

Blurring the boundaries of mass media communication? Interaction and user-generated content on online news sites

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Abstract

This study investigates the communicative setting of one form of online mass media communication, namely online news sites published by professional news organisations. Such sites provide options for audience interaction that go far beyond what was possible in earlier forms. One of the questions this raises concerns the extent to which this might contribute to a blurring of boundaries between 1) mass and interpersonal communication, 2) editorial content and user-generated content, and 3) the roles of journalists and readers. In order to approach these questions, I develop a model for the communicative situation on online news sites which makes it possible to explore these boundaries. Data from five British online news sites show that mass communication and user interaction are combined in various ways on these platforms, without making it necessary to give up the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication. Concerning user-generated content, the news sites show marked differences as to how clearly they differentiate it from editorial content. For the role of readers this means that they can turn into sources for journalistic news writing. The last part of the study contextualises these findings by adopting a diachronic view on the development of interactive forms on news sites, relating them to earlier reader feedback in print newspapers and looking at some of the most recent trends with respect to the integration of social media.

1. Introduction

Online settings can lead to new communicative situations, in which the forms of interaction and the roles of the interactants differ with respect to previous settings. This is one of the aspects that have attracted most attention from scholars analysing online communication in recent years. Bublitz (2012), for instance, explores the implications of changing roles in the communication process, which means that the old roles of writer/author and reader/recipient are replaced by the concept of user, who combines aspects of both roles. Lüders (2008: 692) talks of the “convergence” of different media forms and argues that the boundaries between interpersonal communication and mass communication are blurred online. Investigating online news, Lewis (2003: 102) likewise identifies a blurring of boundaries between mass communication and personal communication. With respect to the roles of the interactants in online news, in particular independent news media, the blurring of boundaries between authors of news texts and their recipients has been expressed with the blend “produser” (Bruns 2005: 315; 2008: 69–99).

In the present study I investigate some of these shifts on online news sites of institutionalised news media. The aim is to characterise the combination of different communicative forms, in particular aspects of unidirectional mass communication and interaction. Moreover, the roles of readers and the relation between editorial content and user-generated content are similarly explored. While it is certainly true that shifts occur with respect to all these aspects, I will argue that blurring is not in all cases the most appropriate characterisation of the change. Janoschka (2004: 89, 96–101) develops a model of interactive mass communication on the Internet, which she successfully applies to online

advertising. According to this model, mass communication and interpersonal communication can be combined on a single platform, without blurring the boundary between the two. I suggest that this model can be adapted to online news sites in a way that makes it possible to localise different forms of communication on distinct areas of the sites. In contrast, the study of data from five British online news sites will show that the roles of readers and the boundaries between different types of content are not in all cases clear-cut. In sum, this study aims to find out which of the above-mentioned boundaries are blurred on online news sites and where apparent blurring can be disentangled.

One question that is raised by all investigations of change in new media is the degree to which it depends on the technological setting and its development. Therefore, section 5 provides a contextualisation of the findings from the previous sections by presenting theoretical accounts of media change, on the one hand, and examples of the diachronic development of selected interactional features of online news, on the other. I will argue that technological determinism is unlikely to fully explain the developments on online news sites and I will provide evidence that precursors of present-day forms of reader interaction and user comments can already be found in print newspapers before the creation of the World Wide Web. A brief look at some of the most recent developments on online news sites, in particular with respect to the integration with social media platforms like Twitter, concludes the study.

2. Interaction on online news sites

On online news sites, both mass communication and interpersonal communication take place. News articles are not co-authored by readers (unlike Wikipedia articles, for instance). They are created by a small number of text producers – journalists and editors – and are accessible to a large, mostly anonymous audience. As such, they are cases of mass communication. In contrast, user comments and debate sections in which readers often quote, reply to, and argue with other readers (see Neurauter-Kessels 2011) are spaces in which interaction and interpersonal communication take place. Thus, online news sites combine very different communicative forms, ranging from uni-directional mass communication to interactive discussion forums. As such, they are multiple-tool platforms of communication (Jucker & Dürscheid 2012: 43–44), rather than one specific communicative form.

Janoschka's (2004: 96–101) model of interactive mass communication on the Internet provides a good starting point for characterising the communicative situation on online news sites. A slightly simplified version of her model is represented in Figure 1. The black arrows stand for mass communication that flows in a unidirectional way from a sender (S) to the audience (A). In contrast, the white arrows stand for interpersonal communication, which takes place between users (U). The users can overlap with the sender and with the audience of mass communication. In the context of online news sites, the senders are news professionals, i.e. journalists and editors, whereas the audience consists of the readers of the news site.

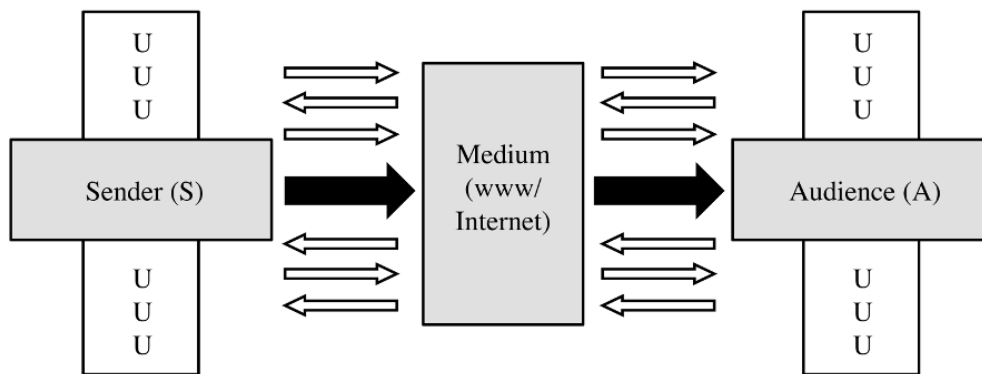


Figure 1. Janoschka's (2004: 98) model of interactive mass communication on the Internet, slightly simplified.

Related to their role as multi-tool platforms of communication, online news sites combine two main types of content, editorial content and user-generated content, which both have their own areas. Editorial content (e.g. news articles) is produced by journalists and consumed by the audience. Communication is unidirectional and the text undergoes an editing process before publication which is comparable to that of print newspapers. In contrast, user-generated content is contributed by members of the audience and while there may be editorial intervention, mainly in the form of deleting content that violates the site's guidelines, editing is not the norm.

Interaction with and among readers takes place in the areas devoted to user-generated content. On the one hand, there are special sections of the website in which community interaction takes place. These can contain user forums and debate sections, polls, forms for submitting stories, images and videos, and links to such material provided by other readers. Some sites ask their readers to submit suggestions for stories they would like to read and corresponding sections with links to stories that were realised as a consequence of such suggestions. On the other hand, pages containing editorial content, e.g. in the form of specific news articles, often contain areas for user-generated content. On most news sites, user comments can be posted in response to articles, usually at the bottom of the page. Sidebars or boxes inset in the text sometimes contain links to additional user-generated content, such as debate sections, online polls, videos submitted by readers and image galleries with readers' pictures. Videos and image galleries are sometimes integrated into news articles and used as illustrations, alongside visual material from professional press photographers. [1]

In addition to interaction taking place on the news site, it is of course still possible for readers to contact text producers through other channels. Letters to the editor are an old form of such interaction, used in print newspapers long before the digital age. Today, letters to the editor are usually sent by e-mail or via online forms, even though sending a letter by post is still possible. Some news sites also publish phone numbers to which text messages, multimedia messages or calls can be directed in case of breaking news. In addition, most news sites are present on social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which open up yet another option for providing feedback. Communication taking place through such channels is not strictly speaking taking place on the news site. However, the news site facilitates such communication, e.g. by providing contact information. Moreover, it integrates information received through external channels, either in sections devoted to user interaction (e.g. slideshows with readers' pictures) or in editorial sections.

