

The Changing Role of Journalists in a World Where Everyone Can Publish

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Abstract

Citizen journalism - when the general public investigate, fact-check and publish news stories - is changing the face of news. The historic role of gatekeeper, played until now by professional journalists, is obsolete. But new technology and increased civic participation are creating new opportunities for the mainstream media, and three key roles are emerging:

1. Investigation - traditional in-depth investigative journalism made more transparent by publishing research and references.
2. Curation - collecting trustworthy links and synthesising an informed and succinct overview of a story.
3. Facilitation - working with the community to help people publish stories important to them.

What is 'Citizen Journalism'?

Ask a dozen people to define 'citizen journalism', and you will undoubtedly get twelve different answers. This is not because agreement can't be reached, but because many different activities have been lumped together under the same umbrella term. One definition might be:

"Citizen journalism: The execution of journalistic behaviours, such as investigation, fact-checking, and news publication, by the general public, usually on the internet."

It doesn't matter where these behaviours are exhibited, whether on a blog, a wiki, an independent website purpose-built to collect citizen journalism stories, or in a newspaper. Nor does it matter who is doing it - some journalists are also citizen journalists. What is important is that the general public now have the ability to investigate, report and fact-check news of every type and on every level, from international to hyperlocal.

However, some dislike the term 'citizen journalism', because:

1. It sets up a false dichotomy between the professional journalist and the citizen journalist.
2. The term ascribes the citizen journalist with a motivation - to become a professional journalist - that in the majority of cases does not exist.
3. The term encourages people to make a value judgement, as if there is 'real' journalism and 'citizen' journalism, and that the former has more value than the latter.

There are many alternative phrases in use to describe mainstream media, including 'participatory media' and 'distributed journalism'. But despite its flaws, the term 'citizen journalism' has gained currency and thus is the one this paper shall use.

What do citizen journalists do?

There are a number of 'journalistic behaviours' - activities that we usually associate with journalism - that people voluntarily engage in, out of curiosity, for the public good, or for their own ends. These activities can be done by members of the public singly or in groups, or they can be co-ordinated by the mainstream media or an individual journalist in the course of his or her job.

These journalistic behaviours can be roughly classified as:

- Distributed investigation

A group of people investigate an issue, each obtaining a small item of information, perhaps via a Freedom of Information Act request, which when published in the aggregate allows a broader picture to emerge. This can happen spontaneously or in a co-ordinated manner.

Example:

According to Lisa Williams, in her paper, *Frontiers of Innovation in Community Engagement* [1], in May of 2006, the forums on Florida's Fort Myers News-Press website became a "platform for readers and journalists to collaborate on what turned into a major

story: mismanagement, and perhaps even fraud, at Cape Coral's public water utility. Ten months later, the paper and readers are still actively digging, and their work triggered an investigation by the Department of Justice and the prospect of significant reforms."

- Original reporting

People report the news as it happens, either with or without mainstream media assistance.

Examples:

NowPublic [2] is a purpose-built citizen journalism website which allows people to post their own news or links to stories from the mainstream media, which are then collaboratively fleshed out with eye-witness accounts, photos and video.

In South Korea, *OhMyNews* [3] has a more traditional format, but publishes news stories written by volunteer reporters alongside material created by professionals. Launched in 2000, *OhMyNews* is seen as one of the most successful citizen journalism projects, with over 50,000 citizen reporters. Unlike many citizen journalism projects in the rest of the world, *OhMyNews* employs professional editors to work with the citizen reporters, editing their stories and helping them improve their skills.

- Fact checking

Individuals, frequently bloggers, react to a claim made by the mainstream media, politician or other source and determine if it is true.

Example:

The so-called 'Rathergate' or 'Killian documents' [4] investigation, wherein a number of bloggers examined claims made by CBS news anchor Dan Rather that he had obtained documents critical of President George W Bush's service in the United States National Guard. The authenticity of the documents was challenged by bloggers and they were subsequently withdrawn by CBS. One CBS staff member was fired, and several others asked to resign in the aftermath of Rathergate. Dan Rather himself retired some time later.

