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**NEWSROOM CURATORS & INDEPENDENT
STORYTELLERS: CONTENT CURATION AS A
NEW FORM OF JOURNALISM**

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Introduction

Whether we choose to call it “information overload”, like Alvin Toffler did in 1970¹ or “filter failure” following the Clay Shirky’s more recent definition, the problem of how to find relevant information among the thousand tiny pieces of content published online every day cannot be underestimated.

Journalists have always had to face the problem of how to verify a certain piece of information or to distinguish reliable sources from the others, but the emergence of the Net and the explosion of the consumption of news on the Internet, has brought new challenges, making it even more difficult than before to distinguish between truth, half-truth and falsehood and raising new questions as well. For instance: how to give due credit to the original uploader of footage and protect his rights when the video is embedded by a news organization in its pages? How to draw the thin red line between quoting and plagiarism, in an age in which a lot of outlets use the very same multimedia content, found somewhere on the Internet, sometimes without even quoting the source?

Not to mention the fact that some newspapers are redesigning their online layout in order to meet the expectations of the audience and increase traffic: for instance giving prominence to live blogging in the case of major events or, like the Huffington Post, placing only one news (and a big picture) to dominate the head of the homepage.

In short, it’s clear that a new medium, like the Net, needs a new language, or in other words, its own rhetoric.

That’s one of the reasons why a new professional figure is increasingly gaining importance: the content curator, a word used to define a person who selects the best information found online with regard to its quality and relevance, aggregates it, linking to the original source of news, and provides context and analysis. The curator doesn’t have to be a journalist: he or she may be a blogger or a tweeter as well but, since many of the skills required to a good curator are the same ones needed to a good reporter, journalists are maybe the best fit to play this role and many of them have already

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In his book “Future Shock”. Random House, 1970.

begun experimenting with new forms of storytelling based on content curation.

New forms of reporting, and especially using and curating user generated content (UGC), can't of course completely substitute the work on the ground, but they can prove truly helpful in certain situations, especially when reporters cannot be on the ground due to police restrictions or to the danger of being assaulted and even killed (just think of what happened in the recent Syria conflict). In short, they are an opportunity, not a problem. But guidelines must be written and borders have to be defined in order to assimilate these new practices and tools without jeopardizing the quality of the final editorial product. It is a fascinating issue and a fascinating, albeit difficult, moment for journalism.

In the first chapter I will therefore try to define exactly the role of a curator and what are the differences, if any, between this role and other traditional journalistic roles. I will examine the differences between simple aggregation and curation, and present some case histories of curation applied to news production.

I will also provide an overview of the main independent platforms for curating news that have emerged in the last few years: from Storify to ScribbleLive! and, for each of them, supply examples of news stories that were distributed through these channels, and show how some news organizations have already begun to adapt part of their coverage for these formats. And I will describe the coming to light of new for-profit enterprises like Storyful, whose core business is providing mainstream publishers with "certified" content taken from social media.

In the second chapter, I will deal in more depth with the process of collecting, verifying and using UGC in some mainstream news organizations, during two events that challenged traditional methods of reporting. The first one is the England Riots, the biggest unrest in UK since the 80's, taking place on a scale that would require an army of journalists to cover with the usual strategies; and the second being Occupy Wall Street, the spontaneous protest movement on a part of a group of American citizens worried and angered by the constant growth in inequality in their country.

For each of these events, I will examine the coverage given to them by well-known newspapers and broadcasters: the Guardian and the BBC for the riots, and the Washington Post for the Occupy Wall Street protests. Both

events were spread over an extended period of time: the former went on for four days, the latter is still active, although not so vibrant as it was at the start. Instead of trying to report on all the coverage (an impossible and too diverse a task), I will concentrate on some episodes that marked the protests, which became iconic in people's perception of them, or represented a turning point for those involved.

For many observers, the police raid and clearing of New York's Zuccotti Park during the night of 15 November 2011 represented a turning point: a blow from which the movement struggled to recover. At the same time, for all its importance, the event was difficult to cover for mainstream reporters, as the police evicted them too from the Park together with the protesters, even though they had been shown the journalists' credentials and press cards.

That's why curation platforms like Storify, during this period "saved the news" (as the website ReadWriteWeb titled it²) allowing freelancers, professionals and journalism students to reconstruct what was happening thanks to pictures and videos uploaded by protesters using their smartphones.

Mainstream media themselves took advantage of the wealth of user generated available, showing footage and pictures in their coverage and sometimes embedding pre-curated stories on their pages. The last part of the paper will be devoted to summing up the findings of my research, pointing to the way the news organizations work and trying to suggest possible standards and best practices in the art of curation.

Areas of future research of topics that could only be hinted at in the course of this study include defining the borders between content curation and plagiarism, an issue that many news organizations will have to face as the focus shifts more and more to re-using other people's content,, and understanding the possible future evolution of content curation as a job.

² http://readwrite.com/2011/11/17/how_storifying_occupy_wall_street_saved_the_news_o

CHAPTER I – CURATION AND “CURATORS”

1. What “curation” means and why it’s important

First of all, who is the “curator”, that bizarre figure who has lately made its appearance in lots of articles dealing with the promotion of journalistic (or marketing) content?

As the Latin etymology of the word suggests, he is, essentially, someone who “takes care”. Extending the concept, we could say that a curator is someone who takes an inordinate mass of material, and turns chaos into order, or in more recent slang, turns “noise into signal”. The first content curator in Western culture was God or, outside of a religious context, Plato's Demiurge, the creature who shaped the material world, creating a structure out of indeterminate non-being.

Although it's fair to say that journalists sometimes feel like little Demiurges, using words or images as a tool to shape the world, a more modest, and much used metaphor is that of the museum curator, the person behind an art exhibition: his job consists of choosing the best and most representative paintings (or sculptures, or whatever), ensuring their origin and authenticity, organizing them according to a certain parameter - maybe in chronological order, or the affiliation to a certain artistic movement, a certain theme or other criteria – and presenting them to the audience in the most effective and captivating way. This is nothing new in its essence: journalists have been doing it for a while, although usually splitting different tasks among different professionals; the reporter discovers and selects sources and provides a first draft of content; the editor assembles, sometimes integrates and shapes that very same content; the verification part of the process can be done by the reporter, by the editor, or by both, according to the procedures of the newsrooms, or on a case by case basis.

After the explosion of the so-called Web 2.0, the huge success of social networks like Facebook and Twitter, the rise in circulation of smartphones

and the increasing importance of mobile connections, what has changed is the amount of information available to journalists. The content – text, pictures and videos – generated by users has become so widespread that it is theoretically possible to cover an event from afar, just with the aid of a computing device and an Internet connection, some Twitter lists and a careful look at the right YouTube videos or Facebook pages. And in some cases, when entrance to the actual scene is too dangerous or technically challenging, that may also be the only solution.

This means basically three things: first that is now (theoretically) possible for one person, usually but not necessarily, an editor – to cover all the roles before performed by different professionals; second, that in order to preserve good quality reporting standards, new, tech-savvy ways of filtering and verifying sources, are needed. Third, that the data produced by users or by organizations may be used as source for in depth analysis and investigations – something that was previously not thinkable. A new journalistic profession is emerging, the “data journalist”, who's in charge of a peculiar form of content curation, building info-graphics, geo-tagged maps and similar to give the audience the idea of how a certain subject is evolving. Not only this, but data can now be used not only to tell, in a visual way, what's happening in real time. They are also the source for “cold case” style investigations. The Guardian's “Reading the Riots”, which we'll deal with later, is an example. The importance of data and user generated content in contemporary journalism means also that their preservation is becoming a central issue.

Sophia B. Liu, in her paper “The rise of curated crisis content”³ distinguishes seven different roles or aspects of the content curator: the archivist, the librarian, the preservationist, the editor, the storyteller, the exhibitionist and the docent. While almost all of them are variations on the three key tasks mentioned before, it's worth noting the space given to the “preservationist” feature. As Liu says, “the goal here is to engage in preservation activities that engender long-term maintenance of and access to the collection for posterity's sake”.

This not currently one of the core concerns of journalistic curation: journalists tend to assume that articles are eternal, as long as they are stored in the paper's archive (both online and offline). However, as regards online coverage, as newsrooms rely more and more on user generated

³ Liu, Sophia B. The Rise of Curated Crisis Content. Proceedings of the 7th International ISCRAM Conference – Seattle, USA, May 2010

content, the risk of all or part of this material disappearing after a while is something to be taken into account. Amateur footage uploaded in YouTube and then embedded in a live blog or a story by an editor, may disappear due to copyright infringement or because it has been removed by the uploader; the same fate may be faced by tweets or Facebook posts.

In a study⁴ published in September 2012, analysing six different event-centric datasets of resources shared in social media in the period from June 2009 to March 2012, Hany M. SalahEldeen and Michael L. Nelson, two researchers from the University of Old Dominion (Norfolk, Virginia), found that after the first year of publishing, nearly 11% of shared resources would be lost and after that the trend would continue at 0.02% per day.

2. Curation and journalism

Curation now plays an important role in how news stories are created by newsrooms (or freelancers) and then delivered to an audience. But not all stories are created equal: some stories allow themselves to be “curated” better than others. The best fit are those in which the participation of the users to the storytelling process, and their contribution in term of multimedia content, is huge⁵. Typically, this is the case with natural disasters – storms, earthquakes, tsunamis and similar – in which the devastation, together with the work of rescuers and the toll in human lives, if present, is thoroughly documented online. Covering natural calamities is also, on the other hand, one of the most challenging task for curators as, in these circumstances, some people seem to rejoice peculiarly in posting online fake images that have to be carefully debunked.

Protests, revolutions, social movements, and terrorist attacks also offer a great opportunity to create stories using content uploaded by the audience⁶. In interviews with BBC staff during the research work for this paper, the London bombings of 2005 have often been recalled as one of the first examples in which the audience contribution helped clarify what was happening, signalling a turning point in global news coverage. Survivors on

⁴ “Losing My Revolution: How Many Resources Shared on Social Media Have Been Lost?”, available at <http://arxiv.org/abs/1209.3026>

⁵ On this topic, see also: Nicola Bruno - “Tweet First, Verify Later” - Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism - <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/news/item/article/tweet-first-verify-later-new-fell.html>

⁶ See also: Tenore, Mallory Jean (21 November 2011). "The 5 types of stories that make good Storifys", available at <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/153697/the-5-types-of-stories-that-make-good-storifys/>

the ground transmitted mobile phone images to social networks, family and friends, as well as news desks such as the BBC⁷. This was made possible by the diffusion of smartphones with mobile connectivity.

This was probably a “watershed moment” but it was still in a form relatively primitive when compared to what happens today. In 2005 the Web had not yet become the favourite place for “conversations”, replacing the nearby pub. Facebook was barely born (it launched in 2004), and Twitter had yet to emerge. Instagram was not even thought of. Flickr was the photo sharing network of choice and social media users were still a minority of Internet surfers.

As of June 2013, Facebook had 1.11 monthly billion users, and Twitter around 200 million. Smartphones and tablets are now widespread and the “conversation” around a current topic, be it a TV show, a celebrity’s marriage or a Party congress, has become another great source of material to curate. More and more news organizations collect the comments and reactions of the user around these kinds of subjects. Twitter, in particular, has become the “vox populi” of modern times.

Sometimes the conversation is spontaneous, or at other times it can be started by media outlets, eager to build a story out of user reactions, or of user generated multimedia content. In the second case, a hashtag, which is a word or combination of words preceded by the # symbol, used on Twitter and other social networks to identify all messages related to a certain topic, is usually provided.

3. Gatekeepers or gatewatchers?

All this increased participation has both its drawbacks and opportunities. It is changing, overall, the role of journalists, who without giving up their traditional skills, are also becoming more and more information “managers”. They are more like human filters which thanks also to the absence of boundaries (i.e. space limitations, like television's airtime or newspapers pages) typical of the digital world, verify and add context to what content

⁷ See also: <http://gnovisjournal.org/2009/05/13/camera-phone-images-how-london-bombings-2005-shaped-form-news>

they think to be relevant, and feed it onto Web pages or mobile applications.