Figure 2 illustrates the communicative situation between professional media producers (journalists, editors) and the audience on online news sites. Red stands for newsroom professionals, like journalists and editors, who contribute content to editorial areas in a mostly unidirectional way. In contrast, blue stands for the audience, who, on the one hand, consume editorial content and, on the other, contribute to and interact in user areas. Interaction takes place mostly between members of the audience, but sometimes journalists and editors participate, too, for instance by submitting comments that clarify certain aspects of the article. More importantly, though, they are responsible for monitoring content submitted by users and deleting contributions that violate editorial guidelines. The thin black arrows that connect the audience and newsroom professionals directly stand for interaction that takes place through channels outside the news site, such as letters to the editors, e-mails, and Twitter. In this model, the same amount of space is given to editorial areas and user areas, and the two types of areas are separated from each other. As I will argue in section 4, the space devoted to user-generated content and the ways in which it is combined with (and distinguished from) editorial content are aspects that vary considerably across news sites.

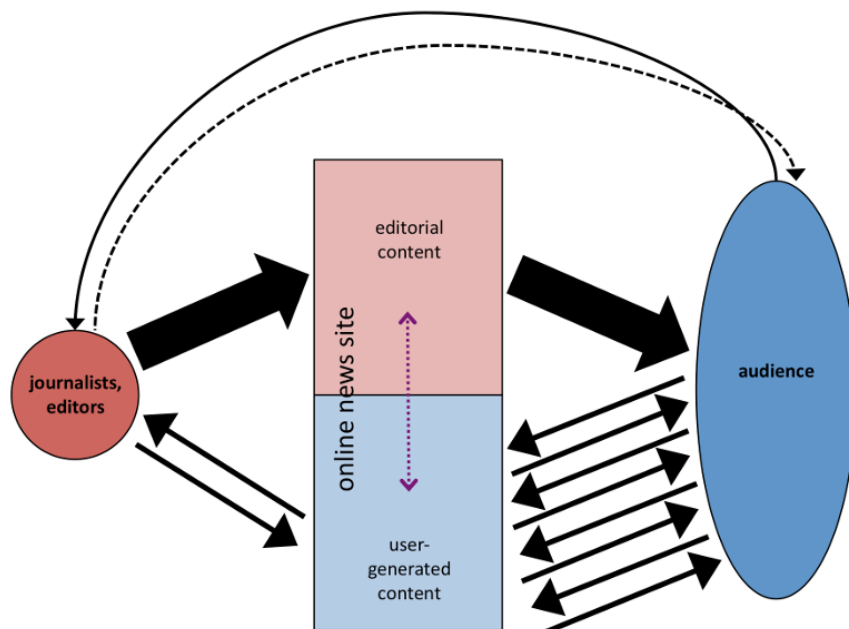


Figure 2. Communicative situation on online news sites.

An interesting complication for the distinction between user-generated content and editorial content is created by the flow of information between the two (purple arrow). On the one hand, users often respond to and quote editorial content. On the other hand, reader contributions, whether provided through the news site or through different channels, may make their way into the editorial sections of news sites. A basic form of this can be found in pages that consist of collections of selected user comments in response to a specific topic or article. In other cases, contributions by readers are integrated into news articles along other types of source materials. As I will explain in more detail below, users can even turn into sources for professional media producers, in which case their contributions become part of the editorial content.

3. The functions of user-generated content

What in the previous section was called user-generated content is far from homogenous in

terms of form and function. It can, for instance, take the form of a user comment voicing criticism towards a published article, a picture of a breaking news event taken by an eye-witness and sent in via a mobile device, a story idea submitted through an online form, or a personal account related to a previously published news story. One important distinction concerns the function of user-generated content on a scale ranging from informational to personalising. User-generated content at the personalising end of the scale provides a personal perspective on a news event, such as a personal opinion or an account of how a news event affected the user personally. In contrast, the informational end consists of factual accounts of prototypical news events. Both functions can occur in user-generated content submitted in the form of text, images or videos. The following three user comments, all submitted to the same *Mail Online* article about heavy snow fall in the UK (*MailOnline*, UK news, 6 January 2010), illustrate various points on the informational/personalising scale.

The image shows three screenshots of user comments from Mail Online, arranged vertically. Each comment includes the text of the comment, the user's name and location, the date and time, a 'Report abuse' link, and a 'Click to rate' button with a rating of 4.

Comment 1: "still no snow in Burton!"
- Dom, Burton on Trent, 5/1/2010 9:24
Rating: 4

Comment 2: "Do you know what, I don't care if it snows, rains or blizzards. My first Grandchild is going to be a boy all else pails into insignificance
Let it snow, let it snow,let it snow"
- Kevin, South East England, 5/1/2010 10:54
Rating: 4

Comment 3: "here in wakefield its coming down in buckets,just nipped to local shop and got what i needed and im staying in!"
- sarah, wakefield uk, 5/1/2010 9:39
Rating: 21

Examples 1–3. Comment section at the bottom of Mail Online article.
Click the images to see them in context.

Example 1 is the most informational comment, sharing the observation that there is “no snow in Burton”. In contrast, the comment in 2 has a very low informational value. It provides a very personal perspective on the news event of heavy snow by telling that the snow is of little interest to the commentator, since he is excited about the news of his first grandchild. Many user contributions fall somewhere in between these two extremes, like the one in 3. Here, the information that there is a lot of snow in Wakefield is combined with a more personal account of how the user copes with the situation.

These different functions do not only apply to user-generated content, but also to editorial content. Prototypical hard news articles are expected to consist of informational content, especially in up-market news publications. Down-market publications, in contrast, are sometimes criticised for their focus on the emotional and personal. However, even up-market publications contain personalised content, and this is not only the case in sections devoted to soft news and opinion. Example 4 presents a quote that was published in a news report about the Haiti earthquake on *BBC News*. It provides a highly personalised perspective on the catastrophe by focussing on the personal experiences of someone whose boyfriend is missing.

"I've been calling, trying to call on the internet and in e-mails, and I've got nowhere," said Nadege Attis, whose boyfriend is missing.

"I've decided it's better for me to go there, and find any ways I can to go there," she told BBC News. "I can't keep waiting."

Example 4. *BBC News*, UK news, 16 January 2010.

Click the image to see it in context.

