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THE FUTURE OF BREAKING NEWS ONLINE?
A study of live blogs through surveys of their consumption, and of readers' attitudes and participation

Neil Thurman and Nic Newman

This study investigates news readers' use of, participation with, and attitudes to live updating news pages (also known as live blogs), an increasingly common online news format. Data comes from an online survey, and from web analytics of live blogs hosted by Guardian.co.uk and on the ScribbleLive platform. The survey had approximately 11,000 respondents and the sample was weighted to reflect the demographics of the online populations in the nine countries polled. The findings show the extent to which news consumers use live blogs to follow news, and, for the US and UK, their preferences for different types of news content in this form. UK respondents' attitudes to the accuracy and balance of live blogs, and to their usability and convenience, are reported. The Guardian.co.uk data reveal the relative attention received by live blogs compared with picture galleries, articles, and an op-ed piece; whilst the data from ScribbleLive shows the proportion of content contributed by readers in a sample of 11 live blogs. In answering a call for further study of this under-researched aspect of online news, this study extends our understanding of the changes taking place as news consumption shifts, increasingly rapidly, from print to online.

Keywords accuracy; balance; content preferences; live blogs; reader contributions

Introduction

Live blogs are an increasingly prevalent feature of news sites, used to cover breaking news and running stories, sports, and other scheduled live events. Take, for example, the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami. The search for survivors and the crises at Fukushima and elsewhere were covered extensively, and news organisations worldwide used live updating news pages—or live blogs—as part of their coverage. Some of the live blogs—for example from NYTimes.com (Goodman 2011) and Guardian.co.uk (Batty 2011)—were published by news organisations that were practised in the format and had access to platforms that allowed journalists covering the disaster to relatively easily integrate videos, still images, maps, and social media. Other live online coverage—for example that from FT.com (Bond 2011) and *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ 2011)—was more *ad hoc*, with existing blogs commandeered as instruments for live reporting as these news organisations scrambled to imitate the coverage of their peers.

Although such major breaking news stories, with the consequent 'improvisation' around news routines (Berkowitz 1992), are relatively rare, evidence suggests that, at least at some news sites, live blogs have become a regular feature. For example, Thurman and Walters (2013, 82) found that Britain's second most popular newspaper website—Guardian.co.uk—published an average of 146 live blogs a month, and ScribbleLive, a provider of live blogging software, has "hundreds" of clients—including CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, and AlJazeera—the "majority" in the media industries (Ekaterina Torgovnikov, personal communication, July 29, 2013).

Live blogs are also becoming a feature of local news coverage. The *Manchester Evening News* runs a daily live blog (Manchester Evening News 2013) and, in 2013, the BBC rolled out live blogs as part of their local news coverage, initially covering the cities of Birmingham, Derby, and London. These 'Live Local News Feeds', which use the "same technology" as the regular live blogs on the BBC news website, display "short updates of local news, sport, travel, [and] weather" (BBC 2013a), using quotes from BBC reporters and "tweets [and] emails from members of the public" (BBC 2013b). The feeds are updated between 8am and 6pm, seven days a week, with the aim of "increas[ing] our ability to be fast and accurate with the latest stories". In their description of this new service, the BBC show an awareness of, and a desire to conform to, some of the emerging conventions (see: Thurman and Walters [2013]) of live blogging, particularly its transparency and sourcing practices. For example, they say they will "try to link to our sources on stories as much as possible", and that they will "give users a greater insight into our journalism … by inviting them to see how we develop stories" (BBC 2013a).

The rise of professional live blogs has been, in part, a reaction to the way social media and blog sites introduced the idea of bite-sized chunks of content arranged in a chronological order. This new format proved useful for audiences in keeping up-to-date with friends and family but soon started to become useful in telling certain types of news stories. Twitter in particular, through the introduction of hashtags, effectively enabled its community of users to run their own live blog on any major event, from the Iranian elections to the World Cup. And other software, such as Storify, has developed, allowing anybody to quickly and easily curate a news story by aggregating social media items in a coherent way.

