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Neil Thurman and Alfred Hermida

Gotcha: How newsroom norms are shaping participatory journalism online

For some time, commentators (see: Saffo 1992; Matheson 2004; Gillmor 2004) have welcomed the Internet as a medium that promotes active participation rather than passive consumption, and, as a result, has the potential to help create a more democratic and representative public sphere. In 2006 Time Magazine named "You" as their "person of the year" in recognition of what it called "community and collaboration on a scale never seen before . . . the many wresting power from the few". The web, they said, is the "tool that makes this possible" (Grossman 2006). Jon Pareles (2006) went as far as to say that user-generated content was the "paramount cultural buzz phrase of 2006".

Although Pareles may have been right to identify the importance of user-generated content in discourse *about* the media, we must not forget that only a small minority of citizens actually use the technologies that facilitate media participation. The 2007 Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton & Helsper 2007) showed that just 16 percent of current Internet users in the UK had tried to set up a website or blog, or posted messages on discussion boards. Because 33 percent of Britons do not classify themselves as Internet users at all, the true extent of participation is even lower -- at just over 10 percent -- with participation rates amongst retired people and women less still. That said, the number of Internet users posting photos did increase by 10 percent between 2005–2007 (Dutton & Helsper 2007), showing that, to a limited extent, the culture of participation is growing.[1]

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In the context of the hype surrounding user-generated content and the growing numbers who are creating and publishing certain types of content online, this chapter will focus on two issues. These are what opportunities exist for users to participate with mainstream online news websites in the UK and the effect such participation is having on journalistic processes. The news media are an important object of study because of the active role they play "in the creation and manipulation of reality" (Nicholson & Anderson 2005) for the 'readers' they 'serve'.

A key question we aim to address is whether the Internet in general, and participatory journalism in particular, can give greater agency to its users to influence the processes that create, reflect and transmit culture via the news media. We have chosen to focus on the mainstream media because -- despite the success of 'pure-play'[2] sites such as YouTube, Google, Wikipedia and eBay in categories like entertainment, e-mail and search, reference material, and e-commerce -- news and current affairs is still dominated by sites with print or broadcast parentage. In fact, the twelve news and current affairs websites with the most monthly users are all owned by established news providers (Thurman 2007).[3]

Although established corporations dominate the provision of online news, the alternative media has had considerable influence on practices in the mainstream, particularly in the area of reader participation. Sites such as OhMyNews.com and the "many news-related weblogs maintained by people who are not journalists" (Matheson 2004) have helped prompt editors and executives to adopt the formats for participation developed by Internet pioneers and popularised by such citizen journalism endeavours.

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Defining ‘citizen’ and ‘participatory’ journalisms

The terms ‘citizen journalism’ and ‘participatory journalism’ are often used interchangeably when referring to the “act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis 2003). But there is an important distinction to be made between genuinely independent ‘citizen journalism’ endeavours, and opportunities citizens have to participate with existing, institutional news publishers. The media used to consider any form of engagement with their public to be ‘citizen journalism’. For example organising a “citizen panel” to question a US senator was described as an “exercise in ‘citizen journalism’” by *The Boston Globe* who helped organise the event in 1995 (Rezendes & Ford 1995). The term has also been used to refer to professional journalism done with civic virtue, as in this example from Canada’s *Globe and Mail* in 1998:

> Be sensitive to and studious of the values that your community has declared to itself, and to the agenda that it has set itself. . . . Then get to work to tell stories of how life is being lived against that framework of values. . . Then you’ll be doing citizen journalism (Watson 1998).

Only after the turn of the millennium did we start to see the term ‘citizen journalism’ used in the way most people understand it today: citizens reporting without recourse to institutional journalism -- the “peer-to-peer journalism” Howard Rheingold has referred to (Hanluain 2003). The growth of blogging helped cement the association between ‘citizen journalism’ and independence from the mainstream, as in this 2004 report from CNN.com on the removal from office of Ed Schock, a two-term Republican congressman from Virginia, which referred to how “investigative reporting from a blogger showed the growing political power of citizen journalism” (Sifry 2004).

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The phrase ‘participatory journalism’ has a similarly mixed history. In the 1970s and 1980s, it referred to journalists participating in the events, and with the people they were reporting, rather than any opportunities citizens had to participate with the processes of journalism. This example, from *The Washington Post*, is typical, involving a reporter trying his hand as a stand-up comic:

> “I was kind of thinking of doing maybe a little routine myself.” I shrugged my shoulders and smiled with self-deprecating modesty. I looked over at him to check his reaction. I continued, “You know, as part of the article, I might see how a performer feels on stage. It’s kind of . . . participatory journalism” (Levine 1977).