They still maintain a fundamental role, but in many cases, especially when it comes to the kind of stories described in the previous section, they have had to give up their exclusive fatherhood in the generation of news. In other words, their function as “gatekeepers” is weakened. That is why some scholars (Bruns 2003) have suggested a new concept, which is considered to replace traditional gatekeeping, namely gatewatching. Whereas in gatekeeping newsrooms control the decision to allow a particular story to enter the news channel of a certain news medium (McQuail 1994), in gatewatching the audience plays an active role in the news creation and selection process.

As explained in detail in a recent paper by Swiss scholars Katarina Stanoevska-Slabeva, Vittoria Sacco and Marco Giardina⁸, social media such as Twitter and Facebook have given rise to the creation of a new gate, open to both media and users; but reporting in social media is usually atomized in short bits, lacking a clear storyline. That's why it's important that someone makes sense of all this material, selecting content and crediting sources. This is what most media outlets do these days when they approach user generated content found on social media and “curate it”. Increasingly, thanks to the rise of new social media curation platforms, the same role can be played by independent professionals (whether journalists or amateurs).

4. Independent “storytellers”

Together with the rise of curation tools and platforms, another trend has become clearly visible in the last few years: the emergence of “independent” curators. They might be freelancers or amateurs, or they might be working for a news organization, although with such a level of independence and visibility to transform their job into a one-man-show, NPR’s Andy Carvin, celebrated especially for his coverage of the Arab Spring through Twitter, is the best example of this.

By collecting pictures, videos, links and other user generated content posted

⁸ “Content curation: a new form of gatewatching for social media” – available at <https://online.journalism.utexas.edu/2012/papers/Katarina.pdf>

online, and by tweeting them in a sequence, or combining them in a more sophisticated chronological narration on networks such as Storify or Tumblr, they are often able to provide a perspective different from that of mainstream media. This is a complementary view, in some cases, or alternative in others.

There is, though, a fundamental difference between the kind of coverage made possible using only Twitter and the one achieved by also using some of the tools mentioned above. The first could be really difficult to reconstruct after the event is over, since the stream-like nature of Twitter privileges what's happening in real time; whereas the structure of stories on curation platforms, and the fact that some of them (like those built on Storify) can also be embedded on external sites, makes it easier to preserve and consult them later.

That's also the reason why people like Andy Carvin, who master the first approach, do not actually apply to themselves the word "curator". They prefer to call themselves a "news DJ" or "news anchor".

That's how Carvin described his job in an interview with the website The Verge:

"There's that word "curator" that gets used so often, but to me that seems to suggest archiving information rather than analysing it in real time. (...) Probably the best way to describe what I do most of the time is serve a function similar to a news anchor. I process news in real time and try to share the most interesting bits with my Twitter followers. But I don't see them as just my followers — they help me research, translate, etc. So I guess I'm like an online news anchor who uses Twitter as his newsroom, with Twitter followers helping me do my job better"⁹. Whether they are "curators" like those working with Storify, or online "news anchors" like Carvin, these new professional figures are often "distant witnesses" (to quote the title of a Carvin's book¹⁰), covering from afar an event that, for its scale, or for the conditions on the ground, would be difficult to be told in any other way. In other cases they are insiders, blogging and tweeting from the centre of the action. One interesting case is the coverage of Occupy Chicago¹¹ done by Claudia Vago, an Italian social media curator who, after becoming

⁹ <http://www.theverge.com/2013/1/23/3890674/tweeting-the-news-andy-carvin-test-pilots-twitter-journalism>

¹⁰ A. Carvin. "Distant witness". Cuny University Press, 2013.

¹¹ For more information on this project see: <http://claudiavago.me/blog/grid-portfolio/occupy-chicago/>

well-known to Italian twitteratis for her storytelling of the Tunisian revolution on the microblogging platform, travelled to the USA to narrate the story of the Occupy movement, financing the journey thanks to an online crowd-funding campaign.

Once there, she mixed with the protesters, live blogging and streaming online video from the protest marches and also re-tweeting and amplifying content provided by others and later adding context to this material.

When seen through the lenses of traditional journalistic values, the problem with this kind of curation is that there is no longer a pretence of detachment and neutrality in the telling. Objectivity, defined as being equidistant from the main actors of a story, is no longer a goal. Or, better said, objectivity it is now considered to be equivalent to “transparency”. “I think people know I sympathize with protesters”, explains Vago, “I never hide which side I’m on, but that doesn’t mean I’m not honest in my reporting.”¹²

The underlying idea may also be that “livestreaming” for instance, in other words capturing the scene as it unfolds, has a kind of objectivity in itself. But framing of course is still essential to make sense of what’s happening.

5. Curation tools: an overview

In the last three years, a number of online platforms meant to address the issues of content curation have emerged. Some of them, like Scoop.it (<http://www.scoop.it>) or Pearltrees (<http://www.pearltrees.com>) do not address a specific target audience (although Scoop.it offers a premium package for professional curators and business brands). Others, like Storify, Storyful and ScribbleLive, to mention the best known, are instead focused specifically on journalistic curation.

Big news organizations, like the BBC, Guardian and Washington Post analysed in this research generally speaking prefer to use their internal

¹² Personal communication, February 2013.

platforms for managing user generated content. But there are exceptions: Reuters, for instance, uses ScribbleLive! to deepen its real time coverage of international events¹³. The New York Times, ABC News, Bloomberg and other famous brands rely on partnerships with Storyful to enhance their news gathering and verification procedures.

This same content is used to build liveblogs, or create maps, info-graphics or other kind of visual and interactive content that helps the audience to understand how the event is unfolding. We will examine some case histories later in this paper, but what follows is a short overview of the most used curation tools and their purpose.

Liveblogs

Liveblogs have gradually become one of the most popular formats for news consumption on the Internet. They are particularly good at narrating an event while it's unfolding. It is the default format for covering online major breaking news stories, sports events, and scheduled entertainment news.

A liveblog can be described as a single post, made up of short micro-updates (that may consist of text, embedded pictures, videos, links or other elements such as tweets) and constantly updated by one or more authors. It does not follow the traditional reporting format of the inverted pyramid, but is usually presented in a reverse chronological order, with the latest update at the top. Live Blogging combines conventional reporting with curation, where journalists sift out and prioritise information from secondary sources and present it to the audience in close to real time, often incorporating their own comments.

This means that the content posted may come from user generated content found online, or from other official sources such as the police, governments, or other media outlets. Sources are usually properly credited for the material "borrowed" and often, but not always, a link to the original publisher is provided.

A recent study¹⁴ by scholars Neil Thurman and Anne Walters shows that the Guardian alone publishes an average of 146 Live Blogs a month, and these

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<http://live.reuters.com/#LiveEvents>

14 "Live blogging – Digital Journalism's Pivotal Platform?" – available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21670811.2012.714935>

articles receive more visitors for longer periods of time than conventional articles or picture galleries on the same subject.

At the BBC, the format – often under the caption “live text” or “live pages” - has been a big success in terms of usage, so much so that the broadcaster thought of using it not just for dealing with breaking news, but also, in the words of the website editor Steve Herrmann, “to make this approach work as a regular feature on the site rather than just something we use around big stories.”¹⁵ The BBC uses its own content management system (CMS) to power live blogs, but it also announced in March 2013 a custom integration with the external curation platform Storify¹⁶.

Storify

Storify¹⁷ was launched in 2010 but opened to the public in April 2011. It is one of the most highly regarded curation tools, thanks to its flexibility, ease of use, and the option to embed one’s curated story into external blogs or websites. It was created by a former Associated Press Reporter, Burt Herman, and consists basically of a CMS through which interface users can search with keywords multiple social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other tools like Google News. It is also possible to insert text between the various embedded pictures, videos, or links, adding some explanation to give context.

Although Storify as a company doesn’t share much data on platform usage, it boasts that is used by the 20 top news organizations in the USA, with millions of stories being uploaded. The platform is often used for live blogging, although this was not its original mission. “We’re not specifically focusing on live blogging”, says Herman, “but more on gathering stories from social media; people use it for live blogging but it’s not why we were born.”¹⁸ It can be also used on tablets, via its iPad app. In March 2013 it launched a VIP (paid for) version, specifically designed for professional use with enhanced support for liveblogging and the option to customize the look and sources of media stories.

¹⁵ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2011/11/live_coverage_on_bbc_news_onli.html

¹⁶ <http://storify.com/storify/storify-powers-new-social-storytelling-live-bloggi>

¹⁷ <http://www.storify.com>

¹⁸ Personal communication, February 2013

ScribbleLive

While Storify is more about collecting stories, ScribbleLive, launched in 2008 by two employees of the Canadian Television Network, Michael De Monte and Jonathan Keebler, is more focused on real time storytelling. Among its customers are corporations like Reuters, MSN, CBS, and CNN. It allows journalists to cover any event in real time, using their own content or UGC. Posts can be updated not only through the Web interface, but with iPhone, Android or BlackBerry apps, SMS and voice-mail.

In the words of De Monte, it allows reporters “to build up story and narrative from the building blocks that are around you on the web”. Each block can be then commented on or shared via Twitter or Facebook. With ScribbleLive, the publication process of a liveblog is streamlined: reporters do not have to file content to an editor who then edits it and publishes it to the web. They can post it directly from their phone or PC straight to a website, where it is edited in real-time.

The tool can also be used to gather feedback and to continue to tell a story when the main event is over.

Storyful

In April 2010 another platform claiming to help journalists in their use of user generated content was born. Storyful, unlike Storify, wasn't conceived as open to the public, for smoothing and making more effective the process of storytelling, but rather as an intermediary between newsrooms and producers of user generated content. It was founded by the former RTE (Irish State Television) journalist Mark Little. As he wrote in an article for the Nieman report¹⁹, by creating it, he imagined “a news agency built for the social media age. I wanted to create the products and protocols that would equip other journalists to meet the challenges of the golden hour”.

By the term “golden hour” he is referring to “the time it takes social media to create either an empowering truth or an unstoppable lie, when a celebrity death trends on Twitter or an explosive video surfaces on YouTube.”²⁰ Storyful proposes to news organizations a different kind of subscription plan.

¹⁹ “Finding the Wisdom in the Crowd” - <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102766/Finding-the-Wisdom-in-the-Crowd.aspx>

²⁰ Ibidem

Registered users get access to an online dashboard made up of curated Twitter lists and videos on the current breaking news and get alerted via email every time a user generated video – usually found on YouTube - has been “cleared”, that is to say the author has been contacted and has granted permission to use the footage, for free or a fee.

Verification of UGC is a crucial aspect of Storyful’s work. While the process of news discovery is largely automated, a staff of experienced journalists performs various checks and investigations to make sure, or as sure as possible, that the content found on social media is genuine and not an elaborated forgery made up by someone trying to promote his own agenda.

Another sensitive job performed by the organization is dealing with copyright issues: “It’s still a Wild West when it comes to rights”, explains former Storyful editor Claire Wardle. “When it’s private users that post on their own channel a clip uploaded by someone else without giving credit, it is usually enough to contact the video sharing platform and have it removed. When it comes to established media, it is more difficult. Lots of news organizations simply take content from YouTube, without permission, and upload it to their own platform adding their own pre-rolled ads.”.

6. When curation is at the core: some case histories

As we’ve seen in the previous sections, curation of UGC plays a fundamental role in live coverage of certain breaking news events. But for some websites, born “on” and “for” the Internet, like the Huffington Post and Buzz Feed (to mention maybe the most outstanding examples) it’s more than this: it is an essential part of the editorial process.

The Huffington Post, launched in 2005 (with its U.S. version, based at www.huffingtonpost.com), was maybe the first general news site (aside from political blogs and aggregators such as the Drudge Report) to find a successful business model around content curation. As Michael Rundle, editor of the UK edition explained at the 2013 News:rewired conference in London, the underlying idea is “to create engaging content and stuff that people will want to read... <...> We’re bringing together information from lots of different places. We read it, edit it, organise it and present it to people, and then give them more information on how they can find out more”.

