Hosting the Public Discourse:

News Organizations, Digital Intermediaries, and the Politics of

Making Newsmedia Social

Joshua Braun, Dept. of Communication, Cornell University

Tarleton Gillespie, Dept. of Communication, Cornell University

Contact:

Joshua Braun

336 Kennedy Hall

Dept. of Communication

Cornell University

Ithaca, NY 14853

Joshua.A.Braun@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, we will examine the inverse and converging movement of two sets of institutions: news organizations, as they find that part of their mission necessarily includes hosting an unruly user community that doesn't always play by the norms of journalism; and online media platforms and social networks designed for users to share content, finding that the content being shared is often a form of news, some of which challenges their established user guidelines. We draw on a range of in-depth interviews to understand how each industry is finding itself in the other's turf, and facing the challenges and tensions the other has long coped with, but from its own distinct vantage point. From this we will explore the ways in which the roles of news provision and community management are increasingly intermingled—in ways that will continue to have an impact on both news organizations and digital intermediaries, along with their audiences and users.

While today's headlines are full of stories about the death of newspapers at the hands of the Internet, the longer story has been the efforts of all kinds of news organizations to adjust to, take advantage of, and in some ways migrate to an online environment. More than just delivering the news on a website or pushing it to mobile devices, traditional news organizations have been seeking to establish a sustainable online presence and expand the news experience by incorporating interactive mechanisms that allow users to join the conversation (Bruns, 2005; Deuze, 2003; Deuze, Bruns, and Neuberger, 2007). Of course, the manner and scope of this user participation differ by organization and by the technical infrastructure they implement. Moreover, they have changed over time with the shifting expectations of users and the need to compete with emerging forms of online public discourse. Still, in the rush to offer comment threads, user blogs, discussion spaces, snap polls, and feedback opportunities, newspapers and broadcast news organizations find themselves increasingly in the position of hosting unpolished, wide-ranging, and unpredictable user-generated discussions.

News organizations are now faced with the opportunity, and increasingly the obligation, to interact with users in new and ever more involved ways. And the content management software they often depend on as infrastructure for their sites now regularly comes packaged with the tools for user involvement anyway. When news organizations open up discussion boards and comment threads on their stories, or when they brand their pages as blogs, they get user-generated content, regardless of whether the journalists at these organizations intend to engage with them or not.

This ambivalent embrace of user interactivity poses a new set of challenges and obligations, largely unfamiliar to traditional news producers. While they once spoke of and for the people through their particular, professional news-gathering practices, now they must also deal with the mundane details of overseeing the participation of actual readers. This means imposing and justifying policies for managing this unruly dialogue—policies that must not only be practical and enforceable, but also balance the economic, professional, and ideological aspirations of the news organization. News organizations in these positions find themselves forced to grapple with whether user comments fit the journalistic quality of their sites, as well as what form of comment moderation will maintain the health of these sites, avoid legal liability, avoid tarnishing an organization's brand and reputation, all while preserving their journalistic ideals.

The kind of community management that these news organizations now find themselves responsible for has for some time been the purview of what we will refer to as "digital intermediaries"—online content platforms (e.g., YouTube, Flickr), social networks (e.g., MySpace, Facebook), and online communities (e.g., LiveJournal, Daily Kos). Designed not to produce but to merely host user-generated expression, these content platforms and social networks can serve as a model for news organizations now finding themselves managing user-generated content. But just as these news providers find themselves drifting into the role of community management, digital intermediaries too are drifting, finding themselves not just chaperoning user communities, but playing host to the public discourse that news organizations have traditionally provided.

Most digital intermediaries have had to draw lines in the sand in their own policies about obscenity, hate speech, violence, libel, and spam, as well as intervening when the tenor of the discussion threatens to turn away users and their productive contributions (Gillespie, 2010; Tushnet, 2008). Some of these policies are written, others are fostered as community norms, others are built into the technology itself. Now, as these sites increasingly play a role in providing news, or as a space for a variety of forms of citizen journalism, they are finding they must balance their efforts to cultivate and protect the health of their community with the kinds of obligations that have traditionally accompanied the journalistic mission. The lines they must draw in the sand are no longer just about porn and copyright infringement, but whether to remove the video of Neda's slaying during the Iranian protests (Raghavan, 2009), holocaust denial Facebook groups (Respers, 2009), terrorist training videos (Date, 2008), and racist commentary about the Obamas (Colker, 2009). The content policies and their enforcement must toe the line between avoiding legal liability, keeping an eye on the economic bottom line, and some kind of quasi-journalistic commitment to protecting their users' freedom of speech and the vibrancy of the public discourse they produce.

In this paper, we will examine the inverse and converging movement of these two sets of institutions: news organizations, now finding that part of their mission includes hosting an unruly user community that doesn't always play by the norms of journalism; and media platforms and social networks designed for users to share content, finding that the content being shared is often a form of news, some of which challenges their established user guidelines. We hope to tease apart some of the distinctions, commonalities, and dynamic interrelations between traditional

news organizations and digital intermediaries by looking at how they are coming to share the

same space and deal with the same problems.

