

# **Comments please: How the British news media are struggling with user-generated content**

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# **Comments please: How the British news media is struggling with user-generated content**

Interviews with senior editorial executives from the leading UK news websites explored their perceptions of user media and the reasons for adopting or not adopting user-generated content initiatives. A content analysis survey quantified the progressive adoption of UGC by mainstream news organisations. Findings reveal that news executives are expanding opportunities for user content but are experiencing problems with incorporating user media into professional journalism structures due to concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues. They are therefore cautious about implementing user-generated content initiatives. The evidence suggests that editors are undergoing an uncomfortable transition in integrating user media and are seeking to retain a traditional gatekeeper role in adopting user content on their websites.

**Keywords:** User-generated content, citizen journalism, online journalism, participatory journalism, grassroots journalism, blogs British news websites.

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the attitudes of senior news executives in the UK to the widely debated issue of user-generated content (UGC) and reveals how they are integrating user media in professional journalistic contexts. It also quantifies the progressive adoption of UGC by mainstream news organisations. It shows how news

organisations are increasingly soliciting and publishing material—such as photos and personal accounts—from users, and illustrates how they are struggling over the extent to which professional journalism standards should be applied to this content. The research shows there is a high degree of variation in approaches to involving readers.

While there has been a change of attitude towards UGC since 2005 (Thurman, n.d), there remains a reluctance to relinquish the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists. This paper argues that at the core of this dichotomy are issues of identity and control for news organisations. Websites driven by user content such as YouTube can be described as empty vessels, whose brand identity is defined by the nature of the user media. News organisations have an identity that is defined by their professional content. This research found that news organisations are increasingly shifting towards moderating UGC. It suggests that they see greater value in user media that fits in with their brand and values. The findings indicate that media organisations desire to offer user content that is clearly identifiable with their brand and is perceived as valuable to readers.

While this research looks at user-generated content initiatives (UGCIs) in the context of the UK newspaper industry, it has broad relevance to the news industry as whole. It comes at a time when news organisations across the world are experimenting with ways of integrating user media into professional journalistic models.<sup>1</sup> The British experience offers valuable lessons for news executives making their first forays into this area and for academics studying the field of user media.

### **Research context**

Media organisations have been accused of maintaining a "rather static core set of news practices", placing "other journalistic practices at its margins" (Matheson,

2004) at a time when there has been an explosion in so-called citizen journalism. This term is generally taken to mean independently published news and current affairs content, where citizens post their material online to their own blogs or unedited websites (Hening, 2005). It is often used as a catchall phrase to cover everything from headlines ranked by user recommendation to videos on YouTube (Williams, 2007).

This paper looks at UGC in the context of participatory journalism, where ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications to create more journalism. Participatory journalism is distinct from what Blood (2006) has termed as collaborative journalism. She defines collaborative journalism as "news reporting, enabled by the Internet, done by a dispersed, unorganised group of people, or a group that spontaneously (and temporarily) organises around the Internet in a particular event." Blood cites Flickr as vehicle for collaborative journalism. Her argument illustrates the key differences in the organisation of user media between channels such as Flickr and those provided by established news organisations. In collaborative journalism, content is organised from the bottom up, whereas in participatory journalism control is exercised from the top down, with a news organisation controlling the channel for user involvement and participation.

The advent of user-generated content is leading to a shift in the relationship between mainstream media organisations and the people formerly known as the audience (Gillmor, 2004). Bowman and Willis (2003) argue an "online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information". They say that news organisations can still retain a role as being the definitive authority on various subjects. But, at the same time, they have to accommodate users who wish to contribute to the journalistic process. This, they

argue, challenges the way journalists work as the "news media are geared to own a story. They shape it, package it and sell it."

Media organisations are grappling with how to respond to these changes, brought about by the emergence of new digital tools that allow for consumers to become producers. Gillmor (2004) argues this reflects the "innate conservatism" of mainstream media, so that "when big media companies consider having a conversation with their audience, they tend not to push many boundaries". UGC raises issues as to the evolving role of the news media, having an impact on certain key values in news organisations (see, for example, Fulton 1996). Participatory journalism presents a fundamental shift in established modes of journalism as it undermines the "we write, you read" dogma of modern journalism (Deuze, 2003).

Services such as MySpace, Flickr and YouTube are channels for content from numerous and varied sources but exercise little editorial control. In contrast, mainstream news production has been characterised as being the "exercise of routine and highly regulated procedures in the task of selecting from already limited supplies of information" (Fishman, 1999). News organisations have tended to expand their operations to the Internet based on their existing journalistic culture, including the way they relate to the public (Deuze, 2003). This means that a mainstream news organisation does not realise, as Deuze argues, the impact interactivity and connectivity "will have on its established culture of doing things, its monopoly on content, its understanding of what is public, its roles in community".

