

“Citizen journalism” in European television websites: lights and shadows of user generated content

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Abstract

Television networks in many European countries have launched web participation channels in recent years, so that viewers can send a variety of news content. For some authors, they are a new form of “citizen journalism”; a more proper term for this concept, it is argued, seems to be “user generated content”. This article deals with the essential aspects of this kind of participatory journalism in television websites, by analysing the initiatives of several television networks in Spain, Great Britain and France. It examines the nature of user generated content in those television websites case studies, and it enquires to what extent these initiatives can be regarded as “citizen journalism” and what kind of content they promote. Finally, it explores the challenges and opportunities posed by citizen journalism and user generated content to professional online television news.

Keywords: User generated content, citizen journalism, online journalism, television news.

Introduction

The term “citizen journalism”, according to Bowman and Willis (2003) refers to individuals’ active role in the elaboration and distribution of news content. Using blogs and other social media becomes a kind of “participative journalism” which, as both authors argue, consists of:

“The acts of citizens who play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating the news. The intent of this participation is to provide the independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires”.

Kunelius (2001) established the beginning of the citizen journalism movement in the United States early in the 1990s, and from there on, it extended to Latin America and Europe. Therefore, current offerings of citizen journalism would not constitute an entirely original concept. However, the phenomenon is rapidly extending because of interactivity and content exchange facilitated by the Internet. Instead of being primarily journalistic-centred, online news are increasingly user-centred, so that citizens have a much greater input on news, with a qualitative leap in the presentation of their own stories, opinions and audiovisual material. In the online environment, Llop (2006) states that “anyone can be a journalist”, and he therefore recommends that users should receive training in the use of technology and in the journalistic coverage of events.

Citizens' participation allows journalists to get a better knowledge of those events people are interested in and to maintain a direct contact with the public. Dan Gillmor stated that almost no major media organization had really attempted to systematically involve its audience: "while news companies make their mission to inform the public, few have made it a mission to arm them with tools they can use to make a public ruckus" (2004:125). "Citizen journalism" initiatives have been increasing sharply over the last few years, although "the impact of weblogs and citizen media on traditional, professional journalism has thus far been rather limited" (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008: 26). The concept of "citizen journalism" is increasingly being replaced by the more comprehensive notion of "user-generated content" (UGC), which does not include the reference to "journalism". The wording "user-generated" also blurs the notion of citizenry and civic engagement, for content can be produced by consumers, interest groups and eyewitness alike, and it is implied that professional news editors are needed to turn the content into "journalism." Therefore, the label of UGC emphasizes the need for a specialized profession with a unique set of standards and practices, different from those of web users, bloggers and the public, who are not regarded as "journalists" but as content producers.

Researchers are analysing in which ways news organizations are incorporating UGC in the process of news production. Domingo et al. (2007) explored the development of participatory journalism in an international perspective by studying the structural characteristics of users' participation in online newspapers in eight European countries and the USA. Hermida and Thurman (2007) conducted a quantitative content analysis survey of citizen journalism initiatives by mainstream online news media in the United Kingdom. Thurman (2008: 151) found out that British mainstream sites are hosting spaces for user generated content, "although not as a direct or linear response to these so-called 'grassroots' or 'citizen journalism' activities". Media users as well as interested organizations' participation are not restricted to blogs, websites, and such collective sites as YouTube, but through a variety of interactive options can also support or oppose the stories that the organizations and the media provide in their websites, thereby exposing messages to larger audiences (Karlsson, 2010). Therefore, new media are giving rise to a wider spectrum of voices and exchanges among them, thus creating a stream of "conversation" about current events (Boczowski, 2004: 185-6).

The renewed interest for UGC in television websites can be attributed to different factors. First of all, it is related to the rapid growth of interactive digital technologies, which make professional or amateur media production tools easily accessible at an affordable cost for ordinary users. In this way, the entrance barrier to the media is lowered to a level where the individual users or community-based organisations can become content producers. Because most new technologies are built for the digital environment, the internet has become the main vehicle for citizen journalism and UGC. Secondly, news organizations have

begun to realize the journalistic value of UGC and now understand that in order to remain competitive, they have to learn how to incorporate and capitalize on citizens' contributions. Thirdly, there is a common trend among web and new media users which fosters to exchange, share and collaborate in various aspects of communication (Deuze, 2006). Finally, other factors such as the erosion of trust in traditional institutional information sources, and the rise of digital social media and powerful search capabilities could also be taken into account (Thurman, 2008).