To do this, we have conducted a series of in-depth, qualitative interviews with members

of major network news organizations (ABC News/ABCNews.com, CBS News/CBS Interactive,

MSNBC/MSNBC.com), as well as of several large digital intermediaries (YouTube, Facebook).

We discussed with each of them what went into overseeing the user communities on their sites

and setting the policies designed to maintain them. We have collected background information

on a range of organizational policy decisions made by these companies, as well as a number of

controversies involving the removal of content from their sites. Throughout the paper, we

explore the ways in which the roles of journalism and community management are increasingly

intermingled in ways that will continue to have an impact on both news organizations and digital

intermediaries, along with their audiences and users.

Network News and the Social Impulse

The Journalistic Promise of Interactivity

Recent years have brought about challenges to and shifts in the institutional boundaries,

technological bases, and professional identities surrounding journalism. But as journalism has

become more difficult to neatly define, articulations and justifications of its importance have

become especially vociferous. As journalistic institutions themselves fret about the widening

cracks in traditional news business models, they are more vocal about the social value of their

products, hoping to justify the cost of their endeavors to investors, lawmakers, and the

(consuming) public. Politicians themselves have sought to defend the fourth estate from legal

challenges and financial disaster (Vasnis, 2009). And all the while, non-traditional new media have attempted to confront or provide alternatives to mainstream journalism—or at least appropriate some of its cultural authority.

There are many claims and arguments on which the legal and cultural authority of journalism rests, but among them is the claim to advocate for the public, to serve as its voice in a mass-mediated society. In mainstream journalism this role is often somewhat abstract—we trust the daily newspaper and the evening news to serve as public forums by making us aware of the views and issues confronted by our fellow citizens (Sunstein, 2007)—but it can also, at times, be far more direct, allowing citizens direct access to the public sphere in the form of "letters to newspapers, phone-in contributions to broadcast talk shows, and participation in studio debates about public affairs" (McNair, 2009).

Whether news organizations justify their work by attempting to speak for the public or by allowing the public to speak through them directly, interactive Web tools that allow audiences to talk immediately to—and sometimes through—a news organization online, are increasingly important. Often, if not inevitably, they are also appealing to journalists because they make a similar promise. For instance, Ed O'Keefe, the senior producer for special projects and innovation at ABC News described the network's blogging efforts this way:

> As the Web has grown, so has our use of it. And I think it started as sort of a utilitarian necessity, and now it's developed into another great tool in our arsenal, not just to reach out to our audience and publicize what we're doing, but to interact with our audience in ways that we never have been able to before. ... [Blogs are a] way in which we can interchange, and begin a dialogue, a conversation about the news with our audience, with our users in a way that just simply didn't exist before.

Of course, such new forms of interchange come with a host of tensions and responsibilities that, while in some ways continuous with pre-digital practices, can also present a unique and rather steep learning curve for the organizations adopting them. These are explored in the next section.

Taming the Torrent

In 2007, ABC News expanded the community section of its site. The trade journal, *AdWeek* described this primarily as an effort to build brand loyalty among existing ABCNews.com users interested in the network's evening newscast, *World News Tonight.* Over the course of the ensuing three months, however, the site not only got more "sticky" for existing users—the number of unique visitors grew by 13 percent to 10.9 million, and the number of user-contributed comments spiked to 64,000 per month (Shields, 2007). The network's senior vice president in charge of digital endeavors, Paul Slavin, told *AdWeek* that the popularity of the social features had caught the network by surprise. "We didn't necessarily expect this," he said (Shields, 2007).

Whether they predict it or not—whether they intend it or not—when major news organizations add social features to their sites, they get feedback in droves. Containing and processing the resulting "chaos and noise," and—hopefully—turning it into something collegial and constructive has become an increasingly central part of what traditional news organizations do as they move online. As early as 2007, media analyst Mike Shields concluded that "hosting more pages and streaming more video are actually of 'negligible' cost. What does add to the bill [for media organizations]: hiring professionals to police a site's expanding collection of community pages—a necessity these days."

Of course, the notion of "interacting with the audience" or "engaging in a conversation" is somewhat relative. News sites may allow both journalists and audiences more interaction with one another than ever before. But journalists and editors range in their interest and/or reluctance to incorporate interaction with users into their reporting and work routines (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman, 2008). For some this give-and-take with audiences is the long-awaited culmination of the populist promise of journalism, a chance for "real dialogue;" for others it dilutes the expert role journalists can play in providing the information citizens need. It appears to many at the networks that the way for broadcast news to stay relevant in the digital era, and the key to a sustainable online business model, is interactivity—for network news organizations to host and engage with the content, conversations, and communities generated by their online users (National Post, 2005; Johnson, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Squires, 2005). Others pledge transparency and nominally invite user feedback but hope to avoid the risks and responsibilities of hosting user-generated content. In either case, the expectation to participate is growing.