- Crowdsourcing

Maintream media outlets ask the public to send in accounts - usually photographic or written, but increasingly also video - of their experience of a specific news story.

Example:

On 11 December 2005, a series of explosions at an oil depot in Buncefield, England, lead to one of the largest fires in peacetime Europe. The BBC asked eye-witnesses to send in photos, videos and written accounts of the event and were flooded with submissions. Some of the eyewitness accounts are still available on the BBC's website [5], one of which includes video footage shot by a viewer from a plane window. A small selection of the thousands of photos sent in at the time is also still available [6].

- Story development

Some journalists take the crowdsourcing idea and apply it to their own work, soliciting not just feedback from the public, but ideas and information.

Example:

Clive Thompson, when writing an article on 'radical transparency' for *Wired*, solicited help from his readers via his blog, *Collision Detection* [7]. He said on his blog [8]:

"Normally, I don't post about magazine assignments I'm working on -- because the editors want to keep it secret. But now I'm researching a piece for *Wired* magazine, and the editors have actually asked me to talk about it openly. That's because the subject of the piece is "Radical Transparency". And, in fact, I'd like your input in writing it.

"[...] So, in the spirit of the article itself, we figured we should practice what we're preaching, and talk about the story openly while I'm working on it. In fact, I'd enjoy getting any input from anyone who's interested. What do you think of the concept? Does it make sense, is it off-base? Got any superb examples that prove that radical transparency works -- or that totally contradict the thesis? I can't pay you for any of your thoughts, but I'll give you a shout-out in the piece if I use your idea. You can post below or just email me directly."

Thompson's article, *The See-Through CEO*, was published in the April 07 issue of *Wired* [9].

An explosion of information

We are living in an information-rich age. In the pre-internet era, news was available on a relatively well defined schedule. Papers were published and news broadcast on TV or radio at the same times each day and, if you missed it, you were reliant on those around you to give you the news. If a story was not deemed important enough by the editors who defined the news agenda, there was no alternative way for it to reach a mass audience. As writer James Lileks says [10],

"In those days, I suppose, the guys who ran the wire room were the best informed people on the planet. Talk about your gatekeepers: If there'd been a coup in some small country, they could have kept everyone in town from hearing about [it], just by ripping up the story and tossing it into the trash."

The public now has access to unprecedented numbers of news sources. There are several rolling news channels, both domestic and international, on British TV, including: BBC News 24, Sky News, Fox News, CNN, Al Jazeera English, Euronews, CNBC, BBC Parliament, and Bloomberg. Internationally, hundreds of radio stations broadcast their news programs online and thousands of news organisations now publish text, audio and video online. Google News scans 4,500 news sources continuously and produces thousands of results for searches on popular stories. The current trend towards providing on-demand news services is only going to increase the amount of news available to us from traditional news sources.

Of course, news is not restricted to current affairs and sources not limited to the traditional media. Businesses can now distribute their press releases to journalists and the public alike via mailing lists, RSS and websites like PRNewswire [11] and PressBox [12]. NGOs such as MySociety [13] are republishing Hansard, the public record of British Parliamentary debate, online on the They Work For You site [14]. And, of course, there are countless blogs and other citizen journalism sites adding eyewitness accounts and first-hand news to the mix.

We have plenty of information. What is scarce is attention.

In order for news to remain meaningful, it's important that we are not flooded with data, but see only those stories which provide the best information about issues which are important or relevant to us. There are too many sources for us to read, many of which simply repeat known facts or syndicate the same content, so help is required to sift through these huge volumes of data.

Using algorithms to filter news

When Google News was launched in 2002, it broke new ground by using algorithms instead of humans to filter the news and cluster related articles together. It allows people to create complex Boolean searches which produce RSS feeds so that headlines related to user-specified topics can be delivered to the desktop in real time.

Google News [15], and other services such as Findory [16], also have recommendation algorithms that compare the articles you read with those read by other users in order to predict items which may be of interest to you. But filters can only achieve so much. They can only assess your past behaviour, compare it to other people's, and then make a best guess as to what your future requirements might be.

Computers also have a problem 'understanding' audio, video and photographs. It is very difficult for computers to recognise a face in a photograph, let alone tell you whose face it is or whether that photograph imparts important information.