In this context, television networks have incorporated channels of audience participation, so that viewers can provide their own content and feedback about the news. Such kind of activity is not new, for television stations have traditionally broadcasted amateur video with journalistic value. Even whole programmes have been entirely produced by editing videos recorded by ordinary people. Networks often broadcast material which has been shot by anonymous people who happen to be on the spot before professional journalists arrived. For example, the first pictures of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York; of March 11 Madrid train blasts or of July 5 London bombings, were all provided by eyewitness.

Television news executives are trying to ameliorate the massive exodus of younger viewers, who are keener to get their news through the Web. In 2010, over one thousand billion Internet users are able to exchange their views and upload their material in platforms such as *YouTube*; many of them are generating public communities and exchanging videos at the expense of traditional television channels.

The growth of citizen journalism in European TV news websites

All over Europe, television channels are striving to diminish the distance which separates them from their audiences: by increasing interactivity, explaining journalistic practices to their audiences, or even involving citizens in the search for newsworthy events. During the terrorist attacks of 7th July 2005 in London, most of the material initially broadcasted came from recordings from eye witnesses (Allan, 2007). Citizens sent over 300 videos and 1000 pictures to the BBC. In June 2007, the news programmes of this network showed amateur material about the devastating impact of floods in the Southern part of the country. Within three days of the catastrophe, the BBC received over 3000 pictures and 200 video clips; most of them were testimonies from people whose houses and business had been flooded by the waters. The BBC only broadcasted a small percentage of this material and the information gathered helped design the coverage. According to BBC News director Richard Sambrook (2005:16), citizens' contributions constitute "an added value which improves the quality of the news". BBC News 24 launched *Your News*, the first news programme created from user generated content, which shows stories sent by viewers. Likewise, Channel 4 also created the citizen journalism platform *Picture This*, based on talent hunters of the best amateur

photographers. The programme demands a high degree of collaboration between the television channel and the web (Kiss, 2007).

User-generated content is of enormous value to the BBC, but it should not be allowed to dictate its news agenda, according to the head of BBC News, Peter Horrocks (2008), for the increasing use of citizen journalism has enhanced the network's news provision. But he questions the limits of that usage, what value audiences get from it and how much the network should invest in this initiative. Horrocks (2008) argues that only a small minority of the BBC's audience uses its interactive facilities, and organisations such as political parties, businesses and trades unions could employ user-generated content as a means of shaping the news and public opinion.

Spanish public broadcaster TVE has also introduced UGC in their news. In February 2007, TVE's La 2 Noticias newscast invited viewers to send their contributions with their opinions about current events. This kind of direct information provided a training ground for the public and on November 12th 2007, TVE La 2 launched *Cámara Abierta 2.0*, a programme significantly made up by viewers' content. Participation was requested in different ways: recordings without editing, and also pictures taken from mobiles or webcams, about important news events. *Cámara Abierta 2.0* broadcasted only citizens' videos with journalistic value. The programme website displayed indications about the way to shoot video and news criteria that the public should take into account to elaborate those pieces. They have broadcasted proposals about specific topics, such as "living with immigrants" or "wild real state". The project showcased TVE's public service commitment to provide users with a basic level of training on how to produce this material, in order to foster this kind of "citizen journalism". However, each programme usually shows only one piece sent by viewers; others are elaborated by the newsroom or by special contributors, such as bloggers or freelance journalists.

The Spanish commercial network Antena 3 also experimented with UGC. On January 2007, it launched the website *Tuclip.com*, where viewers could send videos and select in which programme they wished them to be broadcasted. Users got paid 100 euros for each piece, and they granted all exploitation rights to the network, without any temporal or geographical limitations. Antena 3 received over 6000 contributions in the first twelve months and about twenty of them were broadcasted in different programmes. As producers acknowledged, a large percentage of videos submitted by members of the public were never broadcasted. Also, many videos shown on television lacked any journalistic interest and were *infotainment* pieces. For example, among most watched videos in *Tuclip.com* during January 2008 there were a Dominican stripper, a comedy sketch and a sensual dance. Videos shown in newscasts dealt with a flooding in Madrid, a bank robbery and a country tornado in the North. Sections available within *Tuclip.com* website included "humour, in the web, hot, sports and total impact". It is significant that publication date was not included in the clips

published in the web, probably as not to reveal the slow update and the small amount of videos received. Most of the pieces uploaded were not attractive to a large audience and lacked journalistic values and the site was cancelled in January 2009.