In the 1990s, with the rise of dotcoms, ‘participatory journalism’ began to take on other meanings, used to refer to both professionally run sites that actively sought user-generated content *and* independent electronic publishing endeavours. Examples of the former included Slashdot, the “quintessential example of participatory journalism”, according to the *Orange County Weekly* in 1999, which described the editorial model it was deploying. “Rather than passively opening their mouths and letting the pros shovel in stories, the readers at Slashdot provide the news themselves by sending in tips on stories and commenting on issues in the discussion forums that follow each story” (Hilty 1999). *The Northwest Voice* was another example, described by its founder as “an example of what’s being called participatory journalism, where we look to the community to tell us what’s going on” (Kridler 2004). Blogs were considered to be participatory journalism too. So, a 2004 CNN.com article quoted Dan Gillmor: “Gillmor touts the blog movement as a primary sign of this new participatory journalism” (Boese 2004).

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Samantha Henig (2005) picked up on this definition problem back in 2005 in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

> The problem here is an unclear definition of what the *New York Time*s called "participatory journalism, or civic or citizen journalism." For starters, pick a name! As we see it, there are two separate things going on here. And, leapin' lizards, at least two separate names at our disposal. First, there's the move of established newspapers and news sites to solicit and publish material, such as photos or personal accounts, from their readers -- that we'd like to call 'participatory journalism'. Then there's the creation of blogs and unedited news sites that allow users to write and post their own content. That one we'll call "citizen journalism".

We have followed Henig's suggestion, so the subject of this chapter is 'participatory journalism', in our terms: the technical, editorial and managerial process that allow readers' contributions to be elicited, processed, and published at professional publications.

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Table 1: User-generated content initiatives at British newspaper websites, May 2008 (developed from: Thurman 2008 and Hermida & Thurman 2008)

	Format	Description
1	'**Blogs**'	Allow journalists to publish short articles -- or 'posts' -- which are presented in reverse chronological order. Most allow readers to comment on the entries. 'Blogs' are explicitly authored by one or more individuals, often associated with a set of interests or opinions, and can include links to external websites.
2	'**Comments on stories**'	Readers can submit their views on a story, usually from a form at the bottom of an article.
3	'**Have your says**'	Resembling 'Message boards' but with significant differences, these are areas where journalists post topical questions to which readers send written replies. A selection is made, edited, and published by journalists, with the submissions either fully or reactively moderated. 'Have your says' usually remain open for a limited number of days.
4	'**Message Boards**'	Areas that allow readers to engage in threaded online conversations or debates on topics often initiated by readers. They are usually reactively moderated. They are structured so that users can reply to any of the posts rather than just the original one. The discussions usually remain open for weeks or months.
5	**'Polls'**	Topical questions where readers are asked to make a multiple choice or binary response. They provide instant and quantifiable feedback to readers but offer very limited interaction, which is restricted to 'yes' or 'no' answers, or a multiple-choice response.
6	'**Q&As**'	Interviews with journalists and/or invited guests, with questions submitted by readers. By their very nature, 'Q&As' are moderated. But since they are usually webcast in audio or video, or transcribed, as live, they offer a sense of interactivity and immediacy.
7	'**Reader blogs**'	Allow readers to create a blog and have it hosted on a news organisation's website.
8	'**Your media**'	Galleries of photographs, video, and other media submitted by readers and vetted by journalists.
9	'**Your story**'	Sections where readers are asked to send in stories that matter to them. These then are selected and edited by journalists for publication on the website.

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The evolution of formats for participation

As our definition suggests, technical processes are required in order that user-generated content can be elicited, processed and published at professional news sites. This section outlines what those technical formats are and describe how they have evolved over time.

As table 1 shows, we have identified nine generic formats used to encourage contributions from the public at mainstream news websites. This taxonomy of formats was first formulated as a result of a survey in April 2005 (Thurman 2008). It was further developed after a second survey in November 2006 (Hermida & Thurman 2008). For this chapter, we have again reviewed the range of formats deployed on mainstream news sites.

The evolution of formats between April 2005–May 2008 shows that there has been relatively little innovation; and this at a time when discussion about participatory media and the related concept of 'web 2.0' has grown dramatically.[4] The only new formats that became established between the first and the second survey were 'Reader blogs', 'Your story' and 'Your media'.[5] No new formats appeared between the second and the third survey.