Although there is evidence of live blogs' increasing prevalence, prevalence, on its own, is not a sufficiently strong indicator that live blogs are truly significant to the future of journalism. To make that judgement we also need to examine their popularity with readers. Anecdotal evidence, and what little previous research exists, indicates live blogs may be popular with readers, at least by some definitions of the term. For example, previous research (Thurman and Walters 2013) has shown that, for a sample of seven stories published at Guardian.co.uk, live blogs had "median unique visitor numbers 233 per cent higher than conventional articles and 219 per cent higher than picture galleries on the same subject", and that when the BBC News website runs a live page side by side with an article "they are often equally visited" (Steve Herrmann, personal communication, July 20, 2013). However, such simple 'reach' is only one dimension of popularity. Equally important is attention or engagement.[1] A reasonable proxy for attention is time spent reading so, exclusively for this article, we compared the amount of time spent reading live blogs against time spent reading picture galleries, articles, and an op-ed piece. We did this for two news stories covered by Guardian.co.uk: a march against public sector cuts in London on March 26, 2011, and the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton on April 29, 2011. The results are presented in figures 1 and 2. The data show that the live blogs attracted the majority of the attention these stories received, with the rest split fairly evenly between the articles, picture galleries, and the op-ed piece.[2] These results are in accord with other analyses that have shown average live blog visit times (over 24 hours) of six minutes (Thurman and Walters 2013), and average live blog engagement times of 12–24 minutes (see table 1). Such levels of attention compare very favourably against the attention paid to newspaper websites *as a whole*. For example, in 2012, the average duration of visits to US newspaper websites was 3.75 minutes (NAA 2012).

[Insert figure 1]

[Insert figure 2]

[Insert table 1]

We have shown that live blogs appear to be increasingly prevalent on international, on national, and on local online news channels; and, when compared against equivalent

coverage in different formats, are sometimes achieving higher levels of reader engagement. There is, however, still much to find out. This article aims to help fill the gaps in our knowledge by trying to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How popular are live blogs with a representative sample of online news consumers across nine countries?
- RQ2: Does their popularity differ demographically and with levels of internet use?
- RQ3: What are readers' attitudes to live blogs' usability, balance, accuracy, and convenience?
- RQ4: Are particular types (e.g. sports, breaking news, ongoing political stories, and scheduled non-sporting events) of live blog more popular with readers than others?
- RQ5: Are live blogs more inclusive of facts and opinions from citizens than other online news formats?

To answer these questions we will analyse data from an international online survey of over 11,000 news users, and also look at data on readers' contributions to 11 live blogs hosted on the ScribbleLive platform. The next section describes the methodology used in the survey. The results follow, and the article concludes with a discussion and some conclusions about the part live blogs may play in the future of breaking news online.

Methodology

The main data used in this article comes from a larger project the authors were involved in: a multi-national comparative survey on digital news consumption commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The survey was conducted by YouGov, using an online questionnaire, in January and February 2013. The data was weighted to targets set on age and gender, region, newspaper readership, and social grade, to reflect the total population of each of the nine countries surveyed. Sample size ranged from 965 (in Italy) to 2,078 (in the UK), with an average sample per country of 1,228. A total of 11,055 responses were included in the final analysis. A set of common questions (in the native language) were asked, as well as some country-specific questions. The results exclude answers from respondents who said that they had not consumed any news in the previous month. This proportion was between 2–4 percent in most countries but as high as 10 percent in the UK. These responses were excluded in order to ensure that the results were based on reasonably contemporaneous experiences of digital news consumption. However, the exclusion of data from respondents who had not used news in the previous month means that the survey over-represents the consumption patterns of more regular news users.

Results

RQ1: The survey showed that 11 percent of UK news consumers had followed a live news page in the previous week, with live news pages even more popular in the US, Brazil, Italy, and Spain, and especially in France (19 percent) and Japan (35 percent) (see figure 3). Live blogs were least popular in Germany and Denmark (8 percent) where over 40 percent of news consumers had read longer stories or articles in the previous week.

