This is an observational study of the way the BBC deals with user-generated content (UGC) at its UGC hub. It finds four types of UGC. First a form of unsolicited news story; second a form of solicited content for specific extant news stories; third a form of expeditious content for specific items and features, and fourth a form of audience watchdog content. The study also finds that UGC is routinely moderated by the BBC hub and that traditional gatekeeping barriers have evolved over time to ensure the maintenance of core BBC news values. The study concludes with the view that the extensive use of UGC at the BBC hub encourages the increasing use of “soft journalism”, with as yet unknown consequences for the BBC.

KEYWORDS BBC; gatekeeping; news values; UGC

Introduction

The following consists of an observational study of the way the BBC deals with user-generated content (UGC) at its UGC hub. To be clear the BBC hub is only one important part of the main newsroom and was created in direct response to a growing influx of material from its audience. Within the BBC’s news operation there is a multiplicity of different newsrooms and the way that UGC is gathered, elicited, and used (often without any hub involvement) varies. Practices differ subtly across national, regional and local newsrooms as well as platforms. In short, while the BBC hub is central to the way the BBC deals with UGC, a lot of UGC enters different BBC newsrooms from elsewhere. This remains an important qualifier to the findings and the conclusions I draw.

UGC has created a range of tensions and problems for journalists who seek to reconcile their traditional values of quality, impartiality and balance with “audience participation”. The nature of these tensions and problems have been explored in recent academic literature which addresses how a range of large news organisations are dealing with UGC (reviewed in Harrison, forthcoming) and in the context of this study begs the question of why a public service broadcaster like the BBC should face the attendant risks and costs of managing and using UGC. The answer is that UGC is presented by BBC senior managers as consisting of a mixture of: public service broadcaster obligations toward inclusivity and mass reach; a means to combat viewer disengagement with mainstream news; a response to increasing competition for audiences; anticipation of the constantly changing skill sets of audiences and the increasing and changing capacities and forms of ICT and, the editorial ability of the BBC to make UGC fit its own traditional news values. It is, of course, easy to mock UGC, or be suspicious of these reasons. The charges of “deskilling”, “cheap content” and facilitating redundancies are, it is feared, hidden and disguised by the UGC slogan “the world is your freelancer” (World Editors Forum, 2008, p. 96). Inside the BBC there are concerns that the real reason for the BBC’s use of UGC is a
contribution to efficiency savings. The alleged economic benefits of UGC, however, are not entirely apparent. UGC is not a cheap option. The BBC’s impartiality rules do not allow for a partisan viewpoint to dominate and UGC is seen as requiring careful scrutiny (sometimes legal and always editorially and journalistically) and as such is labour intensive and expensive. The use of UGC at the BBC is quite a change to what was once a static and fairly unresponsive and self-contained news organisation. But what does this participation signify? There is concern that UGC has a corrosive effect on news standards of impartiality and accuracy, simultaneously we are told that the use of UGC by news organisations is evidence of audience empowerment. Dividing these two views depends upon the way we answer two questions. First, is UGC routinely fed straight into the mix of BBC established news priorities without altering news selection criteria or editorial values? Second, does UGC represent the extension of BBC news from a civil point of view? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions.

News Routines and Categories of UGC at the BBC

According to the Editor of the Guardian newspaper, Alan Rusbridger, “the role of journalists in this multi-media age has not changed: User-generated content will only be a complement to their work” (World Editors Forum, 2008, p. 92). For Rusbridger, UGC is something that must fit into the routines and rhythms of newsrooms and traditional professional journalism. UGC, however, is chaotic and can be overwhelming and many mainstream newsrooms have been cautious in using UGC (see Domingo et al., 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Thurman, 2008) and where they have adopted UGC journalists have retained traditional gatekeeping roles (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). UGC needs to be managed and organised in ways that means it can be conveniently interrogated and used and the BBC’s UGC hub attempts to do this. It receives, classifies and stores UGC for ease of use. Since June 2008 a centralized “Mediawire” desk monitors audio and video feeds and passes stories on to the most appropriate outlets. UGC journalists are now much more integrated into the newsgathering process, ensuring that UGC is being incorporated into newsroom operations. UGC is incorporated into the news planning routine as the UGC Editor attends weekly and daily planning meetings and recent newsroom re-organisation allows these to occur in an increasingly integrated way. Accordingly, UGC is being absorbed into established newsroom routines and as such can be routinely “trawled” as part of “the news net” alongside other traditional sources of information.