The culture of the newspaper industry is an additional factor to consider when discussing the attitude of the press to UGC. A study by the Readership Institute (2000) found that newspapers generally have an aggressive-defensive culture.<sup>2</sup> The study defined this as "where people are expected to approach tasks in forceful ways to

protect their status and security". It found that a second common defensive culture in newspapers is passive-defensive, where conflict is avoided and norms are based on dependent and conventional behaviours. This would suggest that newspapers are, as a norm, resistant to change. The Reader Institute study concluded that:

In the past, defensive cultures fared well, producing consistent, reliable products and services because changes in the environment such as technology, demography and competition have been slow moving. But today they are ill equipped to respond to rapidly changing customer needs, surging competition and revolutionary advances in technology.

Despite this, according to Williams (2007), traditional news organisations are starting to recognise that "their audiences are more than empty receptacles waiting to be filled with information selected [by] an editorial priesthood." This research backs her conclusion that the shift towards more engagement with the audience is taking place "gingerly" because newspapers, magazines and broadcasters are worried offering tools for user contributions could become a "free-for-all that annoys readers instead of generating useful conversations."<sup>3</sup>

## **Methodology**

This paper uses qualitative methods to examine the motivations behind the adoption of UGC by UK news organisations, as well as the internal debates taking place in newsrooms over the publication of user media. It focuses on the online experience of the leading national, commercial British newspapers in the UK, and, as such, does not include the BBC, which is a publicly funded national broadcaster. The paper is based on semi-structured research interviews with 11<sup>4</sup> editors and managing editors of leading British news websites completed in a one-month period in 2006.

The interviews are supported by a quantitative study of the adoption of user-generated content initiatives (UGCIs). A sample of 12<sup>5</sup> UK newspaper websites was conducted in November 2006. The websites were studied over a period of 48 hours and visited a number of times at random during the day. For the assessment of the UGC functionality of each site, the unit of analysis was a web page. Each section of a website was examined to see if it contained any UGCIs.

The study identified eight main formats used by news sites to allow readers to contribute: 'Polls', 'Messageboards', 'Have your says', 'Comments on stories', 'Q&As', 'Blogs', 'Your media' and 'Your story'.

'Polls' are defined as topical questions where readers are asked to make a multiple choice or binary response. These are simple to construct and are popular with readers. Polls at the *Dailymail.co.uk* can get 10,000 votes at a time (Thurman, n.d). These tools provide instant and quantifiable feedback to readers. They are easy to set up and run automatically, meaning they are inexpensive and risk-free. But they offer very limited interaction as polls offer a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or a restricted multiple choice response.

'Messageboards' are areas that allow readers to debate a topic often initiated by another reader and are usually reactively moderated. They are one of the oldest forms of participation, dating back to 1999 at *Guardian.co.uk* and 2002 at *Dailymail.co.uk*. Messageboards are structured so that users can reply to any of the posts rather than just the original one. The discussions usually remain open for weeks or months.

'Have your says' resemble 'Messageboards' but with significant differences. These are areas where journalists post topical questions to which readers send written replies. A selection is made, edited and published by journalists and the submissions

can be fully or reactively moderated. In contrast to ‘Messageboards’, ‘Have your says’ usually remain open for a limited number of days.

This format has proved popular with readers. On the day a popular British radio presenter died in October 2004, the BBC received 35,000 e-mail submissions, rising to a total of 100,000, to the ‘Have your say’ that had been established in commemoration (Thurman, n.d).

The ‘Comments on stories’ format allows readers to submit their views on a story. These comments are usually submitted using a form at the bottom of an article. This format may or may not require a reader to register with a news site.

‘Q&As’ are interviews with journalists and/or invited guests, with questions submitted by readers. By their very nature, ‘Q&As’ are moderated. But since they are usually webcast in audio or video, or transcribed, as live, they offer a sense of interactivity and immediacy.

