

Uneasy Relationships: Journalists, Social Media and the Implications for News

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### Abstract

The rise of social media and its prominence during the “Arab Spring” has radically changed the relationship between journalism and the public. Foreign correspondents are no longer the sole source of news; raw emotional images are being uploaded to screens without the filter of the news desk; armed with the little more than a mobile phone, members of the public have increasing power. This array of digital media is rapidly blurring traditional boundaries, fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, professional and amateur. And yet mainstream news organizations show little sign of abandoning normative values based around objectivity and an ideal of rational discourse; in fact some appear to be fighting a rearguard action, attempting to colonize social media within their existing newsroom structures. But is it not time to recognize that the blurring of formats has made the journalistic norms look anachronistic? And is it not time to consider new practices which would allow a better appreciation of the often highly emotional forces attached to news reporting across today’s multiplicity of formats? Concentrating on the coverage of international news, this chapter will explore the uneasy relationship between journalism and social media and its implications for the practice of news reporting in the digital era.

### Uneasy Relationships: Journalists, Social Media and the Implications for News

Images of atrocity, carnage and grief flow into our screens from the streets of Damascus, Cairo and Bahrain. They fill our televisions, laptops, i-Pads and mobile phones. Unedited and raw: this is today's depiction of what was once, in hope, called the Arab Spring. It is no longer the privileged preserve of foreign correspondents, now, arguably, a dying breed. But is it journalism? Does this "user generated content," "social media," "citizen journalism" or "citizen witnessing", as it has variously been called, depict the facts or is it propaganda; truth or lies; objective or subjective? The boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred and with this blurring emerges a complex and tense relationship between journalists and the public. One thing is certain, that relationship has changed for good.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the uneasy relationship and its implications for news. It examines briefly the historical context for the upheaval in today's news industry and the collapse of the industrial business model that dates back to the introduction of the mass printing press in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Drawing on contemporary examples of citizen journalism in the international news arena and studies of newsroom attitudes, it looks at changing practice and the reaction of mainstream news organisations to social media, including what has been a tendency to pour scorn on its proponents as not "proper" or "professional" journalists. The arguments in recent years have become polarized, either labelling the changing news environment as the death of journalism as we know it or heralding the birth of a new age of democratization. The emphasis has often been on how journalism can *adapt* to survive in the digital age. This chapter adopts a different focus, arguing that the time has come to go further and reappraise the journalistic norms that have held sway for the past 100 years and to develop new codes and practices that would allow a better appreciation of the often highly emotive forces attached to today's digital media environment.

Elsewhere in this book authors examine the implications of changes wrought by digital media and the explosive growth in digital forms of communication across all aspects of life and society. Digital media are reshaping the way communities form, the way they function and act. So why should news be an exception? Why should the community of professional journalists and, to use a phrase coined by Jay Rosen (2006),<sup>1</sup> “the people formerly known as the audience” who are now involved in news production, be any different? Rather than adopting the prevailing view that journalism needs to adapt to preserve its traditions, it is more appropriate to re-examine how the profession of journalism defines itself and how it can be relevant to society in this new media landscape. Rethinking age-old habits, behaviours and practices, not least the misused and imperfect concepts of impartiality and objectivity, will arguably better reflect and serve today’s rapidly changing globalized society. At the same time, it is important to note that this evolving news environment places additional emphasis on media literacy, both in terms of the public consuming news and on the new generation of digitally savvy journalists and journalism students.

### **Broken beyond Repair**

If proof were needed that the industrial model of journalism is irreparably damaged, two recent watershed events in Anglo-American journalism illustrate the upheaval now underway. Firstly, the sale of the Washington Post for \$250 million to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos put an end to 80 years of ownership by the Graham family. Forty years after its Watergate heyday, the Post’s chief executive Donald Graham stated in a letter to the staff that, “the newspaper business continued to bring up questions to which we had no answers” (Mitchell, Jurkowitz & Guskin, 2013, p. 1). According to the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, advertising revenue for the US newspaper industry declined by 6.8% in 2012, the seventh consecutive year of decline. In the light of this, it remains to be

seen whether Bezos can deliver on his promise to bring a “new golden era” to the Washington Post (Gabbatt, 2013).

Secondly, in the United Kingdom, another watershed moment came with the news that in 2013, for the first time, the majority of adults now use the Internet to read or download news. According to the Office for National Statistics, 55% of adults are using online news compared to only 20% five years ago. Digital readership is most popular with tech-savvy 25-34-year-old Britons, with 72% likely to download or read news online. But almost half (49%) of 55-64-year-olds are now doing the same. Newspapers can not even rely on the older generation to sustain their tried and trusted business model.