Whatever dialogue does exist, at least on the news sites themselves, is carefully hemmed in by a company's terms of service, its moderation policy, as well as the constraints written into its interactive software (Braun, this symposium). These controls aren't imposed lightly or by way of some authoritarian impulse. For news organizations, embracing the idea of "the public" is one thing; dealing with an unruly torrent of user-generated content often proves to be quite another. This is particularly true for branded news sites receiving tens of millions of pageviews each month. Will Femia, MSNBC.com's former online communities manager, who currently works as a Web producer for the network's *Rachel Maddow Show*, noted that a news site and the

discussions it hosts will inevitably be "assigned a character by individuals who are on whatever crusade they may be on." The news organization becomes a symbol—or rather a whole set of symbols with cultural currency—to which different individuals and groups impute different meanings. He elaborates,

> NBC News means different things to different people, but it means something. And MSNBC means something. And Microsoft means something. And even within that, our sub-communities mean things beyond what we can control. Like it just doesn't matter [what you do]. You're going to get a Fox News guy in there somewhere. Or you're gonna get an anti-corporate guy in there. You know what I mean? To some extent there's nothing you can do.

As anyone who's visited a news site knows, the civility of comments ranges widely, often depending on the topic and the source of the original content. For example, a senior producer at CBS Interactive (the digital arm of CBS and CBS News) explained that obituaries could result in either "touching" or "out-of-control" comment threads depending on whether the subject of the story had been a popular or controversial figure. Likewise, Femia at MSNBC noted that with regard to comment moderation, "Some things you can leave wide open and everyone has a good time. And some things, [snaps fingers] as soon as you hit the publish button, it fills up with bile and venom."

Sources across the three broadcast networks' digital news divisions noted that political stories and blogs, in particular, could be a challenge to moderate, as they frequently attract heated commentary. Nor is this phenomenon unique to U.S. broadcast networks. The BBC's political editor, Nick Robinson, recently announced he had stopped reading comments on his own blog, Newslog, stating that they were generally written by "people who have already made their minds up, to abuse me, to abuse each other or abuse a politician" (Townend, 2010).

Even when comments are civil and constructive, their volume can eventually prove

overwhelming. Back in 2007, Ken Paulson, editor of *USA Today* and its Website, told the trade

journal *AdWeek* that its heavy comment volume, which could result in up to 1,000 reader

comments on a story, was a "breakthrough" in the way the paper related to its readers (Shields,

2007). But in the intervening years, some involved in the journalism business have voiced less

sanguine opinions of high comment volume. Mike Davidson, for instance, a Web developer

behind MSNBC.com's new blogging tool and CEO of MSNBC's Newsvine subsidiary, for

instance, noted that while comment volume can be a marker of a story's popularity or impact, it's

not necessarily a good surrogate measure for the quality of a user's interactive experience with a

site. In short, says Davidson, "10,000 comments on a story...[is] not a conversation. That's not a

community." Femia expands on this idea:

> Sometimes the volume can be too much to *not* let it run free. You can't read
> 5,000 comments. Literally, you can't read 5,000 comments in a day. I'm pretty
> sure you can't. You'd go blind, first of all. And you'd also go insane. And
> regardless of whether there's any value in having 5,000 comments on there, I'm
> pretty sure that the user's reward happens as soon as they hit the publish button on
> their comment. And that's it. Like, it could not show up and most people, I think,
> would probably be okay that they at least got to put out what they were going to
> say. (emphasis original)

This flood of content from users simultaneously invites moderation and makes it especially

difficult. For instance, in 2007 CBSNews.com ultimately made a decision to temporarily shut

down comment threads on all stories related to then-Senator and Presidential candidate Barack

Obama. Mike Sims, the director of news and operations for CBSNews.com told the press that

the site could not immediately find a way to deal with the "persistence and volume" of racist

comments the stories were attracting. While some appreciated the move, it also led to criticism

of the site, with some commentators claiming that not allowing readers to see and react to racist

comments effectively hid the important issue of racism in the campaign.

The fact that a major network would invest so heavily in designing interactive features

into its site, only to shut them down reflects the profound challenge that comment moderation

can pose. Katherine Seelye (2007), who reported on the network's decision in the *New York*

Times aptly noted that the controversy demonstrated the nascent and evolving nature of news

organizations' moderation policies, noting that "there is no rule book for resolving clashes

among the anything-goes ethos of the Web, the efforts by candidates to harness it to their ends

and the standards that mainstream journalism has tried to impose on what appears under its

banner." The challenge for network news sites is daunting, and not just for CBS.

ABCNews.com, for instance, has found it necessary to retain a team of moderators whose sole

job is to review every comment posted to the site. MSNBC.com pre-moderates all of its blog

comments and now sends all of its story comments to Newsvine, an altogether separate site

where comments appear without MSNBC's branding and masthead.

Of course, comments aren't always bad. Some can be incredibly useful. But as with

most places on the Internet, proprietors of news sites are charged with setting the wheat apart

from the considerable chaff. More than one source expressed the difficulty they found in sifting

particularly good or useful comments from the constant flow of user generated content. Femia

referred to this as the challenge of "surfacing comments:"

> You have someone like Bob Sullivan, who writes *The Red Tape Chronicles*, which
> is a consumer issues blog. And he'll write a story about, "So-and-so rips you off
> in such and such a way." And then he'll get a mountain of comments saying, "Oh,
> yeah. I got ripped off that same way," or "Hey, look. Here's how else you get
> ripped off." And sometimes, "Here's how I solved the problem." But that guy is
> comment number 562 on a 2,000-comment list. How does [Sullivan] say, "Look,

> this guy had a good idea?" ... [His blog is] a great example of that kind of audience- or reader-interaction that serves his journalistic pursuits as well. And it's a challenge for him to process that much input. ... My point is that you get chaos and noise, and [there's the problem of] containing the chaos and noise. And then there's [the problem of] processing the chaos and noise...the two ends of the spectrum that we see, given our volume [of comments].