Taking into account both the distinction between editorial content and user-generated content, on the one hand, and between informational and personalising content, on the other, this leads to the classification scheme in Figure 3. Section A stands for prototypical editorial content with a high informative value, such as news reports based on press releases by government organisations. Section C stands for prototypical user-generated content that mainly serves a personalising function. Section D represents editorial content with a highly personalising function, such as quotes from directly affected persons. Section B, finally represents user-generated content that fulfils an informational function.

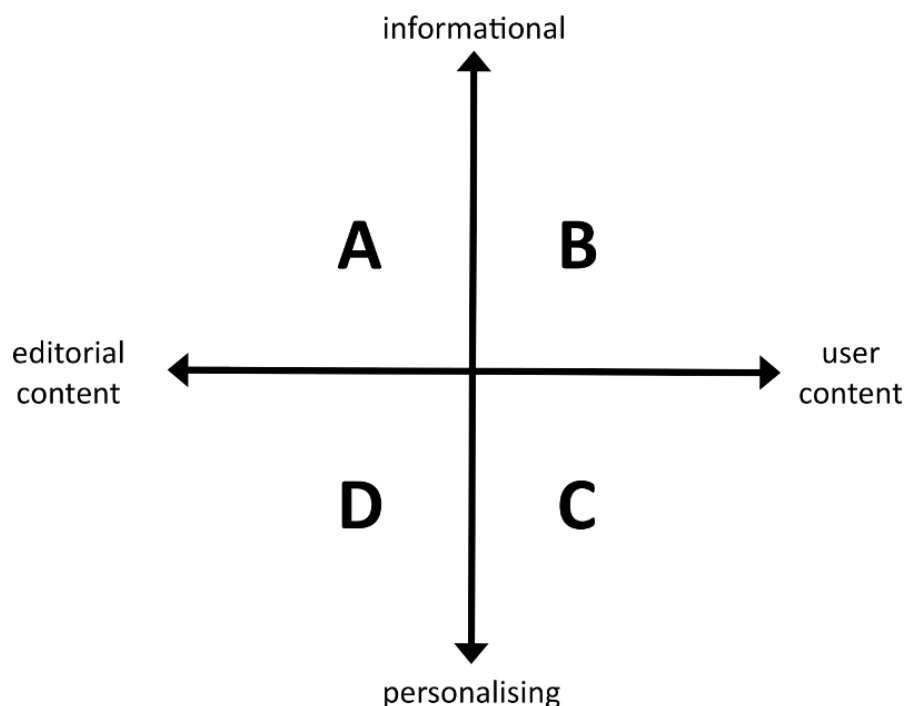


Figure 3. Classification of content with respect to creator and function.

This last type of content points to some problems for the distinction between editorial content and user-generated content. If purely factual information provided by readers of a news site is integrated into an editorial article, it fulfils the same role as information received through traditional journalistic sources. Looking at the final product, it is not always clear whether a specific account was provided by a reader who contacted a news site, or whether journalists had identified and interviewed a potential source. The following example, an eye-witness account of a bomb attack in Kabul, is a case in point.

Speaking to BBC News from inside the ministry of finance, civil servant Emal Masood said he could see that the Ferozhgah-e-Afghan shopping centre was burned out.

Example 5. *BBC News*, world news, 18 January 2010.

Click the image to see it in context.

The increase of communication channels between professional news producers and the audience and the attempts of media professionals to recruit reader reporters mean that the boundaries between traditional journalistic sources and user-generated content will increasingly become blurred. In this respect, the distinction is again a scale, rather than a binary distinction. The prototypical case of user-generated content in which individuals take the initiative of contacting news media is being complemented by scenarios in which readers are recast into the role of potential sources. At the time of writing this article, the launch of PressApp is being announced, a new mobile app facilitating the “hunt for user-generated content”:

When a newsroom is on the hunt for user-generated content, an editor can send a message to users of the app detailing the request, which will display as a message on the user's phone and sit in the app's inbox. (McAthy 2013)

The app combines options for submitting and requesting content and, according to the announcement, should even enable news professionals to send geo-targeted messages, i.e. requesting content from users in specific locations.

4. Variation across sites

The relation between editorial content and user-generated content, and in particular the type of boundary drawn between the two, is one of the most interesting aspects when comparing how different news sites present user-generated content. The focus of the following analysis is twofold. The first question concerns the amount of audience interaction and the presence given to it on the news site. The second question concerns the ways in which editorial content and personalising user-generated content are combined.

One reason why I focus on personalising user-generated content is practical. My analysis is based on the final product, i.e. the news sites as they are published, rather than ethnographic studies of newsroom practices. As I have argued above, such a perspective does not always make it possible to distinguish between informational user-generated content and editorial content. Factual information about news events are provided by authorities, official spokespersons, news agencies and directly affected individuals, and the form of the information often does not betray its source. In contrast, the source of personalising information is more transparent, given that an account of personal experiences always says something about the experienter. This is not to say that the classification of personalising user-generated content is always unproblematic, but an approximation is certainly easier than in the case of informational user-generated content.

However, the more important reason for focusing on personalising user-generated content lies in my interest in its communicative function. Personalising user-generated content is interesting because it focuses on how ordinary readers are affected by news. It presents personal experience, opinion and emotion, rather than facts, and presents these in the context of events deemed newsworthy. The implicit message this sends out to readers is that the experiences, opinions and emotions of “ordinary” people (like the readers themselves) is relevant and newsworthy and that, by extension, also the readers' own lives and experiences may be relevant news. In analysing the final product, rather than the production process, I adopt the perspective of the reader, who does not have any insights into production. Obviously, studying newsroom practices and investigating how editors and journalists deal with user contributions behind the scenes provide valuable and

complementary insights, but such an approach is not within the scope of the current study (but see for instance the extensive report by Wardle and Williams 2008 on user-generated content at *BBC News*).

The following analysis is based on data from five British online news sites, the *Times Online*, the *Guardian*, *BBC News*, the *Mail Online* and the *Sun*. From each news site, the top-listed news articles in the sections devoted to UK news and world news were collected on 14 different days, resulting in a corpus of 140 news articles in total. The data were collected for a larger research project in January 2010. Thus they do not reflect the latest state in the development of online news, and I will point out some more recent developments in section 5.3 below. However, the data represent an interesting point in the process of news site development. Features that allow online interaction with users were no longer new, but the news sites were still experimenting with their integration. In the three years following data collection all five news sites underwent changes and redesigns to a smaller or larger extent. The changes were most far-reaching for the *Times*, which shut down its website www.timesonline.co.uk in summer 2010 and replaced it with the new sites www.thetimes.co.uk and www.thesundaytimes.co.uk, which are now restricted to paying subscribers. *BBC News* and the *Sun* updated the layout of their news sites, and also *Mail Online* and the *Guardian* introduced small changes to the layout of their sites. Of all the changes that took place, interactive features were among the aspects most affected on all five sites. The data of 2010 are thus interesting because they represent one stage in the development of interactive forms at a time when this development was ongoing.

The *Times Online* is the site giving least presence to user-generated content and interaction. User comments, submitted below articles, are the only form of personalising user-generated content that can regularly be found. Some additional features can be found for selected articles, such as image galleries with reader pictures (see also section 5.2 below), opinion polls and live chats. Generally speaking, these receive little presence on the website, however. There is no special community section and requests for submitting user-generated content are rare, except for generic invitations to post user comments. Applying the model for interaction on online news sites to these data results in the representation of Figure 4.

