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Chapter 4 UGC creators and use of their content by mainstream media

Glenda Cooper

Introduction

“[Reproducing my] tweet ended up boosting my followers by at least 100 in an hour. [...] I realised I’d better stop joking and felt a responsibility to tweet actual news.”

(email interview, Interviewee A, 8 May 2013)

“I was pretty stressed about what I had seen [the Oklahoma hurricane] and felt guilty about my part in taking videos of it. I did not profit in any way from this and I have found it awkward in wanting to go back to using social media.”

(email interview, Interviewee B, 27 May 2013)

The two quotations above are from eyewitnesses who created user-generated content in two recent humanitarian crises. The first tweeted during the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake; the second took a Vine video of the 2013 Moore tornado. Both posted content on the internet with little realisation that their pictures or words would go beyond a small circle of friends; in fact, they both went global.

This chapter deals with voices that are not always heard in discussions about user-generated content and the media: those whose content is taken and appropriated by the mainstream media. At present most research around user-generated content in the mainstream media has focused on the consequences for journalists or the audience. But this chapter uses Bourdieu's field theory as a theoretical framework to examine how much of a disruption to journalistic boundaries are created by the use of such content and whether such content can be seen as just another source in the journalistic lexicon or whether such creators are beginning to (re)negotiate boundaries in the field by participating in 'acts of journalism' (Stearns, 2011; Myers, 2014).

Within this, it also goes on to define some of the ethical questions around privacy and permissions that this raises for journalists who clone and co-opt such content – which I dub 'the virtual doorstep'. In traditional journalistic parlance, the 'doorstep' refers to reporters physically waiting outside someone's house or workplace for a comment, often en masse. The 'virtual doorstep' examines whether this can happen in cyberspace as well and if so how journalists should deal with these new ethical questions.

The changing nature of the field

The news eco-system has changed "more dramatically in the past five years than perhaps at any time in the past five hundred" (Bell, 2016) and one of the major reasons for that has been the ability for ordinary citizens to self-publish. As a result arguments over what is or is not journalism have become intense and are often symbolic contests in which actors vie to control definitions (Carlson, 2015:2).

In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the claims made for user-generated content were extensive: that it would transform reporting, making a more diverse range of stories and voices heard; that creators of content could be active shapers rather than passive bystanders in their own stories (Gillmor, 2005; Glocer, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007). A paradigm shift appeared to be taking place “in which once the media was the centre of the universe and now the user is the centre of the universe” (Robinson and De Shano, 2011: 977).

How should this (re)negotiation of boundaries be best theorised? One suggestion is to apply the tenets of Bourdieu’s field theory to this contestation. Bourdieu’s field theory, which lends itself to empirical research, suggests that there can be a potential shift in the journalistic field – the realm where he says actors struggle for autonomy – as and when new agents gain access. For Bourdieu, boundaries are often fuzzy and contested, and this is where the change occurs. This concurs with Carlson and Lewis’s work around boundary (re)negotiation which they define as currently a key struggle in the journalistic field, based around new technologies and those with the power to best use them (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). Bourdieu saw technologies as fundamentally social, believing that what generates technology is social practice (Davidson, 2004:87; Myles, 2010). That is, technologies do not change societies or social processes just by coming into being, but they can affect social processes through both mundane and innovative uses (Earl and Kimport, 2011). Russell’s (2007) analysis of the 2005 riots in Clichy-sous-Bois appeared to show a destabilisation in the field, opening up opportunities for reorientation. She argues that field theory, as it has been applied to journalism, rests on a stark division between journalists and audience. However, with the growth in UGC she claims that the division no longer exists in the same way, and

that those who contributed to coverage of the French riots of 2005 could be seen as new 'agents' with influence on the field.

In Russell's analysis, the citizen journalists and bloggers did transform the coverage of the riots due to the French media's self-censorship (for example, while the mainstream media decided against reporting how many cars had been burned, bloggers filled the gap); so much so that the meta-coverage of the unrest amounted, according to Russell, to "amateurs weighing in at length engaging the professionals over the presuppositions of the field" (2007:293).

This has led not only to new voices being heard but potential impacts on journalistic practice. This may be resisted and remoulded – as Singer (2005) found in her study of j-bloggers, who aimed to 'normalise' blogs to traditional journalistic practice – but the possibility of change is there (Hermida, 2009; Lasorsa et al, 2011).

