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**guardian.co.uk: online participation, ‘agonism’
and ‘mutualisation’**

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MSc in Communication, Information & Society

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This study is dedicated to the memory of my beautiful little sister Sarah, whose death was avoidable but whose voice could not be heard; and to all those whose voices are unheard and face injustice as a result.

guardian.co.uk: online participation, ‘agonism’ and ‘mutualisation’

Mariam Cook

ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers guardian.co.uk as a participatory media platform and potential host for ‘agonistic pluralism’ online. Using a conceptual framework drawn from critical media theory (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Mouffe, 1999, 2000, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Dahlgren, 2005; 2009) and information science (Marres, 2006; Lin & Silva, 2005) I position guardian.co.uk as a potentially important player in hosting and amplifying the views of citizens via its website: combining observation on and offline to develop an ethnographic account.

Having worked on *The Guardian*’s editorial floor during the time editor Alan Rusbridger’s ‘mutualisation’ strategy was announced, my account includes the description and analysis of social and technical enablers and barriers to participation and tensions relative to them. This includes the consideration of complex questions around digital interaction such as how former newspaper gate-keepers may become gate-openers, accountability and anonymity, and how to encourage, administer and present vast volumes of user-generated content and conversations.

Positioned ‘on the line,’ this account draws on observations of various actors including ‘above the line’ Guardian writers and ‘below the line’ ‘commenters’ (active online participants): revealing animosity, frustration, ingenuity, uncertainty and hope – and pointing to tensions between notions of editorial judgement and media ‘mutualisation’ that seeks to enable outsiders to determine what is interesting enough to publish. From the perspective of participants I describe disengagement by those who feel unheard, but highlight the new Comment is free ‘You Tell Us’ series as beginning to remedy this.

My socio-technical analysis encompasses journalists’ job insecurity, information overload, the power invested in the editor, writers and their motivations, the crowd and theirs, the transformative information economy meeting established industrial media practices and the technological artefacts that simultaneously join and divide all these actors. I conclude with reflection on philosophical, technical and procedural shifts which may enable media to become more ‘mutualised,’ meaning agonistic discourse can be hosted, encouraged, elevated and taken account of by those with political decision-making power.

INTRODUCTION

Ten years into the twenty-first century over a quarter of the world are online, with seventy percent of UK citizens connected (Internet World Stats, 2010; Helsper, Dutton & Gerber, 2008). Some scholars (for example Manuel Castells, 2001; Yochai Benkler, 2006) have argued that online media can be more empowering for citizens than offline media was before it. They suggest that digital communication can facilitate more direct democracy and contribute to a re-distribution of power among state, non-governmental institutions, private organisations and individuals.

Not all concerned are enthusiastic about this technological advance; the current changes to media production and distribution technology which enable citizen to citizen communication and creation have severe implications for existing industrial media. At newspaper organisations falling paper sales combined with the transferral of advertising budgets online (a space saturated with freely accessible content from new and old competitors) means commercial revenues are severely reduced (Ives, 2010). This has led to a substantive contraction of newspaper employment in the US and UK – for example this year both the UK *Guardian* and the group behind *The Daily Mirror* announced large-scale redundancies (c. f. Wallace, Weaver & Embley 2010). The digital revolution is thus very painful for many media professionals.

In addition to the implications of web diffusion for established media organisations and their staff this industrial turmoil is accompanied by a concern which straddles political and academic circles that the contraction of modern journalism threatens democratic discourse. Such commentary warns of losses to society in the absence of professional journalists, said to have historically harnessed the resources of large media organisations to serve as watchdog over governments, and conducted investigations that would not otherwise have taken place.

This evolution has prompted much academic debate on the civic potential of ‘the social web’ in comparison to older ‘mass media’ – throwing up a vast array of utopian and dystopian views on the potential for a public sphere online, and for heteroglossia (many voices and views) to enter public discourse. However there is a dearth of empirical work considering online newspapers as hosts for ‘agonistic’ spaces online, particularly from the view of participants. This account meets this gap by centring in upon the participatory experience offered by a popular British newspaper: *The Guardian* - the most purchased ‘left-wing’ or ‘liberal’ (non-tabloid) newspaper in England – whose current attempt to embrace the digital age is described by those inside as ‘mutualist’.

guardian.co.uk currently attracts around thirty-two million unique users a month (Sweney, 2010) and has confirmed that it is securing a yearly revenue of £40 million from its website (Gibson, 2010); however as a whole *Guardian Media Group* is operating at a loss of £53.9 million (Burrell, 2010). According to its own figures, newspaper circulation continues to fall (Robinson, 2010) and *The Guardian* along with many newspapers across the world, faces what has been described as the terminal decline of print (Schmidt, 2010).¹

This ethnographic account considers guardian.co.uk, a website that attracts a global audience, as a potentially important player in hosting and amplifying agonistic discourse. It focuses upon comments made beneath articles as this is currently the most widespread participation opportunity available to its users. As a contracted employee between October 2009 and March 2010 I was able to explore participation from inside the organisation, during a time when it was moving toward the implementation of Alan Rusbridger's 'mutualisation' strategy.

¹ *The Guardian* wished to state that the wider GMG portfolio sustains it so it "doesn't have to make a profit to survive and indeed thrive". They added "It's about keeping losses at levels that can be sustained by the wider group."

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Literature review

This inter-disciplinary literature review is drawn broadly from critical communications research, and managerial and information science. I first of all review arguments on mass media and democratic discourse. I then consider newer commentary on participatory online media, including its potential to host citizen deliberation and influence public policy. Leading from this I assess literature to position newspapers and journalists within this information landscape.

What's right with mass media?

Criticisms of mass media include its tendency to support political and economic elites, set agendas and restrict and manipulate news and information (referred to by Bennett, 1990 as 'indexing'). Jurgen Habermas's (1989 [1962]) damning account, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, informed us that in the 1830s the transition began from, 'a journalism of conviction to one of commerce.' He criticised the development of mass media in direct connection with the rise of a market economy, "less as organs of public information and debate than as technologies for managing consensus and promoting popular culture" (Habermas, 1989 [1962], pxii). Overall his description, and those of critical scholars who have taken up his ideas, have pointed to mass media's detrimental effects on desirable democratic discourse and civic understanding. Yochai Benkler (2006, p197) elaborates on these criticisms:

1. Limited intake: too many views entirely unexplored and unrepresented.
2. Media owners have too much power over what is said and how it is evaluated.
3. The need to attract large audiences leads away from the politically important and even when political matters are covered there is an emphasis on spectacle over substantive conversation of issues.

However Benkler (2006, p197-198) also highlights three 'defenses or advantages' of mass media:

1. Independence from government, party, or upper-class largesse... given the high cost of production and communication, it has been seen as necessary to create a public sphere grounded outside government.
2. The watchdog function it can afford to support: professionalism, large newsrooms, well-researched observations that citizens would not otherwise have made.
3. Near-universal visibility and independence enables the identification of important issues and provides a platform to put them on the public agenda. They can express, filter, and accredit statements about these issues, so that they become well-specified subjects and feasible objects for public debate among informed citizens.

With these two sides of the argument in hand Benkler, although strongly supportive of newer, collaborative information flows, does not see this replacing 'traditional media' altogether. Instead his work on the 'social production of information' argues that the 'networked information economy' provides individuals with a platform to cooperate and communicate alongside mass media. His case suggests a need for retaining the value journalism brings to society, whilst enabling new media to counter some of the problems associated with 'massification.'