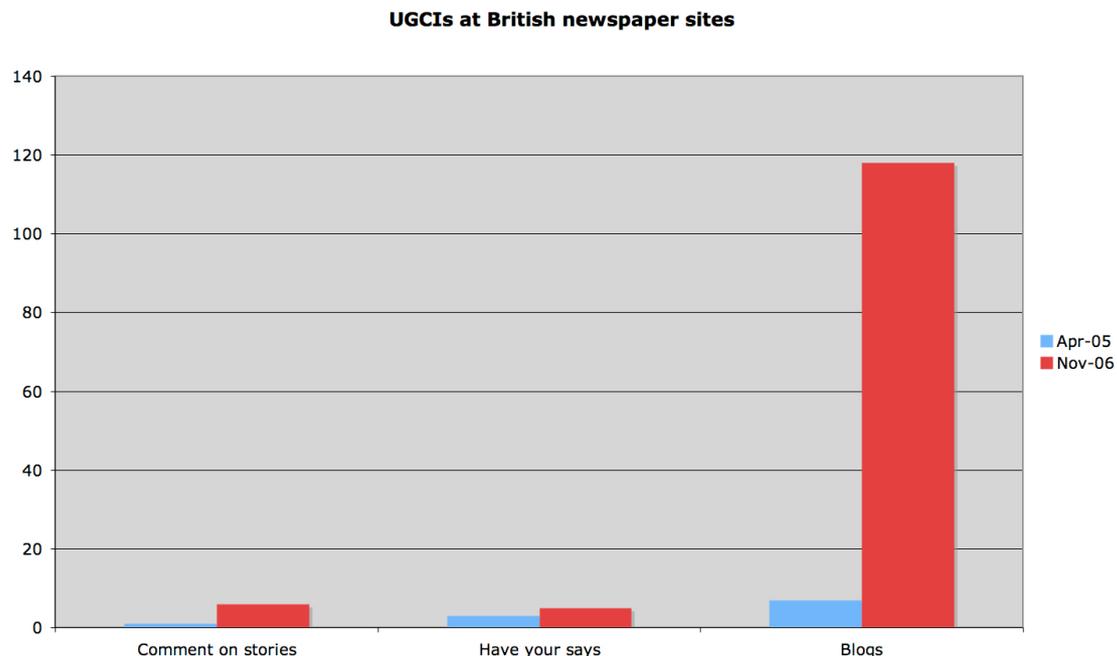
‘Blogs’ are a relatively new addition to news websites in the UK. These have posts laid out in reverse chronological order and most allow readers to comment on the entries. Blogs are explicitly authored by one or more individuals, often associated with a set of interests or opinions. Reader blogs are a new format launched in 2006 by the UK's best-selling daily newspaper, *The Sun*. *TheSun.co.uk* allows readers to create a blog and have it hosted on the news organisation's web servers.

‘Your media’ and ‘Your stories’ formats can be seen as the most radical departure from the traditional publishing model. ‘Your media’ are galleries of photographs, video and other media submitted by readers and vetted by journalists. ‘Your stories’ are sections where readers are asked to send in stories that matter to them. These are then edited by journalists for publication on the website.

## Survey findings

The sample of 12 UK newspaper websites conducted in November 2006 revealed a substantial growth UGCIs (see Table 1) since the last survey in April 2005 (see: Thurman, n.d). The ‘Comment on stories’ format took off in the 18-month period between surveys. The number of UK publications adopting this feature rose from one to six. More than two-thirds of the sites moderate comments, while those that do not moderate comments require registration.

**Table 1**



‘Have your say’ sections have grown more slowly than ‘Comments on stories’. The number of UK newspaper websites using this format has risen from three to five. Four of these are fully moderated, with only *TheSun.co.uk* adopting the use of registration and reactive moderation.

The format that has seen the most dramatic adoption is blogging (see Table 2). The number of blogs jumped from seven to 118 in the 18 months from April 2005 to November 2006. The reasons for this growth are explored later in this paper. Most of

the newspaper blogs allowed comments, though they are almost all vetted by journalists before publication. Only one site, *Guardian.co.uk* allowed users to post comments directly to a blog, but readers have to register and confirm their e-mail address.

**Table 2: Blogs at a selection of British news websites**

| News site                 | April 2005               | November 2006             |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>DailyExpress.co.uk</i> | N/A                      | 1 (fully moderated)       |
| <i>DailyMail.co.uk</i>    | none                     | 7 (fully moderated)       |
| <i>DailyStar.co.uk</i>    | N/A                      | 2 (fully moderated)       |
| <i>FT.com</i>             | none                     | none                      |
| <i>Guardian.co.uk</i>     | 6 (reactively moderated) | 12 (reactively moderated) |
| <i>Independent.co.uk</i>  | none                     | none                      |
| <i>Mirror.co.uk</i>       | none                     | 2 (no comments allowed)   |
| <i>Telegraph.co.uk</i>    | none                     | 37 (fully moderated)      |
| <i>TheSun.co.uk</i>       | none                     | 12 (no comments allowed)  |
| <i>TheTimes.co.uk</i>     | none                     | 39 (fully moderated)      |
| <i>ThisisLondon.co.uk</i> | none                     | 5 (fully moderated)       |
| <i>Scotsman.com</i>       | 1 (fully moderated)      | 1 (fully moderated)       |

### Breakdown of adoption of UGCIs

The *DailyExpress.co.uk* was home to one blog (jointly the *DailyStar.co.uk*) with fully moderated comments, without requiring registration. It also hosted Have your says which are fully moderated. This site was not included in the previous survey.

