

Who Owns the News?

As digital technology changes the shape of our media, bringing a plurality of voices to a global audience, *Think Quarterly* examines the rise and implications of open journalism.

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Traditional top-down journalism – proprietors, editors, and journalists commissioning, writing, and editing stories under the newsroom’s fluorescent lights with no input from the public – has been seriously disrupted. The public wants in – and now has the means of playing a part in challenging journalists and those in power. In fact, we’re slowly seeing the emergence of a new nexus between media, citizens, and their potential impact on events.

The roots of ‘open journalism’ – or a more inclusive way of producing news – are many, but at its core lies a potent combination of recession economics, digital technology, and networked activism across the world.

First, the economy. Recent numbers from the US suggest only moderate recovery, while the UK is said to be in the worst double-dip recession of the last 50 years. With the exception of Germany, most of Europe is either in recession or battling for survival. It’s no wonder, then, that commercial media, whose businesses rely largely on advertising revenue, are struggling to cope.

Enter technology. The internet has given brands a new outlet to connect with consumers, and they’re beginning to embrace it. According to a study by Global AdView Pulse, worldwide digital ad spend saw 12.1 percent growth in Q1 2012, outpacing all other media. It’s been a tough road, especially for print, as many papers and magazines have yet to find a way to turn a profit online. This difficult combination has sent a long-established way of doing business – profit-seeking companies selling audiences to advertisers – into something approaching a crisis, forcing them to look for new sources of revenue, and for new ways of engaging people, creating communities, and eventually monetizing them.

In comes Occupy. From Wall Street to the Arab Spring to the streets of Athens and Madrid, young people are increasingly networked – and angry. This global wave of activism is shifting the zeitgeist from self-absorption to solidarity, while incubating an appetite for real democracy. People want to participate, have a voice, and play a part in describing a world that’s in crisis. And wherever there’s crisis, there’s an opening. Seen through this lens, ‘open journalism’ becomes an extension of Zuccotti Park, an annex of the Arab uprisings, and a fundamental cog in the wider demand for social justice.

The upheaval brings to mind the arrival of Gutenberg’s printing press some 500 years ago, and many media companies have yet to find their feet. As Rebecca MacKinnon, co-founder of Global Voices Online, says, “Those news organizations which figure out how to adapt the best aspects of professional journalism to the realities of a networked society will be the ones that will survive and succeed over the long haul – if they can figure out a business model.”

Global Voices Online has been giving voice to those less heard for seven years now, shining a light where few others are looking. The site, a non-profit with no real-world office, curates, contextualizes, and translates the work of citizen journalists through their own blogs, YouTube channels, Twitter feeds, and other citizen-media platforms. “We pioneered the model of curating conversations coming out of the international blogosphere,” says MacKinnon, “something that has become commonplace on many news websites, especially during breaking news events like the Arab Spring.”

Among the mainstream press, the UK’s *Guardian* has been among the quickest to embrace this new way of doing business, and was the first news organization to adopt the phrase ‘open journalism.’ Indeed, editor Alan Rusbridger refers to it as their ‘operating model.’ “This is not the Gutenberg age, when the ability to communicate widely was placed in the hands of a few,” Rusbridger explains. “Anyone can write, publish, and distribute their work now. Why not ask them to do that with us – or, at the very least, incorporate what they have to say with what we have to say? We do it because it gives a more complete picture. It’s better journalistically, in other words. And we do it because, if we don’t open ourselves, they will simply do it elsewhere. Why compete when you can collaborate? It’s better commercially.”

From coverage of the Arab Spring to last summer’s English riots or the death of news seller Ian Tomlinson during the 2009 G20 disturbances in London, the public have played a role in helping the *Guardian* tell the story. “One example was our reporting of the riots last year when one of our journalists, Paul Lewis, followed the action across England for four days and nights. He was guided by a network of followers on Twitter, which was also his first platform for publishing. ➡



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The information he received helped direct him to particular trouble spots, and witness events that would otherwise have gone unreported. By the end of the four days, Paul had amassed 35,000 new followers – analysis would later show his feed was the most influential of any media organization.”

In addition to contributing to news stories, citizens are at times completely bypassing traditional outlets. Egypt’s infamous ‘Day of Rage’ is a good example. On January 28, 2011, soccer supporters seized the Qasr al-Nil bridge from the riot police, marking the moment Mubarak’s clique effectively lost control. The event was shot on cell phones, posted on YouTube – and quickly became available to people both in Egypt and across the region. “This would never have been shown on state television,” says the BBC’s Paul Mason, “and even a benign and neutral TV network would never have shown it in full.” Two weeks later Mubarak was ousted from power.