Algorithmic filters cannot show you articles which are relevant but unrelated by keyword, they cannot give you summaries of background information, and they cannot choose the best of breed from a variety of different news sources.

Indeed, with this proliferation of news sources, assessing the quality of each story becomes a significant problem. NewsTrust [17] addresses it by allowing citizens to "evaluate how well [a] story supports important principles of journalism, such as fairness, sourcing and context" [18]. NewsTrust says [19]:

"Submitted stories and news sources are carefully researched and rated for balance,

fairness and originality by panels of citizen reviewers, students and journalists. Their collective ratings, reviews and tags are then featured in our news feed, for online distribution by our members and partners."

Whilst still in its infancy - the full version is scheduled to launch in winter 2008 - NewsTrust is indicative of both a loss of trust in the mainstream media and a desire to locate the highest quality journalism and make it easily available to readers.

Algorithmic filters can only ever be a small part of the story. We need human beings to act as curators of information, to help us understand the wider context of the story, provide analysis, make connections, and explain complex stories using metaphor or analogy.

Wanted: Information Curators

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a curator as "a keeper or custodian of a museum or other collection", but increasingly we need to apply the same set of skills to information. Museum curators must be knowledgeable; discerning in the selection and arrangement of objects; and able to research, organise and communicate information. Replace physical items with informational items, and it becomes clear that the same skills are needed - and used - online.

'Curation' is not just a fancy synonym for filtering: it requires an active knowledge of the area, an ability to understand the material being assessed and communicate why particular items are important. This role is, to some extent, already being carried out, generally by bloggers in subject areas such as technology or entertainment, frequently for commercial reasons.

Gia Milinovich is the official blogger for Danny Boyle and Alex Garland's April 2007 film, *Sunshine* [20]. Her role is to collect as many online resources about the film is possible, such as reviews and interviews in the press, in order to provide one central resource for fans [21]. She also co-ordinates user generated content activities, such as creating a group on Flickr [22] where fans can post their own photographs of the Sun. The commercial aim is promotion.

Some bloggers focus more on areas of specialist knowledge, whether academic, technical, or intellectual. For example, on the blog *IPKat* [23], intellectual property experts Ilanah Simon, Johanna Gibson, David Pearce and Jeremy Philips cover IP news and debate in detail. Between them, they keep those interested in IP abreast of developments in that arena.

But whilst many specialist bloggers act, at times, a little like curators, they tend to cover broad subject areas such as intellectual property, technology, mobile phones, or politics. One exception to this is Crawford Kilian, whose H5N1 blog [24] addresses avian flu in detail. Kilian - a professor at Capilano College, Vancouver, and a writer who has published several articles on bird flu - explains the contents of his H5N1 blog [25]:

"Current news stories (with comments) run down the middle column. I try to provide access to the closest, most original source—the actual report, not the news story about the report; or a news story from the country affected. [...]

"In the left-hand column you will find a cluster of News Gatherers—sites that put a lot of flu stories on one page, preferably with frequent updates. Some, like NewsNow, Google News, and Reuters, are more useful than others.

"Next are Hot Zone Sources—media reporting from countries or regions where H5N1 is present, or has recently been a problem."

Kilian is an excellent example of a single-story informational curator who is collecting data and stories from multiple sources, including government sites, discussion forums, French- and English-language journals, books, health agencies, and NGOs. He lists resources in a variety of media, predominantly text but also audio and video, and is discerning in his selection of links, for example, he says that his list of blogs "include[s] some that are updated frequently, and others that touch on the flu only occasionally. I try to review these sites and will often drop a site that hasn't been updated within the past week. Yes, I'm aware of some other flu blogs, but haven't linked to them because they're either poorly designed or promoting some commercial product." [26]

However, Kilian is still in a minority; bloggers generally do not focus on one specific story in this depth. Although bloggers may sometimes cover in detail a story that catches their imagination or is of particular importance, their coverage tends to be reacting to new developments rather than examining the story as a whole and providing background, tracking coverage and critiquing sources.