The agonistic model for public deliberation

As mentioned above, Habermas's critical account of mass media gave rise to the normative ideal of a '*public sphere*,' where 'public opinion' is formed (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). Access to this sphere should be guaranteed to all citizens within a democracy, who are free to associate and express their opinions. However Habermas's prescription for 'ideal speech' has left many scholars unconvinced – as they argue it is the powerful that set acceptable modes of discourse in any 'public sphere'.

Chantal Mouffe's (1999) argument for 'agonistic pluralism' has criticised Habermas's normative public sphere along these lines. She determines its primary goal of rational argumentation lacks, 'the dimension of the political.' Her point is that relations of power are *constitutive* of the social, (i.e. all public life) so we must ask not, "how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values." Her case for pluralist discourse asks that we accept passion and conflict as inevitable and indeed desirable within civic discourse, for only by driving for homogeneity and / or suppressing the true will of the people could we entirely remove it.

Her case for transforming antagonisms into tenable ‘agonisms’ is that sustainable political consensuses are impossible and undesirable, and therefore democratic civil society must be underpinned by a willingness to take account of multiple preferences and interests. Such a standpoint indicates the need for critical awareness of those who have the power to physically structure debates and set ‘ideal’ modes of discourse within them.

Agonism in the digital realm

Taking the agonism debate online, Peter Dahlgren (2005) also emphasises criticisms levelled at Habermas’s public sphere (particularly its ‘ideal speech conditions’ and focus upon ‘rational deliberation’). He draws upon both Margaret Kohn (2000, cited by Dahlgren, 2005 p157) and Mouffe (1999), stating that the difficulties presented by the inherent rational bias of the public sphere are that firstly: it risks discounting communicative modes that can be of importance for democracy including the affective, the poetic, the humorous, the ironic, and so forth; secondly, that it “risks downplaying relations of power... built into communicative situations” (Dahlgren, 2005 p157).

However, although Dahlgren (2005 p151) is cognizant of pluralism and power relations, he too complains that political discussion online “does not always promote the civic ideal; much of it is isolated (and at times unpleasant).” His argument is somewhat circular, and symptomatic of what Mouffe (2000) has termed ‘The Democratic Paradox’- admitting it is contradictory to set boundaries around discourse – for it is the powerful who will always determine what is ‘civil’ - but yet striving towards determining ‘ideal’ civic deliberation. Eventually, however, Dahlgren arrives at a position that acknowledges (even) uncivil discourse can be an important part of political deliberation and,

“what is more important is the reciprocal dynamics that it can generate, reinforcing the parameters of civic culture and the impact this may have on the larger political situation...”

Having established that messy online debate may have value for democratic discourse after all and that disruption to traditional mass media power may be desirable, Dahlgren states that, “democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other” (Dahlgren, 2005 p149). Considering the role of media, in later work he complains “most people, most of the time, are not following current affairs.” But he argues that a shared public culture is necessary for democracy and sustained by people being ‘civically prepared.’

Encountering difference online

In a 2006 interview Chantal Mouffe is sceptical about agonistic pluralism online: her core complaint is a web made up of political echo-chambers– inhabited by groups of people who agree. But Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz (2009, p42) have highlighted a lack of convincing empirical evidence regarding pluralism online because researchers, due to the need for manageable samples, have tended to choose those that reinforce their own predilections about open-mindedness or homogenous discourse. They found against Mouffe’s assertion of homogeneity in online deliberation. Similar to her, they believe, “political conversation that exposes people to dissimilar political views is most beneficial for effective democracy.” But their review of online participation in the US finds people in online forums often encounter different views: most frequently in ‘non-political’ settings.

It could be charged that Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009)’s quantitative research asked its subjects to judge for themselves whether they have encountered opposing political views, throwing up the obvious methodological question as to whether participants can be deemed reliable judges in this. Yet their study is strong because it draws people from a large random sample of (almost 40,000) surveyed US web users, and also because its conclusions are described convincingly as conservative. However having illuminated the wider agonistic public space online where others have failed, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) do not consider how encountering different views effects individuals. The introduction of Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, (2009)’s experimental study is encouraging here: they report that participants found deliberation highly satisfying, and encountering disagreement with others did not generally alter this evaluation, indicating against the inevitability of online echo-chambers. Taken together these two empirical studies are highly relevant for agonistic theory: suggesting a civic benefit to exposing people online to different views in non-political settings.

Noortje Marres (2006) combines Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism with socio-technical ‘Actor Network Theory’ (ANT). This blending of social science with network theory allows her to conceptualise how connections form online between various passive and active, powerful and less powerful political actors, who may or may not agree. Crucially, her analysis leads to what she calls ‘issue networks’ – around subject areas – linking what people say online to their influence of political decisions. Here, finally, we find a theoretical and practical fusion of notions of online deliberation, social networks, and the potential for citizens to influence political elites. Bringing this together with research on encountering difference, if agonistic online deliberation is a normative goal, its potential lies in connecting ‘issue networks’

through political and ‘non-political’ forums: exposing citizens to alternate views in various settings.

Participation on newspaper websites

Many ‘online newspapers’ now facilitate user comments on their websites, creating the potential for them to be part of digital ‘issue networks’ and host agonistic deliberation. However, although various studies have looked at the materialisation of newspapers online, few have considered the perspective of their users and active participants, nor considered the civic function of this participation (see Mitchelstein and Boczkowski’s 2009 global review of nine years research into online news). A rare example is Deborah Chung’s (2008) study, which has explored use of interactive features on US online newspapers. Her online survey found they were used infrequently, but that usage was heavily related to offline political engagement (this correlates with Bennett’s 2003 findings). She also found perceived credibility of online news and users’ own Internet skill level were significant predictors of usage of interactive features. Chung suggests online newspapers focus on providing quality content and consider educating users so they feel confident enough to interact online. This prescription is echoed in Jeremy Rose and Øystein Saebo (2010)’s study of government-run deliberation systems, which argued, “engagement of citizens presupposes a critical and deliberative background political culture... Education may therefore play an important role” (Rose & Saebo, 2010 p229).

These findings are useful in scrutinizing the online interface, however Chung’s (2008 p663) stated aim to understand the, “attitudes and behaviors of news consumers” appears largely impossible via a prescriptive quantitative method that does not allow that behaviour to be observed. Furthermore, Chung does not consider the *nature* of participation referred to in her survey, for example how user experience might explain low take-up. Chung also takes an amoral stance: matching levels of interaction with users’ characteristics and perceptions but failing to consider any potential benefits of online participation to society. Underpinned by a prevailing administrative rationality, the study omits any normative judgement on whether sites *should* encourage online participation.

‘Carnage’ in the media industry

When Emily Bell (at that time Director of digital content at *The Guardian*) let the word ‘carnage’ slip from her lips during a lengthy LSE lecture in 2008 this was picked up and elevated to headlines the next day (see Brook, 2008). She was predicting savage job cuts at

newspapers – many of which are happening now. On a similar note, Charlie Beckett, former Channel Four broadcast journalist and editor, recently blogged about the media industry's agony. However his analysis referred only to employment and production, omitting the media's role in society. "...50% of jobs could be churned through and possibly lost. Meanwhile, many others will show the kind of creativity and enterprise that wasn't even possible with the old hard metal presses and broadcast paraphernalia and create something anew" (Beckett, 2010).