But most research into user-generated content (UGC) has concentrated on the impact that it has had on journalists and newsroom production (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Singer and Ashman, 2009; Singer, 2010; Harrison, 2010). The reaction of audiences to interactivity and UGC has also been well-documented and theorised (Hujanen and Pietikäinen, 2004; Bergstrom, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle 2010; Larsson, 2011).

Yet what creators of content – dubbed 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006) – feel about the use of their work by the mainstream media, and how they may act as a result, has not been fully researched. Some research has suggested that UGC creators may wish to establish their own norms and values (Robinson, 2010), and that journalists' roles as gatekeepers (Bruns, 2008) can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction among UGC creators (Borger, van Hoof and Sanders, 2014). This

chapter attempts to approach this gap in the research. The empirical data this chapter is based on looked at how prevalent the use of UGC is during catastrophic events and what types of producers find their content used. It questions whether journalistic devices like the liveblog that appear to privilege UGC are in fact using content created by powerful users such as NGOs, celebrities, government and quasi-governmental organisations.

It then goes on to examine what the consequences were for those eyewitness publishers in terms of ethical questions of permission and privacy; and how democratising or (dis)empowering this was for them and discusses how some of these citizens, once they realised that their content had been used by journalists, started to change their behaviour and perform what has been called “acts of journalism” (Stearns, 2011; Myers, 2014).

Methodology

This chapter is based on an analysis of two liveblogs compiled by *The Guardian* and the BBC – that covered the first day of the Japanese tsunami on 11 March 2011 - and 23 subsequent qualitative interviews with those whose content featured on the blogs and who found themselves in the traditional role of the witness once associated primarily with journalists. To try to establish the kind of content, and the kind of content producers, that are used during a rapid-onset humanitarian disaster, I chose to focus on liveblogs as a relatively new web-native format, now regularly used by newspapers on their websites and by broadcasters, such as the BBC, to produce a synthesis of traditional journalism and contemporary digital technologies (Thurman and Walters, 2013).

The liveblogs were chosen because they were constantly updated, with lots of different content which should privilege the use of UGC, and because the focus has been on 'different' voices being heard. In interviews with the live bloggers co-ordinating blogs, they talked about the liveblog's strength being its ability to mix authority sources with 'ordinary punters' and unmediated reactions (Cooper, 2016). The Japanese tsunami was chosen for several reasons. First, a humanitarian disaster was one that was deemed newsworthy enough to be given its own blog. Second, a rapid-onset event like an earthquake or tsunami also attracts potential content from non-journalists because of its strong visual elements. And third, this was a disaster which took place in a developed country meaning that, unlike previous events such as the Haitian earthquake of 2010, the infrastructure and demographics of the country meant there were potentially many 'accidental' journalists who would have access to smartphones, cameras, and social media sites like Twitter in order to record their experiences.

Finally the *Guardian* and the BBC were chosen because this was carried out as a wider piece of research looking at the British media¹; *The Guardian* had pioneered liveblogs in the UK amongst the print media, while the BBC was the first broadcaster to specifically set up a 24/7 user-generated content hub in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings (Belair-Gagnon, 2015).

I quantified by hand the number of entries made on the blogs, and who the entries were ascribed to: authority figures; aid agencies, correspondents from their own organisations; other media organisations, news wires (eg AP) and user-generated content. I attempted to contact all the UGC contributors by various means. I used Google and Twitter searches to track down those who had used similar names. I

messed the YouTube contributors via YouTube. I also asked the *Guardian* communities team to contact some of the below-the-line commentors on my behalf. Some of the UGC creators were impossible to find, and it became clear that the media organisations had not contacted them before using the material. Second, mainstream media is still bad at labelling such content, so some creators could not be identified. Those who were easiest to find were those who had been sourced from Twitter, as the most public-facing social networking site, so the analysis may favour such users. Of all those I identified and contacted successfully, only one declined to be interviewed.

