

# Resisting epistemologies of user-generated content? Cooptation, segregation and the boundaries of journalism

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## Introduction

This chapter examines how news organizations are seeking to defend themselves against the incursions of user-generated content through the closely related strategies of cooptation and segregation. In engaging in these strategies, news organizations carry out a form of boundary work to protect the journalistic profession. The chapter takes a closer look at one specific instantiation of cooptation and segregation: The *Guardian* newspaper's GuardianWitness, which provides a platform for user-generated content built into the newspaper's website—just one of many such sites hosted by traditional or “legacy” news media.

I am here deliberately focusing on how a traditional newspaper known for its commitment to and investment in the convergent media environment is negotiating tensions between the professional journalistic content produced by legacy news organizations, and the amateur content generated by users. I am therefore steering clear of a range of other widely circulating debates, including those around how these same tensions may play out on social media platforms and other web-based sites that operate independently of legacy media.

My interest is in how legacy news media negotiate the challenges implicit in the technological changes brought about by convergence. Specifically, I examine the ways in which the increasing role of user-generated content has been managed. While I investigate the strategies of cooptation and segregation, through which user-generated content is “normalized” (Singer 2005), I am also suggesting that far from a simple process of subsuming and absorbing amateur content, the introduction of user-generated content brings about complex, subtle and sustaining challenges to the epistemology of journalism. It both challenges and transforms its ways of knowing, its truth claims and its forms of storytelling.

When I refer to user-generated content here, I understand it as content generated by the end-user. This is, however, only one of many ways of referring to the blurring of the line between audiences and producers of media content, and the corresponding increase in the role of the audiences in participating in the generation of this content (e.g. Singer et al. 2011, van Dijck 2009). These developments have variously been referred to as the rise of “participatory journalism,” “citizen journalism” or “produsage” (e.g. Hermida 2011, p. 15, Bruns 2005), to name just a few of the labels that describe “the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis 2003, cited in Hermida 2011, p. 15). It also reflects an increasing awareness of the agency of users, often challenging accounts of a passive audience, and emphasizing the potential empowerment of amateurs resulting from the new participatory opportunities afforded by technological change (van Dijck 2009, p. 41, Jenkins 2006). Here, I am not interested in entering the debates regarding the potential empowerment inherent in the rise of user-generated content, but rather in assessing its potential consequences for journalism's self-understanding and ways of knowing.

Ultimately, the increasing involvement of the “People Formerly Known as the Audience” (Rosen 2006) in news production entails a shift in the paradigm of what constitutes journalism. It also implies an epistemological challenge—or a challenge to the theories of knowledge associated with conventional journalism. Put differently, even if it may oversimplify journalism’s historical trajectories to emphasize the long-standing stability of conventional “objective” journalistic story-telling, it is nonetheless true that the affordances of convergent news platforms have ushered in a more diverse set of practices and story-telling forms. These developments challenge the epistemology of conventional journalism. I will consider this idea in more detail in the following section, before considering how GuardianWitness—one specific platform for incorporating user-generated content—addresses these challenges.

### **The epistemology of journalism**

The epistemological implications of journalistic forms have long been discussed by journalism scholars. Ettema and Glasser (1987), who were among the first to develop the idea of the epistemology of journalism, understood and studied it in terms of how “journalists know what they know.”<sup>i</sup> Looking at the case of investigative journalism, they sought to trace what “counts as empirical evidence and how that evidence becomes a justified empirical belief—ergo, a knowledge claim about the empirical world” (Ettema and Glasser 1987, p. 343). This chapter, however, understands the epistemology of journalism more broadly, in terms of the “rules, routines and institutionalized procedures that operate within a social setting and decide the form of the knowledge produced and the knowledge claims expressed (or implied)” (Ekström 2002, p. 260). This is particularly important to consider in the light of journalism’s epistemological position as the “primary sense-making practice of modernity” (Hartley 1996, pp. 32-34). The knowledge claims of journalism have broader ideological consequences, but are also shaped by sociological forces and prevailing power relations. Here, I am drawing on recent work investigating how knowledge claims are produced by specific forms of journalism, including blogs (Matheson 2004) and broadcast journalism (Ekström 2002). This approach entails an understanding of how journalists’ processes of justification involve the construction of narratives that operate within conventions established by institutional forms of knowing, circumscribed by power relations. As Matheson (2004) described it, drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power:

Conventions of newswriting do not simply chronicle the world but [...] constitute certain claims to knowledge about such matters as the audiences for news texts, the position of journalists in that world and the relationship between audience and journalist. [...] Journalists adhere to these conventions in order to be able to make the kinds of authoritative statements about events and individuals which we are accustomed to hear from them. News discourse can be seen as a particular instance of the more general ‘will to truth’ which motivates and constrains institutional forms of knowing in modern society (Matheson 2004, p. 445).

In other words, this approach understands the “will to truth” of journalism as embedded within a larger ideological framework. Examining the epistemology of blogging, Matheson (2004) took a closer look at how *The Guardian* responded to the introduction of the new form in its own hosted blogs. He demonstrated that they were characterized by a distinctive way of knowing, premised on the “establishment of a different interpersonal relation, of a different authority and of a journalism focused upon connection rather than fact” (Matheson 2004, p.

453). To Matheson, the writing represented a “more ‘raw’, less ‘cooked’, source of information, allowing users to participate more in constructing knowledge about events in the world” (Matheson 2004, p. 455). The ways of knowing represented by blogging, then, were made possible by the affordances of the new technology. The suggestion that technological change has a bearing on the ways of knowing in journalism is central to the argument made in this chapter.

Along those lines, Stuart Allan (2013) has written compellingly about the epistemological consequences of the increasing place of citizen journalism in the news landscape. To Allan, citizen journalism “may be characterized as a type of first-person reportage in which ordinary individuals temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in newsmaking, often spontaneously during a time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene” (2013, p. 9). Citizen journalism implies a more personal and often subjective stance, free of the constraints of objective journalism. Allan succinctly summarized the main arguments around the epistemological consequences of citizen journalism advanced by critics and proponents. Its proponents suggest that citizen journalism may serve as a welcome paradigm shift challenging the “dry, distancing, lecture-like mode of address” of traditional journalism (Allan 2013, p. 94):

Journalism by the people for the people is to be heralded for its alternative norms, values and priorities. It is raw, immediate, independent and unapologetically subjective, making the most of the resources of web-based initiatives...to connect, interact and share first-hand, unauthorized forms of journalistic activity promising fresh perspectives (Allan 2013, p. 94).

This positive reading is consistent with research on audience responses to user-generated content, which suggests that audiences tend to value it as more “authentic” than professional content—a view frequently shared by journalists involved in shaping and curating audience contributions. This understanding of authenticity encompasses the idea of an uncensored outpouring of personal storytelling, emotional integrity, realism, immediacy and identification. This is contrasted to the perceived professional distance of journalism, which involves a “cold,” “detached,” “objective” and “distanced” approach (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle 2010). For example, in describing user-generated content after Hurricane Katrina, Michael Tippett, founder of NowPublic.com, argued “it’s a very powerful thing to have that emotional depth and first-hand experience, rather than the formulaic, distancing approach of the mainstream media” (Allan 2013, p. 94).

Nonetheless, for critics of user-generated content (including many journalists and newsroom managers), the dangers of verifying audience content make it a risky proposition for news organisations. Allan (2013) summarized the key arguments:

Citizen journalism may be cheap and popular, hence its not inconsiderable appeal for cash-strapped newsrooms, but in a world where facts matter, ethical codes warrant respect, and audience trust is paramount, it continues to spark intense debate about how best to negotiate its benefits and hazards alike (Allan 2013, p. 95).