Traditionally, journalists have been given the task of explaining complex and important news and current affairs stories to the public. Usually this is done by carrying out research, talking to sources, and then synthesising an original article drawing on the information gathered and the journalist's existing knowledge and experience. Only the final article is published and journalists rarely provide a list of references - news organisations generally do not publish their original sources, even when available online, although some now are providing 'related links'.

But the web is built of hyperlinks, and there is a valuable opportunity for the media to deepen their coverage of the news by linking to the sources used in an article's preparation, plus background reading, watching or listening. Instead of simply republishing content in a flat unlinked form, news organisations should be considering how they can use hyperlinks to create richer, more informed, and more nuanced coverage of every type of news. This is particularly important in complex areas such as geopolitics, conflict, and globalisation, where context is required for full understanding.

Journalists are well placed to act as informational curators, publishing their research, critiques of sources, and possibly even unseen documents, as well as their final feature or article. This is not to say that bloggers cannot perform the curator role equally as well, if not better than, journalists. But in a rapidly changing media environment journalists must learn to give their work more depth if they are to continue to add value to society.

Facilitators

In the US in particular, some mainstream media outlets are already working hard to provide more depth to their local news coverage by acting as facilitators, helping small local communities publish their own news stories and hosting discussions relevant to a single town or area.

Many news organisations find it uneconomic to focus on hyperlocal news - stories which are of interest only to a small geographic community. Citizen journalism, however, both provides hyperlocal coverage and helps neighbours build and care for their own community both online and off.

Perhaps the best-known is Bluffton Today [27], a website and newspaper owned by Morris Publishing Group. Bluffton Today has a high proportion of citizen journalism comingled with articles written by staff. It is a web-first publication, with articles being published immediately on the web, rather than being held back until the newspaper is printed. This once rare behaviour is becoming increasingly common as media outlets see the value in keeping their website fresh and up-to-date.

But by no means do citizens require a mainstream media outlet to enable their own reporting of hyperlocal news. Baristanet [28] is a citizen journalism site that was started in May 2004 to cover the towns of Montclair, Glen Ridge, and Bloomfield in New Jersey. It provides "a mix of original reporting, as well as aggregated news, all with Baristanet's unique voice and perspective. Baristanet readers provide another layer of content and opinion by actively commenting on each story as well as providing tips, photos, suggestions, as well as (ouch!) criticisms, making the site their own." [29]

Is a simple matter for individuals to start their own hyperlocal news blog, but sites that bring individuals together to collaborate on news storytelling can add real value to a community.

Mainstream media outlets that successfully launch such sites may also benefit not just by forming stronger relationships with their audiences, but also financially from increased opportunities to sell online advertising space. Newspapers, in particular, are in decline, with year on year falls in sales [26]; it is possible that advertising revenue from successful citizen journalism sites may help bolster publishers' income.

Conclusion

The empowerment of the public has undoubtedly resulted in increased civic engagement

[30]. Political apathy occurs when citizens feel disengaged from the political process, so it is essential to democracy that people are able to take part in public discourse: the ability to speak out, to be heard, and to make a difference is of vital importance in modern society. Citizen journalism plays a key part in this process, but with massive proliferation of information sources, we risk overwhelming ourselves, thus stifling instead of nurturing the conversation.

The historical information bottleneck no longer exists, and the media are no longer in a position to act as gatekeepers who control the flow of information. Instead, they must now fulfil one of three core roles:

1. Investigation - there will always be a real need for journalists who have the skill, time and resources to engage in investigation. The importance of this role in a functioning democracy should not be overlooked, particularly in the current climate of damaging cuts in the mainstream media's newsgathering operations. However, journalists should publish their research and references wherever possible to provide more depth to their work.

2. Curation - the more information is available, the more help we need to make sense of it, and the journalist who becomes expert at assessing other people's content, creating a collection of trustworthy links and synthesising an informed and succinct overview of the story is performing a valuable service to a time- and attention-poor audience.

3. Facilitation - there is a significant opportunity for journalists to work with the community as facilitators, helping people publish stories important to them, whether international or hyperlocal.

These roles lie at the core of a healthy democracy, and we must consider their increasing importance in this connected, information-rich age.

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