Twenty three qualitative interviews with such creators of UGC whose work was featured on these two blogs were carried out between 2013 and 2015 via Skype, phone or e-mail because they were mainly still based in Tokyo. Of those identified from the *Guardian* and BBC liveblogs of the first day of the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, sixteen agreed to be interviewed from the BBC blog, while seven from the *Guardian* blog agreed to be interviewed. (Of those quoted directly in this paper, interviewees A, C, N were in the *Guardian*; the rest were in the BBC). A further in-depth interview was carried out with Interviewee B who had taken viral video of the Oklahoma hurricane used on the *Guardian* liveblog.

Findings

The *Guardian* blog of the Great East Japan earthquake began at 7.22am GMT on Friday 11 March with a picture of Sendai credited to the AP and an elongated entry from the *Guardian's* Tokyo correspondent Justin McCurry. It reads like a traditional news story, giving information about the earthquake striking north-east Japan and triggering warnings of tsunamis.

There are 76 timed updates on the blog throughout the day. Most of these involve information from a single source, although 14 do include more than one source, making 95 sources quoted in total. Of the updates made on the Guardian's live blog, 14 appear to be based on user-generated content (14.7 per cent). There were 14 updates from Guardian correspondents. The biggest 'contributors' to the blog were the newswires (26) as the blog reproduced their headlines, making 27per cent of the total. Authority figures who were quoted or alluded to made up 25per cent (24 references) while there were 16 references (17per cent) to other media such as the BBC and the Japanese state broadcasters NHK.

The BBC's live page had 229 updates with 237 sources used in total compared to the Guardian's 76 but its user-generated content accounted for less – 25 in total or 10.5per cent. The BBC's UGC divided into two main types: tweets taken from the social networking site Twitter, and information that had been sent in by viewers to *Have Your Say*, a BBC site where the corporation encourages viewers to send in information. Apart from a livestream of waves and a picture via Twitter the UGC component of the BBC blog was overwhelmingly text based, reflecting perhaps that video and audio UGC is prioritised for programmes.

The BBC calls its liveblogs "live pages" or LPs for short. It was dominated by authority figures (72 references, or 30per cent) such as President Obama and William Hague. It also relied heavily on quoting its own correspondents (45 entries, 18.9per cent). The BBC took many of its updates from the wires – (63 references or 26.6per cent) but this is likely to be because of its one-source development rule as one BBC LP writer explained: "Any one-source development is attributed to news wires (Reuters,

AP, AFP etc.)” (personal correspondence, 2013). The BBC also credited other media 21 times (8.8per cent).

So despite expectations that the blogs would be a place where user-generated content would be featured strongly, content from non-authority sources or non-media sources counted for no more than 15per cent on the Guardian and only one in ten sources on the BBC blog.

Creators of user-generated content are not always representative of the public at large. For example, in one study, a typical UGC contributor to the BBC was a 45–54 year-old male, employed full-time as a middle manager or professional (Wardle and Williams, 2008). This view is challenged, however, by Bergstrom (2008), who found while younger, well-educated internet users were more likely to create content, those of lower or middle-level education were most likely to think it was important to comment on news websites.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from such a small number of comments on the liveblogs, but the *Guardian’s* blog largely seems to back up Bergstrom’s argument, while the BBC tends to back up Wardle and Williams.

The *Guardian’s* UGC creators I managed to contact were aged between mid-20s and late-30s. Most were expats – largely from England, although there was a Scot and a Chilean. Two of the content creators were English teachers, while a couple were IT specialists. There was also an engineer, a music journalist and a communications specialist. They were all based in Tokyo.

The BBC’s UGC creators were more diverse, which probably reflects the fact that there were more contributors, as well as the BBC’s greater global reach. They ranged in age from 20 to 50 and included a professor, two teachers, a trader, a diplomat, an

actor, a student, a small business owner, a tourist guide, an IT specialist, a journalist and a philosopher. Most of them came from Tokyo, but because the BBC's blog ran longer than the *Guardian's*, it also used three contributors from Hawaii, which was put on alert after the tsunami. As with the *Guardian*, the majority were white, although some declined to give their ethnic background. There was a marked preponderance of male creators of UGC for both blogs, although it was impossible to tell the gender of the small number who did not respond to requests for interview from only their usernames or Twitter handles. Those who responded to requests tended to be male as well; all seven *Guardian* interviewees were male. The numbers, however, are too small to make firm judgments about the reasons for this.