[Insert Figure 3]

RQ2: In terms of demographics, the survey results show distinct differences between Spain, Japan, and the US—where live blogs are accessed more or less equally by men and women; France, UK, and Brazil—where there is a moderate bias towards men; and Italy, Germany, and Denmark—where there is a pronounced bias towards men, with, in Germany, more than twice as many men accessing live pages. The survey also showed how live pages are accessed most heavily on computers at work and by those who are most

interested in news. 17 percent of UK respondents who access news at work (including places of study) use live blogs, compared against 11 percent for all respondents. In Japan, 86 percent of live blog users were heavy news consumers, accessing news several times a day; in the UK the figure was 78 percent.

RQ3: Questions about readers' attitudes to live blogs' usability, balance, accuracy, and convenience were included in the UK part of the survey (see figure 4). The results show that significantly more respondents (40 percent) than not (12 percent) agreed that live blogs were more balanced than articles because of the range of opinions they report and their links to sources. Although 28 percent of respondents thought live blogs could be difficult to understand because of their formatting (short updates in reverse chronological order), 43 percent disagreed. Most (62 percent) respondents agreed that live blogs were a convenient way to follow news at work with only 10 percent disagreeing. Slightly more respondents were unconcerned (35 percent) about a lack of accuracy on live blogs than concerned (27 percent).

[Insert figure 4]

RQ4: A question about the popularity of different categories of live blog was included in the UK and US parts of the survey (see figure 5). The results show that, among respondents who had used a live blog in the previous week, live blogs covering 'breaking news' and 'unfolding political stories' were more popular than those that covered 'sports' and 'non-sporting scheduled news' (like the Oscars or the X Factor TV show).

[Insert figure 5]

RQ5: Finding out whether live blogs are more inclusive of facts and opinions from readers than other online news formats was outside the scope of the Reuters Institute survey but, exclusively for this article, we analysed data from 11 live blogs covering a breaking news story (the Boston marathon bombings), a sporting event (Wimbledon 2013), an ongoing political story (the 2012–13 protests in Egypt that led to the removal of president Mohamed Morsi), and a non-sporting scheduled news story (the birth of His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge), to find out the proportion of reader contributions. The live blogs were published using the ScribbleLive platform. The results, presented in table 2, show much higher levels—ranging from 21 to 50 percent—of non-official new-technology mediated content than observed in previous studies (see for example: Wigley and Fontenot [2009] and Wigley and Fontenot [2011]). Furthermore, because some of the journalists' own updates (not used to calculate the proportions reported in table 2) contained non-official new-technology mediated content, these figures are an underestimation.

[Insert Table 2]

Discussion

The data reported in this article help extend what is known about an expanding journalistic phenomenon. Although it was known that live blogs are increasingly prevalent and—where they do exist—can perform well against other news formats in capturing readers' attention, we have had no data about their consumption by the general population. This survey shows that an average of about 15 percent of news consumers use live blogs on a weekly basis, with considerably higher usage in Japan.[3] Taken together with the levels of engagement this article has shown that they can achieve, it is not premature to say that live blogs have become an important feature of the online news landscape, as popular, the survey shows, as news 'video and audio' in Japan, and more popular than news 'pictures and graphics' and 'apps' in both Japan and France.

The survey has allowed earlier findings and hypotheses about the reasons for live blogs' popularity, and readers' attitudes to the format, to be tested. Thurman and Walters (2013) proposed that one of the reasons live blogs were popular was that they fulfilled, in various ways, readers' changing consumption patterns, including for news at work. The survey gives some empirical substance to this hypothesis. It also confirms Thurman and Walters' (2013) finding that readers consider live blogs to be more balanced than articles because of the range of opinions they report and the sources they link to. Such transparency is becoming a key feature of the format, as acknowledged in the BBC's commentary on their own expansion of live blogs into local news coverage (BBC 2013a). Such transparent sourcing (and correction) practices may, in the future, influence other on- and offline news formats.

Although the survey showed a clear majority of respondents agreeing that live blogs were more balanced than articles, a much smaller majority were unconcerned about their accuracy, a reminder that audiences are not willing to forfeit accuracy completely in return for being kept up-to-date in almost real-time. Another cautionary finding for news publishers is that close to a third of readers found that live blogs' formatting could make them difficult to understand. Developments at some news sites show that the disadvantages of live blogs' informality and lack of coherence are being recognised. For example, ITV News, which re-launched its website as a live stream in March 2012 (Halliday 2012), has recently started to add more traditionally-formatted articles providing more background and context on major stories (see, for example, ITV [2013]). ITV News' Web Editor, Jason Mills, agrees that "the article isn't dead" and that "there are some stories that don't necessarily stream in themselves", but also believes "the article is changing" and will become a richer format within news streams that will become more time- and location-aware (personal communication, July 23, 2013).