This lack of innovation is not entirely surprising given the slow rate of change in the news industry. The traditional model of newspaper consumption survived for more than 300 years until the advent of the World Wide Web. In another news medium -- radio -- FM technology was unchallenged for sixty-one years until the disruptive technology of digital radio was licensed for use in the US in 2002 (Thurman 2005). Partly as a result of this stasis, "newspaper routines have not changed significantly since 1990" (Sylvie & Witherspoon 2002).

With such little change, proprietors have put scant investment into research and development: an important source of innovations in other industries. The

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economic imperative, another source of innovation, has not been powerful either. Meyer (2004) likens owning a newspaper in the twentieth century to “having the power to levy a sales tax”, evidenced by his assertion that “a monopoly newspaper in a medium-size market could command a margin of 20 to 40 per cent” compared with average profit margins of “6 to 7 per cent” found in typical retail products. “Newspapers have been slow to adapt” he says “because their culture is the victim of that history of easy money”.

Diffusion of user-generated content initiatives

Although mainstream news sites have been relatively reluctant to innovate with new formats during the period studied, we have seen greater changes in how they have adopted these formats. Back in 2005, only one of the national news sites surveyed -- Guardian.co.uk -- hosted real blogs (those with comments enabled); and one national newspaper website -- Independent.co.uk -- had no formats for readers to contribute at all. Compare this with the distribution 38 months later, when the number of ‘Blogs’[6] at national newspaper websites had increased from seven to 207, and the number of publications allowing ‘Comments on stories’ had increased from one to eight.

This growth was partly a result of editors’ and executives’ fear of being marginalised by user media, as this quote from the then editor of Telegraph.co.uk illustrates: “[T]he idea of becoming a forum for debate was an area that newspapers had to get into, otherwise they’d get left behind”. But it was also due to a shift in attitudes which saw managers like Peter Bale start to appreciate “the extra flexibility that the dialogue with readers” had given to the publication he was responsible for, TimesOnline.co.uk (Hermida & Thurman 2008).

Our third survey -- conducted in May and June 2008 -- showed some interesting changes in mainstream publications’ adoption of participatory journalism. The

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picture was mixed with some expanding their provision, others remaining stable and some even scaling back.

Scaling back

Some publications that were relatively advanced back in November 2006, after a period of rapid adoption, have experienced a period of stability and have not expanded their provision of user-generated content initiatives. In other cases, such initiatives have been quietly dropped. Take, for example, theSun.co.uk which, in November 2006, hosted 12 blogs. At the end of May 2008 there was no trace of 'Arthur's Blog',[7] or 'Street Chic Blog', 'Trevor Kavanagh's Blog' (aka "the blog politicians fear") or any of the other 'blogs' hosted back in November 2006.[8] The four blogs that were recorded in our May 2008 survey were different in character, used to report on specific events -- The French Open, a *Sun* reporter's trip to the Pole,[9] and The Apprentice[10] -- rather than as an ongoing platform for debate. Here the term blog is being used as a journalistic device to help differentiate types of news content. In this regard, blogs are not, as they have the potential to be, about initiating a conversation with the audience, but rather just another way of presenting copy. The editor of theSun.co.uk in an interview (2004) expressed this view of blogs, as no different from traditional journalistic practice:

> What's the difference between a blog and a column . . . [or] a colour piece as we used to call it? We used to do '24 hours in the life of a nurse' and that's the same thing. I'm not against them I just don't understand why they are called anything different (Pete Picton quoted in: Thurman 2008).

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Continued growth

Although there has been some scaling back, there was considerable growth in the provision of user-generated content initiatives between November 2006–May 2008. For example, in our 2006 survey one British national newspaper -- *The Independent* -- again had no formats for reader participation. This period of self-imposed isolation was prompted by an earlier, negative, experience with participatory journalism. The editor of its website, Martin King (quoted in: Thurman 2008), explained the problem, describing the users on its, now defunct, message boards as:

> . . . a bunch of bigots who were shouting from one side of the room to the other and back again without even bothering to listen to what the other side of the room were saying. If someone did try to put a reasonable, balanced view it was an exception.

By the summer of 2006, Independent Digital's New Media Strategies director, Richard Withey, was acknowledging that user media was a "phenomenon you can't ignore" and saying that "the whole idea of the newspaper proprietor and his editors telling people what was going on in the world and the world neatly reading that . . . that self-perpetuating oligarchy has been broken down very rapidly" (quoted in: Hermida & Thurman 2008). By May 2008, the newspaper had launched 18 blogs, allowing comments on selected stories, running the occasional 'Q&As' and publishing some readers' photos.