Of course, *The Red Tape Chronicles* is, perhaps, an exceptional case. As Femia's comment about the user's reward being in clicking the publish button indicates, not every commenter is writing in with the intent of starting a dialogue. Even when well-moderated, user comments don't always constitute a conversation or a discourse—civil or otherwise. He added,

> Not everyone gets helpful comments like Bob Sullivan. ... And something that we've found—or that I concluded—was that to a large extent, the value for the user comes in making their statement, in getting it off their chest. ... Part of why I think [MSNBC.com's attempt at] chat rooms failed...is that people logged in because they had something to say, not because they had anything they wanted to hear. And so that is also an important factor, I think, in how the communities take shape.

We can see, then, that even good moderation has its limits. And poor moderation on a news site potentially exposes the organization to legal liability. In some cases libel laws apply, and there are other risks as well—if a commenter exposes an anonymous source, for instance. Moreover, it's recently been noted that vicious comments on stories can in fact scare away journalists' hard-won sources (Davenport, 2010). O'Keefe explains the difficulties inherent in moderating comments on a news site:

> It's a double-edged sword. It's one of those situations in which you want to encourage that community conversation, but of course we're a major news network. We are responsible for the content that goes on our site. And we want to make sure that the conversation is civil and appropriate. So we have standards for all of this and we have very diligent post-moderation [after-the-fact filtering of published comments]. ... You open the gate and allow people to communicate, and you actively encourage...dialogue, and you can get inappropriate remarks, offensive remarks, threatening remarks. Those are the ones that we are targeting

and want to get out of the conversation, because we hope this is a forum for civil dialogue, and it's very difficult to accomplish that on certain occasions.

News organizations have a great deal of experience sifting through pre-digital audience correspondence—choosing which letters to the editor to print, which callers to put through, which audience members to call on at a televised town hall meeting. A major difference is that such editorial decisions were generally made behind closed doors. Editors might discard ugly correspondence, let through only those opinions they considered educated—or a few things they found outrageous or reprehensible, under the assumption that they could subsequently balance them with indignant rebuttals from other readers.[1]

Handling user comments online differs in that, except for systems that hold comments for review, moderation is done in public view. And regardless of whether news organizations actually get called to the mat to account for their moderation choices, they have generally felt the need to set norms among users and justify their editorial choices by publicly setting user guidelines and rules for moderation.[2] In short, as interactivity becomes an increasingly large draw for news sites, some form of comment moderation is both deeply necessary and unavoidably messy, and major news organizations must be pragmatic about how best to handle the torrent of user generated content they receive, while justifying their choices in terms of their journalistic mission.

This process is not merely a rhetorical one, but—as we've seen—makes distinct demands on journalists' time and the nature of their work. And as the online efforts of major news

---

[1] A journalist friend of ours calls this last strategy the notion that "sunlight is the best disinfectant."

[2] See, for example, CBSNews.com's "Rules of Engagement" (Rosellini, 2005)

organizations continue to expand, these demands continue to refashion news work. Femia observed that,

> What happens with community is that you get to know your people. You get involved in an exchange, in a back-and-forth. Or you at least supervise an exchange in some capacity. And then when good things come out of that, you're able to use them. And if you don't have that immersion, that's when it feels invasive. That's when it feels like this other separate thing, and then you say "I don't want anything to do with that, because I have no idea who those people are or what they're doing." And that's a condition within MSNBC.com and it also exists with the TV folks as well: This idea that the Web is a spigot, you know what I mean? Especially community requires your participation and your awareness. And you can't just milk it. You can't just pull the bucket off the maple tree and it's full of UGC content. ... There's an engagement that's necessary, I think, in order for that to be a productive relationship. ... Explaining that, or sharing that with a news gathering organization is a challenge in itself. ... You know, why Tweet? Try to explain to a 50- or 60-year-old television correspondent who's been in the business forever why they suddenly need to write 140 characters about their everyday. ...Why is that anything? What are they doing? Often it's explained to them that it's just part of this promotional thing. And I think a lot of people dismiss it as just being a marketing gimmick. Or I don't even know if they think that deeply. Sometimes it might just seem like a chore that they have to do as part of being a reporter. "Well, you know, you have to put in a certain amount of Web time, and that's how you do it." But in fact, [involvement] is what we're encouraging...and I see it with the *Maddow Show* producers a lot. I can see them getting enthusiastic about their community, their viewers, watching their people who watch their show, and seeing how they react to it. And to some degree, having an interaction with them. That's work. You have to do it.