The Dutch audiovisual company Endemol has produced several user-generated TV news shows since October 2007. The daily half-hour programmes - IK OP TV ("Me on TV") – are broadcasted on seven regional channels in The Netherlands. Endemol worked in partnership with Dutch citizen journalism service *Skoeps*. The shows asked viewers to send in their own reports from which they make local news TV items. Citizen reporters can upload their news videos on to the *Skoeps.nl* website, as well as uploading content via the show's site. Videos were then screened before being placed on the sites and selected for the presenter-led TV show. The programme enlisted several hundred citizen journalists, who worked unpaid but were given a suitable mobile device with which to capture stories.

The cases of *Upload Now* (ITV News) and "Have your Say" (BBC News)

ITV News intended to create the UK's first nationwide network of citizen correspondents who can shape TV news coverage on a daily basis. On 31st July 2007, ITV News launched a website which provides user generated content to its newscasts, *Uploaded*, which publishes user-generated content such as opinion pieces, debates and news. Viewers' contributions were not just an add-on to coverage of the big stories – they become an integral part of all three daily ITV News bulletins. Citizen correspondents could register directly through ITV's broadband service and uploaded their mobile or webcam clips to the website's *Daily Debate* and they could email their pictures and videos. Registered users received daily emails from the ITV News team, inviting them to contribute and have their say on the news. There was also an *Uploaded Forum*, where users could comment on other members' clips or views. The best uploaded clips from the website were then aired on ITV News bulletins to drive debates and offer a reflection of the nation's mood on issues ranging from bullying to election campaigns and the state of the National Health Service. The BBC did not pay for any contributions it publishes on the web or shows on television, while ITV News did offer payment for the material aired.

New sections were included in order to extent the quality and reach of viewers' participation. A *Citizen Exclusives* section gave everyone a platform to contact the ITV News team directly if they captured exclusive footage. In addition, the website featured a *Caught on Camera* section, where members of the public can share clips with other users. *Uploaded* were developed by the channel's multimedia division ITN On, which worked closely with the ITV News' editorial team to produce online and mobile content and drive daily debates.

Uploaded's contributors dealt with issues such as gun control, giving up smoking or videogame violence. They tended to be from the UK and many of them sent in their video reactions to some of ITV's news stories. Each of them appeared identified with their name. The site was updated three or four times a week. The BBC News website provided a section called "Have Your Say", with different topics and articles that solicit responses from the public. Users also have the option to recommend someone else's post, which can later be sorted by the number of recommendations. The content of the comments on any given topic has a wide range. The BBC has allowed a plurality of ideas be included and displayed under the discussion question, indicating that the news organization is engaging the public in discussions about relevant topics. There is also a very extensive collection of blogs, some of which are on the "Have Your Say" homepage: The Green Room, The Editor's Blog, Nick Robinson's Newslog, and Newsnight's Ethical Man. The Green Room consists of editorial pieces surrounding environmental issues, the Editor's Blog has blogs by various BBC editors, Nick Robinson's Newslog contains blogs by the political editor Nick Robinson, and the Newsnight's Ethical Man is dedicated to topics discussed on Newsnight airing on BBC Two on weeknights. The BBC also launched a series called "Your pictures, your world" in which they ask the public to submit photos around a certain theme. The 12 best are selected by the photo editor and posted on the site where people can vote for their favorite. Although there is journalistic value to lots of the UGC on the site, much of it relates to personal interests.

The BBC understands the importance and potential significance of UGC so much so that they are willing to give monetary reward for quality submissions. If other news organizations follow in this trend, payment for UGC may become the norm. Professional journalists are paid for their content and offering the same compensation to citizen journalists gives them a greater importance.

The BBC took UGC one step further and created "what it has billed as the UK's first news programme based entirely on user generated content" (Conlan, 2006). The program, called "Your News", aired on December 2nd 2006 and it included a large amount of the content being sent in by the public. By doing so, the BBC acknowledged the possibilities of UGC and its potential to have editorial significance.

The case of *The Observateurs* (France 24)

France 24 launched *The Observateurs*, a collaborative site that covers international current affairs by using eyewitness accounts from "observers" - that's to say people who are at the heart of the event. The content isn't produced by professional journalists - but everything's selected, verified, translated and explained by an editorial team at the channel's newsroom. The site is also a place for people passionate about international current affairs to get together and discuss events. By drawing on professional journalists and

amateur enthusiasts, there is an attempt to present both original and quality content. Observers can receive messages from all over the world, have a photo come up when they add a comment to a post and contact the editorial team to let them know of any good amateur material or interesting stories.