There was also sharp but understandable divide in reactions between those who had posted information on social networking sites such as Twitter, and those who had gone on the *Guardian* or BBC sites to post messages themselves. Most of those I contacted whose tweets had been used had had no idea that their information had been distributed to a wider audience in this way.

Some became aware because their Twitter followers suddenly and inexplicably began to jump considerably in particular Interviewee G, a student, who saw his followers jump by 50 per hour (Skype interview 17 June 2014) and Interviewee A, a music writer who was featured on the *Guardian* blog saw his jump by 100 an hour (email interview 8 May 2013). Most explained that they had posted in a public place, and therefore, while they did not expect it to be picked up in this way, they felt that they had put the information out in the public domain. For those who had directly commented on the *Guardian* or taken the time to fill out a form on a BBC website, there was a lack of prior notification how and when their content would be used, but

a realisation/expectation that it might be. Interviewee H, who was working for a technology company in Hawaii was one of the few who was contacted:

“I was happy to contribute, and as an 'open news' kind of guy with a Creative Commons license on most of my media, I would've been fine with use with credit without prior approval.”

(email interview, 1 July 2014)

Only one creator – Interviewee G - whose tweet was used on the BBC blog – raised questions about the fact that no one appeared to have tried to verify his words:

Privacy and the ‘virtual doorstep’

In the past, members of the public who have been quoted in media coverage of disasters have had their words sought and mediated by journalists, rather than having their own content taken on and dispersed via media organisations. How journalists treat the privacy those caught up in tragic events or disasters (McLellan, 1999; Ewart, 2002; Townend, 2012; Newton and Duncan, 2012) has been articulated in this way looking at the traditional ‘doorstep’ defined above and ‘deathknock’ (where journalists seek comments from the bereaved family).

Forms of guidance such as Section 5 of the PCC Code² or Section 8.16 of Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code Guidance³ have concentrated on journalists who meet their subjects face-to-face or over the phone and where the journalists creates the content. Increasingly however is the problem of what I have called the ‘virtual doorstep’: when

a person involved in a traumatic event feels pursued by journalists, not physically but online. As in real life they may be pursued in cyberspace for context around content they have placed online for friends and family only, or finding that text, pictures or video that they put online are then used and shared by the media. This lack of consent in the unauthorised use of social media material is sometimes painful for people, because they see it as 'stealing their identity' (Newton and Duncan, 2012).

Approaching people in cyberspace is often brief, abrupt and lacking the social niceties of checking how survivors or families feel in the aftermath of a shocking event that is now employed by most journalists who have to meet survivors face to face. This has led to some journalists to call for more thought and guidelines (Frankel, 2015; Kennedy, 2015)

While some like Interviewee H, did not mind the media attention, others whose content was used often found it distressing to be pursued in cyberspace. What they particularly found difficult was the volume of interest and also the personal interest in themselves.

Interviewee J, a teacher ended up deleting his Facebook account, while Interviewee K who worked in the tourist industry became overwhelmed when between 15-20 journalists rapidly contacted him; when contacted by a BBC journalist who disputed his account he had found it very stressful and when rung by another BBC reporter the day after, refused to speak to them. Interviewee L, an IT manager had filled in a Have Your Say form and was rung up by a BBC journalist. His recollection was that he was told he was about to be put on air "within a minute or two" without time to consider. This had adverse consequences:

“My company at the time are [sic] very media sensitive, so after the "spot" interview ... I was verbally told ("reprimanded"?) [sic] not to do any further discussion / interviews.”

(email interview, 12 August 2015).

Interviewee G also had an unhappy experience. He was approached by a German newspaper and a German/Swiss television television station as a result of the BBC tweet. He did not want his full name used in the newspaper article or for the interview to be shown in Germany itself. In the event while the newspaper journalist only used an abbreviation of his last name, Interviewee G said he could still be identified, while the Swiss journalists sold the interview to German channels

“They didn’t really value what I explicitly asked them – not give away some information or not broadcast in some region, but they did anyway. So I kind of have the feeling I cannot trust journalists anymore, because you never know what they are going to do with your stuff. “

(Skype interview, 17 June 2014)

Interviewee M, who was from Wales and worked in a radio station but who had tweeted a general message of support for the quake victims “Thoughts are with the people of Japan and all the neighbouring countries that will be affected by the tsunami.” which was used on the BBC blog also found herself under attack. A blog reader complained about the use of tweets in news stories, and this was then mentioned on the News Channel’s feedback programme *Newswatch* using her tweet and username as an example. As a result Interviewee M started to get tweets from strangers ‘trolling’ her (personal communication, 31 July 2014).