The survey's finding that live blogs are more popular—both in the UK and the US—for their coverage of 'breaking news' and 'unfolding political stories' than for 'sport' and other scheduled news confirms Thurman and Walters' (2013, 98) finding using a larger and more representative sample. This is an important result that deserves further investigation.

Previous research (Thurman and Walters 2013, 97) has indicated that readers were twice as likely to participate with live blogs as with other forms of online news. Although reader participation across live blogs and other online news formats has not—yet—been robustly compared, the data on reader participation this article has analysed indicates that—at least in the particular form of live blog provided by ScribbleLive—more non-official new-technology mediated content is being included than we have previously seen in other forms of online news. Live blogs hosted by ScribbleLive and analysed for this article show 21–50 percent reader contributions compared with live blogs at Guardian.co.uk where tweets and 'above the line' comments from readers make up just 7.5 percent of the total number of live blog updates (Thurman and Walters 2013, 91).

We may be seeing, therefore, two distinct models of live blog emerging. One—typified by some implementations of the ScribbleLive platform—that puts reader testimony and comment on a par with that of journalists, and another—that adopted by some news organisations with their own proprietary live blogging platforms—that conforms to a more traditional gate-keeping approach, with reader testimony included on occasion but mostly relegated 'below the fold' to the comments section, with consequent low visibility. Live blogs are a genuinely new news format—one of the first that has been developed specifically for the online medium. Although it has been innovative in its sourcing, correction, and verification practices, whether that innovation will extend to its inclusion of citizen testimony remains to be seen, as journalism's established routines, new technological tools, and the external influences of social media platforms play out in online newsrooms.

Key Challenges

Just as news publishers, like the BBC, are innovating in their provision of live news feeds, so too are the social media companies whose content streams have so influenced the

delivery of mainstream journalism online. Social media platforms are now starting to include a richer variety of formats, such as Twitter cards for photos, and new short (6–15 second) video formats like Vine and Tout. In turn, mainstream media streams—or live blogs—are responding with more visual approaches. For example, in their live coverage of the 2013 'Ashes' cricket competition, the BBC used a range of icons to highlight key moments in the games. An important question for mainstream media revolves around the rights issues that often accompany the inclusion of video and pictures in their live blogs. Whilst tweets are posted without permission being asked, there is far greater nervousness about doing the same for photos or videos unless they have been sent directly to the news organisation. For example, in the case of a helicopter crash over central London (BBC 2013c), and the murder of a British soldier in a busy London suburb (BBC 2013d), the BBC had to wait around 10 minutes before including key user-generated video whilst permission was negotiated (personal communication, Trushar Barot, July 17, 2013). So a key question for mainstream media in their development of live blogs is how to keep up with social media platforms like Twitter,[4] not just in terms of speed, but also in terms of the inclusion of images and video. ITV News' Web Editor, Jason Mills, agrees it can be hard to keep up: "We've found that if you make contact with rights holders and are among the first to request usage you almost always get permission. If you're an hour after everyone else you often don't" (personal communication, July 23, 2013). BBC News' website Editor, Steve Herrmann, says their live blogs are trying to complement rather than compete with Twitter: "We will need to make sure we are seeking the best user generated content and the rights to use it, on Twitter and elsewhere, whilst also linking out to it when we do not have it ourselves, and providing our own verification and context" (personal communication, July 20, 2013).

Although live blogs are popular with audiences, they are also very time-consuming and costly[5] to produce, especially as they often exist as an additional layer of content: the article or summary of the event still needs to be written too. One potential danger is that the range and depth of output will be reduced as news organisations push more and more resources into a few major events. Steve Hermann says a key concern is how to balance resources in a newsroom that needs to deliver both articles and live blogs:

> There is still a need for self-contained, structured reporting and analysis, and for narrative storytelling, but its relationship with the live stream is still developing. We are still working to understand how they can best complement one another and how the two can be blended together when appropriate. And, for newsrooms, what the implications are of trying to do both (personal communication, July 20, 2013).