The *DailyMail.co.uk* hosted seven blogs. Users can also leave comments on stories. Both were fully moderated and registration was not required. The site also offered messageboards. Users had to register to post and the content is reactively moderated. Users can also start their own threads or discussions. As of November 15 2006 there were 1,449,811 posts. The site also offered Q&As, called webchats, polls. Since the last survey, the number of posts to messageboards has increased from 1,165,000 to 1,449,811, seven blogs have been introduced and fully moderated. Comments on stories are allowed.

The *DailyStar.co.uk* had two blogs that were fully moderated. (One is offered jointly with *DailyExpress.co.uk*). It also offered Have your says, which were also fully moderated. No registration was required to leave comments on either format. This site was not included in the previous survey.

The *FT.com* offered polls, Q&As (called Ask the expert) and messageboards (called debates). As of November 15 2006 there were 29,281 posts organized into 342 discussions. Unregistered users' posts were fully moderated. Since the last survey, the number of posts to messageboards increased from 9,432 to 29,281. *FT.com* no longer prints columnists' e-mail addresses alongside their bylines.

The *Guardian.co.uk* hosted 12 blogs, messageboards (called Talkboard or Unlimited Talk) and offered comments on stories. Users needed to register to participate in all three and comments were reactively moderated. The site also offered Q&As (called Live chats). Since the last survey, six new blogs have been created, comments have been allowed on stories and registration was introduced .

The *Independent.co.uk* did not host any user-generated content initiatives. This has not changed since the last survey.

The *Mirror.co.uk* was home to two blogs that did not allow users to comment. Users could take part in messageboards that were fully moderated. The site also offers polls (called Quick votes). This site was not included in the previous survey.

The *Telegraph.co.uk* hosted 37 blogs, Have your says (called Your View), messageboards and Comments on stories. All of these were fully moderated but did not require registration. The site also offered polls and a Your media format (called Your Gallery) in the Digital Life homepage. Since the last survey, the site has introduced 37 blogs and allowed comments on stories.

*TheSun.co.uk* hosted 12 blogs that did not allow comments. It also provided readers' blogs with comments enabled. Registration was required to post a comment. These could be fully or reactively moderated, depending on the preferences of the blog's owner. The site was home to messageboards (called discussions) and Have you says (called MySun discussions). These were reactively moderated but registration was required. *MySun.co.uk* also hosted My media and offered fully moderated Q&As (called webchats). Since the last survey, 12 blogs and readers' blogs have been introduced, as well as messageboards. Registration is now required to contribute to Have your says, which are reactively moderated.

The *Timesonline.co.uk* hosted 39 blogs, Have your says and Comments on stories. These were fully moderated comments but registration was not required. The site also offered Q&As (called Talking point) and polls (called e-polls). In December 2006, it launched a Your story section (called Your World) to showcase readers' travel stories. Since the last survey, *Timesonline.co.uk* has launched 30 blogs and introduced polls.

*ThisisLondon.co.uk* hosted five blogs and Comments on stories. Registration was not required but comments were fully moderated. The site also offered messageboards (called Have Your Say) that were fully moderated and required registration. As of November 15 2006 there were 182,454 posts. Since the last survey, five blogs have been introduced and Comments on stories are now allowed. Q&As, chatrooms and reader reviews have been removed and the number of posts to messageboards decreased from 389,000 to 182,454.

*Scotsman.com* offered Comments on stories and was host to one blog. Both required registration to post comments and are reactively moderated. It hosted Your story (called My story) as part of its Heritage & Culture site. It also offered Your

media (called Photoblog) as part of the Edinburgh festivals site. Both of these features were fully moderated. Since the last survey, *Scotsman.com* has introduced a blog, Comments on stories and the Your story section.

## **Main findings**

### **(I) Fear and the adoption of UGCIs**

The interviews with editors provided an insight into the growth of UGCIs. Our initial findings suggest that the growth identified in the survey is likely to be partly the result of editors and executives' fear of being marginalized by user media. Figures suggest the fear might be justified—in December YouTube received 38 million unique visits and Wikipedia had 39 million unique visits in the US. This compares to 26 million for MSNBC and 23 million for CNN (Nielsen/Netratings, 2006).

### **The boom in user media**

Another factor that has been credited with changing attitudes of news executives in the UK was upsurge of user media on the July 7 2005 bombings in London. The BBC received 22,000 e-mails and text messages from the public about the London tube and bus bombings on the day of the attacks (Douglas, 2006).<sup>6</sup> It was also sent 300 photos and several video sequences taken by members of the public. The dramatic stills and video led BBC TV newscasts, the first time such material had been considered more newsworthy than professional content (Douglas, 2006). The public response to the July 7 bombings can be seen as an example of how user media is a "phenomenon you can't ignore" (Withey, 2006):

The whole structure of the newspaper proprietor and his editors telling people what was going on in the world and the world neatly reading that ... that sort of self-

perpetuating oligarchy has been broken down very rapidly, and user-generated content now forms quite a big part of, as you say, national newspaper websites (Withey, 2006).

