

Nieman Reports: Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard

WINTER 2005

Citizen Journalism and the BBC

‘... when major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on, news coverage is a partnership.’

By Richard Sambrook

Tweet



On the day of the London bombings, the BBC News's Web site used images sent to them by citizens who were affected by the attacks. On the site, people could learn how to submit their video, photographs and words for use by the BBC.

On July 7th, when terrorist bombs exploded on London subway trains and a bus, it was a day of intense pressure for our news teams to get things first, but more importantly to get things right. Our initial indication that we were facing more than the “power surge” the transport authorities were reporting came in an e-mail a viewer sent to us. Before long, many more text and e-mail messages containing images and information arrived from the public, and these became an integral part of how the BBC reported the day’s events. Within six hours we received more than 1,000 photographs, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages, and 20,000 e-mails. People were participating in our coverage in a way we had never seen before. By the next day, our main evening TV newscast began with a package edited entirely from video sent in by viewers.

Our audiences had become involved in telling this story as they never had before. By day's end, the BBC's news-gathering had crossed a Rubicon. The quantity and quality of the public's contributions moved them beyond novelty, tokenism or the exceptional, and raises major implications that we are still working through. Not the least of these is how to handle this volume of material. Our small hub of four people was overwhelmed and is clearly going to be inadequate as we go forward. Of course, the BBC has used phone-ins, amateur video, and e-mail in its programs for years, but what was happening now was moving us way beyond where we'd been before.

Our reporting on this story was a genuine collaboration, enabled by consumer technology – the camera phone in particular – and supported by trust between broadcaster and audience. And the result was transformational in its impact: We know now that when major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on, news coverage is a partnership.

After the earthquake in Pakistan and India in October, the most vivid descriptions of what happened and its effects came in e-mails and texts from the area. On page after page of the BBC's News's Web site we carried the most compelling eyewitness testimony. And as happened during previous disasters, our site was used as a notice board for families trying to contact each other.

In September of this year, the BBC focused for a day on broadcasting from Afghanistan. As part of this coverage, one of our reporters took a laptop and satellite phone into the village of Asad Khyal, where about 300 families live and work on small grape farms or do odd jobs. Many live in huts after the Taliban destroyed their homes. We reported what an ordinary day was like for them – and allowed those who came to our Web site to question them directly. It became an extraordinary global conversation; questions were asked by people in Azerbaijan, Switzerland, the United States, Korea and Japan, among many other places. Questioners wanted to know about their lives, their families, their concerns, and their view of the world. These conversational links created a unique cultural connection.

The BBC's Citizen Journalism

These three examples from recent news coverage show how BBC's viewers and listeners contribute to our daily journalism and how they are fast becoming part of our core editorial endeavor. The BBC holds a license from the government that enables it to experiment with citizen journalism and social networks. As a public broadcaster, funded by the license fee every homeowner with a TV has to pay, its focus is on providing value to its audience – even in small communities. This circumstance allows it to try things that commercial broadcasters, with an eye to the bottom line and share value, would not attempt. The BBC has long been expected, by virtue of its public funding, to innovate and lead industry developments. During the 1990's, the BBC was swift to move its news coverage onto the Internet and has since consolidated that early lead.

The BBC believes its role is to support the public in learning and using digital technology to engage with the world. What follows are some examples of how this has worked:

Since 2001, Digital Storytelling has been a flagship project. It takes the tools of digital media production into communities across the United Kingdom, enabling people to tell their stories in their own way. Through local workshops, held in a portable studio, 10 people at a time learn new skills such as crafting scripts, recording voices, laying down music, and editing stills and video. Their stories are then produced as short programs and broadcast either as inserts to the news or with other BBC programs with related themes. To date, more than 500 people of all ages and backgrounds have made such programs. In 2006, the BBC will launch community TV – broadband services with ultralocal content provided by community-based reporters equipped with camera and laptop. With the emergence of community TV, many of these people will become regular contributors for the BBC.

In 2003, Argyll and Bute Council, on the West Coast of Scotland, joined a Scottish Executive project called Digital Communities and issued every household in the North Argyll Islands a personal computer and narrowband Web connection. Working directly with the islanders, BBC Scotland launched a participatory media project called Island Blogging. Using a blog interface built by the team, bloggers aged 17 to 70 began to write about their lives and the issues that affected them – from being storm-bound in the spring to the delights of the local horticultural show, complete with pictures. Comment areas on the blogs lead to contributions and, sometimes, heated debates from those living on other islands in the United Kingdom and in countries throughout the world. Subjects like wind turbine energy prompted comments from around the globe while post-match debate over the Coll Bar's Pool ladder generated posts from Coll and the neighboring islands. Some stories – like the beaching of a whale on Coll – actually broke first on Island Blogging and were quickly picked up by the mainstream Scottish media.

