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How Live Blogs are Reconfiguring Breaking News



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Live news pages, also known as live blogs (see Figure 4.4 below), have become one of the most engaging formats for news online. According to the editor of the *Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, who oversees the UK's second most popular newspaper website, live blogs outperform all other modes of online journalism.²² Such anecdotal evidence is supported by hard data showing that live blogs receive more visitors for longer periods of time than conventional articles or picture galleries on the

same subject (Thurman and Walters, 2012), and by their increasing prevalence at news sites worldwide, including NYTimes.com, FT.com, and BBC News online.

However, despite their popularity, live blogs have received scant attention from media researchers. The Reuters Institute surveys are helping to fill this gap by providing – for the first time – data on their consumption across a number of countries, and on news consumers' attitudes to live pages.

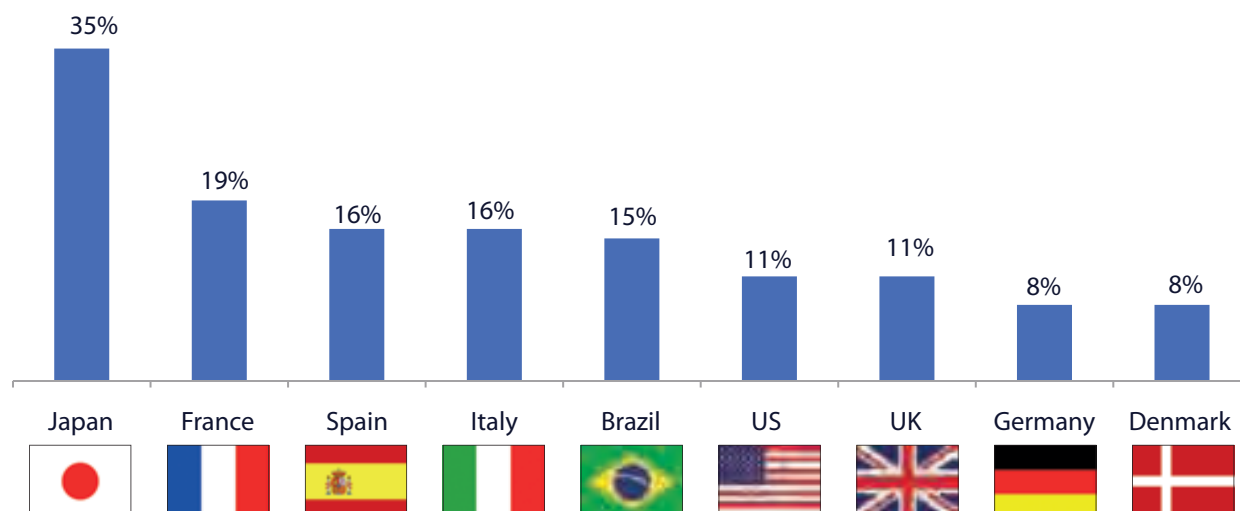
Figure 4.4: A live blog at Guardian.co.uk, with some typical features highlighted

The figure shows a screenshot of a live blog on the Guardian.co.uk website, with several features highlighted by arrows and text boxes:

- Summary headlines:** A box at the top left lists key points: "€200bn IMF loan arrives to €150bn after Britain refuses to lend €25bn", "Mario Draghi: no doubts about strength of euro", "German foreign minister: 'We have no hidden agenda against the City of London'", and "Asian markets fell following Kim Jong-il's death".
- Multimedia element:** A box points to a video player showing a man in a suit speaking.
- Informal tone:** A box points to a timestamped update: "7.50am: Good morning, and welcome to another day of rolling coverage of the eurozone crisis."
- Transparent corrections:** A box points to a note: "This article was corrected on 20 December 2011 because the original described Sony Kapoor as working at Open Europe instead of Re-Define, a London-based thinktank."
- Date-stamped updates:** A box points to a timestamped update: "9.55am: [Standard & Poor's has said it won't downgrade South Korea's credit rating following the death of Kim Jong-il]."
- Use of content from Twitter:** A box points to a tweet: "9.55am: FT's comment on standard: Asia's credit rating is under threat. South Korea's credit rating is under threat. South Korea's credit rating is under threat. South Korea's credit rating is under threat."
- Generous use of hyperlinks:** A box points to a timestamped update: "10.40am: Some interesting research in the FT shows homeowners in some of the poorest parts of the country put themselves at risk of repossession (£) by taking out second mortgages in the run-up to the credit crunch."
- 3rd-party content signposted:** A box points to a timestamped update: "10.45am: Some interesting research in the FT shows homeowners in some of the poorest parts of the country put themselves at risk of repossession (£) by taking out second mortgages in the run-up to the credit crunch."