Although the production process at the BBC uses UGC on a routine basis, the relationship between news journalists and the audience itself (the UGC part) is less routinized and is still developing due to the diversity of forms which UGC takes. At the BBC I found four categories of UGC which delineate the news journalist’s way of relating to the UGC audience:

1. UGC as a form of unsolicited news story.
2. UGC as a form of solicited content for specific extant news stories.
3. UGC as a form of expeditious content for specific items and features.
4. UGC as a form of audience watchdog content.
UGC as a Form of Unsolicited News Story

This form of UGC can break or help create a news story. In February 2007 people began emailing the BBC when they filled up their cars with contaminated fuel they were buying around the country. The BBC had run a small story on this the day before, but had insufficient evidence to challenge the petrol suppliers who predictably said that the petrol was not contaminated. The numerous emails and “your stories” coming into the BBC allowed the BBC to investigate these companies further. The BBC was able to extend the story using traditional journalistic techniques of investigation, asking difficult questions of the petrol suppliers and then, using the public’s account, subsequently re-tell the story in a new light. For an Editor of the UGC hub this was an example of the BBC in partnership with “ordinary people”, against the “big corporations”. At other times unsolicited UGC represents a “cry in the dark” news story. Here people email what they have witnessed under difficult or extreme circumstances, for example events from “inside” a disaster area (Burma) or war zone (Afghanistan). It is hard to doubt the value of UGC when such stories emerge and are taken up by a news organization like the BBC. On other occasions it is visual material, usually a picture or telephone video which is sent to the UGC hub. This usually supports eyewitness accounts and is sometimes referred to as “accidental journalism”, such as the pictures and videos of the tsunami in South-East Asia in December 2004 which were broadcast before the reporters arrived. While these are examples of UGC breaking or extending an extant news story, which is then followed up by journalists, UGC can also change a running news story. A story about the reappearance of John Darwin was being reported by many news outlets in July 2006 was refuted by a woman who searched the internet and found a picture of Darwin and his wife in an estate agent’s in Panama, long after his supposed death by drowning and during a period when he claimed he had had no contact with his wife. UGC in the form of unsolicited content is where the audience is pro-active and participatory and the BBC and news journalists are reactive.

UGC as a Form of Solicited Content for News Journalism Purposes

This form of UGC is universally sought by news journalists irrespective of their news formats to help them enhance, deepen and broaden an existing news story. UGC might do this, for example, by seeking “the people behind the story”. In this case contacts and sources are routinely sought by journalists from the UGC contacts database. The database itself is being cultivated and expanded by the BBC which routinely solicits information from its viewers/listeners/online users by encouraging them to contact it via text/phone/email/online. In this way a news story on Afghanistan was enhanced by a direct approach to specific servicemen asking them about morale in Afghanistan. If the UGC contacts database fails to supply a person, a contact may be acquired from amongst the BBC’s own staff. A UGC hub secondee from Bush House (BBC World News), who had contacts from Pakistan and who knew people who had been arrested during the imposition of emergency rule in November 2007, helped to develop a story. In this instance it was notable how the UGC culture of “sharing its sources with many programmes” was at variance with a traditional journalistic culture which tended to privatise its sources in particular news programmes (Harrison, 2000). In practice it may be less challenging for established and traditional journalism when UGC can be used to move a breaking or running news story on. For example, in the aftermath of the
attempted terrorist attack on Glasgow airport on 30 June 2007 new pictures from journalists at the scene were fed straight into BBC News 24, as were comments/eye-witness accounts from people emailing in. A news story can also be moved on when the BBC UGC hub inaugurates a debate such as “Emergency Rule in Pakistan: Your Reaction”. By asking questions of its online users such as: “Are you in Pakistan? What does emergency rule mean for Pakistan?” “What do you think are General M’s motives for imposing emergency rule?” (6 November 2007); or on 7 November 2007, soliciting the public’s views on detention laws (“terror detention”) and the “South Wales ban on a school girl wearing a Sikh bangle”, the BBC gathers hundreds of posts and responses, some of which may provide useful contacts. The UGC hub may even actively seek a particular type of viewpoint or type of person for a running news story. A post form was put on a website news story provided by BBC online about treatment delay for old people, because television and radio “wanted a person to interview”. Here UGC is about soliciting particular types of content or contacts by asking the BBC’s different audiences to have a say (via the “Have Your Say” website), or to put their opinions forward via email or text.