Editors indicated that they were afraid of being supplanted by competing new media. The introduction of channels to encourage reader participation is, in part, driven by self-interest and a belief that newspapers have to evolve in a digital age or risk becoming marginal. Richard Burton of *Telegraph.co.uk* suggested that "the idea of becoming a forum for debate was an area that newspapers had to get into, otherwise they'd get left behind".

### **The rush to catch up**

As editors jumped on board because of the perceived need to offer greater levels of interactivity with readers, they acknowledged that they were "latecomers to the party" (Burton, 2006) and that newspapers need to be in the business of interactivity, as Alan Revell (2006) of Associated Newspapers said:

We firmly believe that in, what's it called, the great conversation. These businesses are about interactivity and it's about it being a two-way street and people joining the conversation rather than being lectured to or talked to, they do want to respond, not all of them, but people do want the ability to respond instantly and contribute and add.

An illustration of this shift in attitude is the explosion in the number of blogs at mainstream newspaper sites. These jumped from 7 to 118 in the 18 months between the two surveys. By November 2006, *TimesOnline.co.uk* was hosting 39 blogs, and the *Telegraph.co.uk* 37. The editorial process behind the selection and creation of these blogs offers an insight into the motivations of editors. This dramatic growth can be explained as much by a desire by newspapers to keep control of journalists who

would have otherwise created their own blogs, as by a recognition of the value of blogging. At *TimesOnline.co.uk*, leading *Times* and *Sunday Times* correspondents were offered blogs as an attempt to “give them a piece of property on the internet themselves, within our site” (Bale, 2006). This is being seen as giving senior correspondents and columnists a sense of ownership of the website and strengthening their ties to the newspaper. This also helps to explain the rise in the number of the blogs at *Telegraph.co.uk*. This format was offered at first to foreign correspondents as these were the journalists “most frustrated for not having their articles published in the paper,” while “there’s an unlimited amount of space online” (Van den Belt, 2006). The impetus for the blogs came from management, rather than from eager volunteers. “We had to strike while the iron was hot and basically say we need this now,” said Burton (2006).

*Mirror.co.uk* has taken a similar approach, with editors taking the lead on selecting “the right person to bring something to the party” (Purcell, 2006). At *DailyMail.co.uk*, the choice of journalists to set up blogs did not follow a structured editorial process. “The disarmingly honest answer is that it’s those who stuck their hands up basically,” said Revell (2006). For him, it was important to have journalists who were willing to commit the time, rather than force someone into it.

The survey also showed an increase from one to six in the number of publications—including the *Telegraph.co.uk* and the *Scotsman.com*—offering ‘Comment on stories’ features. By contrast, ‘Have your says’ grew more slowly, partly due to technological reasons. Overall the trend among UK news organisations is to provide more ways for readers to participate.

## **Evolving attitudes**

While UK news sites have added more UGCI features, there was some concern that the trend has been over-hyped (Purcell, 2006). Editors tend to view these initiatives as complementary to professional journalism, rather than replacing it. There is a common view that "a good story will beat anything", as Pete Picton of *theSun.co.uk* put it, is superior to content from readers. Steve Purcell (2006) argued that "there's no substitute for a good story, and I'd say more than 10 times the amount will read the story rather than the comments attached to it, but it's still valid to give that feedback area".

However, there has been a shift in attitudes to UGC since 2004. At the time some editors described blogs as "extremely dull", "mediocre" or of "very marginal interest" (Thurman, n.d). Now, there is a realisation that editors may have been too dismissive back then and that journalists appreciate the "extra flexibility that the dialogue with readers have given them" (Bale, 2006). Questions still remain over the place of blogs within established news organisation. While endorsing blogs, Burton expressed reservations about the long-term value of blogs to the newspaper, reflecting general concerns about how blogging fits within a traditional journalistic framework. Burton described blogs as "massively overrated" and as "a bit of fun".

More broadly, there is an acknowledgement that a newspaper's audience can be "very knowledgeable about certain areas", as James Montgomery (2006) described *FT.com* readers. He echoed Dan Gillmor's comment that "readers know more than I do," (quoted in Lasica, 2001), suggesting how the public could improve the newspaper's journalism:

"We are very interested in unlocking that information. We know it's there because our reporters often find that they're talking to somebody who knows a

lot about their subject, maybe more about their subject than the reporter does."

(Montgomery 2006)

The *FT.com* is debating how best to tap into the knowledge of its readers. Montgomery suggested the newspaper was considering creating "niches of areas" online to provide spaces for like-minded readers to discuss a topic, rather than "talking across a broad canvass." The approach suggests that an established news brand can add value to UGC by providing editorial structures to facilitate conversation between its readers.