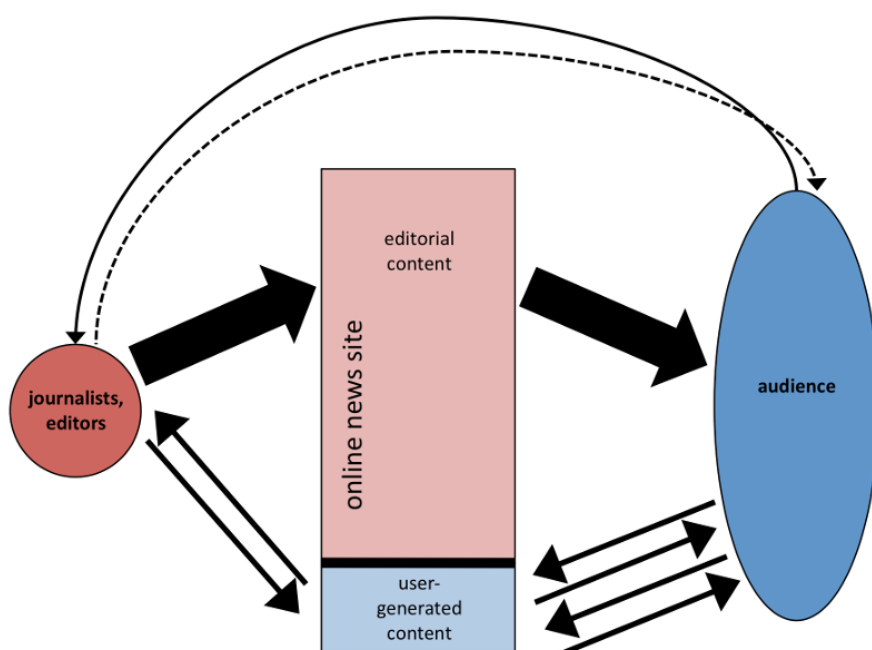
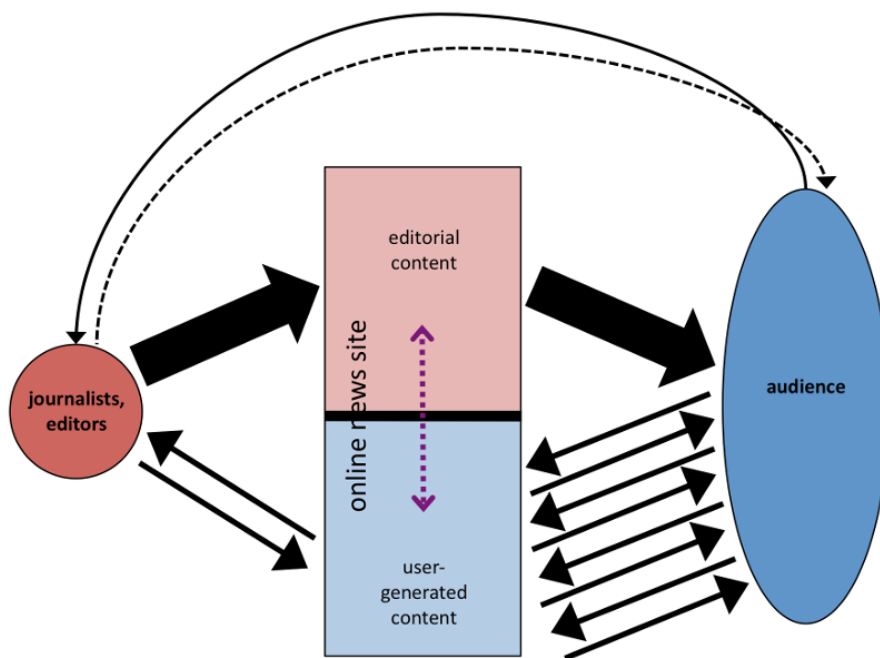


Figure 4. Interaction and user-generated content on the *Times Online*.

The *Guardian*, another online site of an up-market newspaper, gives more presence to user-generated content. In particular, the site contains a community section in which readers are actively invited to participate by contributing comments, pictures and story ideas. That such ideas are taken seriously is illustrated by a section called “you told us”, containing links to articles which were “inspired and commissioned” by users. Another aspect that contributes to the perception that user-generated content has more presence on the *Guardian* than on the *Times Online* is the fact that its front page and the section overview pages always indicate the number of submitted comments with each article teaser. Nevertheless, there is always a clear spatial separation between personalising user-generated content and editorial content.

Figure 5. Interaction and user-generated content on the *Guardian*.

BBC News is in many respects similar to the *Guardian*. Like the *Guardian*, it has a special section devoted to interaction with and among users, called “have your say”. Requests for stories, pictures, videos and personal accounts related to news events have a high presence on the site. This is also the case on article pages, which often end with specific requests for additional information on a story. Moreover, *BBC News* lists special e-mail addresses, phone numbers and online forms where user-generated content can be directed. However, the most characteristic aspect of the site is the way in which personalising user-generated content is combined with informational editorial content, without blurring the boundaries between the two. For instance, user comments are sometimes inserted into articles in the form of speech balloons (see Figure 6), and collections of selected reader comments are frequently published as separate articles or below an editorial article, clearly marked as user comments. This strong presence of clearly marked user-generated content in editorial areas is represented in Figure 7.

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HAVE YOUR SAY



Rob, Lichfield

Send us your comments

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Figure 6. Example for a speech balloon integrated into a news article (BBC News, UK news, 12 January 2010).

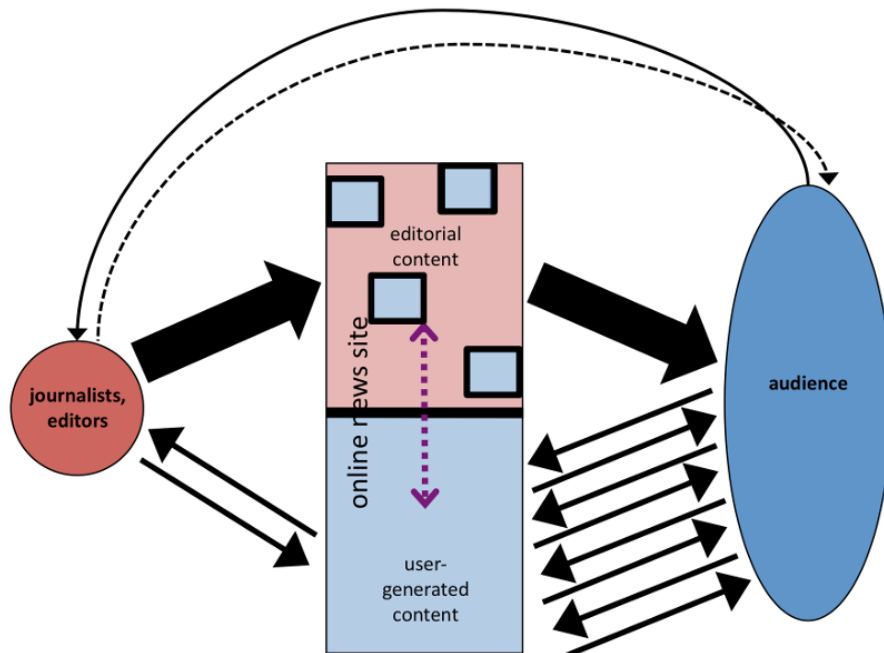


Figure 7. Interaction and user-generated content on BBC News.