Releasing control; becoming gate-openers

Resistance to digital change within journalism was documented in great detail in Pablo Boczkowski's (2004) case studies of the *New York Times*, *The Houston Chronicle* and *New Jersey Online*. His in-person observation at their offices found internal actors tried to output what was done offline, online, leading him to the conclusion that these newspapers achieved digital transition only through the relentless pursuit of permanence... "aiming to leave the core of what they do, and are, untouched." (Boczkowski, 2004, p71).

In a more recent evaluation of the British press online, via online survey and in-depth interviews, Hermida and Thurman (2008, p11) found, "news organisations were struggling to balance the resources needed to control – editorially - UGC initiatives with the commercial potential of user media." They also highlighted cultural challenges for journalists faced with user generated content. However, again, they did not speculate on the social significance of participatory media and suggest, "a gate-keeping approach may offer a model for the integration of UGC" (Hermida and Thurman, 2008, p1) without taking into consideration issues around editorial subjectivity.

Nico Carpentier (2006, p12) has said, "Journalists are often referred to as gatekeepers. They decide on what gets broadcasted, or on what gets published. Gate-openers are interested in providing the options, arguments and perspectives. Instead of closing the gate, it is actually a matter of opening the gate." Chantal Mouffe agreed, stating:

"Ideally, the role of the media should precisely be to contribute to the creation of an agonistic public space in which there is the possibility for dissensus to be expressed or different alternatives to be put forward."

Mouffe (2006 p11)

But what is the *experience* of hosting such agonistic space, and, to connect it to the case at hand, newspaper comments? In her descriptive account of US newspapers online, Jennifer Saba (2009) quotes Keith Whamond (who oversaw several online newspapers) acknowledging the relationship between comments posted via 'Topix' and desirable levels of traffic but complaining of the huge work burden they create. In their defence Topix CEO Chris Tolles said comments really 'drive people' to web sites but, "Editors want control, and commentary challenges that control."

Power, 'frames' and deliberation architecture

From a socio-technical perspective Angela Lin and Leiser Silva (2005, p49) have argued that information systems' adoption is a social and political process in which stakeholders attitudes are determined by their social and political 'cognitive frames.' A technological frame is defined as,

"assumptions, expectations, and knowledge used to understand technology in organisations" ...going beyond, "*the nature and role* of the technology itself... [to] the specific conditions, applications and *consequences* of that technology" [my emphasis].

Orlikowski & Gush, 1994 p178 quoted by Lin & Silva, 2005 p50.

Taking forward this argument in the context of newspaper organisations it follows that individuals will treat and construct technology and work processes according to cognitive frames influenced by awareness of the difficult economic times around their industry. Lin and Silva (2005, p58) also assert that attitudes towards information systems are continually framed and reframed through the exercise of power, indicating a need to consider how power (for example invested in organisational hierarchies and processes) affects individuals' frames and their consequent influence on websites and participation architecture.

Steven Lukes (2005) multi-dimensional critique on the nature of power is useful here. The 'first dimension of power' describes observable conflicts of interest and the second dimension draws from Barach and Baratz (1970 quoted by Lukes, 2005, p15) who believe power should be considered beyond decision-making, in terms of 'non-decision making.' This refers to the suppression and thwarting of both latent and manifest challenges to the values or interests of decision-makers. Here the powerful exert their interests by "confining the scope of decision-making to relatively 'safe' issues" (Lukes, 2005 p20-22). Lukes develops his framework by criticising both the first and second dimension of power as reliant on behaviourism – the

obvious, overt things that people do. His ‘third dimension’ describes how it may be invested in people to the extent they are unaware of alternatives to the bias they work to maintain. This is true latent conflict, misunderstood by both parties, even the driving force, the decision-maker. However, this latent quality makes third-dimensional power difficult for researchers to identify, articulate and challenge.

Conceptual framework

Any evaluation of agonistic discourse online requires a theoretical framework beyond political communication: this study of guardian.co.uk thus builds upon contributions from disparate academic fields. I have outlined and sketched connections between research on democratic discourse, the facilitation and user adoption of online interaction and criticisms of, and pressures on the media industry, before focusing in upon theories of power and human responses to technological change. Emerging from this literature are questions around the facilitation of agonistic space online, and how established media might provide it.

This research is framed overall by the normative contention that it is of benefit to our political systems that citizens’ views are developed, exchanged, understood and taken account of by political decision-makers. It is through this theoretical lense that I examine guardian.co.uk – exposing the practicalities of digital deliberation, with the aid of this three-pronged conceptual framework:

1. Online media may provide agonistic spaces: where staff and technical architecture serve as ‘gate-openers’ within issue networks.
2. Civic culture and civic preparedness may be cultivated by encouraging citizens to participate in debate within both political and non-political forums.
3. Power flows and social and political ‘frames’ influence the implementation and use of participatory technology and online deliberation systems.

Research objectives

The objective of this research is to develop a layered perspective of online participation on guardian.co.uk. I build this by considering the views of online participants, journalists or ‘Contributors’, editors, sub-editors, commercial and production staff at *The Guardian*.

Firstly, this is split into two major perspectives: inside and outside guardian.co.uk. The view from inside is based on observations at the office, and the view from outside on comments posted by online participants: meeting the call above for an empirical consideration of online newspaper participation from the view of users.

Having described the views and behaviours of actors involved, I then seek to identify and analyse important themes, with a view to informing the reader how *The Guardian* fits or might fit within democratic, pluralistic online discourse. During this analysis I will explore links between the experience on guardian.co.uk and the social objective of providing agonistic spaces where citizens' contributions may find a platform from which to influence political decision-making. To achieve this I first seek to answer these questions:

Research questions

RQ1: How do Guardian staff view online participation and 'mutualisation'?

RQ2: How do users on-site view the participation experience?

Through exploring these different perspectives the objective of this research is to identify major themes within my overarching research question:

How can and does guardian.co.uk facilitate agonistic pluralism online?

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Strategy and Methodological Reflections

Online, offline; inside, outside

This ethnographic study utilises online and offline research techniques. The offline (real-world) component is based upon observations and materials gathered between October 2009 and March 2010 during my employment with *The Guardian* as Interaction Manager.² This was an experimental role based on an editorial desk: comprising editorial development, community development and social media development, and carried out four days a week whilst I studied part-time for this MSc. The online component consists of observations from comment threads – some of which involved participant-observation – i.e. writing an article and participating in comments below it. The desk I was based on was described internally at *The Guardian* as one of the more digitally ‘progressive,’ and so was an ideal case for exploring attitudes and practices in relation to interactive media. I also observed and participated on *Comment is Free* (Cif), from which the commenters’ views in this account are drawn.

In common with most ethnography my research questions evolved during my time at *The Guardian*; I had initially intended to explore the online ‘issue network’ around the Trafigura story.³ However following conversations at work and university I began to develop the related, but far wider question at the core of this account. As I was an active participant online and also hired to develop interaction at *The Guardian*, this ethnography can be considered to have participatory action research (c.f. Kemmis & McTaggart 2005) features, namely that I draw upon experiences and insights gathered in the process of moving among and attempting to influence my research subjects.

guardian.co.uk is a large, busy website, hosting thousands of comments, produced by multiple editorial ‘desks’ employing hundreds of staff, so there will be nuances that apply to

² This was a fixed term 3 month contract (extended to 6) to help develop how The Guardian approaches engagement with users at the desk level. (‘Desk’ is a journalistic term, and can be understood as a team of correspondents, editors and sub-editors within The Guardian that focuses on a certain subject area – the largest ‘desk’ is the news desk.)