The news industry has always, of course, been in a state of flux and been forced to adapt, often driven by technological developments. The mass printing press introduced in the late 1800s was challenged by radio, which was in turn challenged by broadcast television, 24-hour news channels, the early incarnations of Internet news providers such as AOL, and so on. Each new incarnation of the media industry tended to be viewed as a threat, with Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously observing that each new medium never leaves an old one in peace, never ceasing to “oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them” (p. 158). But this time, crucially, the underlying business model that sustained the profession of journalism for the past 100 years has almost certainly been fatally damaged. The monopoly on information enjoyed by the media has been broken; the model of one-to-many communication with the strong dominance of the outlet determining content and use has gone, replaced by networked communications in which citizens have power (Broersma & Peters, 2013). The Internet’s ability to connect advertisers directly to consumers without the mediation of a newspaper (or television channel) raises the possibility that the historic link between advertising and editorial will be broken and, with it, the very model that underpinned the delivery of news (Freedman, 2010). The dramatic consequences for the

traditional newspaper industry are already there to be seen. In the UK, for example, The Guardian's daily circulation has dipped to just 187,000, 11.6% down on year ago levels (ABC, 2013), while its website now attracts 4.3 *million* unique users each day. This is the new business dynamic of the industry. But the new sums are not yet adding up.

An investigation by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism showed that the search by the U.S. newspaper industry to find a new revenue model is making only halting progress<sup>2</sup>. As a result, newspapers are continuing to contract at what the report says is alarming speed, with cultural inertia based on what had been a mature and monopolistic industry a major factor. The newspapers investigated were on average losing print advertising revenue at seven times the rate that they were adding digital ad sales. The report highlights the scale of the cultural challenge:

Newspaper executives described an industry still caught between the gravitational pull of the legacy tradition and the need to chart a faster digital course. A number of them worried that their companies simply had too many people – whether it be in the newsroom, boardroom or on the sales staff – who were too attached to the old way of doing things (Rosenstiel, Jurkowitz & Ji, 2012, p.1)

### **The former audience & user generated content**

With the technological revolution has come a new generation of content producers. Two of the earliest examples of what might today be called “user generated content” predate the Internet - Abraham Zapruder's home movie recording of the 1963 assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy and George Holliday's Sony Handycam footage of the Los Angeles Police Departments' 1991 beating of Rodney King (Allan, 2013). However, mainstream U.S. audiences had to wait until 1975 to see the unedited 486 frames of 8mm footage that comprised the Zapruder film. In today's digital age two news events proved to be

key and a delay of 12 years would, of course, be unthinkable - the 2004 Asian tsunami, when holiday makers captured deadly waves hitting the shores on their mobile phones, and the July 7, 2005, London Underground bombings, when survivors were able to post pictures of the attack's immediate aftermath (network news cameras had no access to the underground system which had been cordoned off by police)<sup>3</sup>. With hindsight, this was the start of what has today become the new norm of citizen journalism that has so fundamentally challenged the status quo. The BBC's Media Correspondent, Torin Douglas (2006), described 7/7 as a turning point that democratized media. A study of U.S. use of social media (Purcell, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010) found that in 2010, some 37% of internet users had contributed to the creation of news, commentary about it, or dissemination of news via social media (commenting on a news story [25%]; posting a link on a social networking site [17%]; tagging content [11%], creating their own original news material or opinion piece [9%, or Tweeting about news [3%]). When *The Guardian's* media pages published its 2013 list of the 100 most powerful media figures it took the unusual step of listing number one as "You", "reflecting the extent to which mobile and social media are transforming an industry traditionally dominated by moguls, editors and celebrities" (Deans, 2013). In the view of *The Guardian*, it was a year in which the digital age empowered the people.

The capacity to reveal events which in the "old media" world would have remained hidden (and to do so in virtually real time) is one of social media's most striking features, one which has become increasingly evident in a world of global conflict, war and terror<sup>4</sup>. But viewed from the perspective of traditional journalism, the use of social media poses both an opportunity *and* a dilemma. On the one hand, it is impossible to deny the significance of some of the footage that is being uploaded by the public from their mobile phones, as such footage can undoubtedly be of significant political or social value; on the other hand, it is

often seen as a threat to the profession, its traditional practices and its deeply ingrained code of values, foremost of which are the concepts of objectivity and impartiality.