The Huffington Post (or "HuffPo" as it's also known) does not rely only on third party content. The website features a mix of original content made by professional journalists, curated content, and posts written by thousands of (unpaid) bloggers. Great emphasis is placed content popular on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks, and articles are structured and titled in such a way to become easily "viral", that is shared and re-posted across the Internet. The extensive recourse to curation by the Huffington Post has sometimes been criticized as a kind of intellectual theft: the website has been accused of simply "scraping" (copying text through automated scripts) from other outlets, and adding a link to the source. However, the website has defended itself, saying that this tactic ultimately brings traffic to the original author.

Whilst for the HuffPo the social element is very important, it is still a website that relies heavily on search engines to attract visitors – so much so that it experiments with different versions of its headlines to improve its search engine optimization and attract more users.

BuzzFeed was founded in 2006 by Jonah Peretti (who is also co-founder of The Huffington Post). It has focused almost exclusively on identifying and then providing the audience with content that could go "viral" and be shared on social networks. It makes intense use of list posts ("25 Of The Best Baby Shower Themes Ever" is an example) and quizzes. Its content is mainly visual: pictures and videos take the lion's share. But there is also a long-form journalism section called BuzzReads.

Content curation plays an important role in BuzzFeed's strategy, not only meant as selecting and presenting attractive visuals of what's trending on the Web, but also helping readers to distinguish valuable information from fakes. As Liza Tozzi, former New York Times editor hired in April 2013 by BuzzFeed explained²¹ to The Atlantic, part of her role is to "act as a kind of curator of all the information, good and bad, that flows alongside fast-moving news stories. "Things just come flying at readers," Tozzi says, "and the real service is to break all that stuff down for people and sort out facts from fiction in real time."

A more limited, but still very interesting, use of curation as a core part of journalistic coverage is performed by the satellite TV Al Jazeera English, for

²¹ *"Breaking News Is Broken; Could Buzzfeed Be the One to Fix It?"* - <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/04/breaking-news-is-broken-could-buzzfeed-be-the-one-to-fix-it/275310/>

its programme **The Stream**, which sits at the crossing between social media and traditional TV. The show was launched in 2011. Every day, four days a week, the editorial staff of the broadcaster chooses a theme of discussion and invite the social media community to comment on it before, during, and after the anchored news show, which lasts 30 minutes.

In this way, the “conversation” becomes the centre of the news content itself. During the show, the presenters use YouTube videos to illustrate themes, and invite viewers to tweet their feedback to @AJStream, or contribute through a devoted Facebook page, picking the most interesting hints and using them to shape the discussion.

Skype and Google+ Hangouts are used for audio and video interviews with experts and user-generated audio is also accepted. Besides performing this “real time curation” on TV, Al Jazeera makes available the conversation around every single topic on Storify.

CHAPTER II – A CASE HISTORY: THE LONDON RIOTS

Introduction: England's summer of violence

Two years ago, for five days, between the 6th and the 10th of August 2011, a wave of violence erupted across England, in what would later be called the England (or "London") riots. It all started in the capital's borough of Tottenham: what began with a peaceful protest march following the killing by the police of a young black resident, Mark Duggan, degenerated into clashes and looting.

The following day, the rioting spread; first, to other areas of London, then also to other parts of the country: Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool and other smaller cities. Five people were killed either deliberately or accidentally during the protests and several others (including 186 police officers) were injured. Many cars and buildings were set on fire; shop windows were smashed and goods were stolen in raids that resembled a moment of collective madness.

Journalists soon found themselves amongst the favourite targets of the rioters: BBC and ITN vans were attacked, and individual reporters, like the BBC's Andy Moore and CNN's correspondent Dan Rivers, became the object of unwanted attention. Some photo and video journalists were mugged for their precious equipment.

New technologies played a prominent role in the event: the looters, in most cases young people, were coordinated through encrypted messages sent via the BlackBerry Messenger service. Social networks like Facebook and Twitter were also accused of helping to spread the violence, but this turned out to be mostly unfounded. Indeed, the social media were used by local communities and individuals also as a channel for launching philanthropic initiatives, such as collecting money to help those injured in the riots or organizing the cleaning up of the streets.

The police also communicated (among other ways) through social media and used the photo-sharing network Flickr to ask people for help in identifying

suspected looters. Most of all, online platforms turned out to be a priceless tool for the journalists and news outlets who were seeking to cover an event with which, due to its scale and speed of development, it could have proved difficult to keep pace.

A tale of two cities, or “The Good, the Bad and the Cleaners”

Although the media outlets continued to play their traditional role of gatekeepers, filtering the noise and separating rumour from what was actually happening, it is beyond doubt that during the riots, their coverage was strongly influenced by the content posted by users on social media. Some of the most shared and re-tweeted videos and hashtags helped the audience to make sense of what was happening, building a narrative out of the perceived chaos.

One of the most famous of these, a video of a black woman shouting angrily at the looters, was actually filmed by a Daily Telegraph journalist, Matthew Moore, who did not send it directly to the newsroom, but uploaded it first to a third party platform, Telly (former TwitVid), a service designed to help Twitter users to share video content. On Telly, the video was a huge hit, with 115,000 views in one hour and 23,000 retweets.²² The video was then uploaded to YouTube and embedded on the websites of many mainstream media outlets. It also inspired numerous articles during the ensuing days, as journalists tried to track down the woman's identity,²³ and understand her background and her motivations. Later, she was included in reports of the riots as one of the “positive figures”, the heroes that saved the day and, most probably, Britain's image of itself.²⁴

²² <https://twitter.com/TellyApp/status/100688531999043584>

²³ She was later identified as Pauline Pearce, a 45 year old former jazz singer who became famous as the “heroine of Hackney” and later entered politics.

²⁴ See, for instance: “Moving stories of brave figures in UK riots are told” - <http://storyful.com/stories/6129>

On the opposite side, another hugely popular, user-generated footage was the video of a young man (later identified as a Malaysian student, Mohammad Asyraf Rosli) being beaten and then robbed by fake Samaritans pretending to help him. This seemed to represent a darker picture, the evil without reason and the greed that many of the official explanations highlighted as the main reason for the rioting²⁵.

The video was shot from above by a person living in a nearby building, Abdul Hamid, who then, "shocked by what he had seen", uploaded the footage to his Facebook page, where it was later picked up by his "friends" and went viral, especially after being reposted on YouTube, where during the next few days it was viewed more than 3 million times. The media were quick to embed it in their own pages, in some cases adding their own pre-rolled commercial to the footage.²⁶

This story also attracted a following on the social media, with people sending messages of support to the injured student via Twitter using the hashtag *#getwetllsoonashrafhaziq* and donating money to help him via a Tumblr blog called "Something nice for Ashraf". (<http://somethingniceforashraf.tumblr.com>).

Another major demonstration of the power of the social media was the clean-up operation that took place on the 9th of August, organized mainly through Twitter using the label *#riotcleanup*.

The hashtag took off around 8am and, by 10am, was the top trending topic in the UK and the second worldwide.²⁷

The clean-up operation was felt, and reported, by the media as an act of "redemption", the coming together of a community that strongly reaffirmed its right to a peaceful and decent coexistence, with reports mixing statements of approval by the authorities and celebrities with messages taken from Facebook and, above all, Twitter.

All of these major stories – the shouting woman, the bad Samaritans and the clean-up – were born and became news via the social media,

²⁵ Not everybody agreed with this interpretation, of course, other explanations that stressed social and economic discrimination and harsh treatment by the police were also proposed

²⁶ E.g.: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8691953/London-riots-YouTube-crime-victim-a-Malaysian-student.html>

²⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/09/riot-cleanup-campaign-twitter-facebook>

with journalists subsequently developing, shaping and creating in-depth reports about them. Does that mean that during the riots the media played only a passive role, simply “curating” and responding to content chosen and brought to their attention by the audience? Did the gatekeepers merely become gatewatchers? Not so. It would probably be fairer to say that a kind of interplay was in place, with professionals doing a great deal of traditional reporting, enhanced, but not substituted, by users' content.

1. The Guardian's coverage

Amongst all the coverage provided by the British and foreign media outlets, that of the Guardian newspaper stood out, due to its combination of old school techniques and sophisticated usage of the opportunities offered by the new media.

The riots started on a Saturday night, when the Guardian was theoretically “closed”, being replaced on Sunday by the Observer, so Paul Lewis, the newspaper reporter who has recently been recognized as one of the main sources of news about the event, was technically off-duty.

*“I was a kind of citizen journalist – Lewis recalls – competing on the same level as everybody else”.*²⁸

He then shaped his coverage by combining old style legwork with a savvy use of the newly-available tools.

*“First, I saw a lot of police passing near my house. I went on Twitter to see what was happening and saw that there was a picture, much shared, of a police car that had been set on fire in Tottenham. I searched my local area, and saw there were reports of rioting. So then I asked people for guidance about some way to get to Tottenham, started to tweet about what I saw”.*²⁹

People not only replied to those tweets, but also corrected mistakes,

²⁸ Personal communication, February 2013

²⁹ Ibidem

and offered accommodation, a plug to recharge the phone, a lift, or a cup of tea. It was, as Lewis called it, a process of conversational reporting, in which the traditional separation between the journalist and the audience was hard to apply.

"Journalists like to think of themselves as distant observers – says Lewis – detached from the facts but, in my view, it's impossible to operate like this with the social media, at least to operate successfully. To some degree, you're forced to let people know how you think and feel about a story."

In the first few hours, the news about the riots was still confused, so Lewis' reporting (together with that of the New York Times correspondent, Ravi Somaiya) soon became a reference point for all those interested in what was happening.

He was also used as a "correspondent" by several TV networks, who were struggling to send crews on the ground, due to the danger and discomfort of having a large number of staff and extensive equipment, which would soon make them a target of violence for the looters.

Although not one of the so-called "power users" of the social media, Lewis was able to take advantage of all of the capabilities allowed by the new technologies, including smartphones.

He wrote a short blog post (300 words) to be published on the Guardian's website on his BlackBerry, shot videos on his mobile phone and pictures that were later uploaded online by the newspaper's editors, and recorded voice comments to be shared online via the Audioboo social network.

1.1 Inside the newsroom

While Paul Lewis and other reporters were dispatched on the ground, gathering information, and performing the first selection of relevant material, the editors in the newsroom were busy finding other sources and integrating - using mainly the liveblog format - the first-hand reporting with third party, official or user-generated content.

One tool used by most journalists was TweetDeck software that makes it possible to break down the stream of updates provided by Twitter into multiple columns, each related to a peculiar keyword, highlighting mentions or retweets, or presenting the tweets shared by a selected list of users.

As James Ball, editor and data journalist, recalls: *"I had ten different columns for searching: I was checking different Twitter streams, trying to suggest where our journalists should go. I was also communicating with a lot of Twitter users. I asked some of them to give me their phone number and, if they did, I would put a lot more weight on what they said"*.³⁰

There were other methods used quickly to verify the authenticity of the pictures: *"If they tweeted a picture I would ask them to take two or three more of the same scene, from different angles, and email them within 2 minutes. If they couldn't do that, I wouldn't use their material"*, as well as cross-checking updates by users with things tweeted by others.

A key point was quickly identifying people who could be trusted and building ad hoc lists.

Then, the content was used to fill the liveblog, using the Guardian's internal content management system, that allows the seamless integration of every kind of material - text, pictures, videos - into a separate block, through direct input (as in the case of text) or grabbing and pasting the embed code of tweets, YouTube videos, etc., from external sites.

³⁰ Personal communication, February 2013

Aside from liveblogs, another format widely used by the Guardian for integrating user-generated content into journalistic coverage was geo-located maps.

The newspaper built one of the most comprehensive maps of the incidents taking place during the riots.

The map did not take into account all of the rumours about the riots that were circulating on Twitter, but only those that came from official sources and could be verified. The location was taken from the content of the tweet, not from the “embedded” geotagging functionality of Twitter: embedded locations remain quite rare now (only between 1-3% of tweets are geotagged), and in 2011 were almost non-existent.

The riots marked the Guardian's record traffic day (reaching as much as 5.6 million visitors) and the map contributed significantly to this, with more than 700,000 unique visitors.

