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Why livestreaming symbolises journalism's current challenges'

by Dr Glenda Cooper, City University of London

glenda.cooper.1@city.ac.uk

Every day, on average 96 fatal shootings occur in the US (Everytownresearch, 2018); most do not command any attention except from grieving relatives and the courts. Yet on the 6 and 7 July 2016, two events happened which did end up with worldwide attention. The first was the shooting of Philando Castile by police in Falcon Heights, Minnesota; the second was that of five police officers in a bloody shoot-out in Dallas¹. But what made them stand out was because they were captured on onlookers' smartphones, and then livestreamed.

Livestreaming, by ordinary people using apps such as Facebook Live or Periscope² symbolises the current biggest challenge to journalism. It encapsulates the collapsing of boundaries around what a journalist is, or what journalism does. It has a direct effect on what journalists themselves see as the key challenges to their profession – the failure of the traditional economic model, and the rise of fake news. It allows use of more graphic imagery. And crucially it also points up the problem of information inequality: while there may be high quality media production, many citizens remain information poor (Kennedy and Prat, 2017).

In the past, the authorship of news stories used to be journalist-only spaces where ordinary people appeared as archetypes in narratives, or as sources for comments - the outraged passerby, the grieving widow(er), the 'vox pop'. This changed in the early 2000s with the introduction of phones which could capture images and footage - so-called 'user-generated content' (UGC)³ - combined with the growth of social media sites which could distribute it.

While the gamechanger moment was the 2004 South Asian tsunami (Gillmor, 2005), by the 2005 7/7 London bombings the stills and video taken by onlookers was considered “more newsworthy than professional content” (Hermida and Thurman, 2008:344). The concept of gatekeeping (White, 1950) changed to ‘gatewatching’ (Bruns, 2008). In a world of budget cuts, it proved particularly attractive to mainstream media because such content was also usually free. As one foreign correspondent ruefully commented, why would any editor spend money sending a young journalist to a crisis zone “when they’re getting perfectly good wobbly pictures from some person in the middle of it” (Cooper, 2016).

The ability for ordinary people to tell their own stories has been a positive one heralding a paradigm shift from one “in which once the media was the centre of the universe and now the user is the centre of the universe” (Robinson and De Shano, 2011: 977). Early UGC relied on mainstream media to disseminate it, social media platforms have enabled them to bypass media organisations. Livestreaming allows viewers to experience the story as it happens, with immersivity, real-time interaction and sociality (Haimson and Tang, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, journalists have found this shift difficult to deal with. One of the most highly-prized values in journalism has been that of the act of witness: the journalist as guarantor of the veracity of events (Seaton, 2005:188). So, to defend their craft “against incursions from non-journalists” (Carlson, 2015:9) – journalists started to clone and co-opt the tropes of UGC (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015). In some cases this was done by adopting a first-person emotive approach - sites like Vice News have particularly employed this with pieces like ‘My Grandma The Poisoner’ (Reed, 2014). Media organisations have also adopted the methods that their UGC-creating viewers and readers employ - tweeting, uploading smartphone pictures or short videos, and

livestreaming themselves, rather than wait for a conventional news bulletin or newspaper edition (Cooper, 2016).

However by adopting such tropes, journalists also lay themselves open to the problems that afflict UGC: failure of trust, and increasingly graphic imagery. In the early days of UGC, many researchers posited that audience believed such content was seen as more authentic (Wardle and Williams, 2008). Yet things were not always what they seemed. The fake 'shark' pictures from Hurricane Sandy might have caused amusement (Burgess et al, 2012) but in a country like Syria where many journalists were unable to get access, understanding has often heavily depended on UGC which may be created by activists with their own agendas (Johnstone, 2015).

Such misinformation has been possible because of three things: ease of distribution/cost; difficulty of regulation; and the decline of trust among the audience. These are all inter-related: anyone with a Wordpress blog or livestreaming app can disseminate information for free. With far more operators involved in exchanging information then regulation is much more complicated. And with these low costs and multiple operators, reputations are far more expendable and information spread around much more quickly.