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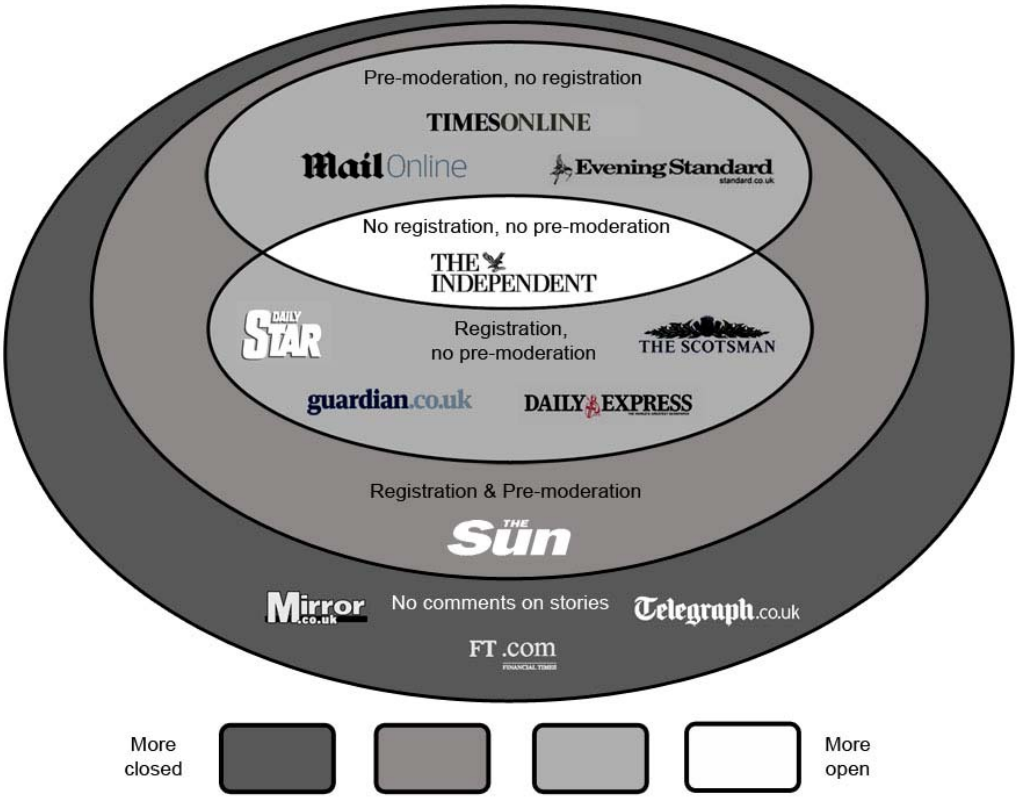
FIGURE 1

Figure 1: Moderation of 'Comments on stories' at British newspaper websites, May 2008



The terms registration and pre-moderation need to be defined Further, as shown in figure 1, they have gone from being the most closed of the news sites studied to being the most open and unique in publishing 'Comments on stories' without registration or pre-moderation. Along with *The Independent*, other publications have substantially increased their provision of user-generated content initiatives. The Express.co.uk hosts 19 blogs (up from one in the previous survey), allows 'Comments on stories' and provides 'Reader blogs' & 'Message boards'. FT.com too have launched 'Blogs' since the last survey -- twelve in their case.

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We must, however, be wary of judging this 'expansion' of participatory journalism on numbers alone. Qualitative factors are as, if not more, important. And, in that regard, the situation is more mixed. Take for example the eight blogs hosted by Dailystar.co.uk. In May 2008 three had no posts at all, one had just a single post (dating from 23 August 2007). In fact only three of the eight bloggers had posted anything in the eight months up to the date of our survey. Although Dailystar.co.uk was by far the worst example of a failure to engage with its readers, some blogs at FT.com,[11] Independent.co.uk and Mirror.co.uk were also infrequently updated.

Part of the problem is fitting blogging into the demands of a typical journalist's routine, as this comment from the then editor of FT.com, Tracy Corrigan, illustrates:

> Maybe we would do more blogs if we had lots of people who had time to write but I think it is difficult to get journalists to commit to doing very long-term blogs when they are doing full-time jobs as well. . . . you might have time to do a daily blog [on magazines] but not here (quoted in: Thurman 2008).

