

News from the Crowd: Grassroots and Collaborative Journalism in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Information content provided by members of the general public (mostly online) is playing an ever-increasing role in the detection, production and distribution of news. This paper investigates the concepts of (1) grassroots journalism and (2) collaborative journalism. It looks into similarities and differences and shows how both phenomena have been influenced by the emergence of the Internet and digital technologies. Then, the consequences for journalism in general will be analysed. Ultimately, strategies to meet the new challenges are suggested in order to maintain the quality and reliability of news coverage in the future.

Keywords

Social Media; Social Networks; Citizen Journalism; Collaborative Journalism; Grassroots Journalism; Social Media Analysis; Disruptions in the Media Sector; Newsgathering; Verification.

1. INTRODUCTION

So-called "citizen journalism"¹ or the active involvement in the production and distribution of information by non-journalists has grown tremendously over the past years. It was facilitated in particular by the availability of

- 1) affordable portable devices (especially smartphones) that allow for the capturing of information in an audiovisual format;
- 2) Internet access almost anytime and anywhere (mobile and stationary), more and more of it provided at high speeds;
- 3) platforms with networking capabilities (especially Social Networks) that allow for the sharing of content and the fast spreading of information to potentially millions of people.

These developments have had significant impacts on established media such as news agencies, broadcasters, newspapers and the like, and led to their former "gatekeeper" functions being challenged: no longer were only a selected few deciding what was in the public interest or could be exploited commercially, with respective distribution strategies as a result. This paper examines:

a) some aspects and impacts of the involvement of non-professionals (e.g. citizen journalists) on information provision and consumption processes (focusing on news and information content). This is what we describe as "grassroots reporting".

b) how established media organisations and media professionals are turning new digital opportunities to their advantage by actively involving non-professionals in the content production and storytelling process. This we label "collaborative journalism".

All this is to show some of the consequences and opportunities in the area of information gathering and information provision that resulted from technological advances in the digital media sector.

2. RELATED WORKS

Depending on the research focus, a fair amount of material exists about the subjects in question.² Various publications [1], [14], [15], [20] deal with the influence of user-generated content on established media, the journalistic profession and related transformation processes. Much technology-oriented research, in turn, examines the impact of Twitter on the spreading of information, especially breaking news (e.g. [17] who argue that it is rather difficult for social media content to be significantly ahead of news media organisations when it comes to breaking news). Another research field compares the effects of news distribution via experts (e.g. journalists) versus "the crowd" (i.e. lay people) and their role in the news process. The authors of [9] conclude that observing "key influencers" is more effective for finding relevant stories than mere hashtag analysis, while [11] state that news curators play a key role on Twitter in discussions around news topics. [8] in turn investigates the role of the crowd as a means of collaborative verification. A variety of publications also deal with the transformation process in the Arab world, and the impact Social Networks had on it ([18], [19]). The author of [5], for example, gives his detailed account of "how the Arab revolution was tweeted", with him being a part of it.

3. GRASSROOTS JOURNALISM - A NEW PHENOMENON?

Grassroots journalism describes a phenomenon that appears under many different labels, e.g. citizen journalism, public journalism or guerrilla journalism. All try to capture an apparent new concept: "the collection, dissemination and analysis of news and information by the general public, especially by means of the Internet" ([16] on citizen journalism). This paper uses the term grassroots journalism in order to emphasize the non-professional

¹ For related concepts see, among others, [20] and Footnote 3.

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² This collection provides a selection only. Additionally, the reader is referred to the vast number of further online resources.

background of this kind of newsgathering and information distribution (see also [7]). Furthermore, the notion grassroots journalism will be used as opposed to collaborative journalism that broadly refers to the involvement of the audience by professional journalists (more on this in chapter 4).