## **(II) Shift towards a filtered model**

Our second finding was that news professionals are struggling to integrate user media within old norms and practices. News organisations are aiming to adopt UGCIs without damaging their brand, meaning that well-established newspapers such as *The Times* do not allow any unmoderated content on their sites, (Bale, 2006). For Bale, not to moderate content would be an inappropriate brand risk. Part of the reason for this is persistent legal concerns (Thurman, n.d). Editors expressed apprehension at the "grey area" of the law as it relates to online content (Purcell, 2006), with newspaper lawyers themselves unsure on certain areas of the law:

As the law's so unclear on who's published what. because there isn't really any case for it yet. And in my role as new media director both here and in my previous organisation, I've taken advice from very senior law groups who've not been clear about who publishes what and what your culpability is, then moderation has to be the way forward for a group that has anything to protect. (Withey 2006)<sup>7</sup>

## **The brand, the online community and issues of control**

The potential that UGC has to damage a newspaper's brand remains a prevailing concern among editors, reiterated again and again in this round of interviews. The idea of publishing a comment without checking it first was described as "very dangerous" (Avery, 2006). It reflects the dilemma facing news organisations. They are putting out a call for user media to be republished under the masthead of a newspaper but feel a need for it to fit the identity and values represented by the brand.

Among the few UK newspapers that allow readers to post comments without moderation is *The Scotsman*. Brown describes this as a "work in progress", deciding at an article level whether comments should be pre or post moderated. The site attempts to mitigate risk by requiring all users to register and by avoiding allowing unmoderated posts on contentious subject matters. Brown said *Scotsman.com* was "from an editorial perspective, quite careful about where we enable post-moderation".

One approach adopted by *The Sun* newspaper has been to create different areas online for professionally produced content and for user media. In October 2006, *TheSun.co.uk* launched a second site—*MySun.co.uk*— that allowed readers to start a blog and contribute stories, pictures and comments on breaking news. This site is editorially separate from the news site, making a distinction between professional and amateur content. Picton (2006) said *TheSun.co.uk* wanted to "encompass both spectrums" by "providing people with the ability to put their own personal journal out there." *The Sun*'s main competitor in the tabloid marketplace, *The Mirror* has adopted a different approach, questioning the value of allowing every reader to have a platform. Instead Purcell (2006) suggested the newspaper may run a competition offering readers the chance to be a *Mirror* blogger, "and out of that, we'll select those who actually can write and have something to say." Bowman and Willis (2003) argue

creating a space segregated from professional content produces a "closed-off annex where readers can talk and discuss, as long as the media companies don't have to be involved. Such an architected virtual space is not a true online community."

### **Controlling the conversation**

The research found that there has been a shift towards moderation. Its purpose is to filter contributions so that they fit in with the identity of the news brand and offer readers content they are more interested in. Bale stresses that *The Times* as an organisation wants to use a lot of UGC but "it's got to be the right user-generated content and it's got to fit with our brands". Editors tend to view UGC as providing content relevant to their readers, both online and potentially offline:

In this world where many people feel that they've got something to say and they want to comment and they want to be heard, we still want to give our *Telegraph* audience the best of and therefore we need moderation. I strongly believe that moderation is the way forwards. Because in a time poor, fast moving, society, you could argue what's the percentage of our readers and users who have time to read through 15,000 comments on any particular article? It's our job, we feel, to display the most interesting ones, and what we see more and more happening now that on a particular topic, topic of the day, your view of the day, we take the best and publish it in the newspaper the next day. (Van der Belt, 2006)

Editors tend to view moderation in terms of the traditional role of journalists, gathering and filtering information for the public. This approach may offer a model for the integration of UGC in professional news structures. Postman (quoted in Fulton, 1998) said the problem facing journalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an informational glut, whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the problem was a scarcity of information. Postman argued the issue for journalism is how to decide what is

significant, relevant information. This research suggests that this approach could be adopted with regards to the role of mainstream news organisations and UGC. The value in user media becomes not just the content itself, but how it is sifted, organised and presented in ways that add value to an audience:

What we offer, whether it's in print or online, is that we are an organisation that filters all the news and then compresses it. And we do that partly because we serve a busy audience who don't have much time to read the paper, who don't have that much time to read the website, and they look to us to have done the filtering and the compression for them. (Montgomery, 2006)

The notion of moderating UGC so that it is in line with the identity of a newspaper comes across in many of the interviews. It ties in to legal concerns and the risk-averse attitude of most editors (Thurman, n.d).