The deployment of 'Comments on stories' is similarly problematic when analysed qualitatively. Although the feature is built into the content management system used at Dailystar.co.uk and Express.co.uk, it is barely used. Take, for example, the 'News / Showbiz' page of Express.co.uk on a typical day.[12] Of the 34 stories that appeared on that page, readers were able to leave comments on just 13. This feature had only been used on eight stories with the average number of comments low -- at just under seven. The situation was even worse at Dailystar.co.uk, where just a single story on the 'News > Full news' page had 'comments on stories' enabled -- 'Am I Your Fantasy' by Vanessa Feltz. Part of the problem is that these Northern & Shell titles do not deliver on their promise of

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participation. On the Express.co.uk website a link encouraging ‘Comments on stories’ is displayed on *all* stories, even where the facility is disabled. This frustrates users and may help explain the low participation rate. Here we are seeing tokenism displayed in the deployment of participatory functionality. Without sufficient resources or an engaged management, user-generated content initiatives are liable to wither on the vine, becoming nothing more than a fig-leaf to cover the traditional “we write, you read” dogma of modern journalism (Deuze, quoted in Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

Institutionalising forums for debate

Part of the reason that sites such as Independent.co.uk, Mirror.co.uk, Dailystar.co.uk, FT.com, and Express.co.uk have struggled, to a greater or lesser extent, to keep the ‘Blogs’ they launched up-to-date is that the burden of maintenance falls mainly on the shoulders of individual journalists. At Independent.co.uk only their ‘Open House’ ‘Blog’ is a group endeavour. In contrast at Guardian.co.uk *only* two of their 28 blogs are individual efforts.[13] The rest are themed (‘news’, ‘arts&entertainment’, ‘travelog’, ‘games’ etc) and have several contributors making these ‘Blogs’ more dynamic than would be possible if they were the responsibility of a single writer. There are also group ‘Blogs’ at FT.com, TimesOnline.co.uk and Telegraph.co.uk. Is blogs capitalised for a reason?

Group ‘Blogs’ are a smart commercial move for another reason. They lessen the likelihood that a journalist will create a successful ‘brand’ and jump ship. This danger was raised, in a slightly different way, by the then editorial director of TimesOnline.co.uk, Peter Bale, who explained that “*Times* and *Sunday Times* correspondents were offered blogs as an attempt to ‘give them a piece of property on the Internet themselves, within our site’” (quoted in Hermida & Thurman 2008), rather than set up their own blogs outside their employer’s sphere of control.

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This movement of ‘Blogs’ from the personal to the institutional can also be seen as part of the normalisation of user-generated content, as it becomes embedded in the culture of mainstream journalism. This development allays concerns some professional journalists have had about the personal voice of ‘Blogs’, and the way they challenged the strongly-established tradition that most reporting is done anonymously, as this anecdote concerning the then editor of Telegraph.co.uk illustrates:

> Burton, also a visiting lecturer at the University of Westminster, recounted telling journalism students of his who were learning to write features that “the message is the only thing that is important. No one knows you, no one cares about you. The reader wants information”, and spoke to them of the “traditional journalist who is a fly on the wall and will be delivering information” -- very different in concept from the tone of most blogs, and a reason why he said, “blogs worry me” (Thurman 2008).

User-generated content develops

Up to 2008 there has been relatively little innovation in the formats used to encourage contributions from the public at mainstream news websites. Although these formats have been more widely adopted over this period, providing more opportunities for readers to get their voices heard, contributions are, in the main, still limited to short textual ‘comments’ on subjects or stories determined by professional editors.[14] There is little in the way of longer-form contributions or opportunities for readers to decide what they write about. Where opportunities to set the agenda do exist (for example in message boards[15]) they often seem to be part of what Bowman and Willis (2003) have described as “closed-off annex(es) where readers can talk and discuss, as long as the media companies don’t have

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to be involved". Attempts to create genuinely open spaces with adequate bridges to sites' professionally produced content are few and far between. Two formats stand out, what we call 'Your Story' and 'Reader Blogs'.[16]

Your Story

TimesOnline.co.uk's 'Your World' travel site was a typical example of the 'Your Story' format and was identified in our November 2006 survey. Readers could write about their travel experiences and geo-tag their story, a link to which would appear on a zoomable world map. By the standards of participatory journalism, contributors were given a relatively generous 500-word limit. At that time, alongside Scotsman.com's 'My Story' feature,[17] it was a rare example of participatory journalism where readers could set the agenda, choosing to write about any place on earth.

Our survey, in May 2008, revealed that both of these initiatives had been dropped. There was no sign of the Scotsman.com's 'My Story' format, despite the enthusiasm expressed in 2006 by its then General Manager, Alistair Brown, who said "we've got quite big plans in that area". Back then, Scotsman.com intended to develop original user-generated content around a theme -- Scottish heritage -- in order to help to attract and retain certain types of advertiser. Brown explained that the idea was "to create a kind of honey pot of ex-pats where we could get whisky brands and some of the airlines [to advertise]. . . we've tried to build products that will attract those audiences". However, even then doubts were creeping in, due to *The Scotsman*'s takeover by another publisher. "The jury is still out, we're still looking at it . . . because of the Johnson Press involvement now, we've got wider requirements to look at in terms of how that will shape up moving forward" (Brown, personal communication 2006).