If grassroots journalism is regarded from a purely technological point, it seems a rather new phenomenon. The development of the Internet and web 2.0 applications as well as affordable and simple-to-use production technologies have created a critical mass of users who not only consume but also produce content on a regular basis, often from a specific angle (contextual, geographical etc.). However, the collection, creation and distribution of news by members of the general public is far from being a new development. Long before the Internet was created, and even before the first professional newspapers were printed, ordinary people without any professional journalistic background were spreading information (e.g. travellers, trades people, ballad-mongers). Furthermore, new mass communication technologies were often used for disrupting hitherto established patterns, conventions and power structures. In sum, grassroots journalism is no completely new phenomenon at all. However, it comes along rather differently in today's digital times.

3.1 Grassroots Journalism and the Internet

The concept and appearance of grassroots journalism has been fundamentally changed by the emergence of the Internet and Social Networks. Blogs, vlogs, podcasts, email, text messaging, Social Networks and specialised communities enable everyone who is connected to distribute content worldwide in real time.

One of the first major political unrests of recent years in which Social Networks were used extensively were the election protests in Iran in 2009/10. Iranians at home and abroad used, among others, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to share information and organise protest. By doing so, they also contributed to local events remaining on the world news agenda (see also [21]).

The worldwide Occupy movement against social and economic inequality that started with the Spanish Indignados in Madrid and the Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011 quickly spread internationally. Again, Social Networks were a driving force for communication between activists and the organisation of events. And again, contributors turned into regular and trusted sources for news and information. One of the most prominent examples is Tim Pool from Chicago, a young man very knowledgeable about digital media. Pool travelled to New York during the first week of the protest and set up live streams via mobile applications to report from the scene. He engaged viewers as participants and invited them to ask questions to which he responded live. Pool became famous for his 21 hour-live-coverage of the raid on Occupy Wall Street and featured as "The Media Messenger of Zuccotti Park" in Time Magazine's Person of the Year 2011 [6].

Grassroots journalism also played an important role in the Arab Spring, the uprising of large parts of the population against their governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries. Again, the Internet and Social Networks were used for communication and organising protests. Similar to the examples above, activists like Egypt's Esraa Abdel Fattah, who became known as "the Facebook girl", or Lina Ben Mhenni (the "twitterati" from Tunis) played bridging roles with mainstream media and helped maintain a 24-hour news cycle [18].

But grassroots journalism is not limited to times of uprising or dictatorial regimes. In fact, grassroots journalism is generally

practiced when traditional media are not able or not willing to deliver information, or simply fail to meet the audience's demand for news. This can have simple economic reasons, as professional news corporations may not have or make available the resources needed to cover everything relevant to a local community or a specific interest group. For instance, grassroots reporters in remote African regions are using mobile phones to report about local events and other news that are relevant to their communities (see the extensive exploratory study on this topic in [2]).

3.2 Grassroots Journalism Today - What is Different?

The possibilities of the digital age have fundamentally changed the context and impact of newsgathering and information dissemination by ordinary people, boosting grassroots journalism:

- Market entry costs are down considerably: a simple (mobile) Internet-enabled device and online access are all that is needed.
- Open government, open data and the concept of free flow of information have enabled citizens to access even sensitive data and information as never before in human history.
- The tendency of Internet users to openly share even personal information has facilitated research about people's behaviour, beliefs and political opinions considerably.
- The Internet is fast; people can access information or the latest news immediately. They can share and distribute it quickly
- The audience is global; anyone online can be reached, at least in theory. English (the Internet's lingua franca) is spoken and understood by a large number of Internet users.

Given the new digital possibilities and the general availability of data and information, it is not surprising that the participation of the audience in newsgathering and dissemination is not only increasing but also starting to threaten traditional players in the media business. News corporations, TV channels and professional journalists have lost their exclusive role as gatekeepers and are struggling to survive. Grassroots journalism has developed from a niche phenomenon to a driving force in modern journalism.

4. COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM

This section deals with various forms of what we refer to as collaborative journalism.³ It investigates forms in which media organisations and professional journalists involve external parties in the production of information, thereby making audience contributions part of the storytelling process or the story itself.

