Gatekeepers: going, going, gone -the challenge of citizenship journalism to traditional practice


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Gatekeepers: going, going, gone – the challenge of citizen journalism to traditional practice

Colleen Murrell and Katrina Mandy Oakham

Abstract

Commentators believe that the reporting of the London bombings of July 2005 ushered in a new era of the citizen journalist. News outlets in Britain were flooded with emails and mobile phone pictures. But with the sheer quantity of material heading into the editor’s inbox, how can we be sure of its veracity? This paper looks at The Herald Sun, The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Daily Telegraph and The Adelaide Advertiser to investigate the current systems in place for checking incoming leads and material. The paper raises questions regarding the reliability of current systems and puts forward the possibility that new approaches and systems may be needed to meet the new challenges. The paper further explores if newspapers are still acting as gatekeepers of the traditional system or if they are letting the gate swing ajar in response to changed circumstances.

Theoretical framework

In 2008 while newspaper owners scrambled to find a way to hang on to classified advertising, stories abounded of job cuts and closures. Commentators such as Dan Gillmor (2006, p. xvi) argue that the “unraveling newspaper business model” means that journalism in the twenty-first century will be fundamentally different to the current pattern of media monopoly and oligopoly, due primarily to the growth of citizen journalism. Two decades ago, Herman and Chomsky argued,
... the "societal purpose" of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises. (1988, p. 289)

The rise of the so-called citizen journalist is seen by some to be a direct challenge to this privileging of certain groups with its claims that anyone can be a journalist. However, the data in this paper indicates that any challenge at this stage appears to be contained by moderation, at least within the large mainstream commercial news organisations selected here. These findings concerning the urge to moderate "user-generated content" (UGC) are mirrored in research by Hermida and Thurman in the UK who "identified a shift towards the use of moderation due to editors' persistent concerns about reputation, trust and legal liabilities" (2008, p. 343).

This paper examines how UGC is dealt with in major metropolitan newspapers in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. It aims to discover the thought processes of online editors in terms of the development of interactivity with particular emphasis on verifying the information sent in by members of the public. It asks whether existing systems of checking and verification are proving to be adequate in dealing with the new forms of UGC arriving in newsrooms or whether new systems of gatekeeping need to be developed in order to respond to the demands of this new form of journalistic contribution. It also asks whether media organisations are developing effective and rigorous systems of checking in order to avoid reproducing hoax stories or recycled material.

The five newspapers selected all have substantial combined online and print readerships. According to the Roy Morgan Readership Results for December 2007, the papers lined up in terms of readership as follows: The Herald Sun (1,484,000); The Daily Telegraph (1,177,000); The Sydney Morning Herald (942,000); The Age (767,000); The Adelaide Advertiser (521,000). The aim of this research is to identify Australian trends and tendencies – it is not intended to draw global conclusions.

Troubling terminology

There is much debate in newsrooms and in academia about the definition of "citizen journalism". Hirst and Harrison (2007) set out to define the term, describing a "person who is not attached to a media organisation, who witnesses an event, and then provides an account of that event, normally using traditional and new journalistic forms. Distinguished from an eye witness by the nature and form(s) of their account" (2007, p. 240). They consider other terms, such as the one cited by freelance journalist Bec Fitzgibbon as "the common correspondent" because, she argues, anyone can broadcast material online (p. 255). Hirst and Harrison also question whether the term "participatory journalism" can be used to define the difference between traditional journalistic roles and the new citizen contribution forms. However they decide the term is "a bit misleading. The idea that anyone can now be a journalist is one of the enduring myths of the digital age" (p. 255).