³ This involved *The Guardian* being subject to a ‘super-injunction’ in 2009 preventing it publishing details on its investigation into Trafigura’s activities in the Ivory Coast: which was then thwarted by millions sharing on the story on Twitter, the micro-blogging platform.

different site areas that could not be captured in this account. These two factors, however, have helped me to mitigate the risks this suggests for my analysis:

1. Conversations with other staff in the building – editorial on other desks, non-editorial, and also journalists that attended Cif's engagement seminar.
2. The process of sharing this thesis with staff who have a view across the organisation.

Online observation

During online observations I found the view articulated by Warren Sack (2005) to be accurate: researchers must make difficult choices when analysing 'Very Large Scale Conversations (VLSC).' Deep discourse analysis must be lost if wider inference across multiple threads is carried out. Sack (2005, p254) has argued that there is both a methodological and philosophical "micro-macro problem: how can a large number of individual interactions add up to a larger social or political force and vice versa, how does a large social force act on small-scale, even intimate interactions?" I have conducted my analysis with this question in mind: observing threads over many months I have drawn upon user quotes representative of the discourse I have observed overall.

This study is carried out in light of lessons learnt from a (*Comment is free* focused) pilot conducted for my methods assignment, during which I found the volume of data collected from the online archive of commenters' discussions difficult to manipulate. In view of this, instead of attempting a chronological account, for this study I have organised observations under themes from the outset. Another lesson drawn from the pilot was to carry out a supporting content analysis, which helped to identify patterns in the online interaction taking place, such as how many commenters were responding directly to the article above the thread.

Access and consent

As mentioned, the nature of my study changed during the course of my employment as Interaction Manager. To ensure I was not breaking my employment contract or in breach of research ethics, once I had determined to write my thesis, in part using the field diary I had kept, I sought senior colleagues who could authorise it. However this was fraught with circumstantial complications, and aside from these once the process began staff raised concerns about how I had gathered observations, on the basis that if they had known I was conducting research they might not have hired me into that role, or would at least have set

guidelines around what was on and off the record (as is commonplace with other research permitted at *The Guardian*).

In terms of gaining consent from other subjects on the desk I worked, over my time there I had told some individuals about my *Guardian* dissertation. But only after gaining permission at a senior level did I tell the desk site editor in detail of my dissertation plans. He was very supportive of this, as were the rest of my workmates on the desk when I formally announced my ethnography of *The Guardian*. However the approach I have taken – gaining ‘consent after the fact’ - has significant drawbacks. Subjects may misunderstand the nature of ethnography, and even though they agree in principle, may be uncomfortable with its implications later (as also experienced by Radhika Gajjala, 2002 in the ‘Sawnet refusal’): my review period was indeed fraught with such tension.

By obtaining materials as a ‘complete participant’ I was party to many conversations I might not have been otherwise; some academics, “have described this as the ideal to which researchers should aim” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p82). Yet using covert research techniques has put this study in jeopardy, and at times, in common with many similar studies (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007 p89-94) been very stressful to conduct, and caused distress for some of my research subjects. Revealing my research intentions beforehand would probably have avoided much of this conflict. (Although this was not possible in this case as it was only *during* my time at *The Guardian*, that I decided upon this particular inquiry). On the other hand seeking prior consent may also have reduced or altered the information I had access to.

To ensure my former colleagues are not compromised professionally by this research, as well as anonymising staff quoted from my field diary I have removed all features that identify the desk I worked on. I have also collaborated with two colleagues in particular to gain consent: Janine Gibson, Editor of guardian.co.uk, and later Meg Pickard, Head of Social Media Development, who has requested several notes to be added. This review process has been difficult but rewarding: helping ensure relevant observations could be retained while removing particularly sensitive elements. It has also been useful for my own reflexivity – forcing me to continually re-evaluate my own positionality as employee, colleague and researcher. For example, I was keen to deliver an early draft to a Guardian reviewer so they understood the nature of the work – but they expressed immediate concerns on reading it about anecdotes and overheard conversations I was drawing upon. And even though I believed I had made sufficient efforts to anonymise individuals, on seeing it she felt uneasy

that she could work out who some of them were. I, in turn, felt uncomfortable upon learning she had shared the draft with someone on my former desk who felt betrayed by its content.

A reflexive disclosure of my role in the field

“You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us.”

Tocqueville quoted by Adorno & Horkheimer (1972).

Radhika Gajjala (2002) has suggested reflexive ethnography includes examining the roles we are assigned as well as the locations from which we speak. Therefore it is fitting to acknowledge that although I may have been ‘a stranger’ in the Tocquevillian sense, in fact, perhaps even because I was an outsider, *The Guardian* brought me in for their new ‘Interaction Manager’ role. I entered with a particular ‘outsider’ status: I had never been a journalist, or worked in ‘mainstream media’ before. I have made my career online: first programming and then managing digital communications and communities for many years, as well as being an online and offline protagonist and activist.

I bring as a researcher an undergraduate education in information systems and a (perhaps) related tendency towards problem-solving and implementation. Bearing this potentially positivist inclination in mind I have been especially conscious of pulling back from prescription in constructing this account (whilst maintaining a normative stance on agonistic deliberation online).

The ‘Interaction Manager’ role was the first of its kind at *The Guardian*: with responsibilities that were experimental in nature. As the organisation was beginning to articulate its ‘mutualisation strategy,’ my role was an attempt to put it into practice. I was therefore playing the part of ‘insider’ as an ‘interaction’ change agent within an editorial team; but also remained an ‘outsider’, in terms of having a unique position, a non-journalistic background, and considering guardian.co.uk from an academic perspective. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) have warned the greatest danger in conducting ethnography is, ‘going native.’ However, given my status it might be considered I was more at risk of going ‘observationalist’ – that is, “failing to understand the orientations of participants” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007 p87). To counter this I have been most conscious of seeking out the views and motivations of my colleagues.

This account is not about my Interaction Manager role, although exploring my research questions from this perspective has been most apt. I did not take the job to conduct this study, but rather because my career aspirations include researching, developing and harnessing web technology towards the achievement of global social justice. I believed of all British ‘newspaper websites’ guardian.co.uk fit best with pursuing these ambitions – firstly due to its large, popular and highly-regarded online presence and secondly to the ‘progressive’ stance of some of its coverage on issues I care about. My experience on the desk was difficult and challenging (perhaps unsurprisingly), but I communicated much of this to those I worked with - and left on fairly good terms in March 2010. This was important to me from a personal and professional perspective and I have been conscious during completion of this thesis of maintaining that good will.⁴

Research Data and Procedures

The data analysed for this account is as follows:

- Field notes / diary: A diary of my time at *The Guardian* from February to March 2010. This was kept in Google Docs, an online word processing tool (so it could be accessed quickly and easily from ‘the cloud’ from wherever I was at work or home). It was then organised thematically.