The BBC's Action Network (formerly called iCan) was launched as a Web site in November 2003 to help people become more involved in their community and take steps in addressing issues of concern to them. Users find others who share their concerns, exchange information and advice, and organize campaigns. There is also material provided by the BBC, such as authoritative guides on how to negotiate civic life, briefing on issues, and a database of organizations covering about a thousand different issues.

The site was created after turnout at the last general election fell below 60 percent and is aimed at people who feel the mainstream political process at Westminster and the town hall (as well as its coverage in the media) is too remote and irrelevant to their lives. The number of users has grown since its launch to about 170,000 per month, with 14,000 registered members.

Enlarging the Civic Space

While the BBC's Action Network operates on a tiny scale, it might hold the seeds of something more profound. Many people in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) believe politics and the news media are engaged in a dysfunctional embrace, in which a lack of openness and trust distorts the public debate. Former Vice President Al Gore, who is now the chairman of Current TV, told participants at a new media conference in October that "some extremely important elements of American democracy have been pushed to the sidelines. And the most prominent casualty has been the marketplace of ideas that was so beloved and so carefully protected by our Founders. It effectively no longer exists."

It's possible that initiatives like Action Network (and there are likely to be many others like it throughout the world) hold some promise for how public participation might revive the marketplace of ideas and how citizen journalism might enlarge the civic space. Much of the strength of Action Network derives from the tenor of impartiality that the BBC brings to the project. The civic space it creates is a neutral area, a place where anyone can put any issue on the agenda, as long as they comply with basic house rules. Participants are likely to encounter opponents to their point of view, but the environment encourages them to engage in a dialogue rather than a diatribe.

At the other end of the scale, we're going to be launching The Global Conversation, which is an aggregation of what is provided to us by the public for use on our global TV, radio and Web services. This service will allow people from different countries and cultures to connect with each other and with the BBC and through this site with commentators and decision makers – perhaps a global public space.

Changing Journalism

What makes these projects interesting – and of importance to journalists – is not simply the innovations they offer in interactive communications. They also point to some of the fundamental changes in the news business that are being brought about by digital technology.

While all of these online changes are taking place, the BBC is undergoing a restructuring that will result in the loss of some 3,000 jobs. This job reduction will allow the savings to be invested in transforming the entire news organization, including the news division, into one that is ready for the fully digital, on-demand age. The broadcast world is changing rapidly, and the traditional model of channels and schedules might not survive the decade.

Digital technology is also fundamentally changing our relationship with the audience – how they use these new digital tools and what they expect from us. For the BBC to retain – and enhance – its relevance, its news services must be able to provide content that can be seen, heard or read any time and any place. We must also help those who receive our news to contribute to our services as we witness fundamental realignment of the relationship between broadcaster and the public. And these are only first steps in what appears likely to be a long journey into new territory.

Not everyone in the organization recognizes that this shift is happening or accepts it. Several of the kinds of initiatives I've described above have existed at the margins of our services and are only just beginning to move toward center stage. Such changes raise policy issues that disturb some colleagues. How can our journalistic reputation be protected when we are not fully in control of our content? As someone who supports this new direction, I don't suggest the BBC staff abdicate their responsibility for accuracy, fairness or objectivity. There will always be a central place for editorial judgment to be applied. That judgment is the essential brand value of major news organizations. As we open up to contributions from the public, we must do so in a way that is consistent with our editorial values. However, I believe that truth, accuracy, impartiality and diversity of opinion are strengthened by

being open to a wider range of opinion and perspective, brought to us through the knowledge and understanding of our audience.

The journalists' role is now to concentrate harder on how, when and where we can add value through our strengths of analysis, context, background and range. But as we do this we must be open to what members of the public bring to our attention. And as long as what they do bring is clearly labeled and attributed, I see no inherent problem with sharing it widely. When handled properly, it adds value and improves quality.

News organizations are accustomed to being the gatekeepers of information. But with the Internet's emergence, information has broken free and become commoditized and democratized. Such change also puts the gatekeeper under the spotlight. We are watched and assessed more closely now by those whom we serve. Such observation can be very uncomfortable, but we'd better get used to it.

Transparency about the news selection and editing process is now as important as the journalism itself in retaining public trust. If we act openly and honestly, even in the face of criticism, it will increase confidence in what we do.