But mainstream journalists, already being tarnished with 'spin' REF were then caught up in the audience's conviction that all information providers were guilty of providing 'fake news'. This was exacerbated in the wake of scandals such as that of the UK phonehacking (Keeble and Mair, 2012) and in the distancing between mainstream media and audience in the Brexit coverage, followed by the Grenfell Tower disaster (Snow, 2017).

Finally, UGC, and livestreaming in particular, has disrupted the journalistic norm that the moment of actual death is never shown (Zelizer 2010) with cases such as

Neda Agha-Soltan in June 2009, Drummer Lee Rigby in 2013 and Jordi Mir's footage showing the death of Ahmed Merabet during the Charlie Hebdo attacks (Mortensen, 2011; Sweney, 2014; Satter, 2015). When the Bangkok bomb blast happened in 2015, a Periscope user Derek van Pelt filmed the aftermath live, exposing viewers to traumatic images before the content creator realised he was filming body parts (Brown, 2015). Since then, suicides, murders, hate crimes, terrorist attacks have all become Facebook Live 'events' (Toor, 2016; Levinson and Jamieson, 2017; Griffin, 2017; BBC, 2018)..

How should journalism therefore deal with the challenge of livestreaming? First, UGC has been a disruption to the journalistic field, and has benefited the public, with the chances of ordinary people's perspective being heard and with many playing a role in civic engagement. While not counting themselves as journalists, by bringing news to light and revealing stories in the public interest they may as yet be performing 'acts of journalism' (Stearns, 2013).

Yet whether editors embed or provide a link to a livestream of a breaking news story has editorial implications and embodies the relationship they want to have with creators of content. By choosing to embed, the media site is taking more ownership and implicitly identifying themselves with the footage. With linking there is more distance, and that the viewer then has to take their own decision as to whether to view material.

What livestreaming does tell us however is that the ethical problems that journalists face today are no different just because technology has changed. Most responsible media organisations would still subscribe to the norms that journalists should respect privacy, credit people for their own work, think carefully before releasing violent content rather than allowing it to circulate and not propagate fake news – whether that content comes via livestreaming or traditional methods. But these ethical questions are less about the tactics – the how and when to use social media, because

any journalist or media organisation who abide by longstanding journalistic norms should be able to judge what is best to do. The real crisis is whether the public and journalists themselves can mount a sufficiently robust defence of public service journalism, with the plurality of information that a democracy needs to operate and be credible.

In one way the news is good. In a crowded media space, in 2018 the BBC still attracts a weekly global news audience of 376m (BBC Media Centre, 2018). Levels of trust in mainstream media have risen across Europe in the past year according to the EBU's 2018 Trust in Media report – as a consequence of people being unsure what they should trust on social media and online (EBU, 2018), while fewer people are seeking out news via social media (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018). For mainstream media organisations there could be an opportunity to show that they can offer something that the noise of social media and user-generated content cannot: the drive to explain and put news in context.

This is urgently needed however, the main concern for a democratically healthy society that information inequality is tackled. Many still remain information poor (Kennedy and Prat, 2017). In 2016, the year of the US election and the Brexit referendum, there was a runaway Facebook Live winner: a woman trying on a Star Wars mask and laughing as she did so (Wagner, 2016).

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¹ In June 2017, police officer Jeronimo Yanez was acquitted of all charges including manslaughter in the case of Philando Castile but was not allowed to return to active duty. Micah Xavier Johnson who shot the Dallas officers was killed by a bomb disposal remote controlled vehicle.

² Periscope which was introduced in 2015 and Facebook Live in 2016 are the most popular, although Instagram also allows live video

³ The term ‘user-generated content’ is highly contested, with many alternatives being suggested, including ‘citizen journalism’, ‘citizen witnessing’ and ‘accidental journalism’, but it is generally accepted as the least bad option. In this context I am using as a basis the OECD’s definition – that it requires some kind of creative effort, publication and it is created outside normal professional routines and practices – i.e. it is produced by non-professionals, “without expectation of profit or remuneration but the primary goals being to connect with peers, level of fame and desire to express oneself” (OECD, 2007).