There are other reasons, from the demand side, to suggest that the live blog will not replace the article at mainstream news organisations. Social media sites are increasingly important drivers of traffic[6] but readers have said they are less likely to share a live blog with friends or colleagues than other types of article (Thurman and Walters 2012). There is still an appetite for a considered linear piece of journalism that sums up or comments on the news. As *New York Times* columnist David Carr says, "a lot of people on Twitter are saying 'old media is dead', but their feeds are full of links to legacy reporting" (reported in: Perry [2013]). At a time when staffing levels continue to fall, striking the right balance between traditional reporting and new formats like live blogs will be one of the key challenges facing news companies.

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Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the comparability of measures of reach and attention as applied to online news see Thurman (2013a).

2. Anecdotal evidence from the editor of the BBC News website indicates that, perhaps because it is viewed more as a definitive website of record, articles are still responsible for the "vast majority of our traffic" and can, "depending on the type and duration of the story", outperform live pages when run alongside (Steve Herrmann, personal communication, July 20, 2013).

3. See Thurman (2013b) for an explanation.

4. Commenting on the Boston marathon bombings, Mark Thompson, president and chief executive of *The New York Times*, said: "For the first time continuous TV news has come in second. … Now, essentially, Twitter is first" (Perry 2013).

5. Previous research (Thurman and Walters 2013, 91) has shown that, on average, a live blog at Guardian.co.uk lasts six hours and relies on the contributions of over two and a half journalists, some on location.

6. An average of 20 percent of news consumers across 9 countries say they share news via a social network in an average week (Levy and Newman 2013, 66).

7. The values here and in figure 2 are minimums because, firstly, visits of 15 seconds or less were not counted and, secondly, the lowest value in each time band was used. For example all visits in the 20–30 minutes band were counted as 20 minutes.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Average length of engagement on 19 live blogs covering four events hosted on the ScribbleLive platform.

	Average length of engagement (mins)*
Boston Marathon Bombings (n=6)	12
Wimbledon 2013 (n=4)	24
2012–13 Egypt protests (n=3)	21.3
Birth of Prince George of Cambridge (n=6)	12

*Total number of engagement minutes divided by total number of unique visitors. For the 19 blogs analysed, total unique visitor numbers were 49,176,696.

Source: ScribbleLive (Ekaterina Torgovnikov, personal communication, July 24–29, 2013).

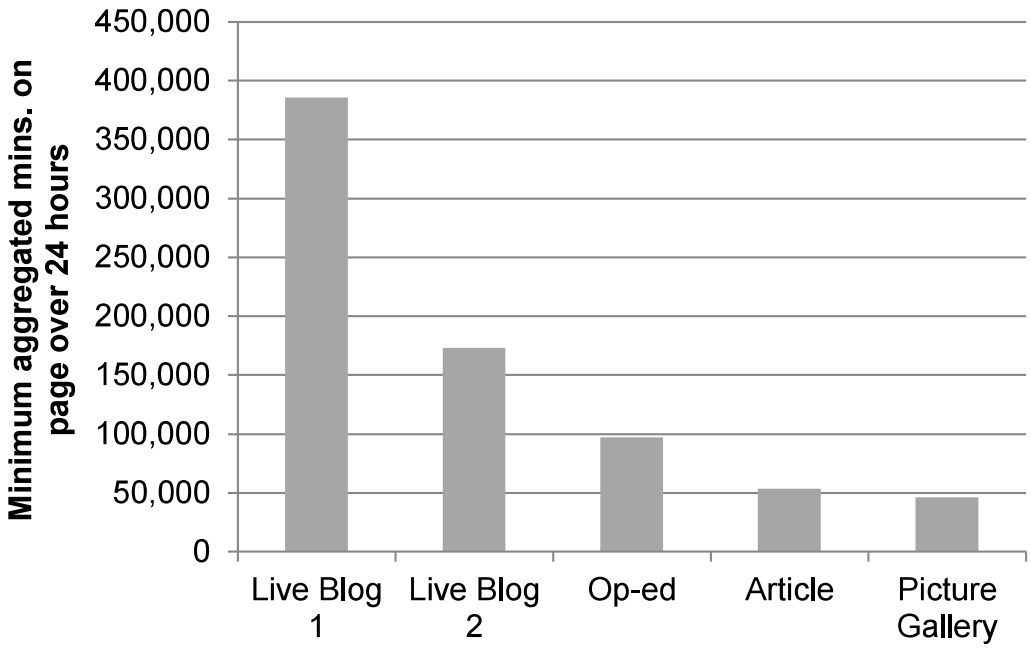
Table 2: Proportion of content contributed by readers in 11 live blogs covering four events hosted on the ScribbleLive platform.