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Over the course of the research for this chapter, TimesOnline.co.uk's 'Your World' went from being only occasionally live to being permanently offline. While it could be accessed, it was clear that the site was not being updated, with the most recent readers' contributions being four months old. *The Times* had taken a different approach to the development of their 'Your Story' format, securing a "seven-figure" sum from BMW to cover initial development, promotion and running costs. Indeed, it appears they only ever intended the feature to run for twelve months rather than make it a sustainable participatory journalism feature on their site (Simpson 2006).

Despite these failures there is some cause for optimism that such novel forms of user-generated content can succeed in the mainstream media and allow readers the opportunity to set the agenda. One such example can be found at Guardian.co.uk. Their 'Been there' site is also based around travel stories but, unlike at TimesOnline.co.uk, there are no restrictions on story length and users can edit and update other submissions. Furthermore readers can aggregate other readers' tips to create travel guides, hence performing a real editorial role for the first time. Here user-generated content goes beyond simply publishing material from users and instead emphasises the sharing and remixing of content. However we must not forget that this feature is outside what most journalists would consider to be 'news', in the softer area of lifestyle, and so is, perhaps, a more acceptable area for publications to cede control to.[18]

Reader blogs

'Reader blogs' have been progressively adopted since they were launched by theSun.co.uk in October 2006 (Schofield 2006). As of May 2008, 'Reader blogs' were also hosted at the websites of the *Daily Star*, and *The Telegraph*. As with the 'Your Story' format, they represent a relatively open form of participatory journalism. They allow readers to set the agenda by initiating conversations,

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rather than responding to institutional content, and publishing contributions -- once users are registered -- without pre-moderation. In contrast to 'Message boards', 'Reader blogs' *can* be better integrated with mainstream content. This is certainly the case at Telegraph.co.uk where their 'Reader Blogs' (called 'My Telegraph') are given the same prominence as professionally-staffed sections like 'Arts', 'Education' or 'Science', and blog posts from readers are routinely promoted, for example in a side bar of the main 'news home' page.[19]

Unlike the 'Your Story' features discussed earlier, 'Reader blogs' touch on a much wider range of topics, including: 'Current affairs', 'Economics', 'Education', 'EU', and 'Politics'.[20] Telegraph.co.uk's 'Reader blogs' have drawn criticism in some quarters, accused, for instance, by Sean Dodson (2008) in *The Guardian*, of publishing "distasteful" copy and providing a home for "unsavoury characters . . . including . . . anti-abortionists, europhobes and members of an anti-feminist 'men's movement'".[21] Dodson comments that Telegraph.co.uk is "providing the platform for others [i.e. its readers] to start the debate" whereas, he continues, "on most comment sites, bloggers sanctioned by the newspaper group typically do so". Dodson repeats the point later in his article, considering debate on Guardian.co.uk's 'Comment is Free' site as being centered around articles that are "always written by a 'commissioned' blogger'", in his words, the "gatekeepers". This "sanctioned" model is, by implication, his preferred approach and is in line with a general tendency for established news sites to want to control the conversation they have with readers. TimesOnline.co.uk, too, have talked about wanting to use plenty of user-generated content, but only if it is "the right user-generated content. . . [that] fit[s] with our brands" (quoted in: Hermida & Thurman 2008).

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Moderation and control

Dodson's attitude, and his reference to readers as "others", is typical of the ways in which many journalists and editors have viewed user-generated content since it became a feature of mainstream news websites. Historically, mainstream news websites normally edited or pre-moderated readers' submissions -- this was the case in 80 percent of cases back in April 2005 (Thurman 2008). In this sense, the media has sought to retain a traditional gatekeeping role, with journalists acting as message filters. The reasons editors took this approach included a desire to "avoid duplication, keep the standards of spelling and grammar high, select material that was newsworthy with broad appeal, and ensure balance and decency" (Thurman 2008). This gatekeeping mode remained largely unchanged between April 2005–November 2006 as more and more news sites offered opportunities for participation (see: Hermida & Thurman 2008). More recently, the picture has become more complex, with evidence of a loosening of moderation practices at some publications and a tightening at others, as news sites compete for readers and struggle to manage the user-generated content they are receiving.