The journalistic promise of public engagement, then, is a dynamic one. The rhetoric of engagement serves not merely as a justification for preserving journalism as it has been. For some, it is also a powerful rationale for reshaping the profession—both a cause of and solution to the changing boundaries surrounding the fourth estate.

Digital Intermediaries and the News Impulse

Proclaiming the Importance of User-Generated News

In late 2009, Twitter made a small change to its front page. Just two years old, the site had initially presented itself as a status update service, a way to keep in touch with friends by

letting them know what you're thinking about at any particular moment. The front page once

prompted its users to answer the question, "What are you doing?" But by late 2009 this struck

Twitter's designers as inadequate for the job, considering the variety of purposes to which

Twitter was being put:

> The fundamentally open model of Twitter created a new kind of information
> network and it has long outgrown the concept of personal status updates. Twitter
> helps you share and discover what's happening now among all the things, people,
> and events you care about. "What are you doing?" isn't the right question
> anymore—starting today, we've shortened it by two characters. Twitter now asks,
> "What's happening?" (Twitter, 2009)

This change may seem cosmetic, but it's indicative of the changes that digital intermediaries

have experienced in the last half decade, both in the way they're used, and how they have come

to perceive their own service, champion it publicly as valuable, and sometimes even redesign it

to better suit emergent purposes. Offering the answer to "What's happening?" highlights the role

they can and do play in providing news and contributing to the public discourse. Just as news

organizations migrating their content online found they needed to host user participation around

their journalism, Twitter and other digital intermediaries, aspiring to make space for user

participation, have found themselves hosting forms of content that look suspiciously like news.

Be it the 2008 U.S. elections, natural disasters in Haiti and Chile, a plane crash-landing

in the Hudson river, political protests in Iran, or the ongoing military actions in Iraq and

Afghanistan, these digital intermediaries have increasingly been appropriated by users as a venue

for eyewitness reporting, citizen journalism, and public commentary. This is a role that these

digital intermediaries largely fell into, rather than having sought it out. For instance, as tensions

grew in Iran following the disputed elections in June 2009, the Iranian government imposed

strict restrictions on foreign journalists. This pushed online sharing services like YouTube,

Facebook, and Twitter into a particularly prominent position, as protesters loaded videos and

posted status updates in an attempt to report on the government forces that were attempting to

quell the protests. For these digital intermediaries, this confluence of political importance and

technological affordance has brought them into perfect alignment with the ethos of citizen

journalism.

> We are constantly amazed by the videos our community uploads, whether
> from their own backyards or the streets of a faraway land. Armed with only a
> camera and a means to reach the Internet, anyone can ask another to bear witness
> to their lives. Given the nature of the YouTube videos from Iran, we may want to
> turn away from some of the images we see, but we keep watching, knowing that
> we are seeing through the eyes of a people who have discovered the power of
> information — despite the often extreme measures their government is using to
> try to stop them.
> We will continue to provide the platform for you to see what they see, hear
> their voices and learn about their struggles. And we encourage you to join the
> global conversation. Leave a comment, upload your own response video or share
> a moving moment with someone else. (YouTube 2009)

 Despite stumbling upon this news function, these sites have subsequently sought to

capitalize on and expand this role. During the 2008 U.S. elections, YouTube established

CitizenTube to moderate Q&As between YouTube users and the major presidential candidates,

culminating in a televised national debate co-sponsored by YouTube and CNN where the

candidates faced questions posed in the form of YouTube videos. These sites have often lauded

their news function as central to their purpose, and the press regularly reports on the importance

of these sites in the direct intervention into news events and as sources of information (Brainard,

2010, Grossman 2009). In an op-ed piece in the *Times Online*, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone

noted that Twitter delayed a scheduled maintenance outage at the height of the Iran protests, after

being asked not to interrupt the service by both users and the U.S. State Department; as Stone

noted, "Twitter cannot rest while there is unrest in Iran" (Stone, 2009).

Showing War, Regulating Violence

As these intermediaries are increasingly put to use as the means of distributing citizen

journalism, reports from the front, and the images of carnage from the battlefield, the disaster

zone, and the political protest, serving community becomes distinctly more complicated.

Providing the news and fostering the public discourse are noble causes, but they open the door to

different, and sometimes conflicting, obligations regarding the circulation of troubling content

and the curation of unruly dialogue. These services often imply in their public proclamations

that there is little tension or contradiction between hosting citizen journalist footage of violence

in the streets and homemade videos of adorable cats, between personal status updates and real-

time information feeds. However, the kinds of content, especially visual, that citizen journalists

are eager to post, often troubles the norms these intermediaries have established.

Though these services present themselves as open platforms and play down their

interventions (Gillespie, 2010), they do curate what they allow users to make available: to protect

their user community from seeing troubling things, to protect their service from becoming

something more disreputable and hard to seek sponsorship for, and to protect their company from

legal liability. These are tensions that they will acknowledge in private: as the director of content

policy at YouTube put it,

> But from a user experience standpoint, when you say you want a positive user
> experience, what does that mean? Right? Because diverse content would promote
> positive user experience and having as much content as possible is great but then
> you've got the user experience perspective also of you don't want people that are
> going on to the site expecting to be entertained and then inadvertently being
> shocked by seeing Neda bleeding on the street without a warning potentially.