Such questions around the verification of user-generated content have always been at the centre of journalistic debates about citizen journalism, and reflect broader anxieties about the growing place of audience contributions in the news landscape, and how journalism should respond to this potential trespass on their professional terrain. Media organizations, which have historically functioned as gatekeepers, have now, according to some accounts, become “gatewatchers” or curators, sorting through and publicizing information available

elsewhere on the internet (Bruns 2005, p. 2). As Anderson (2013) suggested, this has led to tensions between conventional reporting and the emerging activities of curation and aggregation. Referring to aggregators as “second-level newswriters,” he defines them as “hierarchizers, inter-linkers, bundlers, and illustrators of web content” (p. 70).

### *Boundary work and journalistic discourses on user-generated content*

Journalistic discourses on user-generated content have tended to emphasize the continued need for journalistic skills, upholding the boundary between journalism professionals and audience members as amateurs. For example, a BBC course on user-generated content reflected this broader view, and was titled “Have They Got News for Us?” (Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgensen 2011). In researching the role of user-generated content at the BBC in 2007-2009, we interviewed then-Radio Editor Peter Rippon about the public service broadcaster’s use of audience materials, and he suggested that if “we apply our journalistic skills, you can just mold these things into really good pieces of journalism.”

This statement is typical of the journalistic position on user-generated content, which holds that professional skills are required to turn amateur, unpolished contributions into useable and trustworthy content, or *journalism*. Such a position, which actively asserts the primacy of journalistic skills, represents an active form of ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn 1983, Schudson and Anderson 2009). Gieryn, in introducing this concept to discuss how scientists demarcate their activity from other intellectual activities, suggested that boundary work is an “ideological style” which contrasts scientific endeavors favorably to other types of activity. One of the situations where boundary work is necessary, according to Gieryn, is “when the goal is protection of autonomy over professional activities” (1983, p. 792). In such situations, “boundary-work exempts members from responsibility for consequences of their work by putting the blame on scapegoats from outside.”

To Gieryn, then, boundary work is an ideological strategy for defending the boundaries of the profession. The idea of boundary work has been highly influential for scholars studying the sociology of professions, including journalism (see the Introduction to this volume). In journalism studies, the idea of boundary work has been particularly crucial in understanding perceived incursions on professional turf. As Lewis (2012, p. x) suggested, journalism “has found digital media and digital culture to be particularly unsettling to its professional paradigm.” He therefore argued that it is increasingly urgent to understand “how the complexities of professionalism are embedded in and filtered through the ongoing negotiation of open participation on the part of users” (see also Carlson 2007b). This open participation is frequently viewed as an incursion on journalistic practice. As Carlson and Ben-Porath (2012) noted in their analysis of the emergence of a “demotic voice” through a case study of the 2007 CNN/YouTube debates among candidates for the US presidency:

Voices overlap and compete, which can be witnessed in journalistic reactions to the demotic voice ranging from disdain to fear of displacement... Given the lack of a codified division separating journalists from non-journalists, the encroachment of a newly amplified public threatens journalists’ ability to argue that their cultural value stems from the exclusivity of their position as trained societal narrators (p. 304).

As other scholars have noted, journalists frequently reference specific professional skills when discussing user-generated content, thus policing the boundaries of their profession. For example, Allan cites crowd-sourcing analyst Eric Taubert (2012):

Great content captured by smartphone-wielding citizens can die on the vine without ever being seen, unless that content finds its way into the hands of journalists who know how to wrap a story around it, fact-check it and place it into the distribution chain (cited in Allan 2013, p. 19).