²²Bob Franklin, personal communication, Mar. 2013.

Source: Thurman and Walters (2012). Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>)

Figure 4.5: Popularity of live blogs by country

Q11: Thinking of the way you looked at news online in the last week, which of the following ways of consuming news did you use?

Base: All markets UK (n=2078) US (n=2028) Spain (n=979) Japan (n=978) Italy (n=965) Germany (n=1062) France (n=973) Denmark (n=1007) Urban Brazil (n=985)

Both this year and last the surveys showed that 11% of UK news consumers had followed a live news page in the previous week. This year's survey reveals that live news pages are even more popular in the US, Brazil, Italy, Spain, and especially in France (19%) and Japan (35%). Because the survey took place at the same time as the French Parliament was considering whether to introduce same-sex marriage – a debate that was intensely followed due to the increasing number of French parliamentarians who are now on Twitter²³ – it could be that this figure is a result of the survey's timing. However, the French online news market is distinguished by the relatively high number of internet-only or 'pure players' – such as Slate, Rue 89, Mediapart, and Atlantico – whose innovations, including in their adoption of live blogs, have normalised the format in France.²⁴

In Japan too, pure-player sites appear to be driving the popularity of live pages. Yahoo News Japan – the country's 'flagship' news website, used by 64% of Japanese news consumers in this survey – carries a 'breaking news' tab leading to a live page. The popularity of Yahoo News Japan, combined with the rather conventional approach to editorial presentation on the rest of its homepage, are, according to Yasuomi Sawa of *Kyodo News*, the likely explanation for the popularity of live pages in Japan.²⁵

Live news pages are popular then, but with whom? The survey results show distinct differences between

Spain, Japan, and the US – where they are accessed more or less equally by men and women; France, UK, and Brazil – where there is a moderate bias towards men; and Italy, Germany, and Denmark – where there is a pronounced bias towards men with, in Germany, more than twice as many men accessing live pages. In Germany live pages, known as 'news tickers', are used almost exclusively to cover sport events, in particular football, which have a significant male bias in their audience profile.²⁶

It is unsurprising that live blogs are popular with heavy internet users. Typically running for six hours (Thurman and Walters, 2012), they demand repeated visits. Their reverse-chronological order and bite-sized updates – every few minutes or so – while essential characteristics of their ability to convey information 'as live', also present usability challenges.

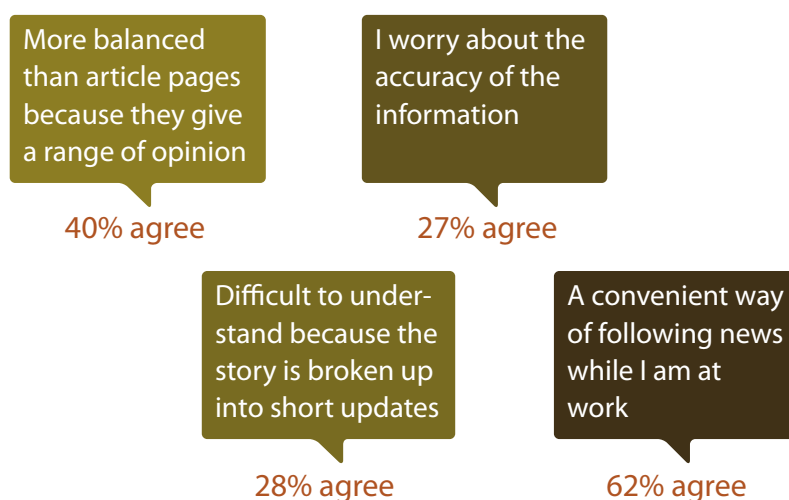
This Reuters Institute survey shows that, in the UK, 28% of live blog users felt they were hard to understand. Although news organisations have been improving the usability of their live blogs by, for example, allowing users to read them in either chronological or reverse chronological order, they are likely to remain harder to understand than traditional news articles because they lack a conventional narrative structure, often have multiple authors, incorporate a range of external sources such as tweets, and make extensive use of quotes from – and links to – secondary sources.