“What's made this kind of crowdsourcing work so well – explains Ball - is that people think this might affect them directly. People were trying to check if there was any trouble in their area, if the roads were safe...and checked every half an hour or so to see if the situation had changed.”

The newspaper also decided to ask the users of Flickr for help, at that time the most popular photo sharing social network, by setting up a group (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/uk-riots>) through which you could share images of the impact of the riots, from the damage caused to the clean-up.

People were specifically asked to try and give an idea of what was being shown in the pictures, and of when they were taken, as well as to geo-tag them, in order to make it easier for the editors to build up a map based on all of the warnings.

1.2 Cold cases

UGC is nothing but data, a mass collection of items that can be analysed also after the end of the event during which they were

produced. This is not easy though, as social networks like Twitter do not usually allow old tweets to be archived, and the internal search engine allows only the recollection of the last 3,200 tweets of a user. The best way to build up an analysis using user-generated content is to access directly Twitter's firehose (i.e. the internal database) and that is exactly what the Guardian did for the Reading the Riots³¹ project, a research study into the causes and consequences of the summer riots.

The project was run jointly by the Guardian and the London School of Economics (LSE), together with other partners, like the Open Society Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree foundation, which sponsored the research. The project was divided in two phases: in the first, academics from Manchester University inspected a database of more than 2.5m tweets pertaining to 700,000 individuals. These tweets were "donated" by Twitter, (according to a certain sample of keywords selected by the researchers), not collected directly, which attracted some criticism from other scholars, but was an important first step in the post-analysis of an event using user-generated content. The study tried to assess three main points: what was the role of Twitter in spreading disinformation during the riots? Was it used as a tool to promote looting? What was the role of the different actors on Twitter?

It turned out the social network was actually a source of false rumours, but that those same rumours were almost always quickly debunked by other users, in line with a popular idea that the "crowd" has a certain inner wisdom, a kind of "swarm intelligence" that is self-repairing and self-correcting. On the second point, researchers found no evidence that Twitter was the main tool used by the looters to coordinate their actions and invite others to riot (the BlackBerry Messenger Service was the network of choice for this purpose); the microblogging website actually played a major role in coordinating the clean-up of the damage but, aside from the specific results of the research, the Reading the Riots project was important because, for the first time, it brought together academics, coders and journalists to analyse user-generated data on the Internet for investigative purposes.

It is difficult at present to say if this is just the beginning of a wave of similar studies – there are obstacles: the funding and coordination of

³¹ Reading the Riots: investigating England's summer of disorder – available in Pdf form from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/>

such large scale projects is difficult – but the hiring³² of the former Guardian’s chief data editor, Simon Rogers, as a first “data analyst” by Twitter in April 2013, looks like a promising step in this direction.

2. The BBC coverage

A big news organisation like the BBC can afford to deploy vast resources, both human and technological, for the task of curating user-generated content.

At the heart of the content curation process at the BBC lies the Verification Hub, a team set up initially in 2005 and now composed of 20 people that sources, verifies and finally distributes content within the broadcaster. What companies like Storyful began to do a couple of years ago, the British media conglomerate has been doing now for quite a longtime.

*"We are a kind of internal news agency and our clients are the different departments inside the BBC – says Trushar Barot, assistant Editor of the BBC News’ UGC and social media hub – The first real time the social media proved truly useful was during the London terrorist attacks on the tube: it sounded quite a radical idea at the time."*³³

At first, the Hub team relied mainly on direct user contributions for gathering multimedia content about a certain news event; in the last two or three years – as social networks like Twitter and Facebook became mainstream and people started to prefer communication among peers (or “friends”) to institutional or hierarchical communication (as was the case with blogs) – the balance has changed, and now the percentage of content is equally divided between what is sent directly and what is found by sifting through the social media.

"Lots of users still send pictures and videos to us directly – clarifies the

³² “Farewell Guardian, hello Twitter” - Simon Rogers.net - <http://simonrogers.net/2013/04/18/farewell-guardian-hello-twitter/>

³³ Personal communication, May 2013

BBC journalist - *We have an address that we advertise both on TV and on the Internet, (yourpics@bbc.co.uk) and a "post form" at the end of news stories on our website. In emails, people often include their phone number, so that BBC journalists might ring them and ask for more information about them and about the story.*³⁴

Phone numbers, through which information can be sent via SMS, are also made available and publicized, both on TV and on the website.

"The key point – says Barot – is always to remember that the audience knows more about a story than we do."

Here the BBC's journalist refers, of course, to the details that make up the narrative, not to the story itself, which is like a puzzle put together by reporters and editors (professional and amateurs), in and out of the newsroom, a wider picture about which the audience usually have little knowledge about.

2.1 Trust is the key

During the Riots, the verification team played a central role, as it was mainly the social media that made it possible to make sense of what was happening and understand where it was preferable to deploy staff.

The UGC Hub team started receiving messages from BlackBerry users, informing the editors they were receiving messages on where to gather for rioting. Twitter was also used to get the pulse of the situation.

As the Guardian case showed, when it comes to building coverage through the social media, in the end, it all comes down to trust: trust in the people who are providing the information and the trust of the audience in a certain reporter of a certain news organization.

"You ultimately build up a kind of database of contacts – says Barot – We started following some people we knew we could trust, and since the violence went on for a number of days, it became obvious to the hub who else was reliable, who were the people who were actually on

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Ibidem

the spot and those who were just pretending to be.”

Copyright issues are taken into consideration but with some flexibility, due to the nature of the medium and the nature of the process: any material found online is generally used only with the permission of the uploader; but, in some cases, when the author does not reply after being contacted, if the team still thinks that the uploaded image or footage is genuine and depicts something that was happening, they may decide to use it anyway, although with a disclaimer.

“We would never say we are 100% satisfied. We’ll say: ‘This, to the best of our knowledge, is an accurate representation of what happened’. If the content passes the verification process, the UGC Hub sends an “internal alert” through the BBC, saying we have this material, we think it’s accurate, but in case you use it, add the disclaimer. The same process applies to the TV channels and website. It’s up to every section to decide whether they want to use it or not.”

2.2 “Just because something is visible, it doesn’t mean you have to use it”

The BBC seems to maintain a relatively rigorous approach to handling user-generated content. In a number of interviews with people at the BBC, while conceding that in a liveblog stream some content might enter – with a disclaimer – that is not fully verified and that would not make its way into a website article or broadcast report, the staff was keen to underline that the BBC softened its editorial guidelines under the pressure of UGC.

“Just because something is visible, it doesn’t mean you have to use it,”³⁵ was probably the sentence through which the employees interviewed for this research best conveyed the underlying philosophy of the broadcaster’s curation. Some of them even insisted on stressing that, “User-generated content is another form of information that we treat as increasingly important but not the only one. We want to retain control over what we use; pictures and videos help us make an editorial

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Interview with Mark Frankel, Assistant Editor for Social News at the BBC

judgement but they are not an end in themselves".³⁶

This does not mean that the BBC did not use user-generated content in their coverage of the riots; especially during the first day, it was dangerous for crew to be on the ground and some teams, including a BBC van, were assaulted by the looters.

Indeed, Barot recalls, *"We had a lot of examples of videos of people who used to live in flats with vantage points quite high from the street-level and there was quite dramatic footage of rioters charging the police and police officers having to retreat"*, and while the BBC, being a very large organization, was able to deploy forces in all of the major hot spots, *"It was difficult to predict where the fire would flare up next"*.

Specific stories also emerged largely thanks to the social media; one example is the successful resistance of the inhabitants of the Dalston borough in London, where the Turkish community fought back against the rioters, chasing them off.

In some cases, the stories were merely dismissed, or postponed, as happened with a rumour about a car accident in which three Muslim men had reportedly been run over by a black man. On Twitter, people were debating the racial origins of the victim and the driver and BBC staff made an editorial decision not to publish anything about it until the police provided more details, fearing that reporting the issue in a "raw format" could bring further tension and violence between two different racial communities.

In this and other cases, the BBC made *"an editorial judgement, and journalistic assessment about what was worth or not worth publishing, looking at the massive, unfiltered information spread on Twitter and deciding how much to broadcast"*.

In other words, the broadcaster acted as a gatewatcher, selecting relevant bits of information out of the undefined stream of user-generated content, while at the same time performing its traditional role of gatekeeper, producing original reports thanks to its journalists on the ground.

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Interview with Matthew Eltringham

2.3 User content is important

The previous considerations lead the BBC editors not to classify the Riots as an “audience-led story” but with some caveats. It is true that the use of the social media and content curation has not reinvented journalism: it has had a big impact on the way in which news is gathered, but it is still the same old jobs, although in a different medium. As Mark Frankel, Assistant Editor for Social News at the BBC, puts it: *“In the past, we didn’t have Twitter or Facebook, but we still had to make sense of situations based on fragments of information”*.

However, the great number of UGC, among them footage and pictures that laid deep roots in the audience’s mind,, did indeed have an impact on the coverage, making it more “emotional” or rather “more real”. *“Using material from the social media – says Barot – helps to narrate the story in a much more telling way than, say, having an academic speaking about criminality or similar.”*

One more thing to consider is that, in straightened times, the news organization has to learn to work with less, and using material uploaded online is a way to make the process more cost-effective.

“Although BBC is a very large organization – Frankel comments – we have to understand that we can’t have as many correspondents as we used to have in many different locations, so we have to rely more on the voices, analysis and comments we gather from citizen journalists; on another level, it is an advantage to us, although an inevitable consequence of what’s happening, and there’s also an in-built advantage because Twitter is more flexible and a great opportunity to gather things more quickly, and we can communicate with our audience much faster than before.”

2.3 Some of them want to use you

There is, of course, a clear and present danger when dealing massively with social media content, not only because some ill-witted users might find it funny to share fake images and spread false rumours but also because, in some cases, they are trying to promote a certain political agenda.

So, journalists dealing with activists and similar have to face an old but always current dilemma: how to have a dialogue with users and integrate

their contributions without being used?

"You have to retain a balance – in Frankel's opinion – it comes back to the division between UGC and the editorial. We take our objectivity, integrity and impartiality very seriously; if we get a lot of material for example from Syria, about the atrocities going on, we have to balance this with some kind of interpretation, or another point of view, such as reports from the ground or from the government about what's going on. Of course, not every report has to have an absolute balance, but we cannot just show images from one side."

The UGC Hub simply acts as a filter: it is up to the single programme editors to decide if and when to use the content provided and in what format. Some kind of content may be more suitable for documentaries than for the website, for instance.

However, when the content is hugely important such as a YouTube video depicting violence against or by the police that has been seen a million times, it becomes very difficult to ignore, even if the authenticity or relevance of the material is not crystal clear. In this case, if the organization is unwilling, or has not yet had time, to investigate the matter further, what it does is to shift the focus from the story's content to its popularity.

"If a video has been seen a million times, this is a fact – says Frankel – probably it's worth have a look at it, but it's still the editor who makes the judgement. What we'll do is create a report saying: this is a story that caught the imagination of the audience".

2.4 New roles and new tools. For a new audience

Since the beginning of 2013, a new role has appeared in the BBC hierarchy, the social news editor, whose role is not only to manage a team who uses the different BBC accounts (like the social media editor does) but *"its main function is to be a link between the newsroom and what is happening on the social media"*.³⁷ This works in two ways: in some cases, it is possible that the editors are working on a certain subject and they ask to see what the Web can tell them about it. In other occasions it's what's trending online

³⁷ Interview with Matthew Eltringham, editor of the BBC's College of Journalism website and founder of the BBC's UGC hub

that may serve as a hint for a possible story.

The role, anyway, is *“still quite experimental and has to integrate into the newsroom processes and mind-set”*.³⁸

Other on-going changes are in the army of tools that the social media Hub uses to perform its mission. During the Riots, Twitter was the main reference point, but a continuous evolution in terms of understanding what the social media are and how to use them has followed. Photo sharing social networks like Instagram have proved particularly useful in the case of natural disasters and, even more recently, in the April 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings,³⁹ the BBC used for the first time a service called Geofeedia,⁴⁰ that makes it possible to see where people are uploading content from Twitter, and other social networks. In this way, it is easier to identify spikes of activity in certain zones and understand at a glance how a certain event is spreading.