Nowhere is this tension better illustrated than in coverage of the Arab Spring from Tunisia to Syria and in coverage of terror attacks such as the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. The examples discussed below illustrate the power of social media, the changes in journalistic practice and power relationships that social media are inexorably imposing, and the ethical challenges posed. At the most extreme level, the public sphere for debate (and political protest) presented by traditional media has shifted decisively, and in real time, to citizens and social media.

In December 2010, students in Tunisia posted video clips to Facebook of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi setting fire to himself after being humiliated by a female police officer. Arabic television network Al Jazeera then picked up the footage. Suddenly, the incident became one of the catalysts unleashing the subsequent uprising in Tunisia. Critically, this was neither the original reporting of local journalists, nor of foreign correspondents posted to the country, nor of those flown in hurriedly from a western capital to cover a crisis already brewing. There was a time when the foreign correspondent was the source of all knowledge, telling his or her audience what was going on at a time of convenience to the media organization (usually aligned to a network's prime time news bulletins back home). Now, the public is starting to tell the foreign correspondent what is going on. Richard Sambrook, the former Director of the BBC's global news division, posed the extreme question as to whether, in the face of the changing international news landscape, foreign correspondents are actually "redundant" (Sambrook, 2010, p. 2). In answering his own rhetorical question, Sambrook maintained that the role of the (dwindling band of) foreign correspondents is already changing rapidly, with "social media ... leading, supplementing and complementing what professional news organisations offer, providing



fresh source material for reporters, but also competing with them for public attention” (ibid: p. 2). While this highlights the complementary or additional value offered by social media, Sambrook also draws a clear distinction between such material and that produced by professional journalists. He concludes that the one key role of the foreign correspondent that will not change is the ability to bear witness independently.

### **Social media becomes an integral part of the story**

Other contemporary examples of high profile citizen journalism or the use of social media highlight such issues around the independent nature of eyewitness reporting and how social media sometimes today becomes part of the story. Graphic video footage in August 2013 of children writhing in agony at what later turned out to be confirmed by UN inspectors as a chemical weapons attack in Damascus caused international outrage. Nabila Ramdani, a French-Arab journalist who had worked extensively in Syria, recounted how her contacts in the country sent her almost simultaneously video film of children dying from the effects of nerve agents. Even the most sanitized, she wrote in *The Observer* newspaper (The Observer, 2013), were considered unpublishable to a wider audience.

When Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons in 1988 to kill about 5,000 of his own citizens at Halabja, there were no mobile phones to capture the horror and it took days for still pictures to emerge. Some 25 years later, some of the Damascus footage was in fact incorporated into the BBC’s main television news bulletins shortly after being posted on the web. But the advantages are not without qualification. Mainstream news organizations that used the pictures generally added a disclaimer, such as the one often use by *The Guardian* on its website: “These pictures cannot yet be independently verified” or “graphic video released purporting to show victims” (The Guardian, 2013, August 21) Underscoring the changing nature of their position, foreign correspondents who had not been on the scene to report

directly and independently, found themselves in the role of interpreting what might have happened. In the immediate aftermath they asked the same question as the viewer – did this footage (there were about 100 individual videos uploaded) result from an attack by the ruling Syrian regime or was it perpetrated by rebels with the express intention of sucking Western powers into the conflict? Two days after the attack, *The Guardian's* website provided an interactive map showing where social media sources were located around Damascus, detailing what was reported and attributing a “reliability score” to each source on a scale of 1-5 (The Guardian, 2013, August 22). In the end, it was left to UN weapons inspectors to carry out the verification and decide how 1,429 civilians were killed.

The extent to which social media and citizen journalism is already becoming embedded in our culture was illustrated in May 2013 when British army drummer Lee Rigby was hacked to death in broad daylight outside his barracks in Woolwich, London. It also illustrated the perverse consequences of this new culture. Drummer Rigby's two assailants calmly engaged passers-by in conversation, waiting to ensure that they were captured by mobile phone footage before the arrival of the police. The pictures of one of the attackers wielding a machete in his bloodied hands prompted 700 complaints to the broadcasting regulator Ofcom, which later launched an investigation into the decision to air the footage. (BBC News, 2013). Here, a different ethical question was raised: should such raw, unedited emotionally laden footage be aired on mainstream news channels? Those arguing for its inclusion point to the fact that it was freely available on the Internet through YouTube and other such channels. Issues of broadcasting and taste are nothing new; seasoned journalists have dealt with them for years and have always had to make difficult editing decisions. However, the unedited video or still photographs were not, in the past, available freely for the public to view or download on the Internet, Twitter and the like. That changed in the wake of the 2003 Gulf War against Iraq, when harrowing videos of hostages such as the British civil

engineer Ken Bigley and Irish aid worker Margaret Hassan were distributed to broadcasters but *also* posted by their kidnappers on the Internet. Inexorably, social media are also changing our cultural expectations of what we expect and do not expect to see.