- Online observation: Observations from comment threads beneath guardian.co.uk articles on Comment is free. The focus on Comment is free for online observation was apt as a) Comment is free is the busiest area of the site in terms of number of comments b) I was able to write and participate there on subjects I know of (i.e. online communities / digital culture).
 - In defence of anonymity online
 - The true worth of online communities
 - Read Cif, but never post?

⁴ Shortly after I sent the first draft of this thesis to *The Guardian*, I was hired on another short-term contract, to build online networks in advance of a new site section on the Millennium Development Goals. This has given me the advantage of being able to discuss my thesis with colleagues more easily but exacerbated the conflict between my status as critical researcher and employee. However, I have remained reflexive in taking account of this problematic positionality and feel ultimately that the review process has not impacted my core findings or conclusions and has been beneficial to the robustness of this account.

- Content analysis on discussions: Following lessons learnt from earlier Cif observations, for data collection on the *Read but never post?* thread I conducted a simple content analysis categorising reasons given for not participating – during my analysis I needed to add another category: commenters explaining why *they* started posting.
- Interview with Alan Rusbridger: Carried out when I was intending to write my dissertation on Trafigura, I have drawn upon parts of this interview relevant to this account.
- Ten possible principles of ‘mutualisation’: A reproduction of items discussed at the mutualisation breakfast on 1st April 2010.

CHAPTER THREE: OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS

The core participatory offer to registered users on guardian.co.uk is posting comments ‘below the line’ - beneath published items. (An illustration of ‘the line’ is included in the appendix). ‘Above the line’ can be found editorially selected content in the form of news articles, features, blog posts, and video. Most content above the line is published with its author’s real name, whereas most commenters post under pseudonyms such as ‘zounds’.

“Adaptive interactivity, much like the blending of medium and human interactivity, allows the users’ experiences to have consequences on site content”

Deuze 2003, quoted by Chung, 2008 p661.

A major aim for my time on the desk was for opinions of Guardian participants to influence its output. On this subject Alan Rusbridger’s commentary might warm the hearts of digital utopians,

“If we went into this thinking we as journalists will lead and you as readers will follow and we will allow you to comment on the bottom of our articles – that’s not going to work... we have to find ways of allowing people to say – ‘well [just because] you’re not interested in this sphere of human activity because you’re living in your ivory tower in Kings Cross - well *we’re* going to put this on the agenda...”

Interview with Rusbridger, 2010

Here he refers to users, the ‘online crowd,’ setting, or at least inputting into, *The Guardian’s* agenda. If ideal civic culture indicates heteroglossia (many voices and views) should form public discourse – Rusbridger’s intentions are in line with guardian.co.uk hosting the deliberation necessary for the development of critical public opinion and for this to work its way into ‘the agenda’ of the powerful. But, practically, on the editorial floor I found social, practical and technical barriers to such efficacious participation.

RQ1: How do Guardian staff view online participation and ‘mutualisation’?

When I began work at *The Guardian* in October 2009 I had the impression its web offer was highly sophisticated and the organisation was keen on developing engagement. However from early on during my time on the desk I realised that interaction, ‘mutualisation,’ and any

philosophy behind it were yet to be articulated to many editorial staff. Although staff had begun using the word, it was only later, in January 2010, that the ‘Mutualisation’ strategy was announced publicly by Rusbridger as the organisation’s move towards more collaborative journalism.⁵

After starting work in 2009, one of the first mentions of this concept I heard on the desk was, ‘he (meaning Rusbridger) keeps talking about mutualisation but no one knows what it means.’ Later on that year a sub-editor laid out her understanding thus:

“Alan has this vision where there will be these huge great mechanical jaws that scoop up what is coming from out there - from bloggers and other sites – and there will be just a few executive editors here making it happen.”

The dramatic articulation of this metaphor conjured images of web technology as mechanical menace supplanting the people who craft news. It deftly illustrated the threat to journalism as a profession I felt palpably among those on the editorial floor- where uncertainty and fear gripped many staff. A sub-editor asked me in hushed tones over the desk, “do you think jobs like mine will exist in future?” I knew from other conversations she was concerned about diversifying her skills to keep a job. At another time a group of students were shown around the office, prompting a contract sub-editor to jokingly remark, “there aren't any jobs here.” A permanent site editor joined in - “I'm hanging on to my chair.” Later on in more serious conversation a sub-editor who had opted for voluntary redundancy stated, “I just don't think there's a future in journalism anymore.” Although senior staff have assured me the timing of these redundancies and the introduction of mutualisation overlapped, rather than being linked, many editorial staff connected ‘digital progress’ and loss of jobs, in line with Emily Bell’s (2008) predictions.⁶

On arrival at *The Guardian* I was told of the organisational aim for all journalists to read user comments beneath their articles and post comments in response.⁷ This edict was connected to accumulated Guardian experience: and later at the Cif Contributors seminar towards the end of my contract, moderators (who observe comments every day) informed attendees that comment threads where a journalist participates are almost always more civil and become

⁵ Breakfast meetings to discuss mutualisation with staff took place between 4 March and 1 April 2010.

⁶ The Guardian wished to state that there has not been a single compulsory redundancy in this department and that the wider context is the ‘advertising recession’ that was happening at the same time.

⁷ Meg Pickard wished to add that there is not an organisational mandate, rather journalists are encouraged to participate.

‘self-managing.’ This concurs with Rose and Saebo’s (2010, p230) findings in the context of government run deliberation forums where the, “presence of politicians was found to contribute to a respectful tone and to factuality in debates.” However, one correspondent explained to me that up until recently they had never had to deal directly with public criticism online: ‘Going into threads’ meant both assimilating and interacting with it and many found the experience upsetting. Yet the Cif engagement seminar I attended was effective in pointing to how journalists can be supported to engage.

The journalist works alone in many ways. Gathering a network of contacts, seeking and storing away juicy tips, huddling in a corner somewhere and then, voila! a story is born – hopefully a ‘scoop’. A correspondent confided with me, “you see journalists don’t really want to work with one another collaboratively – this goes against owning the story.” So the journalist protects ‘their story’, and the editor ‘their’ site – for which their prevailing drive was to get as much traffic as possible in the knowledge when budget decisions are made this will be taken into account. I noticed early on that this reduced the likelihood of editorial staff making great efforts to link to sites other than their own (a problem if a civic ideal is for users to travel between political and non-political discussion - as suggested by Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009).

A theme at the Cif seminar and in conversations on the editorial floor was commenters behaving badly and attacking those ‘above the line’. This view came from those who seemed to lack appreciation of the positive side of passionate political exchanges online. Participants’ perceived inappropriate behaviour and the threat users represent to journalism seemed to temper every conversation I had as ‘interaction manager’: when trying to share users’ insightful comments and ideas with editorial staff it was like being caught between two different worlds which could not interface. During the Cif Contributors seminar I glimpsed someone else used to playing that role when an editor was led to an impassioned outburst, ‘we really must stop all this nonsense that all commenters are rude and abusive!’

Editors seemed to try and read comments – but without connecting this in any obvious way with subsequent stories. Was this driven by underlying fears that openly utilising outside suggestions meant supporting the supplanting of editorial judgement? I wondered at how editors’ frames (see Lin and Silva, 2005) refracted the idea of bending their journalism to the crowd, or to ‘outsiders’ such as myself. I was told by a *Guardian* web editor one of the earliest things a journalist learns is what makes ‘a good story.’ This broaches an obvious problem – what if a commenter’s idea for a ‘good story,’ is not the same as an editor’s? How can the crowd help drive guardian.co.uk’s agenda, when their contributions only filter up when they

correspond with editorial frames - cognitive frames which cannot possibly be understood by others when they are constructed during years of journalistic training and organisational enculturation?