Outing (2005) has gone further in deconstructing the different types of citizen journalism into 11 different forms: ranging from opening up sections of a newspaper to public comment, through to "wiki journalism" where members of the public write and edit their own contributions. With the exception of wiki journalism and "stand-alone citizen-journalism", the other stages appear to produce a form of journalistic practice which involves traditional in-house journalists playing a defining role in moderating contributions from the public. The data from this research indicate that at the Australian newspapers selected, the online editors are dealing with the first and second forms, identified by Outing as "opening up to public comment" and "the citizen add-on reporter".
In these forms public contributions are used to complement material produced by in-house journalists (through comments and tip-offs), or to supplement the journalists’ work (through photos, videos or eye-witness accounts etc.).

Duffield and Cokley argue that some citizen journalism is pushing the boundaries of current conventions. In this sense citizen journalists are going further than merely complementing or supplementing existing material, and are actually changing mainstream journalism. Duffield and Cokley suggest that “we have a growing cadre of citizens who are equipped and skilled to engage in interactive media, media that are powerful enough to replicate conventional mass media services, and able to innovate beyond that, providing the new kinds of media products” (2006, p. 188). And some commentators go further still, proselitising the importance of this democratisation. In June 2006 Kenneth Neil Cukier, a technology correspondent for The Economist, told the OpenBusiness blog:

I believe journalism is undergoing its “reformational moment”. By that I mean that the Internet is affecting journalism just as the printing press affected the Church — people are bypassing the sacrosanct authority of the journalist in the same way as Luther asserted that individuals could have a direct relationship with God without the intermediary of the priest. The Internet has disinteregrid middlemen in other industries, why should journalism be immune? (Cukier, 2006)

In a similar manner, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis argue, “The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history when, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but by the audience it serves” (2005, p. 7).

Drawing back from all this talk of reformational moments, this paper is concerned with the current nexus between citizen journalists and traditional media organisations which are now on the internet. In this public sphere the play for power is still underway. Even though new sites such as OhmyNews make UGC the prime mover of news, the old-style newspapers appear to be still in charge of the mediation between the public and the journalist. Australian newspapers may be soliciting public material, but they still want to oversee the comment, photos or video that get published. Christopher Scanlon, writing in The Age newspaper in May 2007, sums up the views of many journalists when he says, “Just as having Photoshop installed on your computer doesn’t make you a graphic designer, setting up a blog doesn’t make you a journalist — much less a news organisation. Quality journalism requires enormous amounts of skill and money. Expecting the same depth of reporting by committed amateurs is fanciful” (Scanlon, 2007).

For the purposes of this study citizen journalism was taken to mean UGC which was then moderated in some form by journalists in the mainstream newsrooms. The citizen journalist was providing either public comment or acting as an “add-on reporter” providing eye-witness material. A further breakdown could be made of this material, dividing it into three main types, those being:

• those contributions which complement mainstream journalism for example comments and tip-offs which are absorbed into the mainstream following some extensive premoderation
• those contributions which extend mainstream journalism for example photographs, video or eye-witness accounts from the bombings on the London Tube which clearly are user generated material and which are both pre-moderated and sometimes post-moderated
• those contributions which to use Cukier’s (2006) terminology reform mainstream journalism, which are post moderated and sometimes reactively moderated
Interestingly, it was hard to find an example of the third kind of citizen journalism in the material raised by the interviewees in this case study. Perhaps another way of looking at these classifications may be to argue that while the first two kinds of contributions are currently seen as being non-threatening to current journalistic practice and are therefore easily absorbed with minimal moderation, the third category could be regarded as a real threat to the primacy of the traditional news process which gives mainstream journalists the ultimate gatekeeper role.