Increasingly it appears also that traditional media have lost their dominant role in informing the public, clearly evident from the demonstrations in Tahrir Square that led to the end of President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule of Egypt. A survey of how 1,200 protestors used social media in early 2011 showed that about half of those who responded had a Facebook profile and almost all of those used it for communicating about the protests (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Twitter was used less, by about 16% of respondents and by 13% of the protestors. But crucially, traditional forms of mass media were far less important in informing people about the protests than inter-personal communications such as face-to-face meetings, mobile phones and Facebook. Respondents were asked whether they produced pictures or videos of the protests and, if so, how they disseminated them. Some 48.2% of those who replied to the survey had engaged in such citizen journalism, overwhelmingly using Facebook as a means of distribution.

As *The Guardian* remarked in its Top 100 commentary: "The Woolwich murder, Boston bombings and more recently the Syrian chemical weapons massacre demonstrated the extent to which ordinary members of the public, using smartphones and social media, are shaping coverage of major news stories these days." (The Guardian, 2013, September 1).

By the time of the attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi in September 2013, both the Kenyan authorities and al-Shabab militants were using Twitter feeds to distribute their messages. No sooner had the authorities shut down one of the al-Shabab feeds than another sprang up to explain their rationale, namely that Kenyan forces had been operating within Somalia. According to the BBC, the militants' Twitter feed even purported to show pictures of two of their attackers within the shopping mall (Khera, 2013). The

government at the same time was using several different Twitter feeds, from the police to individual politicians and cabinet ministers. Perhaps even more bizarrely, Israel announced an offensive against Gaza in November 2012 through the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Twitter feed. The tweet read: “The IDF has begun a widespread campaign on terror sites & operatives in the #Gaza Strip, chief among them # Hamas & Islamic Jihad targets.” (The Guardian, 2012, November 14)<sup>5</sup>.

For journalists trying to cover the Nairobi attack, the result was confusion and a scramble to verify the al-Shabab tweets as genuine. Verification, as will be discussed later in this chapter, is a foundation of the practice of journalism, but is now moving to center stage as the volume of social media content grows exponentially and, with it, the potential for hoax and manipulation.

Alongside this very “serious” use of social media, it is worth noting that the every day diet of broader social media content served up appears to be staking out a different agenda to what had traditionally been covered. Tabloid newspapers in the Anglo-American sphere have, of course, a long and rich tradition of producing their own such material and, as the Leveson Inquiry in the UK illustrated<sup>6</sup>, are far from perfect when it comes to ethics. But a U.S. study by the Pew Research Center (2010) found that the stories and issues that gain traction in social media differ substantially from those that lead the mainstream traditional media. The research project tracked a year’s worth of top news stories in 2009-10 and mapped them to blogs and social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. It concluded that social media and the mainstream press clearly embrace different agendas, with blogs sharing the same lead story with traditional media for just 13 of the 49 weeks studied. The fact of the matter is that Twitter has become an increasingly used source for journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013, p. 460). Twitter has effectively become a new and highly convenient “beat” for reporters, the traditional “place” of a reporting beat (e.g. parliament,

the law courts etc) being replaced by the social media “space.” Broersma and Graham found that in study of tweets used in news coverage between 2007-11 almost two thirds were cited by popular newspapers and geared to “soft” news.

These examples of international news events illustrate how social media are having a lasting impact on norms and practices of journalism: news is being covered in real time by citizens; foreign correspondents often end up interpreting user generated content or trying to verify it; unedited emotional footage is increasingly finding its way into what used to be carefully controlled (and often sanitized) news bulletins; social media are in some cases becoming the story and Twitter has become a source of instant quotations. All this is having a profound impact in shaping the news agenda that had once been the exclusive preserve of professional journalists.

