Shapiro explained "There is a lot of evidence that a journalist's participation in ethical breaches acts as an accelerant of PTSD. So keeping one's professional compass turns out to be important to psychological resilience."

Additionally, neither is taking the time to consider a journalist's mental health. Dubberley argues that anyone working in journalism could find themselves working on traumatic material: "Even if you've got a dedicated UGC hub, every journalist today needs to be looking at social [media]. And if they are expected to be doing that, they're going to come across really horrible [content]. You need everybody in the newsroom to be aware of what vicarious traumatization is, how that can, in the worst case scenarios lead to PTSD."

Thus, in addition to training journalists on a dedicated UGC, Shapiro proposed "everyone who's going to be using UGC should get baseline training for managing traumatic imagery. Whatever the organization, there needs to internal protocols for assessing, helping people make the call when too much is too much, how distress gets handled."

However, without management, protocols cannot be implemented, leaving journalist's to self-manage" how they work with UGC, a consequence which has its own ethical implications.

In agreement with Shapiro, Dubberley proposed journalists have an ethics based approach to approaching sources online and then each unique situation has to be considerate of that ethics based approach."

For example, In 2011 when mass demonstrations broke out in Aleppo, Syria, Dubberley, then the head of the Eurovision News Exchange where he large exchanges of television news content, made the decision to hold a live feed via the broadcasting app Bambuser. The person filming was standing on top of a building, the location of which Dubberley and his team were able to pinpoint through several verification processes. Although their information was accurate, they decided to wait until the live broadcast was finished before putting out the content, despite the fact that other news organizations were already including the UGC in their news bulletin.

The decision to hold the content was ethically-based, Dubberley said. "If we could sit in a very nice, first-world office in Geneva, in Switzerland and could work how exactly on which building in Aleppo somebody was filming that content, somebody watching that in Damascus certainly could. We were very worried about if we put this out live, the Syrian air force can see that and they can go and drop a bomb on that building."

Instead of using the material, they recorded it and when the Bambuser broadcast ended, they edited the content before putting it out. "We got criticized. We got pressure from newsrooms to put it out live, but we decided ethically we could not do it because the risk was just too great. We need to think in those terms."

The most commonly expressed benefit to ethically engaging with UGC and social sources were trust and reputation. The nature of UGC not only brings the public into the newsrooms but puts a journalist's job in the public sphere. This "converged newsroom" requires audiences to trust journalists and news organizations as credible, accurate and fair sources of information and if this trust is lost then so follows reputation. The consequence of this can be catastrophic for journalists and news organizations. An ethics-based standard of engaging with UGC is recommended to maintain trust and reputation in professional journalism.

Still, as Shapiro argued, "Journalism doesn't do all that well with set standard. We have broad principles and goals which are sometimes in conflict: the principle of transparency in in conflict with the goal of source protection. The goal of getting news fast is in conflict with the principle of causing less harm. The best practice is to make sure each case is a call for learning not just reinventing the wheel over time."

Overall, establishing the value of UGC in newsroom, integrating it into the news process, and managing it both organizationally and ethically, is done proactively and consistently to maintain the newsrooms trust amongst its audience, and to avoid repeating mistakes through old processes.

Conclusion

Setting a new standard in journalism is a difficult task, one restated by many of my interviewees and in my literary review. Engaging with UGC is a fast-paced and ever-evolving area, whereby decisions are made on a case by case basis, and the decisions made in the past are not applicable to those made today.

Nonetheless, for newsrooms engaging with UGC, the following steps are recommended to take:

- Establish the value of UGC for the newsroom/journalist. Given the speed and volume of UGC, time and resources will need to be allocated to verifying material. A news organization should decide if UGC is worth this investment before attempting to engage.
- Determine how UGC engagement can be integrated into the news process. In today's digital media landscape, UGC and social media are not a niche functions of the news, but integral parts to the practice of journalism. The intention of how UGC is used needs to clear align with the principles, goals and objectives of a newsroom.
- Specify expectations of who is working with UGC and how. If all journalists are expected to engage with UGC, then make that clear and ensure journalists are equipped for this task. This will reduce harm for all involved, including sources of UGC.
- Structure your engagement around an ethics-based approach. Harming the public and journalists does not bode well for trust and reputation. To best avoid the risk of losing both, lead UGC engagement with the ethical consideration of all those who will be impact by the material.

While engaging with UGC varies on a case by case basis, there are common best practices shared amongst experts and journalists. In both the US and UK, news organizations, for various reasons, implemented a code of standards for UGC engagement. These implementations were led by dedicated teams, spearheaded by top management. All organizations considered the legal and business ramifications of failing to successfully integrate audience members in the news gathering process. However, non-news organizations exhibited extensive progress in

considering the ethical ramifications of engaging with UGC, both for journalists and content consumers.

Ultimately, a newsroom that successfully engages UGC will build community trust, which in turn could encourage audience members to share their content. When a newsroom establishes a set of standards to protect social sources, reputation and trust in journalism, it fully executes the value of UGC.

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