On the *Mail Online* and, even more so, on the *Sun*, the boundaries between informational editorial content and personalising user-generated content are not always clear-cut (Figures 8 and 9). Both news sites contain articles which integrate highly personalising stories about ordinary individuals into editorial articles. For instance, an article on the *Sun* about heavy snow in the UK in January 2010 combines traffic information and weather forecasts with stories about a bride who was too late for her wedding and one about a woman who took her granddaughter to a performance with a very small audience:

Meanwhile, a panto cast performed for an audience of **NINE** who braved the big freeze.

But Marilyn Cohen, who took her granddaughter Leyla Rose, three, to Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in Leeds, said: "It was wonderful.

"It was brilliant being one of only a few people, as Muddles kept calling out Leyla's name."

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Example 6. *Sun*, news, article b, 8 January 2010.

Click the image to see it in context.

While some of these stories are certainly collected with traditional journalistic methods, it is more than likely that others were submitted by readers. Supporting evidence for this can be found in the high presence of requests for user-generated content with the promise of receiving payment, which strongly suggests to readers that they are potential sources of information for editorial content.

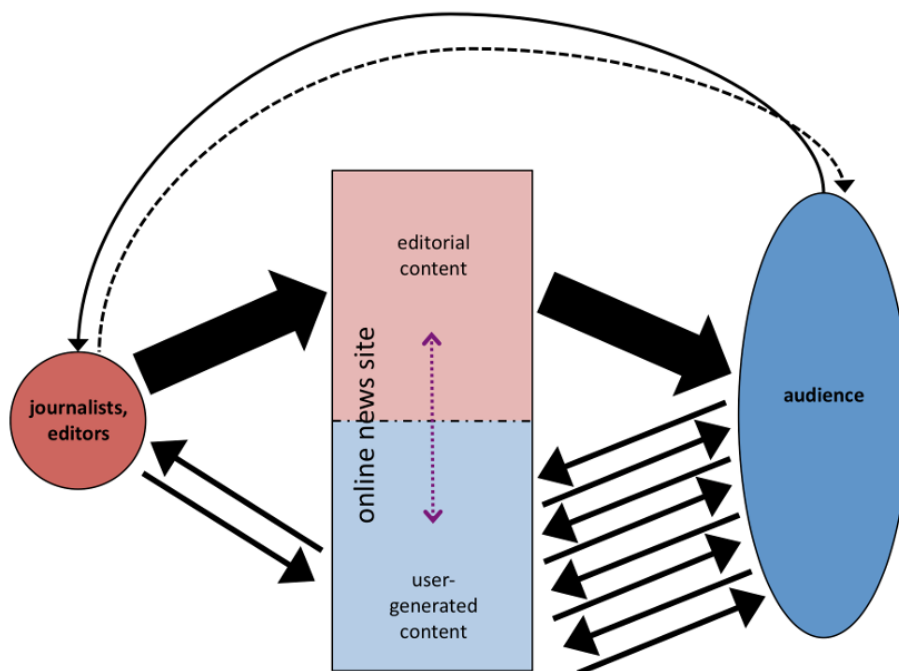


Figure 8. Interaction and user-generated content on *Mail Online*.

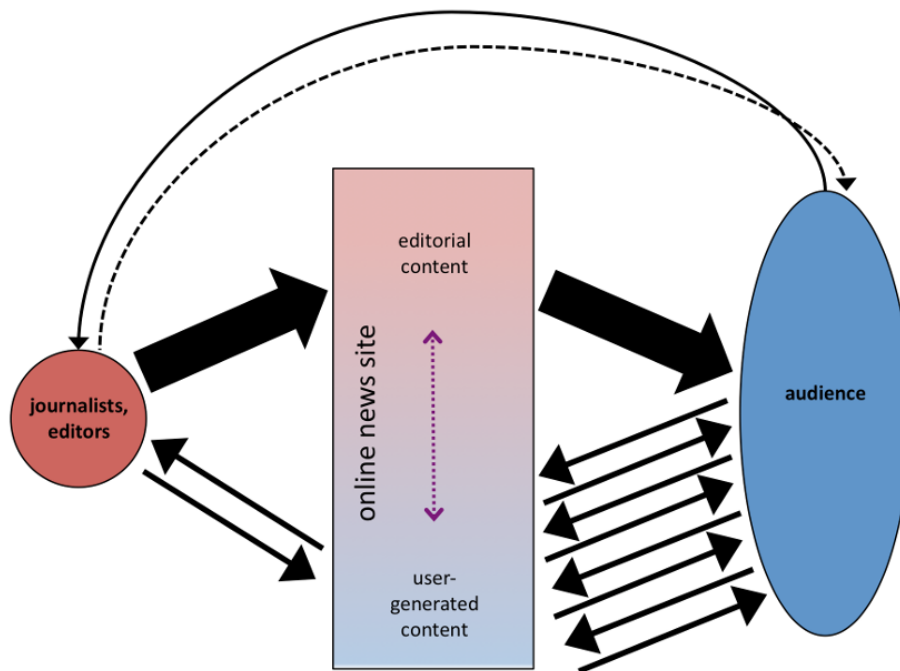


Figure 9. Interaction and user-generated content on the *Sun*.

The place where the blurring of boundaries is most visible is the use of images. On all three up-market sites (*Times*, *Guardian*, *BBC News*), images used to illustrate editorial articles are always marked as coming from professional press agencies, and reader images are restricted to dedicated images galleries, clearly marked as such. In contrast, images embedded in editorial articles on the *Sun* often do not contain any specification of their origin. In a few cases, images described as having been submitted by readers are used alongside pictures from press agencies, without any formatting features that would mark them apart. While the *Guardian* and *BBC News* construct their community as an informed counterpart for intellectual exchange, the *Sun* (and to a somewhat lesser degree the *Mail Online*) construct their readers as both consumers of news and potential informants, thus blurring the boundaries between audience and sources.

5. A diachronic perspective on interaction on news sites

Unfortunately, data from the early days of online news sites are hardly available anymore. Online archiving services like the [Wayback machine](#) often do not include sites of news organisations. If they are included, the layout of the site, visual content, links and user-generated content are usually not retained, due to the technical complexity of news sites. Similarly, the news organisations themselves often only make texts available in their archives. Whenever sites undergo redesigns, the old layout is usually lost. Even if older articles can be found online, there is no guarantee that they still look the same as when they were originally published. This poses considerable problems for studies of diachronic changes of these data. Today, probably the most reliable source of early data from news sites can be found in early studies of the form, especially in the few cases where screenshots are included (e.g. Bucher 1999; Bucher & Püschel 2001; van der Wurff & Lauf 2005).