Methodological approach

In order to conduct this preliminary research the authors believed a case study approach to be the most suitable. Robert Yin argues this approach is useful when “how” and “why” questions are being asked, when investigators have little control over events being studied and when “contemporary as opposed to historical phenomena” are being discussed (1994, p.1). In this specific instance the authors were interested in how online editors were managing this new UGC and why these traditional gatekeepers were responding in particular ways. The authors conducted hour-long semi-structured qualitative interviews with online editors at their desks, either in or attached to the newsrooms. The authors believe in the importance of analysing news production (Cottle, 2003 p.4) and so the questions were designed to elicit specific information about how UGC was processed by themselves and other journalists. Questions honed in on exactly what cross-checking of material was done in particular instances. Questions were also designed to discover what kinds of UGC were being sent (comments, videos, photos etc.) and what happened during important breaking news stories. The newspapers chosen in Sydney and Melbourne represented broadsheet and tabloid papers with innovative online websites. In Adelaide it was believed that only The Advertiser and its online version Adelaide Now conformed to these parameters.

Stories that generate UGC

At 8am on Monday, June 18, 2007, a gunman roamed the streets of central Melbourne, as commuters made their way to their offices. The triple shooting which followed an apparent domestic dispute left one “Good Samaritan” dead, and two other passers-by fighting for their lives in hospital. As police began to rope off the scene and divert the rush-hour traffic, the first photos of the tragedy were already on their way to the offices of the metropolitan newspaper The Age. These were not images taken after-the-event by staff photographers but were eye-witness pictures taken by members of the public on their mobile phones. These pictures made the front page of The Age and its online edition. This incident shows that after a sleepy start, citizen journalism is now beginning to play a more significant part in the coverage of events in Melbourne. According to The Age’s online editor, Simon Johanson, the first pictures started arriving in “volumes” around half an hour after the shooting took place. “That’s a quantum shift. We’ve been pushing towards this for about a year now,” said Johanson.

The shooting was a watershed moment for the paper in its interaction with the public. According to Johanson:

The initial rush of pictures ... I was quite surprised with this one, because we actually haven't had that sort of quick response before. We've had one-off pictures here and there, or a bunch of pictures, but this was like people were just either on their computers looking at the website and then going, hang on, that's happening outside, taking a picture and sending it to us. So that sort of interactivity we haven't had quite the same level before.

At Melbourne’s tabloid competitor The Herald Sun, the shooting was not a major moment, ac-
cording to online editor John Macdonald. This paper received its biggest delivery of UGC a few weeks later when a cold snap brought freezing temperatures and snow to many parts of the state of Victoria. “We had an influx and ended up running 40 very usable photos of the snow on our site and had 345,000 clicks on those photos. [...] The only time I’m interested in citizen photos is if they are doing something we can’t do ourselves”.

At The Sydney Morning Herald, the biggest story for attracting UGC was the stranding of the tanker Pasha Bulker on Nobby’s Beach in Newcastle in June 2007. According to online editor Stephanie Raethel, the newspaper’s inbox was filled instantly by readers’ comments and photos. It was a reader’s picture that the paper published first. At The Telegraph the main story that attracted readers’ comments was the cricketing row between Andrew Symonds and Harbhajan Singh. The paper received thousands of contributions from readers in India. The story that attracted the most photos and “art work” was the Melbourne partying teenager Corey Delaney. At The Adelaide Advertiser the story that attracted 300 on-the-day comments was the closing of the local Mitsubishi plant. Like all the papers, the Advertiser receives most of its UGC in the form of comments, and the only time its online editor, Rod Savage, recalls getting “swamped with photos” was again due to a bizarre weather event – this time floods.

The lack of user-generated video is felt across the spectrum. All the newspapers have increased the video journalism produced by their own journalists, and directly bought in vision through their deals with other media organisations, such as Reuters, APTN, Sky, Channel 7, Channel 9 and Channel 10. However, they do not receive the heavy “citizen video” traffic that finds its way into international outlets like the BBC, New York Times and The Guardian. Fairfax Digital Productions handles the video content for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. It employs 20 journalists across the two newsrooms just to work on video news: ten of them are video journalists. The director, Ian Vaile, says he is keen to receive video but he is surprised to receive “very little” from the public. He speculates that members of the public must imagine that online newspapers are not receptive to this material. He does remember getting some user-generated video about a train fire on the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2007 but that was about all. Over at The Herald Sun the online editor does not actively seek video and thinks his paper would not be able to deal with the different video or mobile phone formats if it did.