UGC as a Form of Expeditious Content for Future Specific Items and Features

This form of UGC is used as part of a forward-planning routine by the BBC to enhance a future story item. During my observation period, the announcement of where the Commonwealth Games would be held was due and forward planning had ensured that the event would be covered across a range of BBC programmes and media platforms. Glasgow was known to be the favourite location and so the “Have Your Say” team put a post form on to their website before the announcement to gather comments and views about the best location and the merits of Glasgow. Even more expeditiously UGC is sought to make more interesting many familiar and perennial items that are yet to come. For example, a “spending at Christmas” case study, using a post form used respondent’s thoughts for news ideas, debates and angles. Expeditious use of UGC involves feeding audience comments/contacts into features running elsewhere in the BBC, as was the case when the BBC’s 6 O’clock News on 6 November 2007 ran a feature on families; this was part of a BBC Family Week and two families who contacted the BBC UGC hub were subsequently used in a news programme. Equally, UGC can take the form of personal remembrances or stories. In November 2007 a photo essay on Laos was run for the website with people submitting beautiful pictures from their country. The main advantage of this type of content is that it encourages “stories” (not necessarily news stories) that would not normally be “heard” or recognised via traditional BBC newsgathering. An interesting observation made by all those working at the UGC hub about this type of expeditious content was that “you can’t cherry pick, once you have got the audience on board, you can’t ignore it”, “the genie is out of the bottle”, and the “floodgates have been opened”. The attitude at the UGC hub was that once audiences are encouraged to participate “you have to take the full spectrum of their content on board” if you want the BBC to be part of the “global conversation”.

246  JACKIE HARRISON
UGC as a Form of Audience Watchdog Content

This form of UGC can be conveniently described as the audience reacting to or trying to influence how the BBC reports or covers a particular news story. Here the audience will contact the UGC hub to complain. Usually complaints take the form of noticing a “drop in standards”, alleged one-sidedness, or a betrayal of traditional BBC values and they can on occasions be orchestrated. To some extent this form of UGC is the one with the longest history, having been a feature of the BBC’s life since it first became a public corporation. It is hard to judge its significance; the frequency of complaining may be facilitated by the convenience of email, combined with a culture of audience participation that ensures that the numbers of complaints is greater than those received in the past from the postal services, but that outrage of one kind or another is proportionately the same in audiences. Or of course it could mean people are more critical of the BBC per se. Here though the audience is always active and the BBC reactive.

While ordering UGC into a convenient and routinely used taxonomy in this way is useful, it still does not explain why some pieces of UGC are actually used and some are not. To understand that we must look at traditional BBC news gatekeeping barriers and the way UGC has affected them.

Traditional Gatekeeping Barriers, UGC and the BBC

In a previous study, which required long periods of observation at the BBC, I gave a list of reasons that a variety of news journalists and Editors had given to me to explain why some stories were rejected and did not feature as news (see Harrison, 2000, pp. 140–1). I now wanted to see if these reasons for exclusion had been affected by UGC. To that original list I have added in italics the qualifiers now engendered by UGC and which influence its increasingly adaptive use at the BBC.

- “We’ve already done that.” UGC may provide new angles that allows the story to move on and be refreshed, as we have seen UGC may deepen and broaden an existing story by, for example, seeking “the people behind the story”.
- “It’s not our kind of story.” It still may not be, but UGC may add a dimension that makes the story newsworthy to more outlets. The central collection of UGC means that someone from the UGC hub can “sell” UGC and sources/contacts to different news programmes with their different news styles thereby adding to a particular news programmes repertoire. Making a pitch to a programme requires that the UGC person knows what different programmes want. For example, in one story a member of the UGC hub said that they had got a spokesperson that 5Live would like. The comment was specifically related to the suitable age, gender, ethnicity of a particular person.
- “It’s too expensive.” UGC is expensive to superintend, but it can have savings when, for example, material is provided from inaccessible or inhospitable places, for example pictures from inside Afghanistan. While a crew might not be sent, the story may still be newsworthy, if pictures or commentary is available.
- “It’s too late, my programme is full.” The increased number of news outlets and the advent of 24/7 news channels ensures that UGC is considered for the widest possible number of options for use. It was very evident during my period of observation that some programmes were more likely to want to take UGC material than others, but as UGC has been brought
into a more central position in the newsroom, it is likely that an increase range of programmes will routinely use UGC content.