	% Reader Contributions*
Boston Marathon Bombings (n=3)	21
Wimbledon 2013 (n=3)	50
2012–13 Egypt protests (n=2)	27
Birth of Prince George of Cambridge (n=3)	27

* Percentages only from events open to contributions where comments were published regularly. Reader contributions include: comments, tweets, and content from social media not originating from reporters.

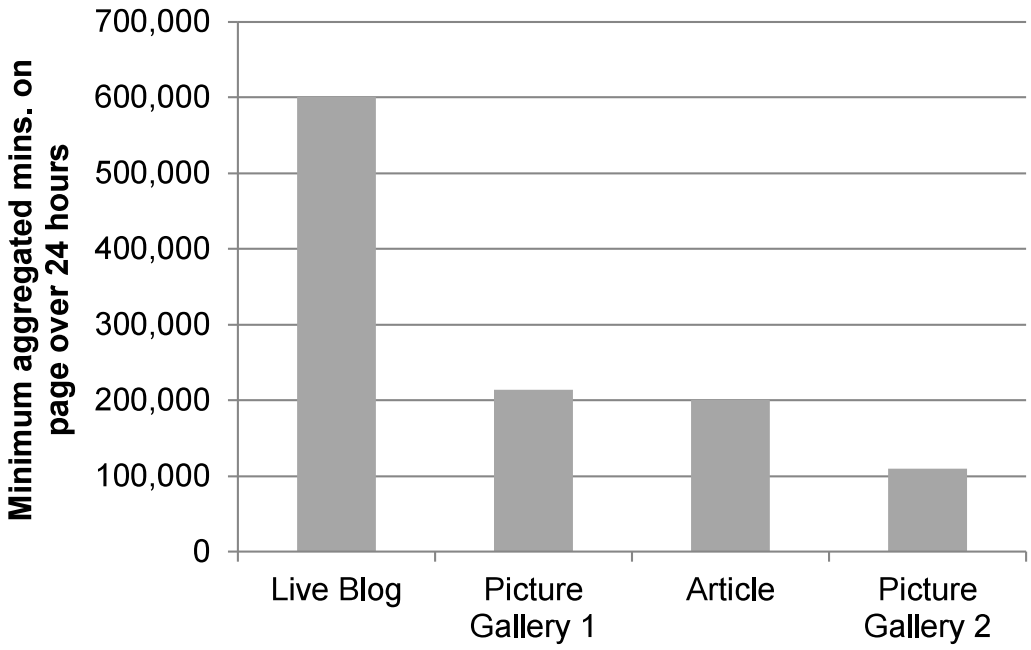
Source: ScribbleLive (Ekaterina Torgovnikov, personal communication, July 24–29, 2013).

Figure 1: Aggregated attention (in time spent over a 24-hour period) received by two Guardian.co.uk live blogs, an op-ed piece, an article, and a picture gallery covering a march against public sector cuts in London on 26 March 2011.