While those whose content was appropriated by mainstream media in the *Guardian* and BBC Great East Japan liveblog found it annoying (and in the cases of interviewees L and M potentially more serious), more severe problems have occurred if an eyewitness takes what is seen as a crucial piece of footage or picture in a disaster. This is what happened to Interviewee B, a security guard, whose Vine videos were seen as the key images of the 2013 tornado in Moore, Oklahoma.

“For many days after, I was pretty stressed about what I had seen and felt guilty about my part in taking videos of it. I did not profit in any way from this and I have found it awkward in wanting to go back to using social media as I had before this event occurred. That's where my head has been lately, trying to get back to normal, but pretty mentally discouraged.”

(email interview, 27 May 2013)

He posted a series of Vine videos (six-second videos which can be shared via Twitter) showing the devastation it had caused. In one, the tornado swept across the area in front of the camera; in another, men were seen searching for a little lost boy called Tommy. He uploaded the videos and started to drive home.

The videos were picked up widely by media outlets across the world, from Australia to the UK to the US and he found himself under considerable pressure online to respond to journalists' requests. Interviewee B found it “overwhelming” and “complicated”, particularly when he was bombarded with requests from different journalists at the same network. He agreed to allow all journalists who asked permission to use his video, but one of his followers had reprimanded AP for not

crediting him. He said he still found it “too painful” to look back over his Twitter feed.

Looking at his feed (provided by Interviewee B) it does show many of the journalists making brief reference to Massey’s own health and safety before going on to request permission to use the Vines. Others, however, are caught up in the ‘story’ and make no reference to what he may be feeling; they frame it as ‘ecstatic’ news – news where there is a break with the news conventions and a “move ... to an uninterrupted flow of images and stories with various degrees of emotional power” (Chouliaraki, 2008). Some use adjectives such as “terrific” and “great”. Interviewee B said that at no point did any journalist discuss payment or copyright with him, even though AP and Storyful would have been distributing his content to their subscribing clients.⁴ Like many of those who contributed to the Great East Japan quake liveblog however, he felt incredibly uncomfortable about money being discussed.

While being pursued by journalists on Twitter caused Interviewee B stress and panic, his very visible engagement laid him open to criticism by internet trolls. In the end he deleted all his Vines and temporarily left Twitter because of the criticism he received for taking videos rather than helping with the relief effort. It was something that he felt unable to cope with and used words like “depressed” to describe himself:

“I was unequipped to know how to deal with such attention. Being famous is something we all may dream about, but when nationwide attention came to me, especially due to a natural disaster and not of my own accord, I wasn't happy about it. I would tell others to just follow their gut in how they should handle any situation. There is a weird push and pull when it comes to such attention. For me, I didn't want so much attention or even try to get some sort of personal gain after witnessing so

many people in a bad situation. I did a few interviews and then stopped interacting because I needed to take time for myself. It didn't take them long to move on."

(email interview, 28 May 2013)

"I had to take a serious responsibility": the evolution of acts of journalism?

"As I said to my staff, officemates, friends and anybody who cared to ask at the time, "Facebook saves the world". Since cellular communications were effectively cut off (majority of bandwidth in use by government/emergency services), only IP-based communications (i.e. the 'internet') was available."

(email interview, Interviewee L, 12 August 2015)

Were these people who shared content journalists? None of them identified themselves as such. But those whose work was used by the mainstream media (once they were aware of it) started to change their behaviour as a result, from simply putting content up online to seeing some reason behind it – nearer to the traditional journalistic idea of 'bearing witness'.

"I felt it was wise to contribute at the time as people wanted to know what was happening. It's embarrassing looking back on it but the air raid sirens and tsunami warnings were blaring for 6-12 hours wear [sic] I lived and my area was also due a massive earthquake."

(email interview, Interviewee N, 9 May 2013)

For some there was an empathetic and altruistic role to be played. Interviewee P who worked at an international school said he had felt “grateful” he had been able to reassure families abroad that their loved ones were safe, while Interviewee Q, a professor, described his tweets as a “mission” and “self-relief”.