- “It’s too tacky, too down-market.” It may be for one news programme, but again the diversity of news outputs, programme differentiation and different attitudes to UGC in the BBC regarding the value of audience input ensures that such judgements do not necessarily mean that the UGC goes unused. Programmes that have long been happy to engage with audiences, such as 5Live, or to show sensational events, or tell human-interest stories as they unfold, will be more comfortable using audience commentary and pictures to enhance their programmes’ impact.
- “It’s boring.” UGC is acknowledged to add impact and frequently a new human or interesting angle.
- “It’s yesterday’s news.” As noted above UGC can move the story on and refresh it.
- “We’ve not got any pics.” UGC can provide compelling pictures. The most often cited example of pictures being available via UGC is the mobile phone footage of victims of the London bomb attacks walking along the underground tunnel after a suicide bomber had blown up part of the train. The images, which have quickly become iconic, are grainy and well below the traditional standards of BBC broadcast material. Indeed, a discussion was held within the BBC about the quality of the pictures with some people feeling that it was inappropriate for the BBC to show such evidently amateur footage. In contrast, one of the Editors of the UGC hub reported this to me as being a moment when “the hairs stood up on the back of my neck”, as he realised these pictures heralded a new era in the way ordinary people could report and recall witnessed events.
- “It doesn’t happen in our time.” An audience member who is there can send messages or pictures easily via mobile phones to be used by a range of programmes. Here, a combination of audience behaviour, their ability to record and transmit their act of witnessing and the proliferation of news programming coincide to ensure that there is both supply and demand for this type of material.
- “It doesn’t move the story on.” Again UGC may provide new angles that allow the story to move on and be refreshed. As we have seen, UGC may deepen and broaden an existing story by, for example, seeking “the people behind the story”, or contriving to find new angles via online case studies and debates.
- “We’ve not got cameras there.” An audience member who is there can send pictures easily via mobile phones, as in the case of the South-East Asian tsunami in 2004. When the cameras and traditional journalists arrived, the reporting took the familiar journalistic role of telling the story of the aftermath of an event. Eye-witness accounts and mobile phone footage allowed mainstream news organisations to reach into and report the actual event.
- “Not enough dead.” McLurg’s Law (roughly “the closer to home a story is, the more newsworthy it is”, usually expressed more graphically as 100,000 of their dead isn’t worth reporting, two of our dead is) may still be current, and is a sad indictment of how traditional journalism places different values on life in relation to geographic and cultural distinctions. However, compelling eye-witness pictures of death, the dying and destruction may over-ride this basic law, if footage becomes available from hitherto unreported parts of the world. This is a development which may have positive benefit in exposing misery and injustice where it might otherwise go unreported. It is here though that UGC may also stand accused of oversensationalising news, or challenging traditional journalistic standards. While news journalists have long been used to leaving overly graphic rushes on the cutting room floor, the pressure to use pictures that seem to show “the real story as it unfolds” is growing in the
digital age, where undoubtedly eyewitness UGC can contribute hugely to the drama and impact of a story.

- “Too samey.” Once again UGC may provide new angles that allow the story to move on and be refreshed and, as noted above, UGC may deepen and broaden an existing story, or provide pictures and comment from a different locality or group of witnesses. The floods in Sheffield in 2007 provided “the same story” told in many ways by those experiencing it.
- “It can wait.” This story could be told any time, and does not have a particular “peg” at the moment. Often a story can still wait, but the expeditious use of UGC means that it is stored to be used another time, or to provide another source for interview. The database mentality is growing rather than diminishing and the phrase “it can wait” has taken on a new significance—“stuff it in the bank for later”.
- “Everyone’s packages have come in over-long so something will have to go.” This occurs when correspondents disobey the programme editor and squeeze a few extra seconds by making their package longer than the allocated time. If several correspondents do this on the same day it can result in a piece being dropped. UGC is no more at risk of being dropped than anything else, it depends upon how compelling the story is not whether it is UGC or not.
- “It would take too much telling.” The story is too complicated for the medium and for the time allocated to it. The non-journalist witness or accidental journalist cannot tell a complex story, but pictures, photographs and written or verbal accounts can add an experiential dimension to a news report and possibly simplify it by adding a human dimension that aids storytelling. It is in this way that UGC may invite the criticism that its is complicit in dumbing down the quality and standards of news reporting by making stories more people-centred or visually arresting and bleaching out complexity where it should be allowed to remain.

Clearly the traditional reasons for excluding a story given to me by a large number of journalists in the 1990s have certainly been affected by the advent of UGC and to some extent they no longer apply in such a rigid form, or at least can be seen to be minimised. But this has to be placed in the context of the increased number of news outlets, 24/7 news channels, changes in audience expectations and habits, and the developments in technology that have themselves facilitated the growth of UGC.

Nevertheless it does appear as if UGC militates against the relevance and the traditional application of the rigid application of past criteria for rejecting an item.