The observers are not part of our editorial team, but they're willing to be contacted by the site's users. We don't necessarily share their opinions. They could be young, old, doctors or miners, Chinese or Brazilian. These people make up 'your eyes across the globe'. Regional editors help us to select, verify, translate and format the material put online. They're young journalists or bloggers who find eyewitnesses and filter information. They're bilingual (Arabic, French, Farsi, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, Russian – English) and all over the world.

France24's *The Observateurs* gives prominence to the channel's own reporting perspectives from citizen journalism content around the world, with an emphasis on verifiable content. One of the arguments most commonly used against citizen journalism is that it is parochial and even more biased than traditional journalism and that by extension, users need to be more skeptical of this content than what is produced and broadcast by the networks. While it is an argument that has some merit, it is often the case that "citizen journalism" content is produced by witnesses present at incidents and journalists simply do not have access to. Separating the really good content from the worthless material is a daunting task. Professional journalists will play the role they always have - to present multiple truths in an impartial, accurate and responsible manner. In a way, trained journalists will have to be even more careful in how they select and present the news and that the real test in the future is actually an old challenge - to be skeptical, but not equally so, of processes and events on the ground and how they are seen, interpreted and reported. For example, a video of Bhutto's assassination, released by the Pakistani TV station Dawn News was shown in *The Observers*. According to one of the journalists, the video was taken with a mobile phone by an 'amateur guard'- someone who should act as a human shield between an attacker and the ex-minister.

The editors update the site daily, with two to four different videos from many different countries: India, Sweden, Canada, USA, Ukraine, Colombia, Kenya, Bolivia... Some of the pieces with an international focus are labeled as "world". Authors are identified with their names and in many instances they provide with a link to their own blog or website.

A typology of UGC in television news

Following the rapid expansion of small video recorders and photo cameras, the public is able to capture an instantaneous account of events as they occur, and television channels can show those first pictures taken

by eye witnesses on the spot. Current debates raise the issue whether those initiatives could be regarded as a new way of doing journalism. Some authors (Celis, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2005) go even as far as announcing the "death" of traditional media, as citizens gain acquire an enormous power to distribute the news and, at the same time, they claim that now "anybody can be a journalist".

Some UGC programmes – *The Observers*, *Cámara Abierta 2.0*. and *Uploaded*- offered specific instructions on the video production process and the news criteria that contributors should follow when editing and shooting the stories. By teaching those who care to learn, these television programmes managed to build an army of news gatherers. Any of them could be there when a huge news event happens and that video will end up on the air and society will be better informed. Therefore, it could be argued that other networks show no particular interest in educating citizens, so as to provide them with the necessary guidance to learn how to communicate in television in a professional way.

Sharing the role of gatekeeper with the audience does not necessarily imply granting citizens the responsibility of regularly providing quality news, which is the obligation acquired by those whose professional job is precisely so. Anyone does not automatically become a journalist just by sending a picture of an event, uploading a video or commenting on a story. The mere gathering, editing and distribution of news content do not constitute a job which could be regarded as "journalism", nor the person who carries it out should be invested with journalistic authority. Nevertheless, the "citizen journalism" movement favours this argument. The insistence in defining journalists only by the activities they carry out tends to diminish their professional role and function. In this way, both tasks are considered to be the same, so that the professional job tends to be relegated to second place by the work of amateur on the spot reporters.

The issue of credibility is also raised. All programmes have some kind of editorial supervision about the origin and circumstances in which they were recorded. Taking into account that networks are responsible for the content they broadcast, most channels include a statement which attributes the whole responsibility for the videos exclusively to their authors. Most of them include contributors' granting permission to use the material for free as they see fit.

In regard to how the material is used, four different types of television citizen journalism might be distinguished:

- a) Television channels that request contributions from citizen journalists to be broadcasted in their newscasts: BBC, ITV News.
- b) Web platforms that admit contributions that can be shown on television: *Tuclip.com* (Antena 3), *ZuKZri* (ETB), Elections 08 (Antena 3, TVE and La Sexta) *The Observers* (France 24).

c) Regular programmes which are entirely based on citizen journalism: ITV's *Uploaded*, *Cámara Abierta* (TVE).

d) Channels whose programming is based on citizen journalism, such as *Current TV* (USA).