When it comes to produce visualization, info-graphics and maps that use data to tell a story in a straightforward and easy way, the BBC has its own dedicated team, the “Specials Team”, composed of some 20 journalists, designers and developers.⁴¹

In the case of the Riots, the team produced some interactive content, such as a Map and Timeline of the incidents,⁴² which helped to locate significant events both geographically and chronologically.

And starting two years ago, another “special” team was also founded: the Future Media team,⁴³ whose mission is to offer to the audience the best possible user experience on all devices on which the BBC’s digital content is available, from desktops to mobiles and from tablets to TV.

The team’s work, although wider in scope, is relevant to content curation as it is focuses also on providing different experiences on different devices. As Phil Fearnley, General Manager of BBC Future Media, commented, at a

38 Ibidem

39 During the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, two pressure cooker bombs exploded, killing 3 people and injuring 264 others

40 <http://corp.geofeedia.com/>

41 Data Journalism at the BBC - http://datajournalismhandbook.org/1.0/en/in_the_newsroom_1.html

42 England riots: Maps and timeline <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10321233>

43 Future Media - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/careers/what-we-do/future-media>

showcase event hosted at MediaCity on the 28th of February 2013,

*"We draw a distinction between mobile and online because there's a different user experience. It's not just about screen size, it's a different consumption".*⁴⁴

One project discussed during the evening demonstrated the use of multiple devices when watching TV programmes – a TV for the video content, a mobile phone for the audio tracks and an iPad for the subtitles.⁴⁵ The idea is to offer the user a more personalized research experience, splitting up the content. It is easy to see how such an approach could evolve and provide a ground-breaking curation experience in the future, and particularly in the case of breaking news events. This concept is very similar to that of "adaptive journalism", cherished by some editors at the Washington Post. The American newspaper is also carrying out some interesting experiments on this topic, which we will touch upon in the next chapter.

3. The emergence of an alternative layer?

It may be true that, at present and with reference to the BBC's point of view, as scholar Jackie Harrison suggests, *"UGC is 'where the audience does it for the BBC' and citizen journalism is defined as 'where the audience does it for themselves'"*.⁴⁶

But what happens when the so-called "citizen journalists" – often activists or tech savvy people – begin not only to produce their own content, but also to curate the UGC produced by others? Just a few years ago, the main authoritative online voices outside the mainstream media were those of respected bloggers, whose popularity was based mainly on their expressing their opinions with text posts on their websites or revealing hidden aspects of their country's situation.

The emergence of platforms like Storify make the "curation" of visual (and textual) content so much easier, and affordable to all those willing to devote time and effort to creating their own narration of a certain event. This might change the rules, with the emergence of a new class of citizen journalist, whom we may call "independent storytellers".

44 BBC showcase Future Media - <http://diginmmu.com/business/bbc-showcase-future-media-633>

45 BBC Future Media Showcase - <http://www.fabric.co.uk/blog/bbc-future-media-showcase/>

46 Jackie Harrison (2010): User-generated content and gatekeeping at the BBC hub, *Journalism Studies*, 11:2, 243-256 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616700903290593>

We started to observe this during the Riots and in the case of Occupy Wall Street. Although the phenomenon is still in its early stages, would-be narrators must, in order to be credible, overcome the main obstacle of verification of UGC, something which, as we have seen, even to the big news organizations, requires significant staff and resources to manage. Not only activists but also other categories of people who are active in the dissemination of news might take advantage of the new curation possibilities: for instance, foreign media outlets, that are unable to dispatch correspondents abroad due to cuts in costs or because it is impossible to enter certain regions. Alternatively, freelancers or would-be journalists may use the opportunity offered by Storify and other curation tools to showcase and demonstrate their skills to established media organizations, gaining in popularity and visibility – as Doernberg did in the case of the Zuccotti Park police raid. Of course, all of these new scenarios come with one or more caveat, some of which we will now examine further.

3.1 Alternative narrations of the Riots – The foreign media

Outside the mainstream outlets such as the Guardian and BBC, content curation tools like Storify provided the medium for alternative narrations, which were not meant to replace, but rather to integrate more material into their coverage.

Some of these 'storifies' were curated by foreign news media: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (who also had two reporters on the ground), through its Community Team, Al Jazeera, ABC News Australia, the New Zealand Herald and Globe and the Mail all produced their own collections of user-generated content, adding an "editorial" layer not only through the choice of video and images, but also by inserting some explanatory notes between blocks of content.

The CBC story took full advantage of the embedding feature provided by Storify, appearing not only on the main cbc.ca but also on several UK- and US- based blogs, for a global audience of more than 122,000 views.

ScribbleLive! was another platform widely used by news organizations,⁴⁷ both British and foreign. Reuters, Sky News and, again, the Canadian

⁴⁷ "ScribbleLive clients cover the London riots in real time" - <http://www.scribblelive.com/best-practices-2/scribblelive-clients-cover-the-london-riots-in-real-time/>

Broadcasting Corporation,⁴⁸ used it to enrich their live blogs of what was going on.

Perhaps the most interesting use of the service, however, was that of Canada's Toronto Star, whose editors "tackled the logistical challenge of being on another continent by scouring Twitter and newswires like Reuters and AP for photos and updates from reporters".⁴⁹ They also pulled in Twitter updates from Gareth Davies, a young community newspaper reporter who was covering the riots from the London Borough of Croydon for the Croydon Advertiser.

Of course, there are potential issues with this kind of long-distance coverage:

"rather than seeing it as a kind of advantage to be exploited – says the Guardian's Paul Lewis⁵⁰ -- we see it as replacing core aspects of journalism, What's the point of sending people to the Middle East, if we have Andy Carvin in Washington to cover it? This could be a problematic attitude".

Of course, for smaller news organizations with limited resources, that could be the only option available and provide an opportunity for them to compete with the biggest players that is otherwise unthinkable.

However, cost-effective as it maybe, this approach is very limited. Crowd-sourcing reporting, using citizens with smartphones as eyewitnesses, may provide newsrooms with priceless multimedia content otherwise not available; but, in my opinion, this can only be used to complement, not to substitute, the work on the ground. This is because there is a chance of being misled by people feeding the journalists with fake or biased material, and also because only by being close to the action can a reporter really "feel" what's going on and integrate this perception into his reporting. This is especially true for certain kinds of journalism, where the human factor, the capability of being empathic to the object of reporting - not to be confused with partiality - is most important (for instance war journalism, or when covering natural disasters or social uprisings). In this and similar cases, interesting or hidden stories can be collected more easily through one-to-one interactions, such as interviews.

48 http://live.cbc.ca/Event/UK_riots_live_blog?Page=0

49 "ScribbleLive clients cover the London riots in real time"

50 Personal communication – February 2013

Far from being a uni-directional experience, with one person asking questions and the other simply answering, interviews are often an exchange of information between two sides, with the journalist shaping the conversation according to the signals – not only verbal ones, but also gestures and other kind of body language – sent by the interviewed. That is why almost always, in my opinion, the best interviews are those done in person, followed by phone/Skype and email ones. And this also why I think it will always be necessary to send someone on the ground, to actually get in touch with the people and the issues involved. Another reason is that relying too much on social media also involves the risk of getting a distorted picture of a complex situation. Just think of what's happening in Egypt. If we were to judge only from the tweets and Facebook posts of the so-called Arab Spring, we would imagine that the country would now be headed towards a Western-style democracy and, in fact, this was the outcome imagined by many commentators. An experienced foreign correspondent would have known better. He would have known that in the countryside, where the Muslim Brotherhood is stronger, few people have Internet access and that's why their voice was not heard online.

What will likely happen is that field reporters will become rarer, more trained and focused. As their presence will no longer be fundamental to document the general lines of an event thanks to the amount of UGC sent to the newrooms, only those capable of adding real value will survive.

It is possible that through technology, we will come back to the romantic era of journalism, where foreign correspondents were stars and their style was much closer to narrative writing than to journalistic prose. Budgets will still be tight, probably. So, how can this kind of effort be financed? One solution could be that journalists sell themselves. Fear not, I'm about talking about corruption or human slavery. Rather something similar to the business model of the website *Emphas.is*⁵¹, an initiative started by some tech savvy photojournalists and based on crowd-funding. Through this platform, projects of investigative, in-depth visual journalism are sponsored by “backers” that, similarly to what happens in sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, are entitled to receive some kind of compensation, if the individual project is successfully funded and completed.

But in this case the reward consists not only in a material artefact, like a photo-book. Backers also get access to the “making of a zone” on the website; they can follow the journalist's work behind the scenes as it

⁵¹ <http://www.emphas.is>

develops in real-time, receiving continuous updates from the photographer on the ground. This makes them feel more involved and allows them to share the emotions felt by the professional while he is engaged in what is usually a long and complex investigation. Emphas.is is a platform mainly for freelancers that need to promote and fund their work, but the underlying philosophy may perhaps prove interesting also for small and mid-sized organisations, that struggle to find the resources to afford correspondents on the ground. In a world where everybody is a journalist, or aspires to be, media organisations must rely on what really distinguishes them: there's much more to the job than just being able to record and document an event via a smartphone. The very process of reporting is fascinating and perhaps it's also something that could be sold, without being afraid of losing what is sacred in the profession.

3.2 Where are the Carvins?

It is fair to say that in the case of the London Riots, no "Andy Carvin" emerged in the form of a single storyteller covering the scene from afar as a distant witness and informing the world via Twitter what was happening. Paul Lewis, and other journalists, like the New York Times correspondent Ravi Somaiya, naturally used Twitter in a savvy way to engage and connect with their audience, but with one fundamental difference from Carvin's case: they were on the ground, not tweeting from an office in a foreign country. The work of CNN anchorman, Piers Morgan, whose Twitter posts were among the most often re-tweeted during the riots, cannot be compared in any way to that of Carvin, as Morgan was mainly expressing his own personal views.

What comes closest, perhaps, to the "distant witness" approach is the Twitter coverage of the looting by Egyptian bloggers, but theirs was more a kind of comparison to what was happening in London than real-time storytelling of the scene on the ground, Andy Carvin-style. The blogger and activist, Mosa'ab Elshamy, for instance, wrote

"the BBC is making it sound like young people have a single aim & that's to loot and vandalise. Nothing or very little on why they are doing so".

The user Big Pharaoh likened the London clean-up to that of Tahrir Square after the revolution, tweeting:

"#Tahrir spirit in #London. Brits in #cleanlondon, marching with brushes exactly like what we did. <http://yfrog.com/kj5oewj>".

Another Egyptian blogger, Zeinobia, tweeted:

"Buildings are on fire, shops are being looted while many "activists" on my timeline are cheering on, calling it a revolution. #LondonRiots".

It is impossible here to speak of "curation" (or storytelling) in the strict sense, but these activists' actions provide an interesting example of how, by using social media as a platform to address their followers, people from different cultures with somewhat similar experiences may generate alternative visions of events that we would otherwise view only through the eyes of the Western media.

CHAPTER III – OCCUPY WALL STREET, ACTIVISM AND INDEPENDENT STORY TELLERS

Occupy Wall Street and the Washington Post online coverage

The year 2011 could successfully be dubbed the year of social movements or, as in the person of the year's cover of Time magazine, the year of the protester. After the Arab Spring and the London Riots, in September 2011 a wave of discontent became apparent also in the United States. September 17, 2011 is usually considered the birth date of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a movement of citizens angry at the growing social inequality characterizing American society⁵². It coincided with the day on which Zuccotti Park, a square located in the heart of New York's financial district, was occupied by protesters. They remained camped there until November 15, before being forced to leave by a controversial police raid authorized by the city's major, Michael Bloomberg.

The eviction represented a turning point for the movement that in the preceding two months, had managed to gain traction, thanks in part to the popular slogan "We are the 99%" (of struggling-to-pay-the-bills citizens, as opposed to the 1% of super-rich ones). Zuccotti Park represented a symbolic standpoint and much more than just a physical place, so after it was cleared, the protest, after an initial reaction, began gradually to fade out of the mainstream debate. The raid was controversial not only for legal reasons (a court later granted the right to re-enter the square, but without camping equipment), but also for the way in which it was conducted.