In helping to minimise these rejection criteria UGC has gone some way to opening up wider discussions and decisions about what is newsworthy and what is not. In other words what now counts as newsworthy has been extended to include UGC as a form of source material and as providing some (slight) indication of what matters and what counts with regard to the audience’s sense of news interests and priorities. As one journalist remarked, “things are a lot more open”, and UGC is acquiring a status as a standard source of pictures or information. As the above indicates, the reasons for using UGC are increasingly because of its perceived convenience and availability, its ease of use and the recognition that it can play a role alongside or fit in with pre-existing news styles. And while the evidence for UGC breaking a story remains thin, i.e. it is accidental in the main rather than investigative; the evidence for UGC playing its ancillary and supportive role in the BBC’s “newsroom mix” is very evident. In short, UGC has been absorbed into BBC newsroom practices and is now routinely considered as an aspect of, or dimension to, many stories. In this sense the traditional barriers which formed the gatekeeping criteria of the 1990s have been altered forever.
The above discussion and examples, however, only reflect a technical or mechanical aspect of gatekeeping and importantly one caveat needs to be made. The above list does not indicate that UGC alters or changes news selection at the level of editorial values. The routine use of UGC shows the confidence with which UGC is handled and managed across all the BBC’s news outlets and this confidence appears to be growing as the UGC hub’s understanding of the diverse requirements of the various BBC outlets with their different styles develops and the different relationships with audiences in relation to UGC types evolves to have a more comfortable “fit” within the BBC. There remains, however, either through territoriality or guardedness from various news domains, a very real and quite genuine worry about the threat UGC poses to editorial values and ultimately to news standards. By addressing these worries we can learn more about the practical daily reality of how gatekeeping in the form of moderation of UGC is undertaken.

The Daily Reality of Gatekeeping: Moderation of UGC at the BBC

The BBC prides itself on the application of its core values and its own news standards and integrity are by and large held in high esteem by the public and are still seen as a cornerstone of public service broadcasting. UGC, however, represents a new set of problems for the BBC, which if not handled correctly poses a bigger threat than that of ideologically inspired reformers. This is because the editorial control of UGC raises new issues and problems for the application of its editorial values.

The BBC guidelines on moderation say “[e]very online space where user generated content is published must have someone editorially responsible for that content and should have a host to provide a visible and active presence and a moderator who can remove illegal or inappropriate content”. In accordance with this, UGC is moderated in two ways. First, pre-moderation occurs where material cannot be accessed by visitors to the website until the moderator has seen it and decided it is suitable for posting. Sites designed to appeal to children are pre-moderated as are online debates about contentious issues such as immigration. Secondly, post-moderation occurs where the moderator sees the material after it has been posted and decides whether it is suitable enough to remain on the site. Sometimes post-moderation is reactive moderation and is initiated by the visitors to a website who have pressed the “alert the moderator” key in order to flag up an inappropriate or offensive message. Post/reactive moderation is more suitable for a mature online community, or for discussions that are not likely to elicit extreme views or overly aggressive responses. Nonetheless the nature of online discussions has already meant that an internal investigations team has had to be set up to deal with porn, racism, abusive and very offensive posts. The BBC also has a list of people who are problems and the UGC hub staff often share some of these comments out loud and ponder the person’s motivations. Some of the people posting obscenities are well known and their posts are taken off. A profanity filter is designed to pick up words that the BBC would deem inappropriate for its site, although users can easily confound the filter by adding asterisks or spaces to words. Unsurprisingly the filter is growing in size and intervention.

In practice the moderation of online content by the UGC hub has proven to be one of the most time-consuming and resource-hungry elements of the UGC phenomenon, largely because of the success of the BBC in eliciting comment from its audience via its “Have Your Say” website. Opinion in the BBC is divided about how many and what types
of online conversations should be hosted and whether licence fee money should be used to encourage heated debate, or to provide a platform for the opinions of only some members of the public. Others, particularly those working in the UGC hub, feel that while it is time consuming to trawl through the thousands of online posts, case studies and debates hosted by the “Have Your Say” website, the effort is worth it to find those “nuggets of pure gold” and valuable contacts that might arise from public participation in online debates.

Moderating, however, is not only time consuming, it is subjective in that the likelihood of removing a post varies from person to person (although a moderator will check with other senior colleagues if fundamental editorial values are believed to be involved or he or she is unsure). Having said that, observation of several journalists showed a variety in practice; some journalists moderated posts quite quickly, while others were slower and more methodical. It was clear that different levels of tolerance meant that UGC is moderated in somewhat different ways by different members of the UGC hub. Adding to this moderators also have to deal with complaints made by the public about other people’s comments, again, requiring a judgement often to be made quickly. If items that are complained about are taken off, the person who posted it may themselves complain, meaning that the BBC has to respond. This may have a bearing on whether or not the post remains or is taken down. The temptation may be to let some things remain in situ, particularly in matters of “taste and decency” rather than matters of illegality or clear infringement of the BBC’s Producers’ Guidelines. Removing posts from the website because the moderator does not agree with the sentiment raises issues of freedom of speech and censorship, something which UGC hub journalists are all too aware of and discuss amongst themselves.