This position suggests that even if the smartphone revolution and other technological changes have generated new opportunities for audience contributions, these would be of little use without the intervention of professional skills of story-telling, verification and distribution. Related journalistic discourses view user-generated content simply as a resource to be harvested by professionals for the purposes of integrating it into stories already on the news agenda. For example, in an interview for our research on user-generated content at the BBC, Peter Horrocks (then editor of the BBC's integrated newsroom, now Director of the BBC World Service) framed the importance of audience opinion—as channeled through the “Have Your Say” comments forums on the BBC website—as a source for journalistic story-telling. He discussed comments after the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto as follows:

The top 20 or 30 recommended posts all had variations on the theme, attacking Islam in comprehensive terms. [...] To be honest it was pretty boring wading through them and wouldn't have added much to anyone's understanding of the causes or consequences of the assassination. Buried amongst the comments however, rarely recommended by others, were insights from those who had met Benazir, or knew her. And there were valuable eyewitness comments from people who were at the scene in Rawalpindi. Our team that deals with user content sifted through the chaff to find some excellent wheat. (cited in Wardle & Williams 2010, p. 291)

Horrocks and other high-ranking journalists we interviewed took a top-down view of user-generated content, viewing its management as a professional task of sifting the wheat from the chaff—rather than seeing user-generated content as newsworthy in and of itself, on a par with material produced by professionals. Such a view puts the audience in its place as a source that can be quoted in journalistic stories or, more broadly, a source of supplementary (and often incomplete, low-quality, and emotive) material. Through such discourses, journalists' privileged status as producers of knowledge and truth is actively enforced (Zelizer 1993, Carlson 2007a, Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010, Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgensen 2011). This observation fits with Singer's (2005) argument that news organizations seek to normalize UGC, slotting it into existing structures and practices rather than fundamentally altering the workings of the newsroom.

### *Cooptation and segregation as boundary work strategies*

However, such normalization is just one of several strategies engaged by legacy news organizations eager to take advantage of new technologies, but concerned about a media

landscape which presents unprecedented challenges as well as opportunities. More concretely, what I will suggest here is that legacy news organizations seek to both segregate and coopt user-generated content. By segregation, I here mean the deliberate separation of audience/amateur content from professional/journalistic content, signaled by separation physically (as when amateur is published in different newspaper sections, platforms or webpages) as well as discursively (in terms of how content is described) (see also Coward 2013, Wahl-Jorgensen 2008, Lewis, 2012). Historically, such segregation has been central to the maintenance of key professional distinctions, including those between professional and amateur, and between “objective” and “subjective” content.

The received account of journalism history suggests that if the first (and non-professional) newspapers made little distinction between “news” and “opinion,” professional journalism came to be understood as a “fact-centered discursive practice” premised on ideals of objectivity (Chalaby 1999). Throughout the history of print newspapers, they have clearly – through physically and discursive demarcation – been separated, and this separation has been of fundamental importance to journalism, serving as a structural underpinning of professional practice. This separation, however, is now under fire from the increasing importance of user-generated or amateur content, which is swiftly ushering in new ways of knowing, or new ways of determining what counts as truth within the interpretive communities of journalism, often grounded in more subjective and partial story-telling practices (Fish 1980, Zelizer 1993). As Carlson and Porath (2012) put it, “citizen journalism’s mix of participatory practices and subjective tone presents a fundamental break from professional journalistic practice” (p. 304).

Here, I suggest that if user-generated content is a perceived threat to such long-standing professional self-understandings and practices (e.g. Williams, Wardle & Wahl-Jorgensen 2010, Lewis 2012), news organizations are generating new strategies for physically and discursively segregating it, thereby highlighting its distinctive and non-professional nature.

Simultaneously, they are engaging in strategies of cooptation by taking on board and actively inviting in contributions. In taking up the concept of cooptation, I am drawing on its meaning within sociology of organizations literature, as first advanced by Selznick (1953). To Selznick, it refers the process of absorbing new elements into the structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence (p. 34). Usually, these “elements” are seen to be representative of the opposition and/or of the views of broader public. Selznick gives examples of the incorporation of “natives” into the formal mechanisms of colonial governance, and the cooptation of civilians into military courts. For Selznick (1953), such processes of cooptation do not simply involve the appropriation of the outsider. Rather, it is an adaptive response which “is consequential for the character and role of the organization” (Selznick 1953, p. 35). In a similar way, journalistic organizations could be seen to coopt audience contributions—a process which, at the same time, transforms aspects of journalistic practices and epistemologies.