One of the most interesting tweeters was Interviewee R, a Japanese trader. She had been stuck in her office when the quake hit. Originally she had started tweeting as a way of communicating with other people caught up in the earthquake – so she and her friends could find out where the damaged areas were. Tweets were also a way that people who were left isolated, often on apartment rooftops, could be traced and rescued by friends, government agencies or the Japan self-defense force (the military). R was unusual in that she also tweeted in English, primarily because she had friends from abroad as well as in Japan trying to find out what was going on.

“I thought my tweet information might help someone because many Japanese people won't tweet in English but I could.... I got many foreign followers in a few days that made me feel that I should tweet about the earthquake in English for those new people. Through this experience I learned I had to take a serious responsibility about all my words in Twitter even I was just common citizen in Japan.”

(email interview, 16 April 2015)

These tweeters did not identify themselves as journalists, but they did see themselves as fulfilling some kind of public service. They were interacting with their followers not just to pass on emergency information to those caught up in the quake, but also to address a wider audience that had been led to them by the mainstream media.

But does this take them beyond an eyewitness role? In analysing Sohaib Athar's (@ReallyVirtual) tweets of the raid which killed Osama bin Laden Myers (2014) makes a persuasive argument that those who do not identify as citizen or accidental journalists may still be participating in "acts of journalism" (Stearns, 2011). Rather than simply telling friends what has happened, they find themselves caught up in a newsworthy event and start to act in a journalistic manner. Crucially this is partly because eyewitnesses are now publishers too – although where they think they are publishing and the act of re-publishing' by mainstream media is frequently where conflict arises.

In Athar's case, he observed something unusual and shared it, answered questions, tried to act as a conduit for information and sought corroboration. This does not make him a professional journalist, but Myers argues it does mean that he is acting journalistically. As he puts it: "An amateur slugger probably won't hit a home run off a major league pitcher, but they're both playing baseball." (Myers, 2014).

Many of those who were caught up in the quake did nothing more than bear witness – writing a tweet, sharing a picture. But, like Athar, several did start to go beyond that and not only share information, but also correct information that was out there.

Interviewee A was particularly concerned by what he saw as tweeters beginning to tweet what journalists expected to hear – and sensationalising what was going on (this was in the aftermath of the quake, but before the impact of the damage to the nuclear facility at Fukushima became clear).

"Suddenly prolific tweeters became "eyes on the ground" and they tended to "act" the way they suspected a journalist should act. Another guy ended up on BBC soon

after the quake talking about his experience - but he was in Nagoya, which couldn't have possibly felt the quake that strongly as it's very far from Tohoku. I thought those citizen journalists were telling the newsreaders what they suspected the public wanted to hear, and thus you got a lot of incorrect information overseas.”

(email interview, 8 May 2013)

To counter this, Interviewee A posted a picture of a milk carton that had been on the edge of his sink, which did not fall off during the earthquake, in order to try to put the relative strength of the quake in different parts of Japan into perspective.

Interviewee K had started to tweet mainly to reassure his parents in Russia, who were becoming increasingly worried about the scare stories that the Russian media were putting out. As a result of his tweet being picked up by the BBC, he estimated that around 15-20 media contacted him and he gave them information and personal anecdotes in order to ensure that what he termed real not ‘made up’ problems. He had had difficulty persuading one BBC journalist that the situation on the ground where 200km from the quake was not as bad as she wanted it to be. As a result, when the BBC called Interviewee K the next day, he refused to talk to them until they promised to look into the matter and set the record straight. Interviewee Q also refused interviews from US radio stations because he felt Hiroshima was too far from the epicentre and thus was not applicable for what the journalists wanted.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussions above reflect the fact that UGC is now an established element of the mainstream media’s coverage of humanitarian disasters. Media organisations often

use UGC because it allows the reporting (if not the journalist themselves) to take place at the centre of the drama; it gives “the whiff of authenticity” (Anderson, Coleman and Thumim, 2015: p95). As these researchers put it when reviewing studies into citizen journalism in local outlets in Philadelphia and Leeds: “The role of so-called citizen journalism in other words may be more to provide traditional outlets with authentic content than rewrite the rules of news production.” (2015:95).