Overall the discussions on the website between the members of the public generally do not meet the same standards of taste and decency as the BBC in its broadcast programmes, particularly in its factual programmes, but those moderating constantly remind themselves that this is a different forum. Some pre-moderated debates such as immigration policy tend to attract people with strong views and often those views become more strident as others challenge them or reinforce them. This leads to the problem of orchestration and amplification where the debate creates a kind of “echo chamber” or “information cocoon” where people’s opinions are reinforced rather than challenged (Sunstein, 2007). Here the debate becomes dominated by like-minded individuals who push the ideas so hard that there is little room to challenge them, a form of campaigning that is far removed from the ideal of a public sphere where rational critical debate facilitates greater understanding, and enlightened thinking. Most people at the BBC recognise the quotidian reality of public discussion and comment (see also the reaction of journalists at the Guardian in Singer and Ashman, 2009) and its difference from some form of discursive philosophical ideal.

Two problems are obvious, one, does UGC reflect public opinion and two, are the opportunities provided by the “Have Your Say” website simply generating noise which is of little value. During my time there it was fair to say that no one confused such debates with being a barometer of public opinion. Unsurprisingly the BBC is re-evaluating its policy of eliciting audience comments and opinion, a re-evaluation which will inevitably have to consider the question of whether it is a public service broadcaster’s job to provide a platform for all sorts of views including unpalatable or unpleasant “non-majoritarian” comment and, if it is not, why not? For example, one UGC hub journalist said that she
found she was asking herself the following question: “when a dictator or fascist dies and someone writes a positive tribute—should it be removed?” Even though the BBC tries, by posting carefully considered questions, to set the terms of public debates, it is still the case that the audiences’ responses remain unpredictable in online contexts, and are difficult and time consuming to moderate.

Far less contentious and requiring far less moderation than online public discussion, and of more practical use to the BBC, is UGC that comes in the form of numerous emails, texts and pictures sent in by the public. These are carefully stored, sifted and sorted, again a resource- and labour-intensive process, further belying the idea that UGC is a cheap option. Many of the them will never be used, but if a picture or video is to be used then they are carefully checked via a member of the UGC hub who will try if possible to have a telephone conversation with the person who has sent it in and ask the following general type of questions:

1. Can you tell me more about your pictures?
2. Do you live far from there?
3. Has it affected you in any way?
4. What sort of mobile phone do you have?
5. We are very interested in using this, is that still OK with you?
6. It all looks very professional, why did you take these pictures?

Pictures are also verified and checked to make sure they are not doctored. Using different types of technology and by checking measurements the digital “story” of a picture is investigated. Finally, the people themselves who email/text into the BBC are also potential “sources” and their details are stored. It is this careful storing, sifting and sorting that allows the UGC hub to offer material and information to other parts of the BBC and which creates the most attractive and productive use of UGC, thereby providing the BBC with evidence of the success of its recent newsroom reorganisation which accommodates UGC. Here the BBC is in much more control of UGC than in online settings where perforce of the online medium it is required to be more reactive than proactive. This is not to suggest that different editorial standards apply, just a different moderating relationship between the BBC and the audience.

Conclusion

Above I asked “Is UGC routinely fed straight into the mix of established BBC news priorities without altering news selection or editorial values?”, and, “does UGC represent the extension of BBC news from a civil point of view?” Evidence given to the 2008 House of Lords Select Committee on Communications put the matter this way. First, evidence from the Annual Report on American Journalism: Project for Excellence in Journalism which observed that

[the prospects for user-created content, once thought possibly central to the next era of journalism, for now appear more limited, even among “citizen” sites and blogs. News people report the most promising parts of citizen input currently new ideas, sources, comments and to some extent pictures and video. But citizens posting news content has proven less valuable, with too little that is new or verifiable. (2008, pp. 29–30)]

252  JACKIE HARRISON
Second, Stuart Purvis observed that “unmediated content is back to the printing press in the first place. It is about people putting forward their views; it is about citizens having a voice suddenly. If we do not like what they say, that is a small price to pay for the freedom those people are being given to air their views”. Understanding these two views depends upon the way we answer the above two questions and from my limited study my answers are as follows.

- UGC is routinely fed straight into the mix of established BBC news priorities without, in any meaningful way, altering news selection criteria or editorial values.