Most interactivity at present comes in the form of comment to a restricted number of articles and “Your Say” sections. Individual UGC in multimedia format is solicited but is still low level. The online editors say it is a matter of educating the public toward increased interactivity. According to The Age’s Simon Johanson,

The multi-media material that we expected to flood in didn’t flood in; it never does. From that point on, it’s been a matter of education more often than not and a matter of building reader and audience awareness of that possibility of interacting in that way with us, using that number, using that email address, of sending us material, of us vetting it, of us checking it. Publishing too, when we think it’s kosher. Now, the details around vetting are something that’s always a little fraught.

**Journalists as gatekeepers**

In the past journalists have been considered “gatekeepers” of the news generation process and of story ideas (see White, 1950). In a traditional sense the first gatekeeper was the news editor whose role was to check information before passing it on to a reporter to investigate and examine. News editors have mostly had to deal with a limited number of sources for possible stories. These have sometimes been referred to in academic literature as “stable sources” (Fishman, 1999, p. 108). These were either their own reporters or they were “legitimised” contacts in government
offices, public organisations or private companies. The people from whom these contacts emanated were known either in person, or through public recognition. They were thus mostly (but not always) already validated, understood to be honest brokers, or constituted people or companies whose information could be checked easily. The material was also mostly given in the written form for newspapers or magazines, and in audio or video form for broadcast organisations.

Now however, these same news editors are dealing more and more with members of the public, whom they do not know or cannot trust in any implicit way. The material can now arrive in newspapers' convergent platforms as written computer files, compressed digital audio or video files, and via SMS or other mobile phone technology. In accepting material via SMS or mobile phone, it is not easy to check who owns the mobile phone concerned. Newspapers must now decide how much checking (or "pre-moderation") they will do in order to find out the provenance of material, before allowing it to be put up on their website. Will they allow free posting of comment with minimal interference, such as is the case with The Guardian? Will they adopt a "light moderation" approach to the "Your Say" material, as the BBC has decided to do, due to the sheer amount of material being sent their way? Will they decide on a strict pre-moderation approach due to worries about bias, unprofessional reporting or legal challenges? This latter approach is by necessity more time-intensive and costly. However, it could prevent problems in the age of the professional internet hoaxer, whose work has been seen in the following cases:

- 2007: Channel 9 broadcasts a fake story about a businessman planning to add Viagra to Sydney rock oysters
- 2004: Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan was sacked after his paper admitted photos of British soldiers abusing Iraqi civilians were faked. The newspaper said it was the victim of a "calculated and malicious hoax"
- 2004: dozens of faked photos of the Asian tsunami are sent in to international news outlets (Glaser, 2005).

There appears to be a gap between the level of rhetoric and discourse about citizen journalism down under and the actual professional practice. Matthew Ricketson (2006), media writer for The Age, wrote in one of his regular columns that the growth in news and information provided by non-traditional sources is highly significant because of:

- the sheer volume of the material being provided
- the ease with which such material can be manipulated
- the "relentless" 24 hour news cycle which squeezes the time news organisations can spend authenticating submitted material (2006, p. 18).