While the OWS members clashed with the police, in an unprecedented violation of journalistic prerogative, the press was forbidden to cover the

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Although, according to some observers, the movement's roots could be dated even earlier, to the August of the same year .

event. Reporters were kept at a distance, on the grounds of their own safety (which, however, fails to explain why the CBS and NBC helicopters that tried to film the scene from above were also grounded). Credentialed reporters, both freelance and hired, were arrested or roughed up, even if they showed their press accreditation.

In this situation, the role of the social media became even more crucial than usual, as user-generated content helped to bypass the imposed media blackout.

This is why I chose to focus on this episode, in an attempt to highlight the work of the newsroom curators and independent storytellers.

I will begin by analysing how the Washington Post made use of this kind of material (together with the official sources) to shape its coverage, and how freelance journalists and other independent storytellers used content curation tools to reconstruct the event.

The Washington Post coverage

Like most other news outlets, the Post was placed in a difficult situation by the sudden blitz of the police in Zuccotti Park; the newspaper could not provide staff round-the-clock to cover the Park, having its own Occupy protests to cover in Washington, but it did want nonetheless to be able to cover the conversation on Occupy, much of which was centred in downtown New York. In this context, social media proved themselves to be of outstanding importance.

"The year of the protests, from Occupy to Egypt – recalls Melissa Bell, director of blog engagement at the Washington Post – gave us a huge chance to experiment with using social media as a news gathering tool. The various Twitter feeds, UStream videos and Facebook accounts by the protesters, police and those living in the area gave us an insight into the events without having to be present 100% of the time. When the eviction happened, few credentialed journalists were on the scene, but we were able to report what we could from the social media."⁵³

Of course, all this comes with a need for transparency towards the reader and certain safeguards to ensure that all of the material gathered is trustworthy and verified.

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Email interview, May 2013

"There has to be an acknowledgement of the filter of the social media in each story. It's very important – adds Bell – to make sure you're letting your readers know where you're getting the information from. It needs to be clear that you're quoting from social media, and never that you witnessed the events in person."

Trust and verification

In the Post's newsroom, a team of eight is devoted to social media news gathering, but the rest of the staff has also been taught how to interact online. Reporters now include social media-sourced material as part of their regular news gathering process. They try to rely on accounts that have been verified through old-fashioned reporting techniques: knowing the source behind the account, or having multiple sources that verify that account.

"But – Bell comments – there are huge pitfalls associated with online coverage. We unmasked one sock puppet, the so-called Gay Girl of Damascus, who managed⁵⁴ to convince the major media organizations, the Post included, that she was a Syrian activist – when all along she was an American man. We continue to work on verification procedures."

The Post has no hard-and-fast policies, but more a sense of considering the use of UGC like getting any other type of information from a source, then being as transparent as possible about who provided the content and how they say they got it.

This is also true, of course, in the case of material provided by activists who are seeking to push their own agenda: *"those videos and photos – explains Bell – should be considered akin to press releases from a source, and therefore approached with a critical eye. Obviously, the protesters have a point of view they want to push on their streams. Likewise, the police and government want to make a, sometimes opposing, point. We need to be aware of any potential biases and make sure our readers know about these too"*.

Liveblogging and curation

The Washington Post, like other newspapers, live blogged what was happening in Zuccotti Park, relying heavily, and transparently, on user-generated content. In combination with some texts that contextualized the

⁵⁴ 'A Gay Girl in Damascus comes clean' - http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-06-12/lifestyle/35234652_1_gay-girl-foreign-media-blog

events, Bell (who at the time was in charge of the liveblogging) embedded video streaming provided by the protesters on the Global Revolution channel, and quoted tweets by professional and freelance journalists and articles written by the Post's staff and information taken from other media outlets' coverage.

Here's an example: *"The New York Times reported that officers asked people to keep moving away from the park, and that a "maintenance issue", kept the park from being reopened. On Democracy Now, the livestream reporter said that lawyers were at the park to negotiate its reopening. 'There is a legal world versus the real world,' the crowd chanted."*⁵⁵

The team in charge of the Washington Post Twitter account also created a public Twitter list (which is no longer available) of reporters, protesters and others at the site. Amateur footage taken from video sharing sites like Vimeo or YouTube was also used, along with some disclaimers aimed at explaining the different possible interpretations of a certain scene, as in the following blog entry:

"A video shows the kitchen area of the park flooded with white smoke, but Josh Harkinson, a reporter for Mother Jones, said on Twitter that it was actually pepper spray, not tear gas. Quinn Norton, another journalist near the scene, said the smoke came from a fire extinguisher".

The Post also used the work of "independent storytellers" to enrich its online coverage. In particular, they embedded in one of their online articles⁵⁶ a "storify" called "Press suppression at Occupy Wall Street"⁵⁷ created by an undergraduate student named Ben Doernberg, detailing the arrest by the New York Police Department of many journalists who were attempting to cover what was happening. The Storify was widely quoted and shared online, and has been seen 51,000 times in total, with almost 10,000 views on the Washington Post website.

Moreover, in the two years since Zuccotti Park, the Post has continued to experiment with managing user-generated content, proposing new visual layouts that attempt to be simultaneously informative and engaging. "We've

⁵⁵ "Zuccotti Park evicted: Protesters lose right to stay in park with tents" - http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/occupy-wall-street-evicted-protesters-arrested-camp-torn-down-live-video/2011/11/15/gIQAzD3DON_blog.html

⁵⁶ "Zuccotti Park's OWS was cleared during a media black-out" - http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/zuccotti-parks-ows-cleared-out-while-the-media-is-blacked-out/2011/11/15/gIQAZGa2ON_blog.html

⁵⁷ <http://storify.com/bendoernberg/press-suppression-at-occupy-wall-street-raid>

built an experience we call 'The Grid' – says Bell – that allows editors to curate Instagram photos, Twitter feeds and YouTube videos alongside our content."

Bell agrees with the idea that the abundance of social media content opens up the way for independent storytellers providing content to news organization, *"but my favourite example – she says – does not hail from Occupy, but from the night Osama bin Laden was killed. An IT consultant named Sohaib Athar, disturbed by the noise overhead, went on Twitter and became the reporter on the scene".*⁵⁸

Storyfing the news: the Zuccotti Park police raid and the role of freelance curators

One can hardly overestimate the role played by the social media in spreading the Occupy Wall Street protest and helping it to reach a large audience.

Scholars Neal Caren and Sarah Gaby from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, tracked the role of social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, in linking supporters and distributing information. By the end of October 2011, they found that more than 400 US Occupation-related Facebook pages had been established, with at least one page for each of the 50 states.⁵⁹

Protesters also uploaded photos and videos to YouTube and image-sharing sites like Bambuser and Yfrog, and broadcast their gatherings live using the Livestream service, mainly through a channel called Global Revolution.

The social network Tumblr played a key role, with the "We are the 99% page" becoming a reference point not only for activists, but also for anyone interested in learning more about the reasons and motivation for the movement, journalists included. Twitter was also used massively, especially during on-going and significant events, as on October 1st 2011, when over 700 individuals were arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge, or on October 15th, when hundreds of Occupy-related protests were held around the world. The highest tally of 55,663 Tweets was reached

⁵⁸ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/sohaib-athar-tweeted-the-attack-on-osama-bin-laden-without-knowing-it/2011/05/02/AF4c9xXF_blog.html

⁵⁹ Occupy Online: Facebook and the Spread of Occupy Wall Street - http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1943168

on November 15th 2011, when the New York Police Department removed all activists and protesters from Zuccotti Park and the surrounding streets.⁶⁰

This huge amount of user-generated content formed the ideal basis for journalists and independent storytellers to “curate” stories focused on various aspects of the protest.

Curation may take many different forms. During the eviction, Reddit, a social news and entertainment website where registered users submit content in the form of either a link or a text post – and one of the most vibrant online communities – became a hub for conversation, with some users actually performing as curators of online content, to give other members an overview of what was happening. Users nicknamed AbsolutelyIDo and MsKog, in particular, “liveblogged” what was happening, posting links to tweets, mainstream and alternative media articles, Bambuser livestreams, videos and pictures uploaded to YouTube and other websites.

One of the most successful curation experiments, in terms of audience reaction (with 48,915 views at the time of writing), was that of the journalist and public media Campaign Director Josh Stearns, who used Storify to track, confirm and verify reports of journalists who had been arrested while covering the movement.⁶¹ Stearn’s curation was also selected in 2012 by Storify users as “Story of the Year”.⁶²

Other influential narrations on this platform were the already quoted Storify on press suppression during the Zuccotti Park raid created by the undergraduate student Ben Doernberg and a story by Columbia University journalism student XinHui Lim called “Police Move to Clear Occupy Wall Street”.⁶³ The latter received fewer visits than the former, but embedded the livestream of the eviction provided by the protesters and eyewitness reports on Twitter by the curator’s Columbia classmates who were at the scene.

Successful and interesting as these attempts may be, if considered through the lens of traditional journalistic aspiration to achieve

⁶⁰ Clark, Eric - Social Movement & Social Media: A qualitative study of Occupy Wall Street - <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:539573>

⁶¹ Tracking Journalist Arrests at Occupy Protests Around the Country - <http://storify.com/jcstearns/tracking-journalist-arrests-during-the-occupy-prot>

⁶² Storify Story Of The Year: A detailed inventory of reporter arrests at Occupy protests - <http://storify.com/storify/storify-story-of-the-year-a-detailed-inventory-of>

⁶³ <http://storify.com/elevour/occupy-wall-street-raided-by-cops>

objectivity, they also pose some problems related to the identity and point of view of the storyifiers. A chronological collection of UGC might seem at first almost “objective” by nature, but the act of curation itself implies a choice: the author selects and highlights what he thinks it is important, on the basis of his own guidelines. The biographies on Storify’s profiles often provide little or no information about who is curating a story and what his ideas could be.

For instance, during the protests Doernberg was not only an external observer, but also directly involved in some events, as he himself reported in a comment on an article on the website GeekWire dated 16th October 2011 (it is impossible to determine the exact date of the comment, but it seems to have been written soon after, being the first of 17 comments).

*“I think the dedication of the movement to non-violence – writes Doernberg – has also been severely underrated. I've only been protesting for two days, and already I've *personally* been driven at with police scooters, ridden at by mounted police, and "moved along" gently or not so gently, by at least 10 other officers. I've seen other protestors being punched in the face, shoved with batons, and arrested with extremely unnecessary force.”⁶⁴*

Knowing this does not, in this case, change the value of his curation effort, but the problem remains, at least in the abstract: a platform like Storify levels the playing field, providing the ground on which different actors can build up their narratives using user-generated (and official or mainstream media) contents as the raw material. Whereas professional journalists usually disclose their affiliations, the same is not true for other subjects and this should be taken into consideration when assessing the value of a curated story.

⁶⁴ On the Scene: A Geek’s Guide to the Wall Street Occupation - <http://www.geekwire.com/2011/occupy-wall-street-geeks-guide/>

CHAPTER IV – TRENDS, SCENARIOS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Transparency and objectivity in social media

To some, the criticism of the possible lack of equidistance of “curators” made at the end of the previous chapter, might remind us of the early push-back offered by established journalists against bloggers, accused of being biased and not following the rules of “objectivity”. Supporters of blogging often retorted that “objectivity”, the idea that news organisations and media professionals are able to put aside their personal belief to provide a balanced coverage of an event, has always been a myth, or at best, something to aspire to. This is probably true, at least to some extent, but there was little chance, in the past, that readers or viewers could do anything about it, or actually be even aware of the problem.

Now, in the Age of Links, as David Weinberg, senior researcher at Harvard's Berkman Center, calls it⁶⁵, and of social media, the audience has a much deeper perception of the process through which news are shaped, and wants to take part in it, discussing, criticising and contributing to it. In this context transparency by journalists is much appreciated and for some scholars, like the Weinberger, it has become “the new objectivity”. Other experts, like Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at the University of New York, recognize the importance of traditional virtues such as accuracy, verification, fairness and intellectual honesty in reporting, but invite media professionals to avoid the trap of “false balance”: “truth telling – Rosen writes - is more important than a ritualized demonstration of viewlessness.”⁶⁶

So, where does this lead us? How can journalists use social media effectively and take part in a conversation with their audience, avoiding the two symmetric risks of either appearing too biased or looking hypocritical (that is, pretending to have no opinion at all)? There is no easy answer. Being open and as transparent as possible is one thing, to take sides is another.