So disruption in the journalistic field may be more limited than was initially thought. The technological ease of reporting faraway stories should not blind us to what remains the same. Humanitarian disasters may seem sudden and chaotic, but they have always been reported using preferred, ritualised strategies (Allan and Peters, 2015). These rituals may have been updated for a web 2.0 age – start a liveblog, search Twitter for first-hand experiences, scan Facebook for pictures – but Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘rules of the game’ are still understood by journalists today. Instead there has been a control, co-option and cloning of UGC to ensure the significant players in the field retain their power. For, despite Robinson and de Shano’s optimism that the “user is now the centre of the universe” (2011:977), the mainstream media still controls which stories we see and when.

For those creators who could be part of the boundary (re)negotiation, most were happy, even flattered, that someone was interested in their content rather than concerned about how this might be used. There was a lack of knowledge about permissions and copyright and, because of the nature of the stories, there was also a squeamishness about seeing their content as something that could be monetised.

The pursuit of these creators in cyberspace was often an unhappy and stressful situation however, which raises pressing ethical questions around how journalists and

UGC creators interact on line, if these creators are to be treated by journalists as simply a source. While these creators had been happy to share information via their own Twitter feeds or Facebook accounts, they found it unnerving to find themselves splashed across a newspaper or website; a difference the journalists may not always have been able to see.

The compressed nature of a tweet (140 characters) or the speed with which a curt one-line email could be dispatched meant that those who had particularly valuable images for the media – were often hounded, not just by many different media organisations, but by multiple reporters within the same organisations. Often this pursuit was handled with scant concern for how they might have been feeling in the aftermath of witnessing a dramatic event. It is easy for journalists to forget that they have become “silent watchers” (Smith quoted in Cooper, 2012), seeing social networking sites as another valuable source and creators of content as another technological gadget, rather than another agent in the field.

Many had no knowledge, until I contacted them, that their content – generally a short tweet – had been used by the mainstream media. But for those who were alerted by friends or family or a sudden influx of followers that they had been singled out, there was a change in attitude. What had started as often a shock response, a need to let family and friends know they were safe, or even a therapeutic act (Liu et al, 2009), became a chance to perform a type of public service. They did not see themselves as ‘citizen journalists’ but their performative acts were going beyond witnessing to providing useful information to their followers. Some also wanted to act as a corrective, if necessary, to other media reports.

In conclusion, the use of UGC in coverage of humanitarian disasters has shown that

the boundaries around these new technologies remain fuzzy and contested, with media organisations appearing to embrace diverse voices, but cloning and co-opting them in order to ensure that they are still defined as ‘non-journalism’ so as to minimise disruption to the field.

If journalists fail to recognise creators of UGC as creators of ‘journalism’ then this raises ongoing ethical and legal dilemmas concerning permission and privacy. The basics of consent – even with no monetary recompense – still appears to be a fraught area and much still rests on an individual’s or an organisation’s normative and deontological approaches. With UGC now an established part of any disaster coverage, such debates need to be resolved.

Interviewees quoted in the text:

Interviewee A, music writer, email interview 8 May 2013

Interviewee B, security guard, email interviews 27 & 28 May 2013

Interviewee D, journalist, email interview 11 November 2014

Interviewee G, student, Skype interview, 17 June 2014

Interviewee H, technology company worker, email interview, 1 July 2014

Interviewee J, teacher, Skype, 3 May 2013

Interviewee K, tourist industry, email interview, 1 August 2014

Interviewee L, IT manager, email interview 12 August 2015

Interviewee M, radio station manager, email interview 31 July 2014

Interviewee N, English teacher, email interviews 8,9,10 May 2013

Interviewee P, teacher, email interview 11 December 2014

Interviewee Q, professor, email interview, 7 November 2014

Interviewee R, trader, email interview 16 April 2015

Interviewees were based in Tokyo except for Interviewee B (US), Interviewee H (Hawaii) and Interviewee M (Wales). All interviews carried out as part of wider PhD thesis

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accessed 27 April 2016

¹ This research was conducted as part of my PhD thesis *From our own correspondents? How user-generated content is altering the power dynamics in reporting humanitarian disaster* (2016)

² See: <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>

³ See: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/broadcast/guidance/831193/section8.pdf>

⁴ Storyful says on its webpage that it does not 'sell' content, nor get a commission for content.

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