4.1 Participatory Programme Formats

Enabled by digitisation, many media organisations have started to experiment with and provide programme formats that engage audiences deeper with their services. They do so in order to increase brand / programme loyalty, find out more about consumer likes and dislikes, and obtain creative input and contributions of various kinds at no or only little costs.

One such format is the BBC's World Have Your Say (WHYS - see <http://on.fb.me/1jxbg0s> and https://twitter.com/bbc_whys). It

³ Other terms used are participatory journalism [4] and networked journalism [3], [10]. All definitions imply an engagement of the audience or third parties in the storytelling process at various stages, e.g. by contributing facts, exchanging ideas, questions, answers etc. - in other words: working collaboratively.

is aired on BBC World Service Radio on weekdays and on TV weekly. Social Networks are used to find and prepare topics (preparation and finding phase) and in the course of the shows. The overall aim is to create a global conversation for which the broadcaster provides the platform and moderation. Individuals can participate by uploading videos / photos (to YouTube and Flickr), call-ins, short-messaging / e-mailing and via Social Networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, and as direct participants in the live shows. For the WHYS programme makers such an approach has the advantage to (a) find out what matters to their audience, also using Social Networks for viral marketing (preparation phase), (b) involve and engage the audience when the show goes out live (production phase), and (c) continue the discussion after the linear show is finished and keep the conversation - and audience engagement - going (post-production phase).

French international broadcaster France 24 provides a combined web / TV format that covers international current affairs called The Observers (see <http://f24.my/1eIPIQa>). Individuals can register on the website, become a "friend" and - if selected - an "observer" (if considered a "trusted source"). Observers can then report about witnessed incidents by supplying content, or may be contacted by France 24 editors because they reside in a particular world region or are experts on a particular topic. According to France 24, this concept brings together professional journalists and amateur enthusiasts in order to provide original and quality content. Obviously, such an approach has the added advantage of being present in various parts of the world at hardly any costs.

CNN and its iReport (ireport.cnn.com/) take a similar approach. In case of events (e.g. a natural disaster) happening in a particular world region, CNN makes so-called "assignments" by asking witnesses to contribute experiences and / or materials. Supplied content is subsequently checked by CNN staff and, if accurate, cleared and published (CNN calls this "vetting"). Suitable or exclusive material may then find its way into one or more of the CNN outlets, e.g. CNN TV. Again, this is an interesting way to gain access to information and material at no cost, and a welcome option in case CNN staff are not at the scene of events.

While the above are individual programme formats, others have gone as far as basing their entire business operations (or large parts thereof) on user contributions. One of the most prominent examples for such an approach is The Huffington Post (www.huffingtonpost.com). In addition to a core group of contributors and editorial staff, the "HuffPost" prides itself of its numerous bloggers (some could also be called citizen journalists) who contribute a wide range of topics to the outlet, often for free.

4.2 Networking Journalists

For New York Times columnist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Nicholas Kristof Social Media has become an essential part of his reporting. With 1.45 million followers on Twitter (@NickKristof) and 582,000 Facebook friends (January 2014) Kristof uses Social Networks to engage his friends and followers in his reporting, often from crisis regions. One of the problems, according to Kristof, is to filter and evaluate the numerous comments and posts, and find the "gems" relevant for his assignments in all that is out there.