As part of their June 2008 relaunch of 'Comment is Free' -- the Guardian.co.uk's blogging / comment platform -- the time limit for commenting was reduced to 48 hours, "mainly" it was said, "to try and keep conversations as topical and relevant as possible" (Henry 2008). Another likely reason was to limit the number of comments and hence the costs of moderation.

The Guardian.co.uk's then Director of Digital Publishing, Simon Waldman, anticipated the implementation of such "traffic calming techniques" in 2006 as a result of his experience with a World Cup blog, where the volume of comments was "almost too much" (quoted in: Hermida & Thurman 2008). TimesOnline.co.uk have also had concerns that "the volume of comments being

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posted [at least 3,000 per day] . . . outstrips(s) [their] ability to handle them". For this reason, they have outsourced moderation to an external company -- eModeration -- who employ moderators in Europe, the Americas and Australia (Baker 2008).

In contrast, a more relaxed attitude to moderation is now in evidence at the websites of three national newspapers -- *The Independent*, the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Mirror.* As of June 2008, all published readers' comments to their blogs without registration or pre-moderation. The shift away from moderation might well be a result of the increase in opportunities readers have to participate. With more choice, news websites may be finding that readers are less likely to participate if barriers to participation -- like registration -- exist, or if they don't get the immediate, positive feedback instant publication gives.

Conclusions

How far has participatory journalism in the UK delivered on the expectations of its proponents to allow "widespread engagement with the public" and foster a more democratic form of public service journalism (Greenslade 2008)? The evidence is mixed. As we have shown, national newspaper websites did increase, considerably, their provision of user-generated content initiatives between April 2005–June 2008: the number of publications hosting 'Blogs' and 'Comments on stories' increased eleven and eight times respectively. There was also a smaller increase in the provision of formats -- 'Message boards', 'Reader blogs', and 'Your story' -- allowing readers to initiate discussions, rather than simply responding to the institutional news agenda.

However, in order to determine the true nature and extent of participation, it is necessary to look beyond the presence of these technical modes of interactivity

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to the ways in which they are implemented and managed. From this perspective, participation is being limited by a combination of factors including:

- out-of-date ‘Blogs’ that do not provide new material for readers to comment on
- the widespread disabling of ‘Comment on stories’ functionality
- the shortening of time-limits for readers to comment on stories or ‘Blog’ posts
- the closing of certain user-generated content initiatives altogether
- the corralling of user-generated content into defined areas of sites with a lack of promotion and integration with professionally-produced content
- the use of participatory journalism terminology -- such as ‘Blogs’ -- as a branding device without the accompanying functionality for participation
- editorial attitudes and moderation practices that seek to normalise user-generated content so that it is ‘right’, ‘fits the brand’, or matches institutional ideas of ‘taste’.

These broad generalisations made, we must also acknowledge that a wide range of practices exist, both across the industry as a whole, and within individual publications. For example, although Telegraph.co.uk does not allow ‘Comments on stories’, they do host a vigorous ‘Reader blogs’ platform, the content of which is well integrated with their professionally-produced output. And, although some of Independent.co.uk’s ‘Blogs’ are infrequently updated, readers are able to comment on ‘Blog’ posts and some news stories without the hurdle of initial registration or the delays that accompany pre-moderation.

These variations in provision are, in part, consistent with Thurman’s (2008) findings that “local conditions” have a “considerable influence on the range and character of the [user-generated content] initiatives adopted” with costs, quality standards, the legal environment, and the management and professional

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preparedness of journalists all playing a part. As the numbers wishing to contribute to mainstream news websites increase, so does the costs of moderating user-generated content, so that it meets newspapers' expectations. When these costs exceed the budgets available, restricting opportunities for participation often becomes the preferred strategy.

This desire for control is partly due to legitimate fears that, without such processes in place, some of the obscene, defamatory and libellous content that news websites receive will be published. It also stems from journalists and editors' long-held belief that they know what their readers want -- and the associated traditions of selection and editing. These journalistic norms have played an important part in the implementation and regulation of participatory journalism in the mainstream. They betray the innate conservatism of newsroom culture -- a culture forged during a long period of technological and financial stability -- and a period that has now come to a sudden end.

The new technological and financial realities that newspapers face have yet to transform such ingrained cultural practices. But they are chipping away at the edges. Significantly, readers are now routinely given 'right to reply', although this 'right' is still often only granted to submissions that are within certain bounds of 'taste'. The notion that participatory journalism is more than a right to reply, but could encompass agenda-setting, to include the full spectrum of public-discourse and compete with professional journalism, is still widely taboo in the profession.