²³Nicolas Kayser-Bril, personal communication, 10 Mar. 2013.

²⁴Jean-Christophe Pascal, personal communication, 11 Mar. 2013.

²⁵Yasuomi Sawa, personal communication, 10 Mar. 2013.

²⁶Christoph Neuberger, personal communication, 12 Mar. 2013.

Figure 4.6: Consumer attitudes to live pages

These characteristics are, of course, also an important part of the reason for their popularity. My own previous research (Thurman and Walters, 2012) showed that readers assessed live blogs' neutrality and balance positively. This survey confirmed this finding, with 40% of live blog users in the UK agreeing 'strongly' or 'somewhat' that they were more balanced than article pages because they give a range of opinions and routinely link out to sources and supporting documents. Only 12% disagreed.

Because live news pages are produced at speed, there is little time for live blogging journalists to undertake factual verification. What journalists do instead is work with trusted sources, for example, known Twitter accounts, and involve the audience in fact checking. This survey shows that more readers (35%) than not (27%) are unconcerned about any lack of accuracy in live blogs. In addition to their balance, live blogs' use of a greater range of primary sources and their transparent correction practices are also likely to have helped instil a degree of confidence about their objectivity. However news organisations should not take their readers' trust as a given. Live pages' compressed and frequent deadlines and informal tone may encourage the potentially dangerous publication of unverified information. As the *Guardian's* Paul Lewis says, 'the danger in the rush to do regular updates is that we will make a really serious mistake' (Thurman and Walters, 2012).

The Reuters Institute survey also asked live blog readers in the UK whether they found the format a convenient way of following news at work. An overwhelming majority (62%) agreed 'somewhat' or 'strongly', with only 10% disagreeing. Of those

respondents who said they access news at work or in a place of study, 17% use live blogs, significantly higher than the figure (11%) for all respondents. Live blogs are particularly suited to following news at work because they match readers' preferences for news consumption in that setting, by providing easy-to-monitor updates on a single page in a discreet, text-based format.

In this year's Reuters Institute survey we wanted to investigate the popularity of different types of live pages. To do this we used my classification of live blogs (Thurman and Walters, 2012), which divides the format into four types: News, Sport, Series/Subject, and Other Scheduled Event (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: Typology of live blogs

Type	Characteristics
News	- Scheduled well in advance, semi-scheduled or completely unscheduled. - Major breaking news stories, generally with a more serious tone. - Examples include natural disasters, protests and riots, unfolding political scandals.
Sport	- Predictable - Casual in tone - High level of direct interaction with readers - Fewer multimedia elements - Links and multimedia elements often included for entertainment purposes, may not be directly relevant to story
Series/Subject	- Cover a subject, not a single story - Usually public affairs topics - Examples include: Politics Live, Middle East Live, and a Live Blog on planned reforms to Britain's National Health Service.
Other Scheduled Event	- Planned in advance and of finite duration. - Cover soft news, such as the Cannes film festival, the Eurovision Song Contest, and television series such as <i>The Apprentice</i> and <i>X Factor</i>, which are live blogged at the same time each week