⁶⁵ “Transparency is the new objectivity” - <http://www.hyperorg.com/blogger/2009/07/19/transparency-is-the-new-objectivity/>

⁶⁶ Mounting costs for the default model of trust production in American newsrooms - <http://pressthink.org/2013/01/mounting-costs-for-the-default-model-of-trust-production-in-american-newsrooms/>

The best option, in my opinion, when posting on social media, is to let facts speak for themselves, to show, not to tell; and always keep in mind firstly, that your message could easily be amplified or distorted, and secondly, that readers are often more keen on spotting mistakes and fallacies than on praising a good job. In short, it's always better to avoid the "matador syndrome", that is, letting yourself be carried away by the "likes and retweets" of the crowd, and keep your mind on the fact that social media are just another public channel of communication. As Margaret Sullivan, Public Editor of the New York Times has said, they are a "double-edged sword"⁶⁷: they can allow journalists to communicate in ways previously unthinkable, but also to perpetuate inaccuracies (although they often, as the Guardian's Reading the Riots project has shown, self correct themselves).

The level of engagement and "freedom of speech" of media professionals on Twitter and Facebook might – as Sullivan notes – be somehow directly related to the kind of role they perform in the news circuit: while op-ed columnists or bloggers are expected to have and express strong opinions, for reporters "it makes sense to keep their politics under wraps" in order to keep their audience from "immediately pre-judging and distrusting them."⁶⁸ I agree with her views but I would also stress the fact that, even if the stream-like nature of social media might make us believe otherwise, comments expressed on Twitter or Facebook can be often retrieved after a lot of time, using the right tools. This is one more reason to be particularly careful, in order not to be labelled for life.

2. Outsourcing the handling of UGC

Dealing with the massive amounts of user-generated content is becoming a challenge as well as an opportunity for most news organisations. While UGC sometimes make it possible to document what is happening in places that otherwise would be out of reach for journalists (such as Syria), sifting through social networks in order to gather valuable information is a time consuming task and requires skills that are not always to be found in newsrooms. That is why some big players have begun to rely on third party services to help them to gather and verify the content. In this final chapter, we will mention some of the most remarkable experiences in this field.

⁶⁷ NYT Public Editor Sees Social Media as 'Double-Edged Sword' That Is Changing Objective Journalism - <http://shorensteincenter.org/2013/02/speaker-series-with-margaret-sullivan/>

⁶⁸ Ibidem

It may be true that, as some experts say, nowadays, "it's better to get it right, than get it first", but speed is still important, especially online: being the first to break a news story still guarantees traffic to news website, and advertising clicks. The downside is, needless to say, that the quicker the publication, the greater the risk of hoaxes and false positives increases, and few news outlets can afford to build a permanent structure to deal with this problem, as the BBC has done with its UGC Hub.

The flawed coverage by some news organizations – even large ones like CNN – of the Boston Marathon Bombings⁶⁹ provides a recent example of the challenges related to verifying information in the era of social media.⁷⁰ One answer to this problem could be relying on the services of an external agency whose core mission is newsgathering and the verification of user-generated content. At least one such agency exists that we mentioned briefly in the first chapter: Storyful. Based in Dublin, but with offices also in New York and Hong Kong, it employs roughly 30 people, both journalists and developers, relying on a combination of algorithms and human skills to spot on social networks like Twitter or YouTube early warning signs of breaking news.

The machine side of this method, known also as the "human algorithm", allows journalists quickly to identify the most authoritative and respected people within a certain network (for instance, among Syrian activists on Twitter), the so-called influencers. The human side consists mainly of verifying the information found online through a mixture of technical skills and old fashioned work. The team at Storyful might simply telephone a promising source to assess his identity and motivation, or analyse a video or image in order to establish its authenticity, using a number of tools including Google Earth to verify the exact location of the events, reading an image's Exif data, and a number of other expedients. The company explained its modus operandi in an ebook, *Social Newsgathering*⁷¹, that offers advice on how to verify online content, how to build and manage Twitter lists, how to use TweetDeck effectively, how to spot fake photographs, and how to geo-locate videos on maps.

⁶⁹ On this point see for instance: "On Boston bombing, media are wrong – again" - Usa Today - <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/columnist/rieder/2013/04/18/media-boston-fiasco/2093493/>

⁷⁰ CNN reported that an arrest had been made in the Boston bombing case, and that a "dark-skinned male" seen walking away from the scene was the suspect. Fox News and other outlets confirmed. Actually, no arrest had been made. See also: "The F.B.I. Criticizes the News Media After Several Mistaken Reports of an Arrest" - <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/18/business/media/fbi-criticizes-false-reports-of-a-bombing-arrest.html>

⁷¹ The book can be downloaded from: <http://blog.storyful.com/ebook/>

The business model of the company is based on subscriptions: the prices start at 500 euros per month⁷² for the basic package and then scale up according to the kind of services requested by the customer. For instance, Storyful worked with ABC News to report the death of Osama bin Laden, discovering content and mapping the key locations and images. What the verification agency does is to try to enhance the work of the news organizations, without overlapping it.

*"When we work with clients like The New York Times – explains founder Mark Little – for example, our job is not to take the place of its reporters but to help turn user-generated content into something they can safely use. This may involve adding context to videos for The Lede blog, building a Twitter list for a beat reporter or helping the picture desk to find a corroborating source."*⁷³

A key part of Storyful's job is putting newsrooms in touch with citizen journalists who want to sell the multimedia they created, or ask for some kind of attribution. The company itself does not buy any videos or pay activists; it simply acts as an intermediary, putting in touch the media organisation with the uploader without receiving an extra fee.⁷⁴

Other platforms dealing with UGC act more as marketplaces, finding newsworthy pictures and clips on the social media, and then selling them to the mainstream media. They usually reward the author and receive a fee for the transaction. One of the latest and more promising of these is called CrowdMedia, that hopes to "completely crush today's model of journalism".⁷⁵ How does it seek to do that? By automatizing to the widest extent possible the process of gathering pictures from the social media (mainly Twitter and Instagram) and delivering them to the publishers.

CrowdMedia software sifts through the millions of photos shared every day on Twitter and Instagram, searching for those with the potential to be newsworthy (based on geolocation, number of retweets, etc.); then it automatically tweets the creators, asking if they wish to sell the picture. If the photographer agrees, it takes only a few clicks for CrowdMedia to insert

⁷² Pbs.org: Storyful Helps News Organizations Monitor Social Media - <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2013/02/storyful-helps-news-organizations-monitor-social-media036>

⁷³ Nieman Report: Finding the Wisdom in the Crowd - <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102766/Finding-the-Wisdom-in-the-Crowd.aspx>

⁷⁴ "YouTube will become the destination;" Q&A with Storyful's Mark Little on crowdsourcing, curation, and the future of video journalism - <http://www.editorsweblog.org/2012/07/25/youtube-will-become-the-destination-qa-with-storyful-s-mark-little-on-crowdsourcing-curat>

⁷⁵ VentureBeat.com: CrowdMedia sells everyone's newsworthy Twitter pics — and could just change journalism forever - <http://venturebeat.com/2013/07/12/crowdmedia-sells-everyones-newsworthy-twitter-pics-and-could-just-change-journalism-forever/>

the image into its archive, where publishers can find and buy it. The company does not offer exclusivity: the same image can be purchased (at a low price) by many different media: the gain is split 50/50 between the author and CrowdMedia. One issue that is not addressed (at present) is that of verification, although Martin Roldan, the CEO, told me in an email interview that the development of an algorithm for spotting fake images is underway.⁷⁶

“We are developing our authenticity algorithm right now. It isn't yet visible on the platform. I can't go into details for Intellectual Property reasons, but I can tell you the good thing about working with UGC is that the multiplication of content by many different people who have nothing in common is in itself a way to verify that an event is authentic (instead of one person potentially doing a setup to sell photos). Also, we are currently adding steps to the verification process to rank the authenticity of the copyright, ways to make sure the person uploading the image is the rightful owner. This works in the same way as fraud detection for online payments”.⁷⁷

Of course, CrowdMedia, though innovative in its methods, is not the only company that is in the business of selling UGC to publishers, and not even the first. Demotix, launched in 2009, splits between the website and the author of the content – on a 50/50 basis – the revenues obtained from selling UGC to established media moguls. Demotix also rewards contributors with a percentage of the revenue gained by advertising. A weak point in this model is that the authors may sometimes find it difficult to monitor how much and where their content has been distributed – and therefore to check if they have been fairly paid.

More recently, smartphone applications such as Newsflare and Scoopshot have sought to take advantage of the closed ecosystem provided by Apple's mobile Operating System (later launching applications also for the Android O.S. and – as for what regards Scoopshot – the Windows Mobile platform), to streamline the process of production, distribution and selling of the content, avoiding the problems related to copyright issues, stolen content, and the lack of transparency in contributors' rewards. Scoopshot, a Finnish startup, claims to “have developed a patent-pending technology that automatically analyzes the authenticity of user-generated content (UGC). From the time a photo or video is captured with the app, we know the who, when, where of its existence. This helps media companies focus upon content itself, not spending effort in authentication”.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Personal communication, July 2013.

⁷⁷ Ibidem

⁷⁸ From: “About Scoopshot” - [bhttps://www.scoopshot.com/v2/about/about-scoopshot](https://www.scoopshot.com/v2/about/about-scoopshot)

As this “externalized” model gains traction, the question is what kind of business model is best fitted for protecting the interests of both the users and the news organizations? Some well-known experiments in the crowdsourcing of UGC, perhaps the most famous being CNN's iReport, contemplate no monetary exchange: users contribute voluntarily, because they believe in a certain humanitarian, social or political cause or because they long for the recognition that comes with having their name credited as the author of the footage/picture. The argument often heard in this case is that paying contributors would spoil their motivation. A more cynical interpretation of this attitude is that some media outlets, struggling with tight budgets, simply prefer to save money and use citizen reporters instead of journalists, as the former work for free, or just for the sweetener of seeing their name on paper or on screen. On the other hand, paying small sums for a picture or piece of footage, as in the business model proposed by CrowdMedia, would not hurt the media outlets too much while helping, at the same time, people in developing countries, for whom just a few pounds' income can make a huge difference to their ability to make a decent living.

3. “Visual” content

The last three years have marked the appearance of applications and social networks based specifically on visual elements, from Instagram, launched in October 2010, to Pinterest, whose main impact is achieved through images, to the more recent Vine application that allows users to upload short, six-second videos. Other platforms, like Facebook, though not confined only to visual sharing, have become the favourite repository for millions of images – the latest figures released by the company speak of 300 million images per day, or 100 billion photos a year. Instagram users share 45 million photos per day, not to mention YouTube, the video-sharing mogul, where 100 hours of video are uploaded each minute.

As Internet penetration and connection speed increase almost everywhere in the world, and Smart TVs (i.e. televisions connected to the Web) become more common in developed countries, the space for video in general and user-generated videos in particular seems bound to grow. YouTube, Google's video channel, is at the forefront of this evolution.

For experts like Storyful's Mark Little, YouTube will ultimately become the place “where people go in the first instance to consume news in the world,

particularly video news”,⁷⁹ and professional journalists will be needed to curate and contextualize the vast amount of video produced and made available on the platform. YouTube and Storyful have already set up a partnership, with the Dublin start-up, curating a few dedicated channels, from “Citizen Tube”, that tries to highlight the best user-generated videos of the day to the “Human Rights Channel”, born in 2012 out of cooperation with the advocacy NGO Witness. In a year, the staff of the channel curated 1,892 videos from 90 countries—through 137 in-depth human rights playlists. “The HRC identified, verifies, and curates citizen video”⁸⁰ claims the channel's informative line.

