The Wild Wild Web

The impact of the digital world on mainstream media is an ongoing concern among editors, as reflected by discussions at the World Editors' Forum (WEF) hosted in Cape Town in June. Kim Gurney takes a wider look at the debate over user-generated content and the mainstream media's approaches to this new phenonemon.

David Schlesinger, editor-in-chief of Reuters, told delegates that a defining aspect of the changing media landscape was the advancement of new forms of online community and communications. If a portent were needed, it came during the presentation of his colleague, London-based Reuters reporter Adam Pasick. He has embedded a digital avatar, Adam Reuters, inside the online world called *Second Life* where over seven million users create their own 3D community. Pasick has in his virtual guise even interviewed Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

Such attempts to reach a new techno-savvy audience are part of a broader dynamic impacting upon journalistic practices in newsrooms around the world. Digital advances have enabled audiences to increasingly assume the role of reporter through posting online articles, weblogs (blogs), feedback commentaries and video clips. The trend has earned itself a label: "user-generated content" (UGC), also referred to as "citizen journalism". Opinion on whether UGC is a threat or a boon to mainstream media is less tidy.

The debate has broadly polarised between two positions, as so-called Web 2.0 flourishes. Traditionalists argue that journalists occupy a unique space in the public sphere; that along with the obligation of covering events in a fair and balanced manner come particular responsibilities and obligations skilled journalists best fulfill. Advocates for digital media's rejuvenation generally laud the possibility of new voices and local, accessible content driven by consumers tired of a passive role.

Indeed, globalisation aided by new technologies has paradoxically whetted the appetite for hyper-local content in an apparent knee-jerk response to increased connectivity. Added to this is a postmodern proclivity for pastiche: we live in a "remix, mash-up" world, according to Richard Sambrook, director of Global News

at the BBC, speaking at the *We Media Global Forum* in London last year. Vincent Maher, a strategist at the Mail&Guardian Online, responds: "On the one hand, I think UGC, Web 2.0 and the whole blogging phenomenon is the cultural crystallisation of the change in capabilities that the physical media infrastructure offers. On the other, the uses of the technology remain highly unpredictable and the way they are taken up is a form of expression that will keep anthropologists interested for a long time."

The phenomenon certainly has interesting ideological undertones – a kind of metaphorical battle between the hallowed *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the constantly morphed online *Wikipedia*, where web users revise existing entries as part of a constantly changing public consensus about "the truth". *Britannica versus Wiki* pits professional arbiters of knowledge against "the cult of the amateur", the title of author Andrew Keen's recently published book. As Américo Martins Dos Santos, head of the Brazilian section of the BBC World Service, puts it: some journalists still see their profession as "a lecture rather than a conversation".

So what has shifted the balance of power? Dos Santos says the July 2005 London bombings was a turning point because of the scale of the response – 20 000 messages were sent to the BBC within 12 hours. "That just highlighted the importance of having a better structure to deal with this kind of content … the BBC recognises that it must open its airwaves for a bigger dialogue with the audience. UGC is a tremendous tool to do it and to keep the BBC relevant to an audience that wants to be really engaged with news."

Dos Santos reflects the view of many other editors when he declares citizen journalism as merely complementary. He concedes there are attendant challenges, in particular keeping consistent editorial values. "The UGC broadcast or published by media companies must still have the same editorial standards. At the end of the day, it is the responsibility of those media companies that are using the material to check if it

is correct, relevant and how best to use it in editorial terms."

Editors and their publishers are nervous of landing on the wrong side of media law. And rightly so: the majority of bloggers who also identify themselves as journalists do not abide by some common journalistic practices, according to the Pew Centre. Its survey with the American Life Project on bloggers, published in July 2006, found 34% considered their writing a form of journalism. However, only 56% "sometimes or often" spent extra time trying to verify facts; 54% hardly ever or never quoted people directly; 61% hardly ever or never got permission to post copyrighted material and 59% hardly ever or never posted corrections. Such flouting of journalistic convention has landed some American bloggers in lawsuits. This has not stopped bloggers getting more official recognition, however: they have been assigned media seats in high-profile trials. Most recently, two former sex trade workers who knew the dead women in a serial murder case in Vancouver covered the trial for citizen media website www.orato.com.

There have been calls to create a bloggers' code of conduct, including one earlier this year by Tim O'Reilly. But blogger "Karl" wrote on O'Reilly's site that taking responsibility for content could only be a good intention: "…to accept full responsibility would mean that those of us without resources would have to shut down the conversations that take place on our pages to avoid liability. And that will create a stratified web where only those with money and time will be able to provide places to converse".

Mainstream editors of web content are facing a similar dilemma. Frits van Exter, former editor-in-chief of *Trouw* newspaper in the Netherlands, told WEF delegates that interactivity actually means you run "an open sewer system". He said: "The readers, your audience… are using it to throw all their garbage through your lines 24/7." Van Exter questioned the rush for new website traffic at the expense of active moderation, arguing that old values in a new game

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could be an asset. He stressed the need for engaged debate on ethics: "Make clear what your ethics are, stick to them and be as transparent as possible about them."

Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at Poynter Institute in the US, says ethics for a journalist are very important because every decision has ethical implications; however, she does not see any lack of grounding in media ethics as a major disadvantage of citizen journalism. The problem is actually with the description itself – "citizen journalism". She states: "Citizen contributions are incredibly important to journalism. Their voices are crucial. But journalists perform a different function. And we professionals should be the ones to make that distinction."

Maher at the M&G concurs: he does not consider most blogs to be citizen journalism anymore: "The blogosphere will continue to be the Wild West of publishing but one has a different set of expectations of it." Maher thinks in future citizen journalism will mostly be created in conjunction with media companies that protect themselves and their contributors from legal exposure. "I don't think there is a big future for citizen journalism that is not edited in some way or another," he adds. "One of the primary reasons for the gatekeeping, other than social responsibility, is the limitation of legal risk and exposure for the media company. This will not go away unless people suddenly stop caring about defamation."

Maher's observations are borne out by research on how the British media are struggling with UGC, conducted by City University journalism lecturer Neil Thurman. He says his findings also have relevance to other news organisations because journalists tend to share similar norms and values. Thurman's paper, presented in March 2007, concluded that reputation, trust and legal concerns suggest news organisations have too much at stake to just open the doors to UGC. He found an opportunity existed to facilitate user media by filtering and aggregating it in ways useful and valuable to audiences. The M&G has recently done just that by launching an "aggregator" Amatomu.com, which effectively provides a one-stop, searchable blog interface.

One recurring gripe among editors in Thurman's first round of interviews in 2004 was the drain on resources to monitor UGC. Interestingly, attitudes had shifted markedly from fear to enthusiasm by a second round of interviews in 2006. Thurman said this was partly driven by Rupert Murdoch's speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 2005 where he warned against complacency about the digital revolution. Thurman said technology also helped: content management systems became more flexible and affordable, which lessened the burden of moderation.

What is clear is UGC is taking off, according to online audience measurement firm Nielsen/NetRatings. It found in an August 2006 report that half of the top web brands in the US were driven by UGC and the media was a big part of this trend: Associated Press scored a high rating on the back of a new video offering to complement online and print news. Others are following suit: Sky News has built a virtual replica of its Twickenham News Centre in cyberspace and BBC News 24 last year launched a new TV programme based entirely on UGC. It also broadcast a series of reports motivated, produced and presented by listeners about major issues in Africa.

There has not been a watershed event spurring citizen journalism in South Africa but the established players are not sleeping: the *Sunday Times* recently launched a UGC website under the masthead 'For the people By the people'.

It is partly the fear of being marginalised that is driving the adoption of UGC initiatives – at least in the UK newspaper world, according to Thurman.

But as the BBC's Sambrook told WEF delegates, there is nothing new in terms of editorial principles about the UGC dynamic. He said: "We've always interviewed the public, we've always interviewed experts, we've always taken contributions from the public but the technology is such that it allows this to happen on an unprecedented scale. And it's much more one of quantity rather than qualitative difference in terms of the editorial principles that lie behind it." McBride at Poynter agrees: "It's merely possible now. That's the only thing that's changed. But that's everything. Many people want interactivity. Now that they can have it, they refuse to live without it."

Maher points out that the old one-to-many mass media model seems incongruent with the way digital culture expresses itself today. Most media companies are embracing UGC more than convergence; it has "immediate and obvious benefits when you consider that introducing UGC onto news sites along with other Web 2.0 functionality… dramatically increases the volume of ad inventory available for sale." He says most news companies are capitalising on the input they get from their audience by monetising the content: "It is therefore inevitable that elements of the audience are going to become a paid resource, especially as quality becomes increasingly of concern." This is already evident in the US where some newspaper sites syndicate content from bloggers. Others, like associatedcontent.com, offer cash for stories that range from the serious to a miracle photo of Jesus Christ in the Korean mountains.

In the end, the battle might be over-hyped. As Steven Johnson points out in *Time* magazine's January 2007 cover story, most UGC is working in a zone where there are no experts or where the users themselves are experts rather than challenging the authority of a traditional expert: "The overwhelming majority of photographers at flickr [a photo-sharing website] harbour no dream of becoming the next Annie Leibovitz. They just want to share with their extended family the pics they snapped over the holidays." His observations are supported by Nielsen/Netratings, which found that overwhelmingly most bloggers were motivated by creative expression.

Thurman at City University says UGC has already had an impact on established newsroom models. He concluded: "Whether it is boon or a threat depends on your point of view and is difficult to unpick from the other changes that are happening – convergence, mergers and acquisitions, globalisation and consumer preferences. UGC can be a positive influence on the mainstream media and its journalists but only in properly resourced and managed newsrooms."

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