### **The cost of control and the role of technology**

The filtering model has cost and resource implications that have impacted on UGCs. Moderation is "a real pain, it's a real chore" (Purcell, 2006). *Mirror.co.uk's* messageboard on Princess Diana was described by Purcell as "hugely successful". But he explained how the messageboard was "invaded with abusers, and just ploughing through the number of messages every day became more effort than it was worth".

Newspapers are caught in a bind: the burden increases as the participation of users rises. Waldman (2006) said moderation becomes more difficult as blogs and other areas encouraging interactivity with the audience become more popular. He said that *Guardian.co.uk* had so many comments on its World Cup blog that "it was almost too much". The experience has led Waldman to start looking at traffic calming techniques.

Technology is seen as one way of alleviating a laborious and time-consuming process. The volume of comments received by sites such as the *BBC News* website has resulted in the investment in information systems to process and publish content. Under the previous system, comments came in as e-mails, which journalists would read, edit and copy into web pages for publication. This proved a cumbersome and time-consuming system, limiting the amount of e-mails that were published (Thurman, n.d). The *BBC News* website uses software by a company called Jivesoft on its 'Have your say' discussions. The system has enabled the BBC to publish "10 times more than we used to" (Taylor, quoted in Douglas, 2006). The software enables journalists to scan e-mails and publish them with a click of a button.<sup>8</sup>

This technology still requires a team of journalists to moderate them and the cost has led some newspapers, like *The Independent*, to close down their forums (Withey, 2006). One newspaper talked about potentially outsourcing the management of its comment areas (Waldman, 2006).

## **(II) Continued debate over value of user media**

Our third finding was that news organisations are struggling to balance the resources needed for UGCIs with the commercial potential of user media. Williams (2007) suggests that news organisation believe, or at least hope, that UGC can save money.<sup>9</sup> However, most user media initiatives are resource intensive due to editorial intervention, rather than because of payments to contributors. The cost of these operations are one of the reasons smaller news organisations like *Independent.co.uk* have held back from adopting tools for user interaction (Withey, 2006).

## **The cost-benefit analysis of UGC**

There remains a concern over the lack of a model to monetise these initiatives (Thurman, n.d). The editorial director at *TheTimes.co.uk* sees commercial potential in delivering niche audiences to advertisers (Bale, 2006). He gives the example of a travel section, rich with UGC from a "good and interesting demographic", which could offer a "very compelling proposition" for advertisers.

But this is counterbalanced by a fear among editors that UGCIs can become what Walden called "self-contained playgrounds", catering to a niche audience that is of limited value to an advertiser. Purcell mentions this as a concern on the popular forums of *Mirror.co.uk*, which "attract the same people all the time".

UGC offers some value to professional journalists as a source for stories. *The Sun* gets three or four stories each week from readers (Picton, 2006). In this case, editors value UGC as a digital form of newsgathering, rather than as a way of allowing readers to express themselves:

With user-generated content, people see it often in terms of what they write but quite often for us, it's in terms of the stories they bring. And users have been doing that prior to the web. They've been ringing newsdesks with stories. It's just a lot easier to do it now online. (Picton, 2006)

But while reader contributions lead to stories, there is some doubt over whether this justifies the expenditure on UGCIs, which editors said accounted for one of the heaviest areas of expenditure. Burton (2006) acknowledges that at times a reader's comment might be passed on to the newsdesk, but disputes it justifies the expenditure on UGCIs. He says this is "just a complete and utter journalistic by-product".

## **Concerns over level of participation**

There are also doubts over the desire of readers to contribute. Withey (2006) argued “most people like to consume media as opposed to take part in it, and therefore the role of the publisher ... is still an important one.” For example, even though the *BBC News* website receives thousands of user comments, these contributions often come from just 0.05 per cent of the site’s daily unique audience (Thurman n.d). This raises questions about the extent to which the audience wants to be active users of news (for a contrary view see: Gillmor, 2004).

This definition of value ignores the worth of participatory journalism to the individual. Bowman and Willis (2003) argue that "traditional media tend to understate the value of participatory journalism, holding that comments, reviews and content created by 'amateurs' provide little value to their mass audience. As such they are missing the inherent psychological value of the creative process to the individual." Saffo (1992) argues what he calls particitainment is the "most powerful hybrid of communications and entertainment". Research by Sundar (2000) into online news reception reveals a sense of engagement fostered by interactive opportunities. This all suggests that the psychological effect of being able to participate in some form is no less significant than the effect of the content itself. Withey (2006) sees user interaction, as *The Guardian* has adopted through its blogs, as a way of "knitting the audience back into your brand".