Contributors to television programmes and websites tend to meet the same filters applied to radio call-ins in radio or to newspaper letters to the editors. They face previous censorship in order to safeguard a "coherent and controlled" editorial standpoint. At the same time, most television channels do not specify their supervision procedures for citizens' videos, that is, how they implement the necessary check and balances tools which would allow corroborate their accuracy and credibility. However, it seems very difficult that the ordinary citizen would achieve a true capacity to influence on broadcast media, where a small number of gatekeepers still hold the real power on content selection.

Conclusion: lights and shadows of UGC

In a participatory culture, journalists perform certain roles which go beyond the mere production of information and they imply the design and architecture of news, in order to provide stories based on users' contributions and to moderate the social conversations which generate online. Thus, journalists can and should assume their role of organizing citizens' collective intelligence, of moderating public spaces of social debate and guarantying the truthfulness of news sources. Otherwise, others would assume that role and there will be no reason to comply about it. New participatory channels and initiatives might be uncomfortable or disturbing for some professional journalists; nevertheless, it is a different kind of journalism. To label it as "3.0 Journalism" or "civic, citizen or participative journalism" is just an arbitrary terminology. It only refers to the fact that people are gathering, analysing, filtering and distributing information they care about and it is at everybody's reach. It is a role which up to now was exclusively the realm of traditional mass media.

The best approaches in participative journalism combine the key strengths of both worlds: professional and citizen journalism –with editors' oversight in the production and collaboration process, to ensure balance, accuracy and journalistic standards with the community sourcing of material. The collaborative engagement between professional and citizen contributors also provides an opportunity for mobility between both roles: so, for example, it is possible to identify consistently strong citizen contributors with a view to offering them professional employment in the news organisation and placing them more explicitly on formal story assignments (Bruns, 2005).

This scenario of slow and uneven development of UGC in European broadcast websites helps explain why the interactivity between television networks and users is low or practically inexistent. Many television news

organizations still do not understand the concept of participative journalism and community media, but companies and newsroom managements are not the only ones to blame. There seems to be not only a structural problem with the implementation of UGC in television websites, but also a reluctant attitude towards citizen journalism: a passive approach on the citizens' side, which do not show too much interest in participation in the media, and a negative attitude on those journalists that believe their status as news bearers should be something sacred, even if many of them do not grasp the new reality of open, participative media.

Journalists and editors show some concerns about user contributions. They feel that there is a need to edit material in order to avoid duplication, keep the standards of language, select material that is newsworthy with broad appeal, and ensure balance and decency. Editors tend to view UGC initiatives as complementary to professional journalism, rather than replacing it. There seems to emerge a shared view that "a good story will beat anything", so that professionally produced pieces are superior journalism compared to content submitted by viewers and web users.

In order to facilitate citizens' entry in the information value chain, it is necessary to build civic maps of citizen sources; also to increase reporting assisted by the community and more interactive writing, using social tools. Sites such as France 24's *The Observateurs* show that citizen journalism works in small communities without a huge financial commitment from the broadcast channel. The education and training process takes some time, but users are hungry for intensely local, people-centered news, with a worldwide appeal.

Most television news outlets, however, do not seem interested in training citizens on how to use the new technology in order to contribute to their websites and television shows. None of the television channels have seriously attempted to build online communities where users would exchange their own experiences have introduced interactive routines and learned to use social tools. There is a lack of dialogue among journalists and users, and there does not appear to be a clear determination to foster this kind of initiatives. Although amateur citizen journalism experiences show a variety of voices and some of them might have a remarkable interest, only occasionally they offer journalistic value. Although they do not amount to the professional standards a newsroom will provide, those initiatives can be regarded as a good example of how to set up ties with the community. However, rather than any true example of citizen journalism in the sense attributed by Gillmor and others, with a few exceptions, the so called "citizen journalism" in television is currently a marketing tool, which serves to generate sensational content at a low cost. At a time when journalistic standards and integrity are facing a crisis, it is important to set good practices of UGC. Some initiatives, such as France 24' *The Observateurs*, are steps in the right direction towards promoting a civic culture of media participation and allowing educated citizens to meaningfully contribute to the process of

gathering, reporting and disseminating the news. While most mainstream TV news providers have not yet recognized the growing importance of UGC in supplying news-related material to the public, they seem to be more open to incorporate these initiatives and are more aware of their role.

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