The idea of cooptation has previously been used in examining news organizations’ approaches to citizen journalism. Kperogi (2011) drew on theories of hegemony to explore how CNN incorporated user-generated content through its iReport.com citizen journalism platform. He argued that:

[By] ‘mainstreaming’ it through the iReport.com experiment, CNN is seeking to contain, or at least negotiate, its potentially disruptive effect on mainstream journalism through a hegemonic cooptation that actively seeks the consent of the

practitioners of this fringe, newfangled form of journalism. ...iReport.com does this by democratizing the conception of news – and in fact of journalism as such – in ways that both strategically negate the canons of journalistic orthodoxy and that seem intended to invite the approval and consent of non-professional journalists who dominate the practice of citizen journalism. (Kperogi 2011, p. 324)

Kperogi's (2011) contribution is to demonstrate how this citizen journalism experiment sought to negotiate the complex challenges represented by technological change, suggesting that this entailed a strategic negation of “the canons of journalistic orthodoxy” —a move that in other words may disrupt conventional journalistic practice through the very effort at maintaining it.

### **Legacy news organizations and user-generated content**

The challenges of managing forms of audience participation and engagement have always occupied news organizations, and raised questions around the boundary between professional and amateur content (see Wahl-Jorgensen 2014). However, the growing prominence of user-generated content has made this an increasingly urgent and prominent challenge. As one observer put it in highlighting the growing importance of user-generated content, “80% of online content today is user-generated. Social media and self-publishing tools have created a glut of online amateur content while also increasing the overall quality of the material. As a result, we've seen a sea change in the way publishers work with and integrate UGC onto their sites, and the way they sell it as a value-add for brands” (Boulin 2013).

Some of the impetus for the increasing attention paid to user-generated content has to do with its central role in documenting major unfolding news stories over the past decade, starting with the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2004. The centrality of user-generated content, particularly in the form of photographs and video, has only accelerated with the invention of social media. Here, the advent of the 2011 Arab Spring and subsequent revolutions and, in the case of Syria, armed conflict, have been singled out. In several cases, Western news organizations were banned from entering the countries, making news from local sources on the ground indispensable for news reporting (Harkin, Anderson, Morgan and Smith 2012). Some scholars have viewed platforms such as Twitter as indispensable in securing information flows in the Arab Spring (Lotan et al. 2011), even if other accounts question the alleged centrality of social media (e.g. Fitzgerald 2014).

News organizations, anxious to avoid being bypassed by technological developments which may make their products redundant, have developed their own platforms for displaying user-generated content. Most major news media will have some form of user-generated content provision embedded into their websites, and will use social media for both promotional and information-gathering purposes. In the United States, some of the more prominent of user-generated content platforms include *USA Today YourTake* (*Your Take* 2014) as well as CNN's aforementioned iReport. The *New York Times* has recently launched a new “opinion product” which centrally includes user-generated content selected on the basis of professional curation. As described in a *Digiday* story:

The product is being quietly billed as “a new, all-day-long opinion experience online and for mobile devices.” It will be a mixture of tweets, Facebook updates, original writing and articles aggregated from other websites, and will involve a significant

amount of back and forth between readers and contributors to the section, according to two job listings about the developing product. (McDermott 2014)

Furthermore, in a move that signals a significant attempt at incorporating content from users into the offering of mainstream news organizations, the multinational media giant News Corp, owned by the Murdoch family, acquired Storyful, the social news agency which verifies UGC sources, for €18 million in December 2013. The News Corp press release which announced the purchase in language representing boundary work, discussing the use of “journalistic sensibility, integrity and creativity to find, authenticate and commercialize user-generated content” (*News Corp Acquires Social News Agency Storyful* 2013).

In the UK, the main national newspapers, including *The Telegraph*, the *Sun* and the *Express* “host social networks where readers can publish photos and blog posts, and talk on forums.” (Bradshaw 2013). Here, I use *Guardian* newspaper’s GuardianWitness as an example of how an award-winning, high-profile platform for user-generated content uses strategies of cooptation and segregation to normalize audience participation. While the chapter is unable to provide a detailed analysis of the site and its content, the discussion here is intended to signal the usefulness of considering cooptation and segregation as specific strategies of boundary work.