What now counts as newsworthy has been extended to include UGC as a form of source material and story enhancement. Rarely UGC may elicit new stories or alter some of the stories that are already being run and thereby affect their prominence in the news agenda. Here the addition of new material such as testimony, usually in the form of pictures and video clips, can make a new story more newsworthy. But it is important not to overstate this. News journalism has, since the advent of ITN (and in the United States before that) recognised that “ordinary people’s” testimony from witnessing an event or their opinion can move a story on. It is also important not to overstate the impact of UGC on gatekeeping practices at the BBC. While traditional barriers to news selection have been made more flexible, editorially UGC is very carefully moderated. The tensions, between the uncomfortable world of public comment and its relationship to the BBC’s attempts to accommodate a diversity of voices, are evident in all aspects of UGC moderation and are sensitively dealt with. Also there exists a manifest contrast between the use of UGC on television and radio, where it is more easily made to fit into the BBC’s news selection criteria, news styles and editorial values, and the BBC’s “Have Your Say” website. The former is far more deliberative, while the latter usually far more urgent. For the BBC the least contentious and the most useful form of UGC is prevalent and comes in the form of the numerous solicited and unsolicited emails and texts sent in by the public. Overall moderation ensures that there is little sign of UGC changing or challenging the BBC’s editorial values and UGC is now systematically used to enhance or provide value-added to news stories by conforming to pre-determined BBC news selection processes and styles.

Nevertheless in spite of this there was, amongst some news journalists, guardedness and genuine worry about the long-term threat UGC poses to traditional BBC news selection and editorial values and this leads us to the answer of the second question.

- UGC does not extend BBC news coverage from a civil point of view. Indeed it may limit the civil function of BBC news.

It is easy to be sentimental about UGC and regard it as heralding a new age of civil journalism undertaken by active citizens who, the story goes: do not work for a professional media organisation, are untrained as journalists and who pass on their own news stories, sources or views of news stories to professional journalists and then collaborate with them. Or they post their material directly on to a public news site, or send their material to a professional news organisation where it changes things. Even on those rare occasions when civil journalism actually happens, and ignoring whether it is paid for or not, the motivation behind it is always described in glowingly civil terms. But this belies the reality of UGC at the BBC hub. As we have seen, often the content of UGC merely
supports a BBC story, or is trivial, or unsuitable for broadcast or hosting. Talk of civil journalism in this context is irrelevant. Rather, it needs to be understood that UGC can and sometimes does represent heterodoxical opinions that may be part of the beginnings of civil change (think of yesterday’s heterodoxies becoming today’s orthodoxies for example, global warming) and while the BBC says that such heterodoxical views are not automatically “moderated out”, the duty the BBC has toward adopting a position of negative tolerance (that is of not tolerating speech that appears to them to breach fundamental, civil or human rights or contravenes human dignity) means that moderation errs on the side of a cautious “BBC news consensus” which forms the basis of the BBC’s own editorial values and the subsequent moderation of UGC. While the idea of “active citizens” radically and effectively changing this news consensus through civil expression is mistaken, UGC does need to be understood in terms of the civil issues it raises for the BBC and its moderation of UGC and subsequent news selection. These civil issues are at the heart of the current and future architecture of our news and they come down to this: what is the relationship (at the BBC) between core editorial values and the diversity and plurality engendered by UGC? In other words what is the long-term relationship between the BBC news consensus and UGC heterodoxies and how do they affect the civil scope of the BBC news? We can deal with this in two parts. The first part, and by far the easier to deal with, is with regard to civil change, and the second part, which is much more worrying, is with regard to public knowledge, to take them in turn.

First, the problem of civil change. At the BBC in its news reporting there is an active attempt to balance views impartially and so it judges UGC for its partiality, but also against a background BBC news consensus. As we also know any news consensus, particularly one where an understanding of civil relationships is concerned, must be constantly challenged less it ossify and fails to capture wider progressive changes in society. Within the diversity of content which UGC represents (beyond the pictures of snowmen and fluffy animals and beyond the unreflective rants of a few strident voices) there could, hypothetically at least, be the heralds announcing the murmurings of civil changes, or at least revealing part of an as yet recondite or poorly expressed debate as to what should and should not count as being part of an evolving civil society. Such an observation only raises the question of how would such a news consensus of the kind that the BBC operates within recognise or judge this kind of content and to what effect. Is it capable of doing so within the current procedures and newsroom routines within which UGC is contained, sifted and selected? While the editorial values of the BBC do not show signs of civil insensitivity, as we have noted above, the BBC has constantly changed its news formats and extended its news reach, for the future much depends on the critical ability of an increasing number of moderators to anticipate signs of civil debate and change. But this problem is promissory and optimistically stated, and I conclude that from my observations it is more likely that UGC will evolve to consist largely of a photo or video taken opportunistically from a mobile phone and emails sent in, which can be used and stored as a repository of potentially useful sources. The problems of recognising recondite or poorly expressed versions of civil debate may never be encountered or need to be addressed.