Each of these sites has in place a set of policies that indicate what is appropriate or inappropriate in terms of conduct, expression, and participation: from sex and nudity to gratuitous violence, from spam to personal attacks. They also have in place an array of techniques and policies for chaperoning their archives, bound by what's technically possible, legally expedient, and financially viable.

Some of the more challenging cases these sites' content managers face come from the presentation of graphic footage from war-torn or politically volatile areas. The Neda video that was so vaunted and celebrated by YouTube and journalists alike, on face value, clearly violates two of their Community Guidelines: "Graphic or gratuitous violence is not allowed. If your video shows someone getting hurt, attacked, or humiliated, don't post it." and "YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies and similar things" (YouTube, 2010). The impulse to honor the policy, and the expression of community concern that brought it under consideration in the first place, can run counter to the journalistic impulse that this footage, as graphically violent and shocking as it may be, has news value. In YouTube's case, this provoked an internal conversation about the video itself: is it of such news value that it warrants keeping it available despite user complaints? Should it be placed behind an age barrier (which excludes not only teens, but any user who is not registered with the site) or a warning about the graphic nature of the footage? This last was the solution chosen in the case of the Neda video, and similar videos of violence against protesters: "The YouTube community has indicated that this video could be potentially offensive. Please click here to follow through to the video."

For some content, it is often difficult to discern between important but ghastly political

violence and the more disreputable activities of amateur videographers, or between hateful but protected public expression and the implied threat of violence. YouTube faced criticism when it removed videos that showed people being beaten in a dark room, only to find out later that it was footage of prisoner interrogations in Egypt leaked by political activists. Digital intermediaries are forced to draw lines in the sand about what counts as merely disreputable and what is criminal, lines that hew more or less with First Amendment jurisprudence. Facebook's content manager described one such line:

> we're pretty lenient even when it comes to profanity in saying somewhat inflammatory types stuff so long as it doesn't cross certain lines. For instance we allow groups on the site that say, "Fuck Christianity," "Fuck Judaism," "Fuck Islam," and actually those three groups were all created by the same guy who's atheist who doesn't like organized religion and as long as he's saying that instead of, "Fuck Jews," "Fuck Christians," "Fuck Muslims."

> TG: Target the religion per se, not the people.

> Exactly. We allow it to stay on the site but that's a very inflammatory statement to a large percentage of our user base and they get flagged in droves.

Facebook later faced criticism for allowing groups that denied the existence of the Holocaust; in response they removed some but not all of the groups, making a similar distinction between political speech reprehensible to some and hate speech that might incite violence towards particular people (Heussner, 2009).

Part of the challenge faced by these intermediaries is having to determine the newsworthiness, cultural value, even the appropriateness of troubling footage, with minimal access to the context around the images they're judging. The director of content policy at YouTube spoke of two kinds of contexts that their team looks at to make decisions on tough cases: the context provided by whoever posted the video—title, description, filename—and any

other context their team can glean, to the extent that they know anything about the content of the video, and whether a YouTube viewer who comes across the video in question will have the same contextual knowledge. In a video where someone is attacked, but whose death is not shown, does the viewer know that the person later expired, and does that make it a more graphic video than if it is not known?

Their considerations of questionable content must also extend to the motives of the viewer: is this video being watched out of a noble sense of public obligation to know of the atrocities of war and political oppression, or out of more prurient interests? Who may be reading a "Fuck Islam" Facebook page, and why? The fact that both the purposes of the content and the impulses of its consumers are so oblique, and to some degree the site cannot help but accommodate all kinds, is not the kind of problem reporters and news organizations generally face. They more often know the context of the images they publish, often having produced them, and even if some of their viewers are enjoying these images for all the wrong reasons, the clear public import of making these images available largely overshadows such prurient uses.

These kinds of fraught decisions of what to show are not, of course, unfamiliar to traditional news organizations, which must also balance the news import with the graphic impact of visual representations of the casualties of war—a recent debate about an AP photo of a dying Marine is only the latest example (Shepard, 2009). But these digital intermediaries, designed and governed first for content sharing rather than news reporting, find themselves grappling with the norms and policies already set in place, designed primarily around their sense of propriety and the ability to build a business on its social and expressive activity. Similarly, Wikipedia, despite its vaunted commitment to open stewardship by its users, must regularly lock politically

sensitive pages when edits turn into flame wars, to maintain civil standards of discourse. Google began receiving complaints in late 2009 when a Photoshopped image combining Michelle Obama's face with an ape's, began turning up high in the search results for images of the First Lady. Google at first refused to remove the image from its search listings, leaving instead a message about its commitment to free speech and the integrity of its search results. It then removed the image itself from the site posting it, a spam blog on Google-owned Blogger, citing risks of spyware (Gross, 2009). The norm of protecting the search algorithm as sacrosanct and their commitment to free speech coincided, but Google was not immune to calls that their search results were promoting a hateful public discourse; ever resourceful, they found a clever way out of the dilemma.