### **Introducing GuardianWitness**

The *Guardian* newspaper, originally founded in 1821 as the *Manchester Guardian*, is a well-known British quality or “broadsheet” newspaper, which is left-leaning in its political orientation. It has a reputation for investigative reporting, and is owned by the Scott Trust, a charitable foundation which aims to secure the paper’s editorial independence. It has long been an unprofitable publication, reporting an underlying loss of £30.9m in 2013, compared to £44.2m in 2012 (Williams 2013). At the same time, since investing heavily in its online presence, it has gained prominence as a global media institution, usually featuring on the lists of the top newspaper sites in the world. For example, in the April 2014 ebizmba rankings (based on Alexa figures), it featured 8<sup>th</sup> on the list of most visited news websites in the world, with 60,000,000 unique monthly visitors, and behind only the *New York Times* among newspaper sites (*Top 15 Most Popular News Websites* 2014).

GuardianWitness (<https://witness.theguardian.com/>) was launched in April 2013 to encourage the contribution of user-generated content and to facilitate its curation for the newspaper and its online platforms. In April 2014, the site won the Digital Innovation of the Year Award at the UK’s national Newspaper Awards. The judges were “uniformly impressed with the scope and implementation of this digital newcomer,” praising its “innovative implementation of social news gathering which works well across numerous platforms” (GNM Press Office 2014).

According to the site, “GuardianWitness is our new home for content you've created, online and on your mobile. You can contribute your video, pictures and text, and browse all the news, reviews and creations submitted by others. Posts will be reviewed by our team and suitable contributions will be published on GuardianWitness, with the best pieces featured on the Guardian site—you could even help shape the news agenda.” This description indicates the ways in which the site seeks to simultaneously encourage and coopt audience contributions, whilst normalizing it through an emphasis on professional editorial control. At the same time, it also suggests that audience members can have a concrete impact through

shaping the news agenda—however this takes place through the mediation and curation of professional practice.

To better understand the ways in which the site discursively constructs the parameters for acceptable content, the call for contributions is worth examining at length, in delineating the types of content elicited, and how this content is discursively framed. First of all, the site sets “assignments” on specific topics: “Editors will issue call-outs for your input on a wide range of topics—be it a photograph of the first daffodils, your filmed thoughts on the latest cinema release or a witty re-imagination of a sporting event.” Here, the idea of “input on a wide range of topics” highlights the active solicitation of audience participation, clearly exemplary of an approach of cooptation, in its clear attempt to incorporating the opposition into the legitimate structure, generating a more easily controllable environment (e.g. Selznick 1953, p. 34). At the same time, however, the language of the call also performs careful boundary work by segregating audience content. In this case, it is done through the suggestion of particular types of content in the form of “a photograph of the first daffodils, your filmed thoughts on the latest cinema release or a witty re-imagination of a sporting event” —all falling squarely within the category of “soft news.” This is more broadly reflected in the site’s construction of the nature of audience contributions as “soft news”, primarily drawing on personal experience and frequently in the form of visual content, usually photographs. For example, the site typically includes requests for weather photos: “Wherever you are in the world, show us your striking photos of this week’s weather.” Images of the weather are a long-standing feature of user-generated content sponsored by news organizations, and contribute to a depiction of an audience eager to participate, but largely apolitical and unable to shape the “hard news” agenda (e.g. Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). On April 8, 2014, it also requested photos featuring “your attempts to make yourselves look like your favourite Game of Thrones characters,” reflecting an emphasis on popular culture in the GuardianWitness agenda which fits the segregation strategy of constructing audience contributions as “soft news.”