Instead of providing a detailed study of the development over time, the following section approaches the diachronic angle from three perspectives. First, section 5.1 will summarise some theoretical considerations about media change and the role of technological

innovation. Following this, section 5.2 points to parallels between online news sites and earlier print newspapers by illustrating shared functions of user-generated content in 2010 and letters to the editor in 1982. Section 5.3, finally, will look at some of the most recent changes of online news sites by comparing the data from 2010 with data from 2013.

5.1 Technological and social factors of media change

The specific forms of online news did not appear overnight and they did not develop in a strictly linear fashion. The development of the characteristic features of online news shows a strong dependency on earlier print forms, which is typical for the development of new media. Thus, many of the features that are characteristic for online news sites (e.g. multimodality, interactivity) were already trends of print newspapers prior to the existence of online news (Bucher 1999; Bucher & Schumacher 2008: 486). Print newspapers had increasingly developed modular forms of presenting news and references to other pages within the newspaper were simple precursors of later hyperlinks (Blum & Bucher 1998). Similarly, means of interaction with the audience already existed, although the relation to the audience was sometimes less transparent in print newspapers (Cotter 2010: 111). Early online news sites were strongly influenced by print newspapers and did at first not realize the full potential of the communicative setting provided by the Internet (Bucher and Schumacher 2008: 486–487). The specific online features such as hypertextuality, multimodality, and interactivity were only gradually developed (Bucher and Schuhmacher 2008: 487; Cooke 2005), and newspapers greatly varied with respect to how fast and in which ways they used the Internet (Thurman 2008). A case in point is user interaction. An early study of online newspapers from around 1997 does not even mention user interaction (Rademann 1999), which suggests that this did not play a very prominent role. On the basis of research conducted in 1997 and 1998, Schultz (2000: 217) concludes that sending e-mails to the newsroom was the only form of interaction on most online newspapers. Hermida and Thurman (2008) compare British online news sites in November 2006 with the findings of an earlier study of the same sites in April 2005 (Thurman 2008). They identified a “substantial growth in the opportunities for readers to contribute” over this 19-month period (Hermida & Thurman 2008: 346), which indicates that reader contributions were explored relatively late in the development of online news.

Technological innovations such as the Internet do not necessarily lead to a sudden change of media and language. Change is more complex, a result of the interplay of older and newer forms, technological innovations and external developments. In an extensive study of the development of American online newspapers, Boczkowski (2005) identifies a number of factors in the organisational structure and attitude in newsrooms that had a profound impact on the way in which new forms developed. These include the degree of alignment between online and print newsrooms, newsroom practices with respect to editorial gatekeeping, and the (perceived) degree of technical expertise of the target audience (2005: 174–177). Similar factors that influence the speed of adoption of interactive features are identified in the studies by Chung (2007), Hermida and Thurman (2008) and Wardle and Williams (2008), all of which also point to the role of economic considerations.

This means that technological factors do not provide a sufficient explanation for the development of new forms of mass media communication. Herring (2003: 7) observes that “[the] technological approach to media and language [...] tends to over-ascribe a deterministic influence on the technical properties of communication systems”. Instead of a deterministic view, she suggests viewing technology as a facilitator of change (2003: 1). This view is also shared by proponents of a weak social constructionist perspective (e.g. Bublitz 2012; see also Bolter & Grusin 1999: 73–77), in which technology is as much a

product of social practices as it is an influence on them. As Bijker (1997) argues,

“Society is not determined by technology, nor is technology determined by society. Both emerge as two sides of the sociotechnical coin during the construction process of artifacts, facts, and relevant social groups.” (Bijker 1997: 274)

Applied to mass media, this means for instance, that if the trend towards interaction and personalising user-content in mass media communication pre-dates the Internet in its current form, this may in fact have been a factor giving rise to the development of technologies that promote the personal presentation of and interaction between individuals in a mass communication setting.

5.2 Interaction in earlier print newspapers

For a long time, letters to the editor were the main form in which readers of newspapers were able to provide feedback and, possibly, contribute content. Letters to the editor still have their fixed position in print newspapers today, but they have lost much of their prominence with the more widespread use of online participation. Perhaps the closest online equivalent to letters to the editor are user comments. Like letters to the editor, they let readers comment on articles published in the editorial section of the news site, and while letters were the most prominent form of feedback in earlier print newspapers, user comments are the most widely used form of interaction for present-day online news sites.

There are obvious differences between letters to the editor and online user comments (see also Landert & Jucker 2011). The first difference concerns editing. Letters to the editor undergo a strict selection process and subsequent editing before they are published. The opposite is the case for user comments, where no editing takes place and where the selection process consists of identifying inappropriate comments for deletion, rather than choosing the best texts for publication. The second difference concerns the time lag of publication. Letters to the editor can only be published at best one day after the publication of the article to which they respond. This means that interaction between letter writers is difficult and if it takes place, it is usually restricted to a short sequence of turns. In contrast, user comments are normally published immediately and longer exchanges between participants can be observed. A third difference concerns the identity of the contributors. For letters to the editors, previous research has shown the dominance of authors who are representatives of larger, often elite groups (Wober 2004). In contrast, the large majority of people submitting user comments on online news sites are unknown, private individuals who do not write in a representative function. Unlike the first two differences, this one is not directly conditioned by technological factors, but by the social evaluation of the different forms of feedback, i.e. the fact that letters to the editor are a recognised way for interest groups and official actors to voice their discontent and correct what, from their point of view, was reported incorrectly. It is very likely also a consequence of the editorial selection process of letters to the editor, which privileges letters that are written by someone with a certain degree of institutional authority and education over letters written by private individuals. This point is illustrated by an article published in the *Times* on the occasion of the retirement of Leon Pilpel, who was its letters editor between 1979 and 1990. Pilpel is quoted with the statement that “[o]f the 300 letters a day, only about eight per cent are publishable.” The article later adds:

He [Pilpel] cites 1982 as one of the best years for correspondence during his tenure. Quickened by the Falklands war, there was a substantial correspondence from former ambassadors and high-ranking civil servants. The quality of the writing and

the clarity of thought, he recalls, demonstrated the great advantage of being taught how to write and how to assemble an argument. (Franks 1990)

A final difference between letters to the editor and user comments concerns their placement. While letters are published on dedicated pages, user comments are, in most cases, submitted directly below articles. This has consequences for text coherence. In the case of user comments, the placement of the comment already establishes the thematic context. In contrast, authors of letters to the editor need to specify to which article they respond (see also Luginbühl et al. 2002: 78).

Looking at interaction more generally, it is clear that the most striking difference between earlier print newspapers and present-day online news sites is one of quantity. I have argued above that the *Times Online* was the news site with the lowest degree of interaction in my sample of British news sites from 2010. Nevertheless, compared to its printed counterpart from 1982 there is a great deal of interaction with the audience. For the following comparison, I chose a topic whose interest and relevance for readers is likely to remain more or less constant over time, namely heavy snowfall. In January 2010 there was an unusually strong spell of cold temperatures and heavy snow. The topic received a great deal of attention in all news sites included into my sample, both from editorial staff and users. Similarly, the winter of 1981/1982 saw several blizzards bringing enough snow to cut off towns and cause severe traffic problems. Also then, the heavy snowfall made front page news and was a topic discussed in letters to the editor.