Related to this and more difficult to assess is the second part of the problem, that of public knowledge. At the moment, UGC is managed and edited at the BBC hub as a supply of news content designed to enhance the BBC’s own news provision without
undermining the BBC’s core values: a case of “professionals moderating amateurs”. While this appears reassuring, it may also hide the fact that UGC actually reinforces a tendency toward soft journalism and human interest, as exemplified by the rise of stories centred on crime, calamities and accidents. If content of this nature leads to a decline of political and economic coverage and journalistic interpretation then there is likely to be an attendant decline in public knowledge, the consequences of which could well be to diminish the quality of civil debate and limit civil engagement. At the BBC UGC material is now placed at the heart of the newsroom. The temptation to use material that may move a story on is growing, but if it begins to move stories out of a hard news agenda and into a soft one then it undermines the architecture of public service news. Ultimately the paradox of UGC might be that by extending reach and audience involvement, in the long run, it diminishes the public service standards of BBC news through the spread of soft journalism.

NOTES

1. I abide throughout to the clear distinction made to me by people at the BBC that UGC is defined as “where the audience does it for the BBC” and citizen journalism is defined as “where the audience does it for themselves”. This is by no means accepted by all and other distinctions and definitions are made. For example, Wardle and Williams (2008) argue UGC represents five different types of audience material.

2. I was generously given access to the UGC hub at the BBC between 4 and 10 November 2007. I was granted observer status and allowed to watch whatever I wished. I was not allowed formally to interview staff using recording equipment (this was seen as being potentially disruptive), and I was provided with an exceptionally helpful minder who introduced me to people and acted as catalyst for my being able to talk informally with all members of staff. The latter proving far more valuable than formal interviews given the limited amount of time I had available. I took field notes in shorthand, which I found encouraged greater freedom of expression than I had noticed when on previous observational work where I had taped conversations and conducted formal interviews (Harrison, 2000). The study was funded by the British Academy to whom I am grateful.

3. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for emphasising this point and for the content of this paragraph.

4. See, for example, Singer and Ashman’s (2009: 18) study at the Guardian which explores journalists’ struggles to reconcile “opportunities for freedom and dialogue presented by UGC while safeguarding their credibility and sense of responsibility”. See also Domingo et al. (2008), Hermida and Thurman (2008), Thurman (2008), and Paulussen and Ugille (2008).

5. Core editorial values for all BBC news journalism were identified in the Neil Report in June 2004.

6. Subjective moderation only appeared to occur in some of the grey areas of taste and decency and not in relation to the BBC’s core editorial and organisational values.

7. “Have Your Say” had over 200,000 registered users in November 2007.
REFERENCES

DOMINGO, DAVID, QUANDT, THORSTEN, HEINONEN, ARI, PAULUSSEN, STEVE, SINGER, JANE B. and VUJNOVIC, MARINA (2008) “Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond: an international comparative study of initiatives in online newspapers”, Journalism Practice 2(3), pp. 326–42.

HARRISON, JACKIE (2000) Terrestrial TV News in Britain: the culture of production, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

HARRISON, JACKIE (forthcoming) “Freedom of Expression and Gatekeeping: the BBC and user generated content”, in: Merris Amos, Jackie Harrison and Lorna Woods (Eds), Freedom of Expression and the Media: the application of legal standards to journalistic practice, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

HERMIDA, ALFRED and THURMAN, NEIL (2008) “A Clash of Cultures: the integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper websites”, Journalism Practice 2(3), pp. 343–56.

HOUSE OF LORDS SELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS (2008) The Ownership of the News, Vol. 1, Report, London: The Stationery Office.

NEIL, RON (2004) Statement by the Board of Governors, London: BBC.

PAULUSSEN, STEVE and UGILLE, PIETER (2008) “User Generated Content in the Newsroom: professional and organisational constraints on participatory journalism”, Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 5(2), pp. 24–41.

SINGER, JANE B. and ASHMAN, IAN (2009) “Comment Is Free, but Facts Are Sacred’: user-generated content and ethical constructs at the Guardian”, Journal of Mass Media Ethics 24(3), pp. 3–21.

SUNSTEIN, CASS (2007) Republic.com 2.0, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

THURMAN, NEIL (2008) “Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media”, New Media and Society 10(1), pp. 139–57.

WARDLE, CLAIRE and WILLIAMS, ANDY (2008) ugc@thebbc: understanding its impact upon contributors, non-contributors and the BBC News, Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University.

WORLD EDITORS FORUM (2008) Trends in Newsrooms 2008: innovative ideas for newspapers in the digital age, World Association of Newspapers.

Jackie Harrison, Professor of Public Communication, Department of Journalism Studies, 18–22 Regent Street, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S1 3NJ, UK. E-mail: j.harrison@sheffield.ac.uk