Someone who has significantly advanced the use of Social Media posts is Neal Mann, now Multimedia Innovations Editor at the Wall Street Journal (@fieldproducer). During his reporting from the Arab World for Sky News, Mann curated specific lists of

influential and trustworthy individuals, especially local journalists and bloggers. He not only consumed what was being posted there but got into direct contact with his sources as often as possible and advisable. As a result, he was often ahead of the news agencies with their reporting, especially while in Libya. [12]

Journalists who operate in similar ways are CNN's Brian Stelter (formerly of the New York Times, @brianstelter) and Andy Carvin of US National Public Radio (@acarvin): they all curate posts from Social Networks in their own (mostly Twitter) channels. One of the primary challenges, according to the above, is to find the most influential, knowledgeable and reliable individuals to speak to on specific topics in a timely manner. [5]

Another way to use the crowd is to ask them explicitly for story ideas or (expert) contributions. Jemima Kiss (@jemimakiss), technology journalist at UK newspaper The Guardian operates this way. She calls on her followers for ideas and advice in the storytelling process and refers to them as her "brain trusts". [13]

5. RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The success of grassroots / collaborative journalism is obvious. It "gives a voice" to ordinary people and reflects what is really relevant to them. However, growing involvement of the general public in news production has also led to problems and criticism:

- The traditional journalistic workflow follows clear rules and a journalistic code of conduct that has developed over decades: research needs to be accurate; the subject of an investigation has to be treated fairly and objectively; anyone subject to journalistic research should have the opportunity to comment; information should only be published when verified. Critics of grassroots and collaborative journalism fear that inexperienced actors will not follow such codes and undermine the quality, objectivity and, eventually, the reputation and acceptance of journalistic work.

- Although journalists are only partly subject to data protection regulations (otherwise investigative journalism would not be possible) the increasing availability of personal information requires more sensitive handling of personal data by journalists, too.⁴ Will non-professional journalists feel the responsibility to do the same? Are they prepared to protect the sources of sensitive information against public authorities or other forces, even when under pressure?

- One of the biggest concerns refers to anonymity. Whoever communicates online can hide his / her identity or even pretend to be someone else. This opens the door to misleading information and deliberate manipulation. Recent experiences such as the abuse of the Internet by the different sides in the Syrian conflict are likely to undermine trust in online journalism and might affect the status of serious journalism in general.

6. OUTLOOK AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

Despite the challenges and problems described above, grassroots and collaborative journalism will continue to grow. It can be expected that accelerating technological developments and increasing Internet access will motivate even more people to participate in the process of newsgathering and information

⁴ For instance, the German code of conduct for the press establishes its own rules for the treatment of personal data, including the right of complaint for any person whose personal data has been used in research and publications.

dissemination. Nevertheless, we need to develop strategies to meet the challenges that have been described here in order to maintain (or improve) the quality of grassroots/collaborative news coverage, and to protect the status and reputation of the media.

There is a significant difference between grassroots and collaborative journalism. The latter is initiated and controlled by professional journalists who try to maintain some of their gatekeeper position or extend their access to relevant information and sources. The former, in turn, is more disruptive, as it is "untamed", challenging established institutions far more than collaborative (and hence more controlled) undertakings. However, introducing more professionalism (or standards) into grassroots journalism seems advisable. It could be provided by professionals and lead to initiatives such as Voices of Africa in which professionals introduce selected trainees to the basics of mobile reporting (see www.voicesofafricamediafoundation.org).

Also, the online community itself could develop tools and strategies to support responsible and accurate citizen journalism. Wikipedia with its scientific and editorial standards and its "self-healing concept" is a living example for this. An equally ambitious Wikinews (www.wikinews.org) could significantly contribute to the quality and reliability of user-created journalistic contributions, in turn.

Finally, Research & Technology Development could further support in various areas (a small selection of research efforts has been provided in chapter 2). The following are needed: software solutions that enable the general public to easily anonymise personal data or images; software solutions that support in the content verification process (as it is aimed for in the EC co-funded project REVEAL); and simple-to-use tools and systems that enable both professional and non-professional journalists to find their way through a continuously growing flood of information (as it is being developed in the EC co-funded project SocialSensor). Grassroots and collaborative journalism are important social phenomena and Research & Technology Development will be a key for maintaining or even improving the quality and reliability of news storytelling in the digital age.

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The views and findings presented here are those of the named authors. They are not necessarily identical with those of Deutsche Welle or project partners, nor do they in any way represent the views of the European Commission.

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