Google's YouTube team found they had to make a similarly strategic adjustment in regard to war footage uploaded to their site. Earlier in YouTube's existence, the guideline quoted above, "YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies and similar things" used to read "YouTube is not a shock site. Don't post gross-out videos of accidents, dead bodies and stuff like that. This includes war footage if its intended to shock and disgust." The initial policy referenced both footage being uploaded by U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and, more troubling to American critics, videos posted by jihadists and insurgents (or Internet users re-posting from other sites) displaying their attacks against U.S. soldiers (Wyatt, 2006). The explicit reference in the guidelines to war footage was removed in late 2007, though the remaining language still offers YouTube room to remove war footage if it crosses less specific boundaries of appropriateness; this change may also afford them greater leeway in retaining such footage if its newsworthiness trumps user concerns.

In 2008, the question of violent but newsworthy footage reemerged, when Sen, Joe Lieberman made public a complaint delivered to Google CEO Eric Schmidt, charging YouTube with hosting terrorist training videos from al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist groups (Date, 2008). The company took it as a moment to present its credentials both as a protector of free speech and public discourse and as protector of its community; after removing some of the videos, it proclaimed that while they had

> examined and ended up removing a number of videos from the site, primarily because they depicted gratuitous violence, advocated violence, or used hate speech… Senator Lieberman stated his belief, in a letter sent today, that all videos mentioning or featuring these groups should be removed from YouTube—even legal nonviolent or non-hate speech videos. While we respect and understand his views, YouTube encourages free speech and defends everyone's right to express unpopular points of view. We believe that YouTube is a richer and more relevant platform for users precisely because it hosts a diverse range of views, and rather than stifle debate we allow our users to view all acceptable content and make up their own minds. (YouTube, 2008)

The terms by which YouTube made and proclaimed this compromise are familiar to the arena of journalism and First Amendment jurisprudence. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that, had the videos been hosted on the *New York Times* website, both the Senator's complaint and the response to it would have been different: an established newspaper could more easily claim a rigid First Amendment defense, not just of freedom of speech but the freedom of the process. Lieberman might have appeared to be silencing the press, in a way that criticizing YouTube did not. Despite their claims to be the new providers of news, digital intermediaries cannot merely follow the traditional norms common to traditional news organizations, and they are not (yet) accorded the wide berth the law allows to news organizations.

Conclusion

One explanation for why these industries seem to be encroaching on each other's domain is certainly economic. The news business is busy adapting itself to the digital age, and as several of our interview subjects pointed out, engaged "online communities" are at the center of many online business models—in short, they're monetizable resources. As YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and others grew, they made any number of claims for facilitating our connection to others, allowing individuals the chance to speak and be heard, and offering entertainment on par with their mass media competitors. But there may have been no more appealing claim of public significance, and financial value to advertisers, than that they increasingly serve a news function.

A second explanation is that online "communities" simply *happen*, and whether or not they're not hosted on a news site, groups of users will often turn an eye to the political. Opening up comment threads to a base of regular users or feeding news content to social networks like Facebook or Twitter raises the potential for, and eventually begets a base of regular, engaged users. To the extent that engaged users are the economic and ideological alternative to "bile and venom," they're obviously welcome. And, if Twitter's real time bulletins can more readily evade traditional forms of information censorship, those who need to speak will turn to it as an alternative traditional avenues are closed to them (Grossman, 2009).

Community management is, by all accounts, hard work. It means confronting all of the challenges delineated above, and acknowledging a seeming paradox at the heart of the way journalists and digital intermediaries justify their work: namely, that fostering public discourse at times means moderating and silencing the voices of individuals, and conversely that managing a community must sometimes take a backseat to public obligation.

While these industries are already encroaching on each others' domains, this is only the beginning. Despite the financial and institutional resources news organizations have already invested in their online components, these elements often continue to be seen as add-ons to the primary work of these companies. But many journalists acknowledge that the demands of serving the online community they're now hosting must be incorporated into the work of the journalists and editors, and that doing so will change news in more fundamental ways than it has already. In addition, the conceptual pull each industry may be feeling toward the others is not only manifesting itself in overlap, but in various forms of partnership. Facebook's "News" function, where users can collect the pages of news organizations they follow, is just one recent version; many news providers use Facebook and Twitter to push headlines and teasers, some post some of their video reports to YouTube; news organizations like the BBC are using Flickr as a means to make available selections from their photo archives.

There is certainly a practical value to these partnerships in terms of enriching the offerings on the platform and increasing traffic back to news sites, or reaching users where they prefer to be. But some, no doubt, also see it as a matter of convenience: producing news and posting it to Twitter allows the production of news to be handled by the news professionals, and leaves the community management to the digital intermediaries. As these and various forms of partnership are explored, it's possible that these industries will re-clarify their roles, back to doing what they've traditionally been most comfortable with. But from recent evidence, what's more likely is a continued intermingling and entanglement of the two, to the point where the distinction between ABC News and Facebook may be relevant from the point of view of each company, but less so to a user experiencing a dialogue and community that traverses the two.

This public discourse will live in and across a matrix of providers and hosts, rhetorics of expert insight and popular sentiment, site guidelines and case-by-case exceptions, information and participation.