For some, if newspapers are to survive, this taboo must be broken and journalists have to stop "acting as secular priests" (Greenslade 2008). For others, like Lee Siegel (2008), there is a danger that such a move will "keep the most creative, intelligent, and original voices from being heard". Newspaper websites in the UK have progressively allowed more and more material from the 'laity' to appear on their pages. However, this process has been tortuous, as publications

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have reacted to the ‘poor’ quality of some contributions by periodically raising the bar to entry or closing the gate altogether. Whether they will take the next step and start to relinquish their gatekeeping role, in favour of a more collective, collaborative approach, will, in part, depend on the success of pilot projects like ‘My Telegraph’ and Guardian.co.uk’s ‘Been there’. Moreover, it will also be dependent on whether the lay participants in these experiments deliver on the responsibilities that come with their new-found freedom.

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Notes

[1] Although the 2007 Oxford Internet Survey showed that posting pictures or photos on the Internet grew in popularity between 2005 and 2007, other forms of creativity and production online became less popular: the numbers of current Internet users who maintained a “personal website” fell by 3 per cent over the same period.

[2] The Internet Encyclopaedia (Flicker, 2004) defines a firm as ‘pure-play’ “if its only distribution channel is the Internet or the wireless Web”.

[3] As classified by Nielsen//Netratings. Data from April 2005 (US Internet users only).

[4] In April 2005, “web 2.0” was mentioned just 25 times in the English language news sources catalogued by the LexisNexis ‘Business and News’ database. By April 2008 that number had increased by over 100 times to 2,531. Over the same time period, mentions of “user-generated content” increased nearly 75 times from 9 to 671.

[5] The ‘Your media’ and ‘Your story’ formats were deployed sporadically by news sites in April 2005. It was not until November 2006 that their use was established enough for them to appear as generic formats in their own right.

[6] Thurman (2008) considers that “blogs represent the best-known form of invitation that writers use to initiate conversations with readers online”.

[7] Arthur Edwards MBE, the Sun’s ‘Royal photographer’.

[8] These ‘blogs’ were blogs by name only. None allowed that most fundamental requirement of the form—readers’ comments—let alone the other functionality the blogging community has come to expect: “the blogroll, permalinks . . . trackback and syndication”. In this case, as with early blogs at the BBC and other mainstream news providers, blogs failed “to conform to some of the social conventions of the blog” (Thurman & Jones, 2005).

[9] ‘The Arctic blog’.

[10] A popular BBC reality TV show.

[11] At the time of our survey, four months had passed since FT.com’s ‘Energy Filter’ blog had been updated.

[12] 2.26pm on 7 May 2008.

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[13] ‘Ask Jack’ -- a computer / technology blog by Jack Schofield, and ‘Greenslade’ -- media commentary by Roy Greenslade.
[14] Limits, where they exist, are between 60 and 300 words.
[15] ‘Message boards’ are hosted by the websites of the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Evening Standard* (survey: May 2008).
[16] ‘Reader blogs’ are hosted at the websites of: *The Sun*, the *Daily Star*, and the *Daily Telegraph* (survey: May 2008).
[17] ‘My Story’ gave Scotsman.com readers the opportunity to write about their Scottish heritage. As with TimesOnline’s ‘Your World’, there was a 500-word limit and submissions were pre-selected and edited before publication.
[18] Dailymail.co.uk also hosts a ‘Your story’ feature, again based around holiday content. Called ‘Your Holiday’ it too has a 500-word limit on textual contributions. Readers can also upload photos and video and contributions are tagged by destination and holiday type. Submissions pass through a moderation process that can take up to a week.
[19] Although promoted by the *Telegraph* on their website, no content from their ‘Reader blogs’ appeared in the print edition on a typical day (11 June 2008).
[20] These topics are taken from the ‘tag cloud’ that appeared on the http://my.telegraph.co.uk/ front page at 13:37 on 11 June 2008. In this case, the ‘tag cloud’ depicts the occurrences of tags added by users to describe the content of the pages they have created or amended within the My Telegraph site. Tags are usually single words and, in tag clouds, they are typically listed alphabetically, with the more commonly used tags shown in a larger font.
[21] *The Guardian*’s own forums for user-generated content also reflect a wide range of opinion, including views that would not normally appear in the paper. Examples include comments on an article about a visit Condoleezza Rice made to the Middle East (Tisdall, 2007) in which readers referred to the US Secretary of State as an “Aunt Jemima”, a racially-loaded term, seeking to characterise Rice as a “faithful slave” (see (McElya, 2007).

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