As the amount of user-generated images and videos available increases, how can news organizations adapt to this change in order to display this kind of content in the most attractive way? One solution is developing ad hoc platforms, whose modular structure can be used for the “conversation” and the news around a certain topic in a stream-like fashion. The aforementioned “Grid” by the Washington Post is an example of this. Other media outlets prefer to use separate online platforms to present UGC, as CNN has been doing for some time with iReports. The Guardian began to do this more recently, with the introduction of Witness, a website/application through which readers can get “assignments” and send their own textual or visual contributions regarding a topic chose by the newsroom.

4. Beyond the language divide

At the beginning of July 2013, Twitter announced that it was testing a tool that automatically translates tweets using Bing, Microsoft’s search engine. Tweets would appear in the original language, and clicking a small button labelled “translate now” would show the translated tweet in smaller text underneath. At first, the social network began experimenting with posts in Italian, French, Spanish and Arabic.

As part of the test, translation was enabled for some of the most-followed accounts in Egypt, “so people around the world can better understand and keep up with what's happening there,”⁸¹ a spokeswoman for Twitter told the blog All Things Digital.

⁷⁹ “YouTube will become the destination;” Q&A with Storyful’s Mark Little on crowdsourcing, curation, and the future of video journalism - <http://www.editorsweblog.org/2012/07/25/youtube-will-become-the-destination-qa-with-storyful-s-mark-little-on-crowdsourcing-curat>

⁸⁰ Data taken from the home page of The Human Rights Channel on YouTube - <http://www.youtube.com/user/humanrights>

⁸¹ All Things Digital.com “As Egypt Erupts in Political Tumult, Twitter Translates High-Profile Tweeters” -

What might seem just a marginal feature may actually have serious implications for how the future of online news will develop, creating a lot of opportunities for independent storytellers and bloggers to make their voice reach a wider audience. In the future, activists and bloggers from foreign countries could bypass the filter of Western curators and tell the world live what is happening. Of course, reporters on the ground will always be needed as well as editors in the newsroom who can help to make sense of what otherwise could seem like 140 characters, not linked together by a common meaning. But the “Andy Carvins” of the future will probably operate in a different way: on the one hand, by expanding their range of available sources, thanks to the overcoming of the language barrier; and on the other by being subject to a much more intense scrutiny, as people compare their own narration with that of many more witnesses among people living in remote countries.

5. Geolocation

Another trend that is gaining traction is the use of the geo-location of users as an opportunity to find valuable content for reporting. The BBC, for instance, is testing a new service, called Geofeedia, that makes it possible to monitor social media by location. It searches across Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Flickr and Picasa and delivers results in real time, promising to uncover “the 70% of content that is missed by traditional keywords or hashtag searches”. Media companies can use Geofeedia to identify breaking stories, tap into citizen journalist-generated images, find sources, gauge on-scene sentiments, corroborate facts, investigate stories and procure hyper-local content. The tool proved itself very useful during the Boston Marathon Bombings when the media looked for all social media content that was geo-tagged close to the finish line of the race.

Another event over which the BBC and Geofeedia cooperated was Margaret Thatcher's funeral.⁸²

The route of Baroness Thatcher's funeral procession was revealed by the authorities well in advance, so that the User Generated Content Hub team,

<http://allthingsd.com/20130703/as-egypt-erupts-in-political-tumult-twitter-translates-high-profile-tweeters/>

⁸² “Margaret Thatcher's Funeral: Powerful Audience Engagement Through User-Generated Social Content” - http://corp.geofeedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/casestudy_bbthatcher.pdf

using Geofeedia's location-based monitoring platform, could set up and pre-populate social media monitoring feeds along the itinerary.

"The team then established a work flow through which they could monitor social media platforms in real-time to identify unique and interesting content, engage with specific social media posters to gain permission to republish their user-generated content and then re-post the approved content into a map view for presentation to their broader audience."⁸³

The team identified hundreds of highly contextual and relevant user-generated content posts during the procession. Of these, 70 pieces were granted permission for re-publishing and presented to the BBC's on-line audience in map view.

Aside from gathering newsworthy content or "conversations", geolocation may also be used to mobilize an "army" of citizen journalists, ready to cover an event taking place near them. This already happens using applications like Scoopshot, that make it possible to send "tasks" to users based on their location, as identified by the smartphone's Gps.

6. The social media curator as an independent professional?

The possibilities offered by the Internet for the rise of a new breed of professional social media curators makes it appropriate to focus on a story which is certainly less known to the general public than Andy Carvin's one, but that is possibly more representative of a certain pattern. Carvin, in fact, while becoming extremely popular during the Arab Spring thanks to his individual efforts and skill in using a social media platform like Twitter, was already a well-established – if peculiar – figure in the world of the mainstream media, working as senior product manager for online communities at NPR. Claudia Vago a social media curator who became relatively famous in the Italian Twitter sphere by covering the Tunisian revolution (and later other social movements) achieved popularity on the news circuit by starting completely as an outsider.

She had little journalistic experience and no idea of becoming a professional reporter. But with friends and relatives in Tunisia, she followed the country's situation out of personal interest and, when the revolution broke in December 2010, she already had a number of contacts in place. She used Twitter to keep in touch with them, later building up a larger number of

⁸³ Ibidem

trusted sources.⁸⁴ She “curated” a flux of tweets on the Tunisian revolution, re-tweeting, quoting and adding context, gaining in the process a loyal following who were interested in knowing what was happening.

Her work led her to the status of “micro-celebrity” on Twitter and she was included by the magazine Wired Italia among the 50 Italian accounts worth following on the micro-blogging website.⁸⁵ This popularity allowed her to launch the project “Towl - Tigella goes to Occupy Wall Street” (“tigella” is her Twitter handle), asking her followers and fans to fund, with a donation of £10 each, a reportage she wanted to make on Occupy Chicago.⁸⁶

The project was successful, in part thanks to some articles in the mainstream media, which described this kind of crowd-funding as “the future of journalism”. Vago produced both text and multimedia content during her stay in Chicago, telling the Occupy story from the inside and then collected all of this material on a devoted website, “#Occupy Chicago”. After these experiences, at the border between Andy Carvin-style curation and reportage on the ground, she coordinated perhaps her most ambitious project on social media curation, Yearinhashtag,⁸⁷ a multimedia review of the main events of 2011 as recounted by the social media.

The story of Vago provides an example of how a skill in curating social media content can create micro-stardom for basically anyone, and her latest project is a fascinating attempt to transform UGC into collective narrations. The key challenge is the lack of a clear business model, at least for now, that could transform social media curation into a separate profession, outside the realm of the media organizations. Vago received curation assignments from several Italian news outlets but, in most cases – except for a contribution to the Italian edition of the Huffington Post – these were unpaid,⁸⁸ so in the end she decided to focus on more traditional but also more profitable projects.

84 Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Augusto Valeriani “Racconto le rivoluzioni. Dal basso”. Il caso di @tigella tra giornalismo, attivismo, social media curation e celebrità online - <http://bib03.caspur.it/ojspadis/index.php/mediascapes/article/view/10252/10156>

85 <http://daily.wired.it/foto/2011/11/18/twitter-italia-foto-50-influencer.html>

86 The total sum collected was 2,600 euro, essential to cover travel and accommodation costs and pay for her work time

87 <http://yearinhashtag.com/>

88 Personal communication – May 2013

Conclusions

The use of content curation as a storytelling practice is still in its early stages, and the potential for using user-generated content to create narrations that are alternative or complementary to those developed by professional journalists is still to be fully explored. One thing, though, seems apparent: the Internet is still levelling the playing field, as it has been doing for some years now, increasingly blurring the distinction between the role of newsroom journalists and that of freelancers, activists, bloggers and other “independent storytellers”.

For, if in the past, the latter could only tell their stories through text or some loose videos or pictures, sophisticated content curation platforms like Storify allow them to build up complex narrations, containing both textual and visual elements (gathered from the Net), contextualizing all this material with short text snippets and in a chronological way in which these different pieces of content are arranged.

Of course, established media brands still maintain a distinctive advantage: they can deploy staff and resources to face one of the most demanding challenges facing using user-generated content: verification. One way is to operate as a single, independent storyteller, with usually little time (and perhaps, but not necessarily, few skills) or incentive to authenticate content; another is to rely on a team of 20 people, as the BBC does.

This is also slowly changing. Applications like Scoopshot and CrowdMedia embed in their content gathering process some forms of authentication and, in the case of Scoopshot, anyone, not only media professionals, can assign “tasks” to citizen contributors. This theoretically allows even those without a professional news organization to back them, to collect and use reliable user-generated content, and the skills necessarily to verify and authenticate, say, a video or an image, are also out there in the open: anyone can read Storyful's ebook and learn how to use tools like TinEye or Google's reverse image search.

The main media brands still enjoy huge advantages, perhaps the most important being their reputation. A video or an image shot by a citizen reporter and used by a newspaper like The Guardian receives a sort of “imprimatur” which adds a credibility and relevance that otherwise it could not boast. In addition, it reaches a wider audience of loyal, focused readers, avoiding the risk of remaining unnoticed among the overload of information now present on the Web.

Media outlets also offer another advantage compared to independent storytellers: their ideological agenda and editorial guidelines are usually known to the public. Readers of the Guardian know that it is a progressive, left-leaning newspaper and will not expect to find in it the same kind of content as is to be found in the right-wing Telegraph. The same is often not true for individual curators who spread their stories through Storify, YouTube Channels or other services: what is their agenda? Are they using only the user-generated content that suits their own motivation, hiding or ignoring the rest? What kind of sources do they consider trustworthy and why? These questions are not always easy to answer.

Professional journalists, on the other hand, struggle to preserve their expectations of balance and neutrality when entering the multi-faceted world of social media to gather intelligence for their reporting.

In the heat of the action, it may happen that even if just for a moment, they step down from the usual role of distant observer and enter the "conversation" with users, on the same level with them. Newsrooms have to find a balance between taking advantage of the insight and content provided by social media and the editorial guidelines. New roles may be needed, as is happening at the BBC, where the figure of the "social news editor" was introduced to act as a link between the editors and the conversations taking place on the social media.

Last but not least, there is the issue of preservation. As projects like the Guardian's Reading the Riots have shown, data shared by users online offer an immense treasure trove for in depth-analysis not only in real-time but also long after an event has taken place. However, for this to be possible, the data must be stored, preserved and made available to the newsrooms (or other subjects, activists or researchers), something which is nowadays not the norm (Twitter's cooperation with the Guardian was exceptional in this respect).

The preservation of UGC is also important in another respect: as more and more coverage of breaking news event is emerging through live blogs, and a large part of live blogs is composed by UGC, what will happen if, due to copyright reasons, users closing their account or other causes, a significant amount of this material were to become no longer available? The reader trying to read the story of how a major story has developed could find voids where once there used to be content, with meaningless text saying things like "as this video shot by the protesters shows", where in fact just a "not found" message is visible. It would also difficult to correct old mistakes and give new interpretations to events that took place in the past, if the

“evidence” (i.e. UGC) on which reports made at the time were based had disappeared.

For news organisations there are a few drawbacks of relying too much on UGC and “automated” newsgathering, and they should not be underestimated: one is to lose sight of the actual content that make up your coverage, as was mentioned in the previous paragraph. Another is to become lazy, to assume that what you find and hear on social media is the real and only “voice of the crowd”, without taking the time to analyse in more depth other possible points of view. Resources are scarce and this could be a real temptation; but not everybody is on the Internet, especially in developing countries, and even if they are, it should not be taken for granted that they are willing to testify online what's happening in their surroundings. Does it actually mean that nothing important is happening? Maybe yes, or maybe they are just too afraid, or censored. Mainstream media should not give up on checking themselves where the truth lies.

As for independent storytellers, they could play a double role in the future: supplement, replace or somehow integrate the coverage done by mainstream media (the Occupy Wall Street's Storify by Doernberg is a bright example of this) and at the same time be the first to experiment with new formats and new models of journalism. Visual projects like the “Year in Hashtag” could be the very first example of what's bound to be the new normal. Geo-location features may also prove to be a fertile ground for new ways of storytelling. However, we have to hope that these new players don't choose to fall on the wrong side of the line, taking advantage of the new possibilities offered by curation tools just to transform them into propagandistic platforms.

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