For some editors, the number of people who contribute does not necessarily matter, as a small number can make a UGC forum "worthwhile" (Revell, 2006). *The Guardian* estimates that only 1 to 5 per cent of readers contribute. But Walden argued this creates a "vibrant community" at the heart of a site, which is of value to advertisers and to other users:

As you look at strategies around user-generated content, you need to realise that only a small number are really going to communicate, sort of engage at that level. But that small number make it much more interesting for everyone else. (Walden, 2006)

Several editors mentioned that the perceived quality of comments rather than the absolute number of comments received was a factor in judging the value of UGC. Brown (2006) related an occasion at *Scotsman.com* when a story on a proposed tram system in Edinburgh generated a level of debate that was "quite remarkable", including a discussion of the geography of the city by geologists.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides journalism and interactive media scholars with an insight into the emerging phenomenon of user-generated content. It is important because UGC challenges established modes of journalism. UGC is leading to a shift in the relationship between media organisations and the audience (Gillmor, 2004). The success of websites such as Flickr and MySpace reflect the explosion in user media that has taken place recently. The boom in free-flowing self-expression is largely taking place outside of established notions of professionalism. It signals a desire by the public to take advantage of tools that allow for creative expression. This paper suggests that established news organisations are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gatekeeping role with regard to UGC as a way of integrating user media into a professional journalistic framework. The research suggests that newsroom culture, defined as the shared beliefs and values that shape employees' thinking and behaviours<sup>10</sup>, frames the approach towards UGC. While this study focuses on the UK newspaper industry, the findings have relevance to other established news organisations seeking to integrate UGC into their products and services, as professional journalists tend to share a similar set of norms and values.

Concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues suggest that news organisations have too much at stake to open the doors to UGC. While in collaborative journalism, control is distributed among users, in participatory journalism news organisations provide editorial structures to bring different voices into the news reporting. This research suggests that news organisations have an opportunity to take on the role of facilitating user media, by filtering and aggregating it in ways useful and valuable to audiences.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in March 5 2007, USA Today unveiled a redesign of its web presence. In an editorial note published on the website, editor Ken Paulson and executive editors Kinsey Wilson and John Hillkirk said the newspaper's journalistic mission was to "help readers quickly and easily make sense of the world around them by giving them a wider view of the news of the day and connecting them with other readers who can contribute to their understanding of events."  
[http://www.usatoday.com/news/2007-03-02-editors-note\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/2007-03-02-editors-note_N.htm), accessed online on March 7 2007

<sup>2</sup> The study found that the impact newspapers which took part in the survey fell into the following culture types: Constructive – 17 newspapers, Aggressive-Defensive – 27 newspapers, Passive-Defensive – 21 newspapers, Mixed Passive/Aggressive – 25 newspapers

<sup>3</sup> Williams cites the example of the Los Angeles Times that abandoned an experiment with a wiki editorial. This allowed anyone to post comments without moderation.

<sup>4</sup> The interviewees were: Richard Avery—Internet Development Controller, Northern and Shell; Peter Bale—Editorial Director, Times Online; Alistair Brown—General Manager, *Scotsman.com*; Richard Burton—Editor, *Telegraph.co.uk*; James Montgomery—Editor, *FT.com*; Pete Picton—Editor, *thesun.co.uk*; Steve Purcell—Editor, *Mirror.co.uk*; Alan Revell—COO, Associated Northcliffe Digital; Annelies Van den Belt—New Media Director, Telegraph Group; Simon Waldman—Director Digital Publishing, *Guardian.co.uk*; Richard Withey—New Media Strategies, Independent Digital. Note: In the text, interviews are sourced as: (Surname, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The 12 websites surveyed were regional (*ThisisLondon.co.uk* and *Scotman.co.uk*) and national, commercial and of print parentage, serving different readerships (in print terms). *Dailystar.co.uk*, *TheSun.co.uk* and *Mirror.co.uk* are tabloid, *Dailyexpress.co.uk*, *Dailymail.co.uk*, *ThisisLondon.co.uk* and *Scotman.com* are middle-market, while the *FT.com*, *Guardian.co.uk*, *Independent.co.uk*, *Telegraph.co.uk* and *TheTimes.co.uk* represent the broadsheet sector.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas describes July 7 as a turning point for the media. He writes that this was the day that user-generated content came into its own in Britain. He writes that the day also marked a change in audience behaviour. Douglas writes that when there were four more attempted bombings in London two weeks later, the public knew what was expected of them and photos and videos flooded into the BBC.

<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the former Labour MP and defence secretary Lord Robertson sued *The Sunday Herald* over a posting on a messageboard hosted by the newspaper that he alleged was defamatory. The case was settled out of court.

<sup>8</sup> Based on author's personal experience as a senior member of the *BBC News* website editorial team from 1997 to 2006.

<sup>9</sup> In parenthesis, Williams adds that she "considers this more wishful thinking than anything else."

<sup>10</sup> Definition used by Readership Institute, Culture Report: A Profile of the Impact Newspapers and Their Departments, 2000, accessed online March 7 2007.

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