Comparing the audience response to the reporting of this event shows some clear differences between the printed *Times* from 1982 and the *Times Online* from 2010 (see Table 1). In the former, the only form of audience response that was found occurred in the form of letters to the editor. In the two weeks following the publication of a front-page article on the snow on 9 January 1982, a total of 6 letters to the editor were published on the topic. There was no explicit request for readers to submit comments or share content with the newspaper, and apart from the letters, no content was presented as audience material. In contrast, a single news article on the *Times Online* (UK news, 10 January 2010) triggered 46 comments within just 5 hours of its publication. Reader comments were invited by a generic request at the end of the article and a sidebar contained a link to an image gallery with 16 pictures submitted by readers. In sum, the online article contained more audience responses overall, and also more varied forms in which they occurred.

	<i>The Times</i> 1982	<i>Times Online</i> 2010
Requests for UGC	no	for comments,
Published reader responses	6 letters in 2 weeks	46 comments in 5 hours
Other user-generated content	none	16 pictures in image gallery

Table 1. User-generated content in the *Times* in 1982 and on *Times Online* in 2010.

However, there are also parallels between the two news publications. First of all, both of them contain user-generated content. Moreover, there are similarities concerning some of the functions the user-generated content fulfils. In both cases, there are user contributions that focus on personal experiences of snowy weather, even though in the data from 1982 these concern memories of earlier weather events. The letter by Nadine Pepys below quotes her father's diary and describes an old photograph which shows a snow house built

by her father in 1919. This combines informational and personalising functions, serving as evidence of the severity of the earlier snow event, while at the same time providing a very personal perspective.

Snow house

From Mrs Nadine Pepys

Sir, In view of the cold weather and recent snow storms I thought it might interest you to hear about the snow house built by my father in the garden at Stonor Park on January 12, 1919. It "finally melted away" in the end of March.

From an old photograph it looks to be about eight feet long and about six inches higher than my six year old brother. A dog is shown sitting on the roof. My father's diary relates that there was snow on April 27 and that on May 13 there were no fires needed in the house for the first time since September.

Yours sincerely,
NADINE PEPYS,
 Old Tiles,
 Catts Hill,
 Mark Cross,
 Crowborough,
 E. Sussex.
 January 2.

Example 7. *The Times*, Monday, Jan 18, 1982, pg. 9.
 Click the image to see it in context.

The content of the letter has striking similarities to more recent user contributions in the form of reader pictures. The image gallery on the *Times Online* contains several pictures that show children with snowmen, snow houses, and other snow sculptors (see Figure 10). As in the letter above, the pictures provide additional evidence of the amount of snow, especially when the location of the picture is indicated. They also provide a personal and light-hearted perspective on the event, focussing on the joy of children playing in the snow.



Figure 10: Picture in image gallery on *Times Online*.

Another similarity concerns the response to previous user contributions. On online news sites, contributors of user comments frequently respond to each other, and such interactions can span several turns. In Example 8b, user C H responds to the comment in Example 8a by P V, in which the latter criticised users who complained about the problems caused by snow.

P V wrote:

This is snow, NOT green mutant man-eating snot from outer space!
Good God, you all react as if you've never seen it before!
Stop trying to "blame" everyone for it either. It is a normal climatic event that (when I was a lad) was virtually an annual event, and it didn't cause anywhere near the fuss you make of it now.

January 10, 2010 3:19 PM GMT

✓ RECOMMEND? (37)

C H wrote:

PV, we didn't have so many problems back then as most people lived near to where they worked & local shops still existed. There were also about a tenth of the number of cars on the roads too. So don't be such a smarmy git!

January 10, 2010 4:44 PM GMT

✓ RECOMMEND? (9)

Examples 8a and 8b. User comments submitted to *Times Online*, UK news, 10 January 2010.
Click the images to see them in context.

The letter to the editor in the printed *Times* from 1982 quoted above also triggered a response from another reader.

Snow houses

From Mrs E. T. Loram,

Sir, Mrs Nadine Pepys's letter (January 18) prompts me to tell you that among a number of china plates painted by my grandmother is one depicting a snow house in the garden of Dewes House, Mere. In her book, *Putting the Clock Back*, she refers to three snow houses in one of which her mother got stuck, having ventured in wearing a crinoline:

These two earlier snowhouses could only accommodate a few at a time, but in the great snowstorm of January, 1881, a large one was built that could comfortably hold 16 people! It had a boarded floor, and we had tea inside it several times. (From *Putting the Clock Back*, by Agnes Yates, published 1939).

The original painting by my grandmother is dated January 23, 1881: the copy on the plate was made by her in 1916.

Yours sincerely,
EILEEN LORAM,
Crookgate, Chapel Knapp,
Gastard, Corsham, Wiltshire.

Example 9. *The Times*, 20 January 1982, pg. 11.

Click the image to see it in context.

The letter mentions a china plate by the author's grandmother that depicts a snow house, and the author quotes a book written by her grandmother in which she describes the snow houses and makes reference to "the great snowstorm of January, 1881". Unlike the online users, the author of the letter does not address the author of the previous letter but the editor, in accordance with the conventions of letters to the editor. Nevertheless, it is made clear in the first sentence, that the letter was prompted by the first letter and, as such, it constitutes a response of some kind.

What becomes clear from these examples is that the reader's wish to interact with editorial staff and each other, to submit their personal stories and even pictures is not a new phenomenon. Participation in mass media and personalising user-generated content existed long before the web 2.0, albeit in different forms and smaller quantities. Technological innovations leading to the present-day forms of online interaction certainly facilitated the change towards more audience interaction by opening up new communication channels and making it easier to provide more space for user-generated content. However, these technological innovations are likely to be as much a consequence of the audience's desire to interact as they are a cause of it.

5.3 Recent developments on British online news

In the three years between January 2010 and January 2013, British online news sites have undergone several changes with respect to forms of interaction. Perhaps surprisingly from a present-day perspective, Twitter and Facebook did not play a very prominent role in 2010. All five news sites in my sample contained quick links at the end of articles which allowed readers to post the article on platforms like Digg it!, del.icio.us, and Reddit. However, Twitter was not included in this list for any of the sites in my sample. This has changed in the meantime and Twitter features prominently in these lists. Moreover, the news sites frequently contain references to their Twitter accounts, asking readers to follow them. A look at the number of followers shows that these differ considerably across the five sites (see Table 2). In the case of *BBC News*, the much higher number of followers can partly be explained by a more international readership. In contrast, the very low number of followers of the *Times* is probably related to the fact that the news site restricted access to paying subscribers with a redesign in summer 2010.

Twitter account	followers
thetimes (The Times of London)	55,064
guardian (The Guardian)	765,517
BBCNews (BBC News (UK))	1,258,800
BBCWorld (BBC News (World))	3,027,377
BBCBreaking (BBC Breaking News)	4,837,219
MailOnline (Daily Mail Online)	202,615
TheSunNewspaper (The Sun Newspaper)	231,159

Table 2. Followers on Twitter (as of 18 January 2013).