### **Deep distrust**

Journalists have in fact been quick to embrace the practical tools of the Internet, such as looking up a wider array of sources, phone numbers and background information (O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008). Today the net is an indispensable part of their reporting toolbox. Twitter, as has been observed, is seen as a quick and convenient source of quotes. But that is far from saying that all journalists embrace social media content from the public or accept it on a par with their own output.

On the contrary, news events such as those discussed above serve to highlight the complex and often tense relationship between traditional journalism and social media. The aim for many journalists seems to be to hold onto the object “professional journalism” as tightly as possible as though, if we lose our grip on it, it is no longer journalism (Broersma & Peters, 2013, p. 3). Journalists questioned in a study by Fenton and Witschge (2011, p.148) were keen to “restate their value and reclaim their territory” in the face of citizen journalism.

This expressed itself in adherence to the traditionally accepted normative values of professional journalism, truth, objectivity and impartiality, the very values that are being disrupted by the explosion of user generated content and multiplicity of voices online. As a result, the authors found, non-institutionalized journalism is often equated with “bad journalism” where opinion masquerades as fact (p. 152). Many journalists are keen to “guard the borders of their profession and demarcate where journalism ends and something else begins” (p. 160). In their study of 239 journalists in 40 newsrooms across Europe, O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) found that 51% considered that the activity of citizen journalists does not comprise “real” journalism and less than a quarter, 23%, actively disputed the contention. Print journalists displayed the greatest hostility, while those working in an online or hybrid environment tended to have more neutral attitudes. Some 63% of the journalists questioned thought print media are more trusted than online. There was a “prevailing principle of continuity” and an internal need to adhere to practices that ensure the professional status established in the 1800s together with the values that generate and legitimize those practices (p. 368).

Old habits clearly die hard. A review of the concepts of balance and impartiality in BBC journalism, carried out in the context of an analysis of its radio, television and online news from 2007-2012, found that in the three areas examined – coverage of immigration, religion and the UK’s relationship to Europe – the broadcaster remained wedded to a traditional and limiting focus on balance (The BBC Trust, 2013). This was conceived as representing the positions of the two main UK political parties, Conservatives and Labour, to the detriment of a broader range of opinion. As a result, coverage often focused on infighting between the parties rather than on the substantive issue.

Further distrust of the new online environment has stemmed from the collapse of the business model and subsequent budget cuts, meaning that fewer journalists are now having to

fill a vastly expanded space offered by newspaper websites. Job cuts and lay offs in US newsrooms are estimated to have reduced the number of journalists by 30% since 2000 and below 40,000 for the first time since 1978 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Expansion of newspaper online websites has in no way compensated for cuts, since journalists are now more often than not producing for all outlets. The criticism of established journalists is that they are now spending more and more time repurposing press releases, without checking them or adding value to them, and reformatting stories for multiple news outlets. This trend, labeled “churnalism” by the British journalist Nick Davies, has led to less original reporting (Davies, 2009). The process has even been likened to “cannibalism” rather than the craft of independent journalism (Phillips, 2012, p. 101). Ironically, this means journalists sometimes have even less time to engage with the public and non-elite news sources such as NGOs (Fenton, 2009). Given this environment, the potential for a hoax to spread without checks is great and arguably growing. In summer 2013, many mainstream news organizations made the mistake of carrying a story about an epidemic of “eye ball licking” sweeping Japan.<sup>7</sup> The story, picked up worldwide, raised the suspicions of journalist Mark Schreiber, who had lived in Japan since 1965. Having debunked the story through some original research, he wrote to newspapers that had carried it, only for some of them to refuse to remove from their websites what they viewed as a syndicated article.

This deep distrust has tended to dictate the broader attitude of established media organizations to citizen journalism. Many British news organizations appear to harbour residual doubts about the value of such material and their websites are adopting a traditional filtering or “gate-keeping”<sup>8</sup> role towards it (Hermida & Thurman, 2008), thus trying to maintain a position of power over content. A study of 12 UK newspaper websites found that the growth in use of user-generated content was partly driven by editors’ and executives’ fear of being marginalized by such media. A prevailing concern was the potential for social media

taken into a newspaper's website to damage its brand, leading to many organizations controlling or moderating such content and essentially vetting what goes online. That in turn has imposed a new cost burden. In fact, it appears that forms of public participation endorsed by the media industry hardly challenge existing power relations (Witschge, 2013).