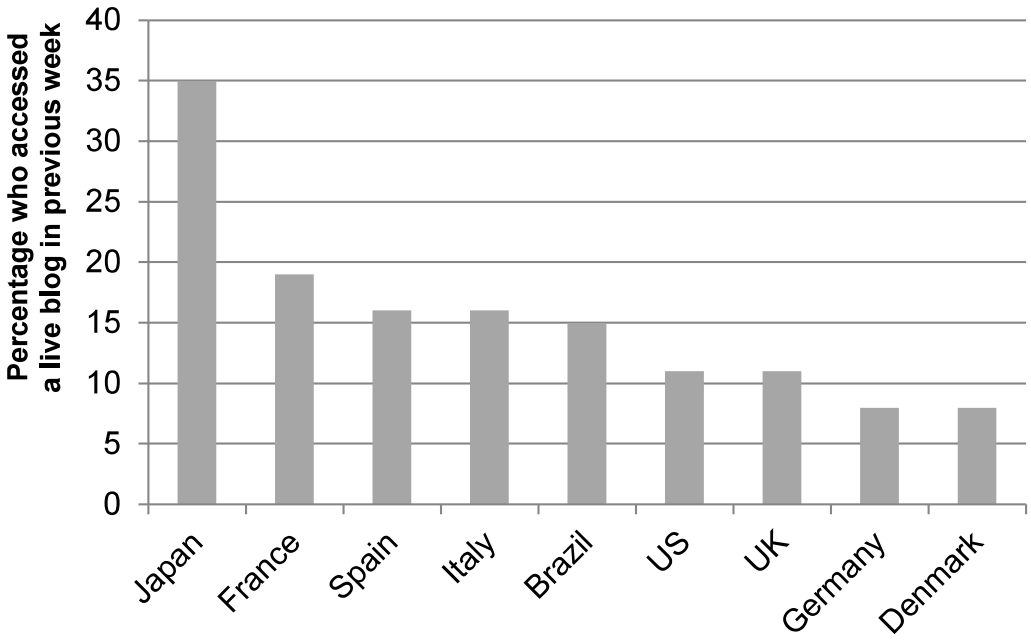
Note: Values[7] are for the 24-hour period starting 00:00 on March 26, 2011. The first live blog (Batty and Davies 2011) began at 10:01 on March 26, the second (Davies and Evans 2011) at 18:11 on March 26. The op-ed piece (Toynbee 2011) was published at 21:00 on March 25, the article at 00:52 on March 26 (Curtis, Taylor, and Dodd 2011), and the picture gallery (Guardian 2011a) at 14:35 on March 26. All times are GMT.

Figure 2: Aggregated attention (in time spent over a 24-hour period) received by a Guardian.co.uk live blog, two picture galleries, and an article covering the marriage of Prince William, April 2011.



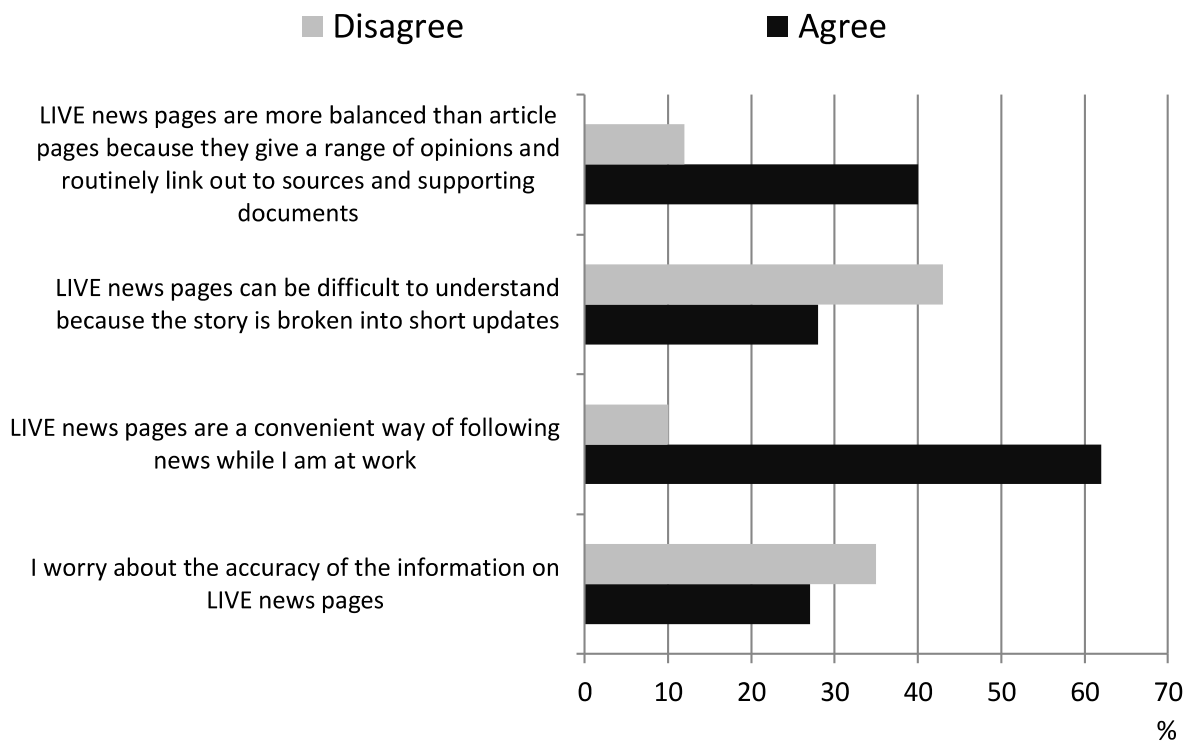
Note: Values are for the 24-hour period starting 00:00 April 29, 2011. The live blog (Owen and Quinn 2011) began at 07:00 April 29, the first picture gallery (Guardian 2011b) was published at 11:17, the second (Guardian 2011c) at 14:31, and the article at 14:59 (Davis 2011). All times are BST.