The majority of tweets posted by the news sites contain headlines of newly published

articles, together with teasers and links that lead directly to the full article on the news site. The tweets are a new form of editorial content that is published outside of the news site, but they closely resemble older forms of editorial content such as teasers on the news sites' overview page. By subscribing to the Twitter feed, users are notified whenever updates and breaking news occur. In this way, Twitter provides a new entry point to the content of news sites.

Keeping in touch with their readers by updating them about the latest news is only one of the ways in which social networking platforms like Twitter are relevant for online news sites. A different aspect concerns the search for information, in particular footage, about breaking news. In January 2013, a fatal helicopter accident in the city of London triggered a debate about the ethical and legal implications of integrating content posted on social media into news reports (O'Carroll 2013). Given the increasing presence of smart phones, which allow their owners to take pictures and videos, it is not surprising that footage of the accident appeared on Twitter long before news media were able to send their own reporters to the site. The *Guardian* journalist analysing the incident writes:

That BBC Radio 4 Today programme referred to Twitter as the news was breaking showed just how much social media has transformed the way mainstream news organisations cover breaking stories in recent years. (O'Carroll 2013)

The increasingly influential role of social media can also be seen when looking at news articles from 2013 in comparison to 2010. In January 2013, once again heavy snow fall caused major disruptions in the UK. Given that the heavy snow fall in 2010 was one of the most prominent topics in my collection of online news articles from 2010, articles on this topic provide a good basis for comparison. From each news site, I collected a prominently placed snow article published on 18 January 2013, plus some additional material linked to this article. In what follows, I am going to discuss the main differences that can be observed between 2010 and 2013 for each site. Obviously, this discussion is based on a very small data sample and further research would certainly be needed to test these findings. However, some general trends become apparent even in this small data set.

The articles on the *Sun* and the *Mail Online* are quite similar to their counterparts in 2010. Both allow users to submit comments and the texts combine general weather and traffic information, reports about accidents and school closures. In the texts, highly personalised content such as nearly missed weddings and half-empty theatre performances (see example 6 above) were not found. However, the *Mail Online* article includes two pictures of a "white wedding", with the caption given in example 10.

Snowed in bride: But Carly Taylor and milkman Richard Smith got to celebrate their white wedding in Swindon, before heading to the reception in a milk float

Example 10. Caption from *Mail Online* article.

Click the image to see it in context.

The last of the bullet points that are used as a lead in the *Mail Online* article asks readers to e-mail pictures, and a link in the article leads to a separate page listing dozens of sent-in pictures. What is noteworthy is that several of these pictures are also used in the main news article, alongside pictures from professional press photographers and agencies. In this case, the use of user-generated content to illustrate editorial articles can thus be clearly traced. Requests for user-generated content on the *Sun* are somewhat less prominent, compared to the articles from 2010. The only explicit request on the page of this article is the line "GOT A STORY? EMAIL: TALKBACK@THE-SUN.CO.UK", printed in gray at the top of the article. The choice of colour means that the request does not have a very high

visibility and there are also no offers of paying readers for their stories, at least not on this page. Another difference concerns the integration with social networking sites. Readers can now click a button at the top of the page to follow the *Sun* on Twitter, and also at the end of the main article text, readers are again asked to do so. In sum, however, the changes between 2010 and 2013 with respect reader interaction and user-generated content are minor on the *Sun* and the *Mail Online*.

In contrast, the up-market news sites contain several innovations in this respect. The most prominently placed snow article on the *Times* contains a live blog which keeps users updated about the situation throughout the day. At the top of this blog, readers are explicitly asked to send in snow pictures for publication – a feature that was absent from the *Times Online* data from 2010. The *Guardian* article contains a link to reader pictures in the sidebar. This is not a new feature, but what is new is the way in which pictures are sent in. Instead of e-mailing them or uploading them with a form provided on the news site, the *Guardian* uses social media platforms, Twitter and Flickr, to collect reader images:

Simply upload a picture on Instagram or to Twitter using the tag [#guardiansnow](#). (We'll only be able to see yours if you turn on 'add to your photo map'.) We'll do the rest, so [check back here](#).

You can also add your photos to our [UK Snow group on Flickr here](#).

Example 11. The *Guardian*'s request for readers' pictures of snow.

Click the image to see it in context.

Among the innovative features on *BBC News* is a mosaic of “almost 1,000 photographs of the snow which users and viewers have sent to the BBC”, which testifies to the amount of user-generated content received by the news site. More interesting with respect to social media integration is an overview page of the “[s]now disruption across UK”, which is linked to the main news article on the topic published on that day. At the top of the page, bullet points summarise the most important information about traffic disruptions, school closures and weather warnings. The centre-right of the page contains two BBC video reports with similar information. Below, requests for user-generated content in the form of user comments, text messages, tweets and Facebook posts are listed. On the left of the page, a scrollable section labelled “report” contains brief posts by *BBC News* reporters, posted throughout the day and labelled with time stamps. These include both updates of information from official sources and user-generated content received through tweets and e-mails. The two types of information are combined in the same space, but each post with reader messages is labelled with a small envelope or the Twitter symbol. Summarising these observations, it appears that all three up-market news sites make use of new forms of integrating user-generated content. At least for the topic of snow and on the basis of this small data sample it appears that the three sites still attempt to be transparent about the integration of user-generated content by placing it apart from information received through official sources and by marking it explicitly as coming from readers.

6. Conclusion

This study tried to throw more light onto some distinctions of mass media communication, for which it has been suggested that they might have become blurred online. Three main types of distinctions were investigated, the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication; the distinction between editorial content and user-generated content; and the distinction between the different roles in the communication process. I argued that mass communication and interpersonal communication can still be distinguished clearly for the analysed news sites. They take place through different communicative forms (e.g. news

articles vs. user comments) and can be localised on different areas. Concerning content, the up-market news sites of my sample communicate a clear separation between editorial content and personalising user-generated content. Personalising user-generated content was only found in dedicated sections and, in the case of *BBC News*, in insets that are clearly marked apart from the editorial news article. On the *Mail Online* and the *Sun*, this boundary appears to be less clear-cut. Highly personalised content about ordinary individuals was found embedded into editorial news stories and pictures for which it was shown that they came from readers are used alongside professional press photography to illustrate articles. Moreover, there is clear evidence that informational user-generated content is increasingly invited, also by up-market news sites, especially in the case of breaking news stories. If the boundary between editorial content and user-generated content is blurred, this affects the role of users. In addition to being the addressee of mass communication, they also take on the role of journalistic sources, who – at least potentially – are in possession of newsworthy information.

The second part of the study dealt with some diachronic developments with respect to interaction and user-generated content on online news sites. On the one hand, I emphasised the continuity of the function of user-generated content by illustrating that highly personalising letters to the editor could already be found in earlier print newspapers. On the other hand, I identified some recent trends on online news sites, in particular with respect to the integration of external social media sites like Twitter, by comparing some of the data from 2010 with similar articles from 2013. The speed with which changes are taking place and the lack of persistence of online data mean that more research is needed if the development of this popular form of mass communication should not pass undocumented.

Notes

[1] For an overview of different formats of interaction on British online news sites, see also Hermida and Thurman (2008: 345–346); Wardle and Williams (2008) provide a detailed discussion of user-generated content at the *BBC*.

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