### **Rethinking practice and the art of curation**

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the fundamental tenets of journalism, and its professional codes around objectivity and impartiality, remain largely unquestioned. The gate-keeping approach to user generated content is clear evidence of an attempt by some organizations to colonize social media and is reminiscent of *The New York Times's* motto "All the news that's fit to print."<sup>9</sup>

But in fact, the behaviors, habits and normative codes of journalism are hardly set in stone. They developed only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when the shared industrial model of Anglo-American journalism, fostered by the mass printing press, was becoming established on both sides of the Atlantic (Hampton, 2001; Mindich, 1998; Schudson, 1978; 2001). Various influences coalesced to develop journalism into a profession with its own code, at the heart of which were concepts of objectivity and impartiality and the establishment of boundaries between fact-based reporting and opinion. Partly this reflected the desire of owners to appeal to a wider non-partisan audience and increase circulation; partly it was an attempt by journalists themselves to set their work apart from government propaganda (particularly during World War I) and the growing public relations industry; partly it reflected the rise of science and an emphasis on empirical facts as the key to reality and truth (Boudana, 2011):

To be attractive to news consumers, journalism presented itself as a non-biased representation of the public good and phrased the news in a neutral, authoritative



language. In aiming for the masses, journalism made an imagined social contract with the audience in which it promised not to take sides in its representation of social reality (Broersma & Peters, 2013, p.7).

It is easy to forget that before this industrial organization and codifying of journalism, much of it was small scale, and highly opinionated, resembling the social networks now ubiquitous on the web (Brock, 2013).

It therefore seems entirely legitimate to question and to start to redefine those normative behaviors in light of the widespread changes wrought by digital media. Very slowly a debate *is* beginning to emerge along these lines, ironically partly fuelled by former journalists who have moved into the academic world. Although sometimes still rooted in age-old values, new ideas are being developed with a view to informing democratic society in the light of the way that society now engages with information.

One of these emerging new practices is the concept of “curation.”<sup>10</sup> With such an overwhelming volume of content generated by citizens, journalists are learning how to curate in real-time information coming in, allowing diverse sources and opinion to be collected, selected, bundled and packaged. This new function has been termed “gate-watching” rather than the traditional gate-keeping referred to earlier in this chapter and is more akin to that of a librarian constantly surveying information as it becomes available and serving as a guide to the most reliable sources. Gate-watchers therefore *publicize* news, by pointing to sources, rather than *publishing* it by compiling one report from the available sources. In turn, the argument goes, this increases transparency and readers or viewers, by consulting original sources, can quickly reduce any inherent bias in a news organization’s reporting staff (Bruns, 2003). Other clear benefits from curation include immediacy, interaction and “crowd sourcing”. But at the same time, such content has to be clearly collated and not end up as a confusing stream of consciousness. The practice of curation is therefore very different from

the purely electronic compilation of content on offer from news “aggregator” web sites (Thorsen, 2013, p.139).

By highlighting the reality of the overlap between “professional” journalists and citizen journalists, Bruns (2011) also urges a more collaborative relationship or hybrid model of journalism. Any claim, Bruns maintains, that journalists report the news and citizen journalists add the commentary is unsustainable, not least because established media organizations are today starved of revenue to employ staff. Rather, citizens and professional journalists rely on each other for impetus and recognize some limits – citizens often can’t attend press conferences (not being accredited) while journalists may not be present at breaking news stories or have access to people on the ground. In Bruns’ “pro-am” model, the creation of shared content takes place in a networked participatory environment that breaks down barriers between producers and consumers. The chief task is to understand who can do what best but this can only be achieved if each side of the journalistic divide respects the other more than is currently the case (pp. 138-139).

As a new and distinct development, curation poses a challenge to journalism’s holy grail of objectivity and impartiality. The objectivity norm united journalists through shared “rituals” and a shared identity (Broersma & Peters, 2013) and perceived threats to it are clearly at the root of the deep sense of distrust displayed today towards citizen journalists. But in fact, there was always a tacitly understood tension between the objectivity norm and the actual practice of journalism – the one relied on adopting a theoretically detached view of the world while the nature of story telling actually relied on evoking an emotional response in the news consumer. On the one hand journalism seeks to engage feeling; on the other hand, it prides itself on dispassionate observation. Far from being emotionally neutral, it is designed to stir, arouse and manipulate (Seaton, 2005). Today’s user generated content and the diverse

streams of fact and opinion that come together through curation, have exposed that central paradox and laid it bare as never before.