While the authors' data would indicate that at the specific newspapers chosen for this research the volume of this type of material is rapidly increasing, news organisations are yet to feel the pressure to implement any specifically new forms of verification to check this new material. Indeed all of the online editors interviewed were adamant that it would be the traditional journalistic methods of cross-checking that would act as the safety net for this new influx of reader-supplied material. The SMH's Raethel said, "If possible we contact the people and if chances are you can't find them or they don't want to talk or be involved often its because it's not for real or it's very old". At The Age, Johanson believed the user-generated pictures of the 2007 shooting coincided with what his journalists were reporting, and therefore they were considered "kosher". But he conceded that had the shooting been further from the office, this would not necessarily have been so straightforward. At The Adelaide Advertiser, Savage thinks online moderation of comments or pictures is nowhere near the level of moderation done on the traditional newspaper where a story goes through "seven or eight processes" before being published. He said, "But online, the process is, **** we've got a story, here it is, one person will read it, will sub it, will put a headline on it.
and then publish it. In terms of speed and in terms of resources that's just the way it happens”. Savage admits that he took a punt publishing a reader’s photo of a house fire in Belair recently because he was so thrilled to finally have been sent some “frontline footage”. He said the website led on the picture and got up to 5,000 downloads: “And I didn’t verify that it was Belair and I didn’t verify that it wasn’t old footage that someone had sent in. I just trusted that that’s what it was”.

Raethel accepts that new technology means that the chances of hoaxing and of skewing reader polls are higher. She says the paper’s journalists do sometimes check the IP address of the posts, mostly when they think they are being targeted by campaigns. With videos and photos, which can have been “photo-shopped,” she hopes that “within the organisation there is someone who can look at it and say, look this has been cut funny,” which may signal a hoax. She does not accept that there is much difference between how the journalists act now with new material as opposed to how they acted when they were just involved with print. She said: “The pressure’s always been there in newspapers when things are breaking late at night – are we going to put it in or not [...] The beauty with online is that there is no deadline. So if it takes us another two hours to check it out we can still publish it in two hours”. The man in charge of SMH’s broadcast journalists, Ian Vaile, is more forthright about the problems with dealing with viewers’ video. “Often there are real issues using that sort of material as news – we don’t know the provenance of it or the story behind it. It’s very hard to validate a lot of the things that you encounter in a user-generated news story”.

While metropolitan newspapers in Australia usually have only one direct competitor per city, the Internet means that the papers’ competition widens. At The Adelaide Advertiser Savage sees his competition now as Melbourne’s Age and The Sydney Morning Herald. He also includes the local broadcast media, now that he has video journalists. At The Age Johanson thinks the whole cycle has speeded up: “Obviously we try and verify as much as possible, but there is pressure there because the actual evolution of a story is so quick at times that it’s quite hard to keep up”.

Policy standstill

At the time of the research interviews none of the organisations had any specific policy statements or guidelines relating to the treatment of material from non-traditional sources. The online editors, however, anticipated that such documents may be necessary in the future as the volume of this material increases. Johanson thought journalists’ behaviour at The Age was still well regulated by the newspaper’s code of ethics. McDonald at The Herald Sun said current procedures would be updated if they started getting “literally thousands of these things every day”.

This is a far cry from those organisations which are already integrating verification issues related to UGC into their guidelines. At the BBC, guidelines for online contributions have been greatly enhanced in the past year. They now include separate policies for different forms of moderation, labeled as “premoderation”, “postmoderation” and “reactive moderation”. According to the BBC online editorial guidelines (2008) premoderation is necessary for sites “dealing with particularly sensitive areas”. Postmoderation “allows users to see their messages being published without delay while every message is read by a moderator”. It adds that “BBC sites which carry postmoderated content should ensure that messages from the public are seen, checked and, where necessary, removed within the agreed time limit. In cases of sensitivity, this may be within one hour of posting”. The BBC guidelines explain that reactive moderation is suitable for “less sensitive sites where a higher degree of self-regulation is appropriate”. It adds, “While hosts are not expected to read every message, they should monitor the overall tone of conversations and be across the issues discussed on the site”.

AJR 30(2)
The BBC online guidelines on “checking the facts” state that “we should carefully scrutinize and if necessary corroborate eyewitness accounts submitted by email before using them, by talking to the eyewitnesses on the phone if possible. By the same token, we should also be alert to the possibility that a site may be a hoax site. Any contributor found through the internet should be checked and double-checked”.