Mason, who chronicled the recent global uprisings in his book, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, says that the fluid nature of information across social media is beginning to undermine established ways of telling the news: “I can see video news becoming a series of unmediated, barely edited or narrated clips, disseminated by Twitter, making traditional ‘live’ or ‘rolling’ coverage redundant.” Amateur news, he argues, can be more reliable than the professionally produced stories shown on TV, adding that “crowdsourced news can be faster, more instantly checkable, and is not open to manipulation by bad actors in the news management or censorship operations, especially at the early stages. So much of TV news already looks fake, with impossibly suave people.”

Mason says that even the competitive nature of news journalism is changing to reflect the ‘collaborative competition’ model found in other networked industries. “The emergence of open peer-groups among journalists, above all on Twitter, is affecting the way I get raw news and is enhancing clarity,” he says. “At an EU conference there will be a few of us all trying to get a scoop, but once somebody gets it, there’s a more collective process of working it through via retweets and comments. Everything’s a work in progress: A tweet leads to a blog; a blog leads to a feature; you tweet the feature; you tweet a link to somebody’s work that’s inspired you, or a response to your stuff. Suddenly there’s a moving ecosphere of knowledge instead of a fixed hierarchy.” ■

Google also has a part to play in this emerging news environment. Google News brings together stories from over 45,000 sources worldwide. The product was created in the aftermath of 9/11 when Google research scientist Krishna Bharat found himself frustrated by how slow it was to manually ‘walk’ the web in search of information on the attacks. “Authors on the web had not created a hub with links to articles on the story because the content was super fresh,” says Bharat. “It seemed to me that Google, being in the business of helping people find information, could automatically create bundles of links to brand new content for the top stories of the day.” Internal feedback was so positive that the company decided to make it a full-fledged product within six months.

Google News may not directly democratize news production, but it certainly makes available the widest possible range of sources. “For any given story, we provide efficient access to all news articles published on the story, from sources around the world,” explains Bharat. “You don’t have to walk the web looking for related content. Our algorithms do it for you continuously, in real time, for every story in every language. Each time you encounter a story on Google News or News Search, you see not only the lead article, but also a plethora of other related choices to read or watch, as a sequence of next actions.”

According to Bharat, this helps local and small publishers as the format advertises related articles to users based on their preference: “With source personalization, we prioritize sources the user likes, but at the same time bring in voices that are essential for a particular story. It balances personalization with serendipity.” This, he says, ultimately benefits democracy: “We allow the facts presented by one source to be complemented and cross-checked with those presented by another. It makes

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in every language.”*

users better informed, and reduces the risk that they will acquire a distorted view based on the output of a single, biased source.” For Bharat, Google News is an integral part of the wider move towards openness: “Ultimately, open journalism depends on a robust process for discovery, and Google’s news products make that possible.”

As digital media grows, the fight to control its future rages on. “The sense of unpredictability has created an opening, and many forces will be trying to take advantage of it,” says Des Freedman, Reader in Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, London. “Many studies are now showing that online news sources are more concentrated than offline news sources. There are obviously fewer studies of Twitter so far, but of those studies that have taken place, you’re not seeing a re-distribution on Twitter.”

Despite positive case studies, Freedman says that digital media’s democratic potential is definitely a work in progress. “Google News is a different means of distributing news. Does it mean that the dominant voices are necessarily different? The *Huffington Post* is able to offer a diversity of voices technologically speaking, but it does fit into a very traditional picture of who is read, as opposed to who could be read.”

Dan Hind, author of *The Return of the Public*, wants to redress that imbalance via a system of public commissioning, where people handle an editorial budget and have direct say over what stories are covered – and by whom. “It works by giving everyone some small degree of control over the content of the mainstream, something they are denied at the moment.” That way, says Hind, “journalism becomes a career in which serving the public, rather than your owner or editor, becomes the royal road to success and prestige.” ➡

It might be some time, and take serious popular pressure, before public commissioning becomes a reality. For now, though, it seems clear that collaborative journalism of the kind that shed light on Ian Tomlinson's death enriches the public sphere. A radically democratized media, however, would probably go beyond the consumerized individual who's able to feedback or input in an already existing process. According to Freedman, "The crucial question is: What do we mean by 'open?' If open is just a motorway where anyone can travel, that's fine if you have a car – but what if you have no say over its upkeep and where the road is going?"

As with most revolutions, the process is chaotic. 'The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff can be put in its place,' writes media theorist Clay Shirky. And as the cracks

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widen, spaces for citizen participation are opening up like never before. For the powerful, that's scary; for democracy, that's a wonderful thing.

Google News. Egypt's 'Day of Rage.' The *Guardian's* open journalism. They're just the beginning. Whatever happens next, new technologies, the disruption of old hierarchies, and the growing mood for a more equitable distribution of resources point in the direction of a more interesting media landscape than the one we're leaving behind – one that gives people more power to set the agenda, to make and distribute news, and to truly hold the powerful to account.

The last words go to Freedman: "We face a situation that has enormous potential; a time in which there is a great appetite for new sources and angles. But there's no foregone conclusion. Just as we might struggle for social equality, we also have to carry on struggling to redistribute media resources ©