The boundary work of cooptation and segregation is further evidenced in calls for other types of content. A second category solicited by GuardianWitness includes “Live news tie-ins”: “Our editors and reporters will sometimes flag live blogs as suitable for contributions, which will enable you to be part of a breaking or fast-moving story. We’ll include the best contributions in the live blog—for instance your experiences of austerity protests around the world or your videos of the latest extreme weather event.” In this case, contributions that fit into the “hard news” agenda are solicited from audience members—however, here, the ways of coopting audience content through incorporation takes a particular form: It calls for audience accounts of personal experiences as well as visual imagery, turning the audience into a provider of supplementary emotional and emotive rather than rational and “newsworthy” material (Williams, Wardle and Wahl-Jorgensen 2011). This limiting protects journalists’ privileged status as producers of knowledge and truth, thus underpinning a move to defend the epistemology of “hard news” journalism against incursions of audience content. Along those lines, in April 2014, the site requested photographs from voters in India’s general election: “We want to see the ink on your fingers to help us tell the story of the size of the vote in India.” Here, the emphasis is on securing visual documentation of audience members’ personal experience, which can be used as illustration for stories and live blogs created by professional journalists. This is consistent with a broader construction of citizen journalists as eye-witnesses (e.g. Allan 2013; see also Ananny, this volume). The idea of eye-witnessing privileges an ocular metaphor (Allan 2013, p. 100, Frosh and Pinchewski 2009), even if witnessing means far more than “watching” and “seeing” (Rentschler 2004, p. 298).

This resonates with longer-standing hierarchies of user-generated content, where images and videos—largely visual material—has tended to be privileged over comments (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2011, Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Wardle 2010). As such, GuardianWitness strategies of cooptation and segregation, though taking a specific form, could also be viewed as consistent with a longer-standing trajectory in news organizations' approaches to user-generated content.

A final category of content solicited by the site is “open suggestions” —material that hasn't been specifically requested. However, the site provides explicit instructions about what types of “open suggestions” are welcome:

- 1) Send us a story: This might be a tip-off or something you may have witnessed in your local area that you think we might want to see. We're always looking for unreported stories, so we would like to hear about things that we might decide to follow up as a story for the *Guardian*.
- 2) Send us your assignment ideas: Have you got an idea that your think [sic] other *Guardian* readers would like to participate in? It might be a simple but beautiful idea such as asking everyone to take a picture at a certain time of day or it might be a way of investigating an issue in more detail. For example asking everyone to share the cost of parking at their local hospital. Or it might simply be an interesting or funny assignment idea which doesn't fit into any of our current assignments.

Of the three types of content solicited, this “open suggestion” category represents the clearest opportunity for audience members to shape the news agenda. Here, it is interesting to note that the two different types of suggestions construct audience contributions very differently. The first suggestion, that of sending story ideas or tip-offs, represents a long-standing practice in news media for broadening their news agendas. Such tip-offs are then potentially picked up by professional journalists who turn them into news stories. The second option is based on soliciting ideas for audience participation—in this case, for ideas that might fit into standard constructions of visual user-generated content (“asking everyone to take a picture at a certain time of day”) but also ones that represent novel contributions to the news agenda (“a way of investigating an issue in more detail”). The “open suggestion” category appears to offer more complex and variegated forms of audience contribution, which do not consistently or neatly operate in line with strategies of cooptation and segregation.

Nonetheless, in general terms, the call for content highlights the fact that GuardianWitness contributions are first and foremost understood as content filtered through, and rendered legitimate through, professional curation—rather than as newsworthy in their own right. This is further underpinned by the placement of the platform on the newspaper's main website. From the *Guardian* front page, it can be found far down in the third right-hand column, below “Culture” and “Life and Style” sections, rather than as, for example, a header tab. This signals the relatively marginal nature of the site in relation to the *Guardian*'s news agenda, and its close conceptual relationship to soft news categories represented by “Culture” and “Life and Style” stories.