In the online environment, the normative anchors become dislodged as the impossibility of achieving objectivity is acknowledged, together with an increased awareness of subjectivity (Fenton, 2010). This is not just driven by the injection of opinion through blogs, Twitter feeds and Facebook comments; it is also a consequence of user generated images which, as illustrated by coverage of the Arab Spring, have not been through a central editing system. The raw video footage now incorporated into network television news bulletins and online websites of the BBC and Sky in the UK has included blood-stained machetes in a suburb of London, children writhing in agony from chemical weapon and napalm attacks in Syria, the execution of Saddam Hussein and the gory last moments of Muammar Gaddafi. Some successful online websites no longer seem to bother with the pretence of objectivity (Broersma & Peters, 2013). Those established media organizations that cling to the old traditions struggle to prevent the established lines of demarcation from blurring even more so than in the past. Even the bastion of impartiality, the BBC, has called the concept of objectivity into question. To the surprise of many of his colleagues, former Director General Mark Thompson suggested there could be a relaxation of regulation around impartiality, saying “Why shouldn’t the public be able to see and hear, as well as read, a range of opinionated journalism and then make up their own mind what they think about it?” (Sherwin, 2010).

The reality of the new digital environment is that emotional content is out in the open as never before, rather than being repressed or surreptitiously injected into news content. Alongside it comes opinion, propaganda and invective and the ability to foster a far wider array of source material.

In this digital age, values of objectivity are de facto giving way to something more akin to the practice of verification, where not only journalists but also citizens can check the validity of what is reported (for example mobile phone footage) alongside the flood of opinion and comment which is valid in its own right. Twitter is transformed into a site of extreme subjectivity when the platform is used for the dissemination of major news events (rather than trivia, rumour and gossip). The death of Michael Jackson in 2009, which accounted for 30% of all Twitter messages at the time, represented an outpouring of grief and opinion but was also for many the first news of the fact that he had died (Crawford, 2011). The same was true of the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008 or when a US Airways passenger jet went down in the Hudson River the next year.<sup>11</sup> The “tweet” which broke that news was from a rescuer, Janis Krums, on his way to the stricken plane: “There’s a plane in the Hudson. I’m on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.” That one tweet at the same time ignored the normative codes of professional journalism – the message was immediate, subjective and emotional (Crawford, 2011). It is time to recognize that a networked media space is steeped in the subjective and that objectivity, as Fenton observes, is in practice an unattainable goal. In addition, the ability of a specific news item disseminated across Twitter to “trend” is a further example of how social media are now able to set the agenda or influence that of established media.

In the United States, veteran journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, who called their new book on journalism “Blur,”<sup>12</sup> also focused on the importance of verification and evidence. Arguing that the separation between journalists and citizens is disappearing, they aimed their work at both. “Blur is,” said Kovach, “a book not just aimed at journalists but at the general public because they are ... becoming their own reporters” (Smith, 2010). Verification of what is happening is, of course, a very traditional concept in journalism but the fundamental difference is that now every individual is responsible for knowing what is

true and the old role of the journalist gate-keeper is breaking down (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). The new media environment neither privileges those who shout loudest in a world of unfettered spin nor does it create some form of citizen-led media democracy that instantly self corrects. Rather there is a blending of cultures which implies greater dialogue and a partnership between the consumers of news and those who used to be the gate-keepers.

In a similar vein in the UK, former journalist turned academic Richard Sambrook (2010) argues for the need for evidence-led reporting, diversity of opinion, and transparency in sourcing, interests and intent. There is a de facto recognition that the destruction of the industrial business model of media has cut the number of journalists being employed and that the traditional role of witnessing news live – although still vitally important - is less likely to happen. Sambrook argues that without facts, and the evidence to support them, opinion is worthless; diversity of opinion can provide a form of impartiality that avoids polarisation and can foster rational debate; and that transparency, about sources, interests and intent, in turn supports trust. Of course, this complex networked environment, in which consumers of news are presented with a more diverse range of material, places a far greater emphasis on media literacy.