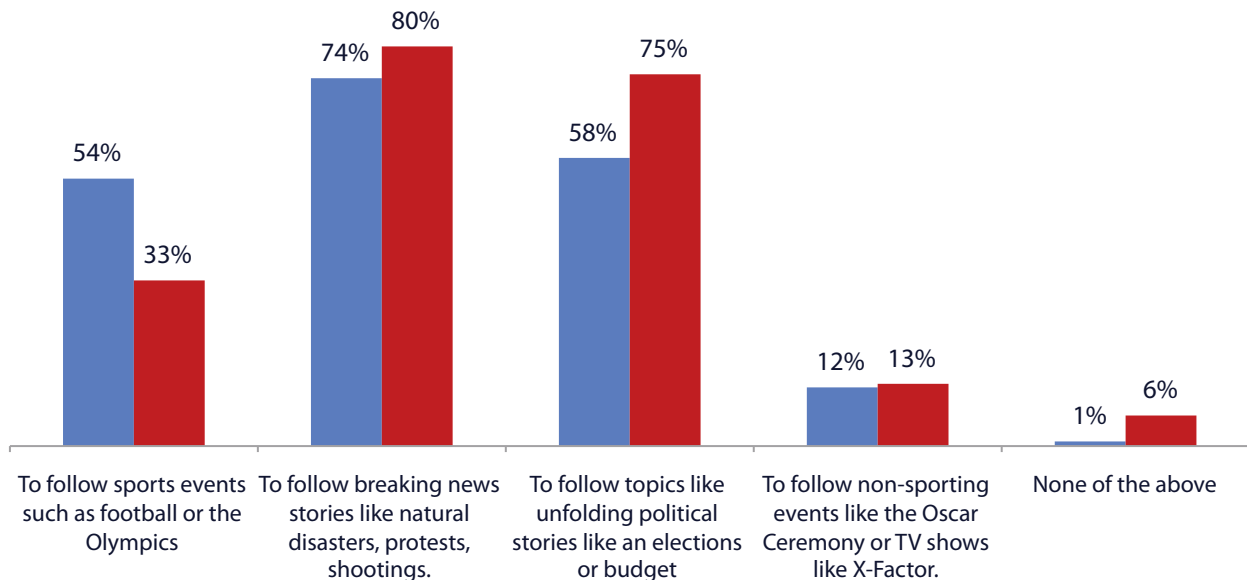
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4. Essays

In my study of live blogs at Guardian.co.uk, I observed they were most regularly used to cover sport (37.6%), followed closely by the running, mainly public-affairs, news stories covered by series/subject live blogs (33.5%). Breaking news live blogs made up 21.9% of the total and scheduled events trailed at 6.8%. One might expect then, given the preponderance of sport live blogs and

sport's popularity with online news consumers (see e.g. Boczkowski, 2010), for readers to favour sport live blogs over the other categories. This survey showed, however, that both news and series/subject live blogs are more popular than sport live blogs with both US and UK news consumers.

Figure 4.8: Types of live blogs consumed in the UK and US



QS14a/14b: You said that you use LIVE news page (short updates in chronological order)

Thinking about this, please select the statements that apply to you.

Base: UK (n=2078) Use live pages (n=237) US (n=2028) Use live pages (n=213)

Could it be, then, that live news pages are making readers more interested in hard news and public-affairs content? While that may, for now, be an interpretation too far, what we can say is that, because the format has developed uniquely for the web, and matches so well with readers' consumption patterns, it seems to appeal as much through its form as its content.

Live blogs' appeal is likely being reinforced by the increasing consumption of news via mobile devices. 79% of mobile news consumers in the UK (and 77% in the US) say they use their mobile for accessing quick news updates during the day. Live blogs' short posts (which average about 100 words) suit smartphones' relatively small screens, and the frequency with which they update mean they warrant repeated daily visits. Some have been critical of how such rivers of news are augmenting traditional discrete articles – even going as far to accuse live pages of being symptomatic of the 'death of journalism' (Symes, 2011). However, although live news pages are meeting some readers' contemporary preferences for snacking on news, often on the go, they

may simultaneously be delivering levels of participation and transparency, and an engagement with public affairs, that could contribute to journalism's reanimation.

References

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