New directions

At the newspapers the authors visited all of the online editors were optimistic about the advent of citizen journalism, although they sometimes had problems with the naming of it. At The Age Johanson is clear that this kind of material will never replace the “resource-intensive” process of professional newsgathering. Over at The Herald Sun McDonald agrees that citizen journalism will not replace what his reporters do today, but is instead an “adjunct” to traditional professional journalism. At the SMH Raethel is particularly pleased with the possibility the public affords the newspaper of prompting stories with tip-offs. She gave an example where a reader’s photograph alleging Jet Star had forgotten to take a clamp off the side of a wing, was turned into a newspaper investigation by reporters. At The Adelaide Advertiser Savage is concerned that too many journalistic resources are being squandered doing hours of moderation of UGC in order to avoid defamation. “Why should you have a highly paid creative person sitting there just crawling through story comment for two or three hours at a time, it’s just silly. But that’s the way it is”.

For all online editors change is a constant, and the online area is a driver of change. In some cases, the changes are moving faster than the in-house working agreements. Staff in the video area of the SMH have largely been recruited from outside the company, are employed by a separate entity and work to different agreements than staff on the rest of the paper. Journalists are increasingly becoming multi-skilled and there are now also substantial teams of video production staff at The Age and The Adelaide Advertiser. Duffield and Cokley sum up the momentous shift in the journalistic environment:

Journalists are evolving into the world’s change monitors, who inform us when the goal posts change, when people alter their positions or even simply when the weather turns. They can expect to have to reform their existing practices quickly ...

Key findings

The online editors appear to be universally excited about the possibilities of opening up the interaction with readers and the increased story-flow that this entails. But they are also mindful of the work demands these opening channels are creating in terms of newsroom moderation. For all papers the principal reader participation is in the form of comments and “Your Says”, and the work entailed involves checks, mainly for defamation. From the data it is clear that the main preoccupations of the online editors concern defamation and breaches of laws relating to gender and race.

According to Johanson, the online area of his paper is where the company’s money is being spent and where growth is predicted. In 2007 he took on five extra journalists and expects to employ another five within the year. This optimism seemed to run counter to the decision by Fairfax to cut editorial jobs at The Age. Johanson also expects to quadruple the video capacity, where he believes the real growth is to be found. Overall The Age employs 27 online staff, of whom five are video journalists. At The Age there is a concerted effort to build interaction with readers, and a belief that in the future journalists will work more closely with their readers and viewers. Any
suggestion that citizen journalists would replace the work of professional journalists is dismissed as “untenable”. Johanson says that moderation is “resource intensive” and admits that “at some point we’ll be duped”. He predicted that by the end of 2008 “either Fairfax or News Limited will move to a post-moderation model”.

At the Sydney offices of the SMH there are 20 online journalists, and another 10 working in the video section. The offices have been redesigned to improve communication between the print paper and the online section. Raethel is very upbeat about interaction with readers but again believes it is an “add-on” service and not a replacement for journalists. She is particularly pleased with citizen journalists as new sources of story material, and considers moderation of new content is not onerous. Raethel does not believe the paper will go to a post-moderation model, and thinks the first time a major law suit occurs, people will appreciate the cost-effectiveness of the current system of moderation. She does think hoaxing has been made easier since the advent of Photoshop but does not believe the growth of UGC means current moderation policies need to change. User-generated video is still limited and the problems associated with moderating this material is acknowledged by the video director.

The Daily Telegraph employs 22 online staff, including journalists, video journalists, artists and a photographer. The paper has worked hard to integrate its reporting staff so that all journalists file for the website and not just for the print version of the paper. The overall person in charge of moderation is the “feedback editor” who is a senior journalist and works for both the online and the print version. The paper gets thousands of daily “comments” from the public. Nothing is off limit for discussion and the contributions are “robust”. Staff members have been given new legal training courses in defamation, racial vilification and contempt issues. Stanaway says he is wary of hoaxes but uses “normal checks”. He says most contribution is comment, which does not need so much checking, but admits this could change once citizen journalists start writing more of their own stories. He also worries about mistakes, because whereas you can kill them off the paper site instantly, it is sometimes harder to remove them quickly off Google. Stanaway believes a number of “different operators” are currently exploring the legal issues surrounding free posting of UGC to sites.