Despite the discursive recognition of the ability of user-generated content to shape the news agenda, the site uses cooptation and segregation strategies to emphasize a view of the audience as a provider of soft news, experience-based visual materials. This is consistent with broader observations made by scholars studying user-generated content (e.g. Örnebring 2008, Jönsson and Örnebring 2011), which suggests that despite the rhetoric of empowerment frequently accompanying the launch of user-generated content initiatives, in actual practice

news organizations frequently constructed audience contributions as distinctly separate from the work of professional journalists, segregating it in sections focused on soft news, and often in the context of consumption and popular culture. Nonetheless, the *GuardianWitness* approach also entails recognition of a shift in the role of news organizations and the journalists working within them, which acknowledges, in addition to conventional reporting activities, the emerging activities of curation and aggregation (cf. Anderson 2013, p. 70). This, then, demonstrates that in journalism, as well as in other organizational types, cooptation is not simply a strategy for incorporation of the opposition (in this case, The People Formerly Known as the Audience), but also leads to changes in the practices of the organization itself. The *Guardian*, in introducing the site, has devoted scarce resources to enhancing audience participation as well as inclusion of audience content—an allocation decision which is in keeping with shifts in the political economy and production routines of news organizations. It makes use of audience contributions on the *GuardianWitness* site as well as in elements of its news coverage, especially live blogs, and these have the capacity to introduce new story-telling styles at odds with conventional objective journalism, as when a bystander’s image of the scene of the Woolwich murder was commended for its “sensitivity and sense of awareness,” advancing the interest of “open journalism” (e.g. Edge 2014). These shifts also reflect a real change in the epistemology of journalism itself—a shift in how it produces the knowledge that constitutes our collective truths.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the increased prevalence of user-generated content presents a series of unique challenges to the authority of journalists. The affordances of convergent platforms have ushered in a more diverse set of practices and story-telling forms, which shake the foundations of the epistemology of conventional journalism. This is an epistemology which has privileged “objective,” unemotional and “hard-news” journalism but now has to contend with the wider range of genres and story-telling forms represented by user-generated or audience content. And whereas in traditional media, audience content was clearly physically and conceptually segregated from professional journalism in forums such as letters to the editor, the advent of convergence and the increasing ease of audience participation online in a variety of formats and on a range of platforms represents a challenge to such segregation. This, in turn, forces journalists carry out boundary work to defend their profession.

In particular, this chapter has suggested that user-generated content is normalized through the closely related strategies of cooptation and segregation. These strategies of boundary work have here been examined by taking a closer look at the *Guardian* newspaper’s *GuardianWitness*, which provides a platform for user-generated content built into the newspaper’s website. The chapter suggests that the award-winning site is highly directed in soliciting audience content which is primarily supplementary to professional journalistic story-telling; visual, and based on personal experience. This form of solicitation represents cooptation in its incorporation of audience contributions; all of it filtered through the curatorial practices of journalists. At the same time, it demonstrates the strategy of segregation, as user-generated content is used as supplementary material, clearly demarcated as illustrations for professional accounts, and coming from the partial and personal point of view of audience members. As such, the site, while inviting in the “opposition,” keeps it at bay by reasserting journalistic authority through specific forms of boundary work.

GuardianWitness is not unique in this respect, but rather one example of how the epistemology of journalism may be subtly shifting due to technological change. It appears that journalism has located successful strategies for defending its turf and policing its boundaries, insofar as professionals consistently make the case for the lasting importance of journalistic skills, and carefully design and delimit participatory opportunities to necessitate the display of these skills, and assert control over the production process. At the same time, it is also the case that new forms of journalistic storytelling (including live blogs), as well as older ones (including conventional news stories) are being shaped and irreversibly changed by the inclusion of user-generated content, which is often more personal, subjective and experience-based than “objective” journalistic reporting. Ultimately, this chapter has provided just one snapshot of the process by which these changes are taking place, indicating the direction of transformation rather than providing a neat (though not necessarily happy) ending. What is certain, however, is that any claims about breakdowns in distinctions between journalists and their audiences should be taken with a grain of salt, given the careful and consistent strategic work carried out by news organizations to justify their continued relevance.

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