The issue of the 'right type of conversation' came up over and over again in discussions with editorial staff. This may be deftly related to the dilemma of liberalism, or 'Democratic Paradox', as Mouffe (2000) has termed it: where in seeking absolute truth and 'common values,' we close down the space for alternative viewpoints. She warned that to avoid this there must be an awareness that, "no regime, not even a liberal one, can pretend to have a privileged claim on rationality" (Mouffe 2005, p223). The implications of this for participation are that it should not be hosted on the basis that superior morals exist. I considered whether the very 'liberal' nature of Guardian staff views - mixed with journalistic modes of operation - results in a media production process where those involved feel they have a certain privileged understanding of ideal discourse and worthy stories.

From the perspective of editorial staff, a concern in addition to *what* was being said, was *who* was saying it. Identity, user motivation and trust figured here. Discussing moderation with an editor, he said, "we can't just have an open platform, PR people would just come along and put up what they wanted." User anonymity was thus connected to unease around 'openness.' Indeed, when I made a case for crediting users' pseudonyms 'above the line' to encourage further participation a web editor said, 'I just think, why should I listen to people who are anonymous?' This seemed a core sticking point for some editorial staff and also for many external Cif Contributors - and motivated my first Cif article *In defence of anonymity online* (Cook, M, 2010a). After the piece was published the editor quoted above said he had reflected upon my argument but still thought there were issues around the expertise and authority of those participating.

As mentioned, shortly before I left the desk 'mutualisation' breakfasts started where Alan Rusbridger discussed the topic with staff. At the session I attended, apparently in deference to editorial sensitivities, the language used by Alan was incredibly cautious. But nonetheless it was refreshing to hear principles in line with the position of this thesis articulated to my colleagues. For example, of the ten 'possible principles of mutualisation' one read: "*It recognises that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest.*" As I have recounted earlier, before starting I had misunderstood staff enthusiasm towards outside engagement. But the conversation at the desk's mutualisation breakfast (six months later) indicated they may be changing the way they thought about their work. I was surprised at how positively my activities on the desk were profiled, concluding on reflection that although

their professional personas and established work processes had so often ran contrary to the goals for my role, my colleagues felt they should seem supportive of such work. Perhaps working alongside an 'Interaction Manager' had made more of an impact than I had realised.

RQ2: How do users on-site view participation?

guardian.co.uk attracts large volumes of comments beneath articles across a range of subjects from culture to Afghanistan to cycling. As described above, the tone and inappropriateness of this debate 'below the line' was a common cause for concern from 'above the line' staff and I did indeed observe that the strongest commenter jibes were directed at those above the line – and experienced some of this myself beneath my own two Cif articles. Online participants adjusted more graciously to language differences, education levels and even opinions more readily amongst themselves than in their treatment of above the line Guardian writers.

Beneath my second Cif article (Cook, 2010b) I discussed use of language and how those outside online communities seemed to find it so difficult to understand those inside. Later on in the comments I added to this, musing on whether this prevents deliberation online influencing institutional power. To this a somewhat cynical commenter posted a lengthy response - to the approval of others:

“The institutions have no intention of sharing power. They frame the debate, they omit the bits the don't like. The institutions are very selective as to who they let in. They have their own opaque internal politics... On-line communities feel and sound so different, as they're the public engaging the public, with little mediation.

Before on-line communities the discourse was limited by, and to the language of the established institutions. Even the so called anti-establishment was firmly embedded within the same institutions.... The grammar of on-line political communities is the grammar of outsiders. It's the gypsy language spoken in the wastelands beyond the palace walls.”

The commenter argued those outside do not (and perhaps cannot) communicate in the same way as those inside. Later on another considered tensions between Cif participants and those running the site. S/he and stated that guardian.co.uk encourages message board type engagement, which it wants to drive page impressions, but...“here's where the tensions start to creep in.” Was *The Guardian* provoking user ire because it sets up expectations of a certain type of interaction, but provides another, more restricted one? The commenter objected to

being described by a staff member as a 'guest' and went on to state *The Guardian* needs its users and therefore the,

“comparison isn't between a tweedy home-owner and the necessity of a guest to remain gracious, it's closer to that of a restaurant or a shop and customers who are there to be served..... *The Guardian* may be hosting the site, but the readers and advertisers are paying for it.”

This exchange was sparked by the topic of moderation - a frequent cause for consternation among commenters:

“...I remember posting the following comment (under an article by Moazzam Begg):
"the moderation on this thread has been astonishing". That's it, not a word more. It was deleted. What on earth standard did that breach? It's like a moderation super-injunction... It creates a long-term malaise that's bound to come out.”

It is specified in *The Guardian*'s community standards that commenters should refrain from discussion about moderation decisions, so it is within these for such deletions to be carried out. However, some users obviously felt they have the right to publicly challenge this authority. Conversely, many wrote in support of moderation: but appealed too for consistency, right of appeal and to know why certain decisions had been made. There is no obvious public place for this at the moment, however I was witness to a heavily contested banning of a user, which was eventually overturned by moderators – showing that given enough user dissent on the threads *The Guardian* will take outside views into account and even reverse decisions.

As part of the Cif engagement seminar, moderators stated that commenters will behave more and more 'outrageously' if they feel no one is listening. They told writers that the lack of an 'above the line' presence helped cultivate an unpleasant tone – chiming with Dalgren's (2005 p152) analysis: “there must be some semblance... that the political talk of citizens has consequences, or else disengagement and cynicism can set in.” I also observed users commenting in line with this, for example, “It's an infrequent event to 'interact' with columnists here. Some have the wit and the balls to engage BTL and fight their corner. Your more controversial writers don't sadly.” This use of language suggested a battle – that you need a certain aggressive parlance to make it 'below the line.' I wondered as I read this if I was just comfortable with confrontational discourse. Did I find it difficult to appreciate the

view from above the line because I had entered *The Guardian* and remained more aligned with the anonymous angry commenter than the serene, successful journalist?

On the subject of commenter / editorial interface, one of the ways I attempted to bring these parties together as Interaction Manager was by rounding up activity in a newly conceived weekly ‘community blog’ that included comments from several articles. Although this seemed useful to demonstrate to the crowd that someone was reading their contributions the editorial process confounded and diminished the range of perspectives I included. Editorial suggestions on it also went against my instincts - for example choosing a ‘best comment.’ This highlighted to me how far the web architecture meant editorial control and selection could be easily reverted to by staff, even when bringing in the views of others. Commenter reaction was fairly quiet, with some positive and some negative comments: site participants did not seem to know what to say underneath; one commented, “Great summary but it feels weird commenting on comments on articles.” Dissenting voices objected to the top-down selection process, similar to experience reported with, ‘My Telegraph’ on telegraph.co.uk - where when a ‘featured blogger’ was chosen participants objected to the selection process and there was ‘a huge conspiracy’ around who was chosen (Beckett, 2010 p7-8). So the blog did not seem to work either with users or the editorial team: it seemed to trivialise the week’s user activity, with its ‘above the line’ standard format: condense, summarise, show the most ‘interesting’ bits.