Figure 3: Popularity of live blogs with online news consumers in nine countries, 2013.



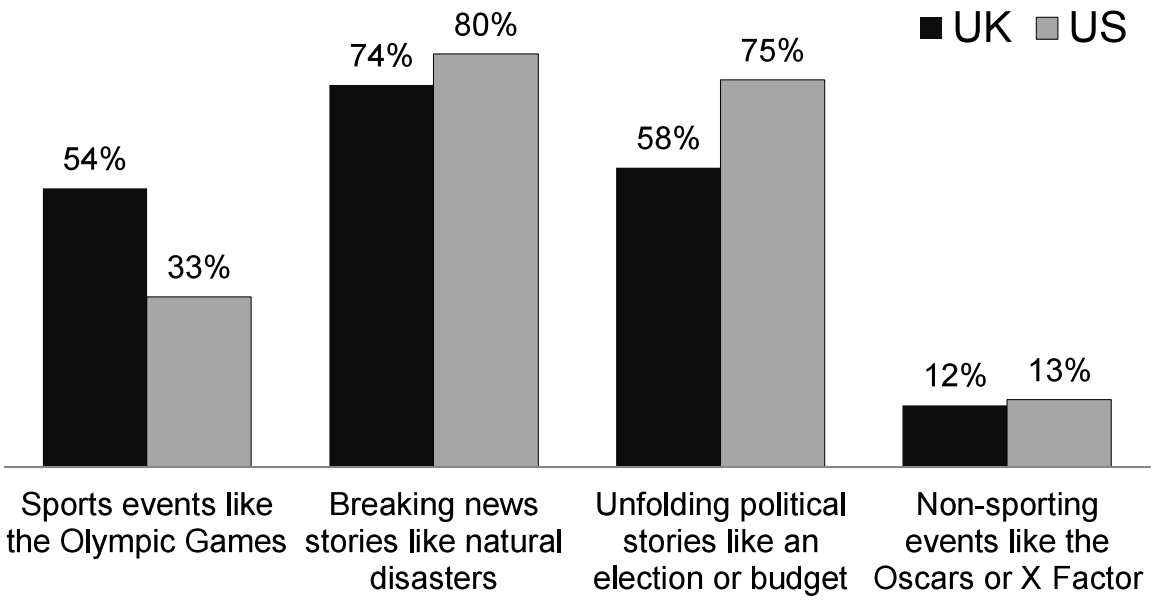
Note: The survey was conducted using an online sample (n=11,055) and excluded respondents who had not consumed news in the previous month.

Figure 4: UK news consumers' attitudes to live blogs' balance, usability, convenience, and accuracy, January 2013.



N=229.

Figure 5: Popularity of four categories of live blog with news consumers in the UK and US, January 2013.



Sample: UK (n=237), US (n=213).

Respondents who used live blogs were asked whether they used live news pages to follow any of the above categories of news content (no time period was specified for the last 'use').