The topic has received little attention within the UK, prompting some, including Sambrook, to question whether the public is yet equipped for the task. In the United States, the arguments have, however been better rehearsed with in a strong “J-School” or Journalism School university culture. Indeed, there is a powerful argument that the emerging practice of curation and media literacy go hand in hand. Mihailidis and Cohen (2013) argue that in an age when the digital generation of students has access to seemingly unlimited amounts of information, and can personalize and reorganize content, the practice of curation is a powerful pedagogic tool to strengthen critical inquiry and engagement. It is a discipline that comes naturally to students who use, for example, the Twitter “list” feature<sup>13</sup> and Facebook

groups to help organize and decide what information to keep, discard, trust or distrust. In a case study using the online digital curation platform Storify, the authors illustrate how, in an education environment, content from established news and media outlets can be combined with content from social networks; how content can be integrated in non-linear formats; how to discuss the credibility of sources; how to understand concepts such as framing, bias, agenda and perspective; how to appreciate and take advantage of diversity; and, finally, how to understand responsibilities.

### **Conclusion**

It is time to recognize that today's networked media space is steeped in the subjective, the social and the emotional. Whether news organizations like it or not, and as has been illustrated, many within those organizations still harbor deep suspicion, the practice of journalism is already changing and the tide of social media cannot be turned back. As a result, the journalistic norms that held sway throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, foremost among them objectivity and impartiality, are increasingly anachronistic. Perversely, the ability to cling to those old norms is being undermined by the very budget pressures social media have brought to bear on traditional business models.

Raw images of atrocities, terror and disaster are available online in virtually real time and unedited, even if some news organizations refrain from using them in their mainstream outlets. Such footage is conveying news items that might otherwise never have been seen. The ebb and flow of Twitter streams can deliver a powerful, shared emotion across national borders that in the case of a celebrity's death (such as Michael Jackson's in 2009) or disaster appears to represent a form of digital mourning. The boundaries between those reporting the news and those commenting on it, between those producing it and those consuming it, have become blurred beyond recognition. The days when a group of middle aged men could meet

in the editor's office to decide what the day's news would be at prime time slots of 6 p.m. or 10 p.m. have long disappeared. And that news is no longer finite, capped at 500 words or 90 seconds - it is a multi-media stream, a work in progress that is continually being updated, iterated, changed and curated.

In this digital media landscape, the new practice of journalism needs to embrace social media and concentrate on new norms based on verification, interpretation and the provision of a diversity of views. Society needs to know *whether* banned chemical weapons killed Syrian civilians, society needs to know *why* this might have happened, and to hear a wide range of views and interpretation on it. That would always have been the case, and indeed it was when Saddam Hussein gassed Iraqi Kurds in Halabja in 1988. But today, it seems churlish not to capitalize on all sources of information to explore these questions with more immediacy and more diversity of views. The underlying mission of journalism does not change and this is not to say that traditional values such as accuracy, investigation or speaking truth to power should be cast aside. But in the transition from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the digital age, the practice of journalism and the relationship with the public is changing forever.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the title of an influential article written by media critic and journalism professor Jay Rosen. He started the article by stating: “The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power that goes with the platform shift you’ve all heard about.”

<sup>2</sup> The study was based on data and interviews at 38 newspapers from six different companies.

<sup>3</sup> The BBC received 22,000 e-mails and text messages, 300 still pictures and several video clips on the day (see Douglas, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> This chapter concentrates on the role of social media in mainstream international news coverage but the volume of such material is of course dwarfed by the daily deluge of blogs, Twitter comments, video footage focusing on other topics from celebrity gossip to trivia.

<sup>5</sup> See also for a discussion of the issue the BBC news item: Israel and Hamas wage Twitter war over Gaza conflict.

<sup>6</sup> The Leveson Inquiry investigated the culture, practices and ethics of the British press in 2011 and 2012 following the News International phone hacking scandal.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of how this hoax gained traction see a report by Elliot (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Defined as: “the process by which selections are made in media work, especially decisions whether or not to admit a particular news story to pass through the ‘gates’ of a news medium into the news channels” (McQuail, 1994, p.213)

<sup>9</sup> In a promotion in 2007 for its website, the New York Times coined the phrase: “All the news that’s fit to click.”

<sup>10</sup> The term has traditionally been applied to the work in libraries and museums to describe the ordering of physical material such as books or artifacts. Today it is being increasingly used to refer to activity online.

<sup>11</sup> The irony is that Twitter’s 140 character limit for messages is actually longer than the traditional Reuters news agency “alert” of 80 characters.

<sup>12</sup> Blur: How to Know what’s True in the Age of Information Overload, a sequel to the authors’ 2001 textbook *The Elements of Journalism*.

<sup>13</sup> Twitter in fact defines its list feature as curation: “*A list is a curated group of Twitter users.*” See <https://support.twitter.com/articles/76460-using-twitter-lists#>