The Cif team put a Read Cif, but never post? article online during my time at *The Guardian* – to encourage lurkers to ‘say hello’ underneath. Many site users do not comment and this thread represented an opportunity to understand their lack of engagement: in the discussion they gave a range of reasons. Some cited frustration with moderation – for example, “I gave up posting when my comments were removed seemingly for disagreeing with the ideas being proposed in the piece.” One confessed shyness, and another that language and location was a concern. Another commenter suggested how participation might be better structured:

“The New York Times has a facility that lets you view comments in order of reader recommendations, and also a kind of “editor's choice” selection. The latter option might be a nice way of promoting interesting comments that would otherwise get completely lost in, say 147th place on a long thread.”

This argument for an ‘editor’s choice’ seemed similar to the community blog – however the New York Times feature mentioned worked better as selected comments were directly attached to the article they were drawn from. So although it retained editorial selectivity it at

least gave space for several 'selected comments' per subject. Perhaps curation that focused on just one conversation would have worked better for the community blog. Crucially, this commenter also suggested other users could decide which comments are promoted upwards.

The discussion went on with other posters considering the physical dimensions of discussion on guardian.co.uk:

“Is an online community scalable to that kind of size, and if so, do we need to look beyond the traditional threaded discussion to achieve it?”

“...It's almost impossible to be arsed getting into a 'debate' that's been going on for three hundred posts already... standard one-dimensional threads like this don't quite work on such an active website (for me). But I've no idea what the answer is. I suppose you could try letting users post their own threads beneath each article (as opposed to having one long thread)...”

“I tend not to post because I always get to the party too late. If there are over 100 or so posts on a thread I never have any hope of reading them all, so have to assume the same of others...”

Some were clearly driven by the combative side of the discourse: a frequent commenter explained, “I only started looking at the online Guardian to access news items... Then I saw a controversial article and the rest - as they say - is history.” However there were three comments that gave disliking the content of comments as a reason not to post. Their objections were similar to the poor view some above the line staff have of commenters. This indicated various staff and users would respond to the cultivation of less *antagonistic* styles of interaction.

How can and does guardian.co.uk facilitate agonistic pluralism?

Logic and logistics: the challenges of collaborative media

Yochai Benkler (2006) lights upon the *Babel objection* which is, “if everyone can speak – no-one can be heard.” How may journalists and editors hear ‘the crowd’? In addition to communicating (in the traditional way) with a network of contacts from which they gather stories, correspondents and editors must navigate multiple internal information systems –

how can they also incorporate consideration of hundreds or even thousands of comments – as well as external social media such as Facebook, Twitter and personal and specialist blogs? This new way of working is being embraced by some, but I spoke to journalists who struggled with the volume of emails they received and were unclear how they could incorporate even more information inputs.⁸ A non-editorial staff member shared with me his experience of trying to get people on various desks to include interactivity in what they do - he said it was incredibly difficult as they saw it as extra work. Correspondents needed to keep producing stories as they always had, but now to also listen and participate. This presented a practical challenge –working in a new way (engaging online) that impacts time available for what already gets them recognised (writing stories) – in an environment where holding onto ones own job is a priority.

As I tried myself to reconcile disparate comments into a weekly blog it became clearer that an ongoing ‘community’ conversation around subject areas is very different to ‘traditional’ news journalism, where a journalist creates a story – to reach as many eyeballs as possible (and impress their editor) – and then moves on to the next one. I began to see the underlying problem as contrasting flows of information. The news cycle around event peaks and controversies – and how citizens (i.e. commenters) understand subjects – as ‘news’ but also as sustained interest areas, daily life choices or even ongoing activism. In relation to this, I spoke to some editorial staff about beginning to think of news subjects as ‘social objects,’ (Engeström, 2005) – however this was not received well. It seemed in addition to workplace culture many individuals were still wedded to an older industrial media logic – even when they had a genuine desire to work interactivity into their work. Lukes’s third dimension of power is useful to assess this phenomena as it describes how latent power and conflict can result in invisible, or in this case barely visible, contradictions. These surfaced in attempts to produce collaborative media while trying to retain approaches suited to mass print media, echoing what Boczowski (2004) referred to as trying to leave ‘the core of what they do untouched.’

My time at the Cif contributors engagement seminar and on the desk revealed a lack of engagement by correspondents and Contributors could be attributed (by varying degrees for different individuals) to lack of confidence, lack of awareness or acceptance of the importance of engagement, to a general cultural disdain for commenters, or to a lack of time or skills to participate in the conversation. However the Cif session showed an inclination to listen and

⁸ I presented on this at the site-editors meeting under the heading, ‘incorporating engagement at every stage of a story’s evolution.’

engage could be built – if accompanied by appropriate motivation and work loads. During reviews of this thesis Meg Pickard, Head of Social Media Engagement told me, “gradually journalists within this organisation and elsewhere are – with encouragement and support – discovering for themselves there may be value, insight and even enjoyment in participating in an online conversation sparked by their work.” But the question of work roles and job insecurity in the digital age clouded attitudes towards this – as did the problem that what is ‘civil’ to one person (below the line) may not be so to another (above the line) – and vice versa.

To motivate a shift in attitudes, it is imperative staff can themselves answer the crucial question, ‘why bother to engage?’ My account suggests that communicating benevolent motives to staff (such as laid out in my presentation to the Cif seminar) would work well for Guardian staff in particular, given the notion the organisation has of being a ‘troublesome’ part of the establishment. Individuals would then be persuaded towards making their media more ‘mutualised’ by developing: a) an appreciation of the civic value of participatory media, b) an appreciation of the crowds’ perspective, c) practical skills to engage with ‘readers’ and d) an understanding that developing their professional personas in this way is valuable to their careers, now at *The Guardian*, and in future.

Hosting, educating, encouraging the crowd

As guardian.co.uk publishes popular material across a vast array of subject areas, it has the potential to facilitate multiple agonistic spaces within spaces – and encourage its users to travel between political and non-political content. (In line with Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper’s 2005 recommendation that young peoples’ civic participation online could be supported by designing links from popular/ entertainment sites to civic/ political sites.) But internal competition between ‘sites’ for traffic runs contrary to making great efforts towards this. Site editors might be persuaded to become more involved in facilitating such user flows if made accountable for them, however during my time on the desk internal referrals did not figure in web reports.

If *The Guardian* can achieve work processes to take account of many voices, it follows that encouraging further participation, even to the extent of educating potential new participants, would be conducive to more registering and commenting. My user observations have confirmed Chung’s (2008) findings that barriers to participation include a lack of user confidence. I have also identified that elements of site design are off-putting – long comment threads organised over multiple pages were deemed by users to be less than ideal on such a

busy website. Furthermore, commenters also desired more transparency about the moderation process. I was led by both commenters and staff to the conclusion that Shirky (2008) is right, that to ‘publish, then filter’ makes it possible for more to be heard on social websites. The alternative is editorial censorship, requiring heavy moderation resource and creating user disillusionment. Making the flood of participation manageable and enabling important insights to filter upwards implies coding online space for citizens’ ideas to be written, searched, rated, and tagged, sorting and showing what is preferred by different individuals and groups: for example the wider crowd, experts, or those most trusted by user or their selected online peers.