References

Brainard, C. (2010, January 13) "New" media crucial in Aftermath of Haitian Earthquake. *Columbia Journalism Review*. http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/ new_media_crucial_in_aftermath.php

Bruns, A. (2005) *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Colker, D. (2009, November 24) Google won't remove distorted Michelle Obama image from search engine. *Los Angeles Times*. http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/11/ google-michelle-obama.html

Could blogs save NBC News? (2005, April 21). *National Post*, AL2.

Davenport, C. (2010, March 4). Blowback: Do comments scare off sources? *Story Lab*. *Washington Post* http://blog.washingtonpost.com/story-lab/2010/03/ blowback_commenting_on_debt_co.html?hpid=newswell

Deuze, M. (2003). The Web and its Journalisms: Considering the Consequences of Different Types of News Media Online. *New Media & Society* 5(2), 203-230.

Date, J. (2008) Lieberman: YouTube Not Doing Enough to Remove Terrorist Content. *ABCNews.com* http://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/LawPolitics/story?id=4889745&page=1

Deuze, M., Bruns, A., & Neuberger, C. (2007). Preparing for an Age of Participatory News *Journalism Practice*, 1(3), 322-338.

Gillespie, T. (2010). The Politics of 'Platforms.' *New Media & Society*, forthcoming.

Gross, D. (2009, December 2). Racist Obama image shines light on Web searching. *CNN.com*. http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/12/02/google.search.obama/index.html

Grossman, L. (2009, June 9) Iran protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement. *Time*. http:// www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html

Hermida, A. and Thurman, N. (2008) A clash of cultures: The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites. *Journalism Practice* 2(3).

Heussner, K. (2009, May 12). Facebook under fire for allowing Holocaust Deniers. *ABC News*.

> http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/AheadoftheCurve/story?id=7566812

Johnson, P. (2005, November 28). A year later, NBC's Williams keeps dialogue going with

> viewers. *USA Today*, 4D. http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/
> 2005-11-27-media-mix_x.htm

Johnson, P. (2006a, April 3). Fact vs. opinion: Who wins online? *USA Today*, 2D. http://

> www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2006-04-02-media-mix_x.htm

Johnson, P. (2006b, March 13). Web-savvy news 'dinosaurs' take a page from history. *USA

> Today*, 12D. http://www.usatoday.com/life/columnist/mediamix/2006-03-12-media-
> mix_x.htm

McNair, B. (2009). Journalism and Democracy. In K. Wahl-Jorgensen & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.),

> *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, ICA Handbook Series (pp. 237-249). New York:
> Routledge.

Squires, C. (2005, December 10). Networks reinvent TV news for a digital age. *St. Petersburg

> Times*, 1A.

Raghavan, R. (2009, June 22) More from Iran: On-the-Ground Footage, Tribute Videos.

> *Broadcasting Ourselves: The Official YouTube Blog*. http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/
> 2009/06/more-from-iran-on-ground-footage.html

Respers, L. (2009, May 18). Facebook urged to remove Holocaust-denial groups. *CNN.com*

> http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/05/08/facebook.holocaust.denial/index.html

Rosellini, M. (2005). Rules Of Engagement. *CBSNews.com*. Network News Website, Retrieved

> March 16, 2010, from http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/20/utility/
> main959709.shtml?tag=contentBody;fixedCommentBox

Seelye, K. Q. (2007, May 8). On the Web, Muzzling All To Hush a Few. *New York Times*, 18.

> New York. http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/05/08/muzzling-all-to-hush-a-few/

Shepard, A. (2009, September 14). Should NPR have run the dead Marine photo? *NPR

> Ombudsman*. http://www.npr.org/ombudsman/2009/09/
> should_npr_have_run_the_dead_m.html

Shields, M. (2007, September 10). The Evolution of engagement. *AdWeek*, 18-19.

Stone, B. (2009, December 27) Why we can never rest: a year in the life of Twitter. *Times Online* http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/technology/article6968440.ece

Sunstein, C. R. (2007). *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Thurman, N. (2008). Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media. New Media & Society 10(1).

Townend, J. (2010, March 4). Is the BBC really falling out of love with blogging? *Journalism.co.uk Editors' Blog*. http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2010/03/04/is-the-bbc-really-falling-out-of-love-with-blogging/

Twitter (2009) What's Happening. *Twitter blog*. http://blog.twitter.com/2009/11/whats-happening.html

Tushnet, R. (2008) Power without Responsibility: Intermediaries and the First Amendment *George Washington Law Review* 76.

Wyatt, E. (2006) Anti-U.S. Attack Videos Spread on the Web. *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/06/technology/06tube.html

YouTube (2008) Dialogue with Sen. Lieberman on terrorism videos. *Broadcasting Ourselves ;) The official YouTube Blog* http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2008/05/dialogue-with-sen-lieberman-on.html

YouTube (2009) Ordinary Citizens, Extraordinary Voices. *Broadcasting Ourselves ;) The official YouTube Blog* http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2009/12/ordinary-citizens-extraordinary-videos.html

YouTube (2010) YouTube Community Guidelines http://www.youtube.com/t/community_guidelines