The Herald Sun online department employs 13 full-time journalists, three full-time “videographers”, two tech-support staff, one artist and one picture editor. McDonald is adamant UGC is an “add-on” service, of use when his team cannot get to the story as quickly as they would like. Most UGC is in the form of comment. The material is heavily moderated and topics are carefully chosen to avoid controversy. Readers’ pictures are mostly related to soft stories, such as weather. He believes the paper would be unable to cope if it did receive significant UGC video material. McDonald believes the old checking methods work and no new training courses have been set up for moderating UGC yet. However, he says he could see that new policies might be necessary if the number of contributions grew exponentially.

The Adelaide Advertiser’s online presence, Adelaide Now, employs 19 online staff, which includes editorial, sales, marketing and multimedia. The site is lively and innovative and has moved to conduct online video debates, such as one between federal and state ministers during the 2007 election. The site is using fully moderated “add-on” contributions and moderation is seen as crucial to the “trust brand”. However, Savage says the moderation process is not as strict online as it is in the print version. He is also concerned that creative and professionally-trained journalists are too tied up in moderation. There were contradictions between his stated belief in tough moderation and his admission that in practice some material gets through without proper checking. He said that News Limited was looking at “lots of different ways of easing the moderation burden on the teams”.

From the authors’ pilot study of these organisations, the commonalities are:
• editors believe that user-generated material is creating a greater sense of interconnection between producers and consumers of news
• so far these major news organisations have not implemented any new or specific systems for dealing with this material
• the organisations believe at this stage traditional journalistic methods are sufficient for the checking and verification of this material
• editors believe the sheer volume of UGC will create future pressures to develop new policies or processes to deal with this new material
• editors believe that there will be cases of defamation and hoaxes

Some of the editors could envisage a time when “free-posting” to a newspaper’s site would be allowed, but were anxious, given Australia’s specific legal framework. The editors of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Herald Sun* were most worried about this, given that they both conceded they received what McDonald called “pretty offensive” comments on a regular basis. At *The Advertiser* Savage believed that even if a “legal loophole” could be found, his paper would moderate it or it would stand accused of being “irresponsible”. However, at *The Age* Simon Johanson is sanguine about the future:

[Moderation] is costly from our point of view in terms of the effort and the time it takes, but because of the legal environment that we publish in here in Australia, which I think is probably one of the more restrictive legal environments in the world, it makes it very difficult for us to be able to allow people that freedom to post and to post-moderate as well.[...] I suspect that in about a year’s time, either Fairfax or News Ltd will move to a post-moderation model and then everyone else will as well, but it’s the chicken and egg situation; who is going to go first.

While it is clear that continuing research is needed, this early pilot study in the Australian context would appear to indicate that while UGC has the potential to bring about a qualitative change in journalism practice. The gatekeepers in newsrooms appear to be reacting to these new contributions as primarily just another technological development capable of being absorbed into mainstream news gathering practices. What these case studies reinforce is the current importance of the gatekeeper function of in-house journalists. There is also the warning about current practices of moderation from online editor Rod Savage that needs to be heeded.

And I think it’s flawed and it’s dangerous but that’s just the way it is at the moment. It’s probably going to have to change I think because at some point something is going to bite us in that process.

**Interviewees**


Ian Vaile, director, Fairfax Digital Productions – interviewed January 2008


Rod Savage, online editor, *The Adelaide Advertiser* – interviewed February 2008
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Authors

Colleen Murrell is senior lecturer in Journalism at Deakin University in Melbourne. Email: murrell@deakin.edu.au. Katrina Mandy Oakham is senior lecturer in Journalism at RMIT University in Melbourne.