Gate-opening: routes up from the bottom

Consideration of what is interesting to its users, combined with a willingness to elevate it, is key to *The Guardian* providing constructive forums for agonistic pluralism online, and being a key node in 21st century issue networks (see Marres, 2006). But tone and language norms often differ across ‘the line’ - is this a significant barrier to citizens entering into the establishment conversations of which they are part? In conversation with a senior non-editorial member of staff they mused that there is too much emphasis at *The Guardian* on *how* things are written, rather than *what* is being written. It seemed this emphasis made commenters’ crudeness jump out at editorial staff with every single ‘unsuitable’ word.

“I had no chance to show them how clever I was because wit is communicated by language and I hadn’t yet learned theirs.”

Maya Angelou, 1974, p40

Carpentier (2006) has suggested the need for journalists to become ‘gate-openers.’ But what if they speak a different language to those outside? My account suggests the need for people and tools that can mediate between inside and outside large deliberation spaces: as a bridge between commenters’ passionate exchanges and items ‘fit’ for publication. Aside from hybrid roles such as ‘Interaction Manager’ perhaps this is where the sub-editing process can play a vital role, turning external ideas into stories acceptable according to Guardian style.

It is Rusbridger’s (2010) description of David Leigh, with the weight of *Guardian* resources behind him, delving into the heart of the Trafigura story that shows most clearly what mass media offers. And if harnessing the means, skills and experience to turn a lead into a well-crafted story are where *The Guardian* may still bring great value: in the digital age this

extends to taking account of what online users think from an initial idea, through to its evolution post-publication. Journalism's value to society, then, remains in carrying out investigations in the 'public interest,' but where the public are increasingly able to articulate and define what that is.

This transformation process: taking the expressed concerns of citizens and converting them into material that may be taken account of by those in power, (given current guardian.co.uk architecture), means channelling user contributions into top profile articles – enabling site participants to influence policy via Guardian journalists and editors, elevating user opinions from comments to web articles, right up to the coveted front page (website or newspaper) slot. It was thus encouraging to see (although from an internal perspective it launched almost in secret) – this very transition starting on *Comment is Free* – where participants are invited to request pieces in 'What do you want to talk about' – and articles are commissioned from this. Users from below the line have also started writing above the line via this feature. Thus, working with 'top-down' technology Cif staff members are managing to bring in a more 'bottom-up' type of publishing. But although this conduit for user feedback was a step in the direction of more 'mutualised' media it still required a commitment to listen and act and furthermore, a Cif editor still ultimately decided what made it up from the bottom.

Identity, tension and influence

Part of the tension between those above and below the line can be attributed to the asymmetry of what is known about each party. The journalist's identity appears with their work for all to see, making them publicly accountable for what they write. In contrast the commenter can use a pseudonym and be untraceable. Journalists and editors struggle with the knowledge what they publish will determine their professional reputation. Commenters struggle to be taken seriously because they post under pseudonyms. John Dewey (1927, quoted by Marres, 2006 p11), argued that 'political communities consisted of actors *indirectly* implicated in a common issue... they are *strangers*.' If this is the case, it is not necessary for online participants to reveal themselves to one another. However even if anonymity is better for generating 'issue definitions' (as suggested by Marres 2006), this presents a problem for consequent policy formation:

a) when democracies are made up of citizens with names *and*

b) national governments take account of *their* citizens and not 'global citizens' who have opinions but do not live within their territory.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic account has empirically tested theories on deliberation online by observing views from inside and outside guardian.co.uk. The insights I have gathered are highly relevant to aims articulated by Mouffe, Marres, Dahlgren, Benkler and others, for agonistic online spaces where issues may be deliberated and consequentially influence institutional power.

I have considered users' frustrations, such as the inability to publicly challenge moderation decisions, the difficulty of getting into long, linear conversations, and the feeling of being ignored above the line. This perception of being unheard cultivates a particular type of 'othering' (Hall, 1997 p223) by commenters of those above them - creating different norms for how they behave towards article authors in comparison to other commenters. It also leads to an ever-perpetuating cycle whereby users are belligerent, making writers wary of interacting with them, leading to further frustration below the line. This 'long-term malaise' might be compared to Mouffe's analysis of the rise of the far right under liberal democracies, where she says a "lack of 'agonistic channels' for the expression of grievances tends to create the conditions for the emergence of antagonisms which can take extreme forms" (Mouffe, 2005 p231).

I have recounted the technical means by which participation is hosted and the consequences of this. The (legacy) 'article at the top' – comments at the bottom architecture means editorial power may be retained, even when trying to bring in others i.e. the deliberation space which current actors work within has the characteristics of a 'technology of power' that entrenches existing social and political interests (see Sack 2005, p266): where more powerful individuals decide what is 'interesting' and may keep the views of others, literally, on another level.

Through relating my experience curating a 'Community blog' I have shown the difficulty of representing multiple community conversations in a 'traditional' article format. I have, however identified how this type of editorial filtering of user generated content may work better if focused upon one subject or conversation; and even better, if supplemented or even replaced by the online crowd determining which comments are most worthy of elevation. This has also led onto consideration of the difference between journalism conducted according to a news cycle of 'interesting' stories and 'community' conversations around ongoing interest areas.

My analysis has thus revealed the path upwards for ideas, even via the new ‘What do you want to talk about’ feature, is reliant on editorial selectivity. However the principles of ‘mutualisation’ are conducive to this altering. There is a philosophical shift required for staff with a more traditional journalistic mind-set to achieve this end: from understanding their roles as having media power, privilege and authority to filter – to having the social responsibility of facilitating, aggregating, and elevating the views of others. This evolution will require continued changes to job roles, work practices, internal information management and the user web interface. More broadly, I have identified a need for ‘online newspapers’ to commit to the motivation, education and empowerment of staff, users and participants, if they are to be progressive nodes in tomorrow’s issue networks.

My account has also raised a related question on how publicly accountable journalists can be made to appreciate, and hold as equally important, those who post under pseudonyms – particularly when they are so accustomed to using identity and expertise to judge who best to listen to. It has also asked how we can expect anonymous online deliberation to influence policy, when policy makers within democracies are accountable to named citizens.

Further research into the themes raised in this thesis could look at how online newspapers’ comments fit into wider issue networks, using network mapping tools and extending ethnographic observation across many websites – tracing how the online deliberation experience differs depending on the website, its commercial structure and technical architecture. Combining the notion of issue networks with the objective of filtering user opinions up to the most prominent positions researchers could look also at the cycle of an issue hosted on an online newspaper – where online comments and investigative journalism work together to construct and tell a story – to ascertain how far this succeeds in connecting citizens with political decision-making. Furthermore, as the world becomes more globalised, another research inquiry suggested is an exploration of how agonism is experienced when online participants implicated in common issues come together from different geographical locations – bringing cultural and linguistic differences with them.

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The Guardian has asked for the following note to be added to any publication of this paper:

Mariam Cook's dissertation was researched while she was on a short-term contract with the Guardian in an experimental new role between September 09 and March 2010. Her findings are based on exposure to a relatively small section of the company in a period of transition and against the backdrop of a changing media landscape. Since she shared the research and findings with us in July 2010, we have worked with her to ensure she contextualises individual comments and experiences. Nevertheless, the work is not endorsed by Guardian News & Media as a true reflection of the attitudes, behaviours and practices of the organisation as a whole.

Meg Pickard (Head of Social Media Development, Guardian News & Media)

Elisabeth Ribbans (Managing Editor, The Guardian)

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Appendix 1. Example Cif article, showing the line

A screenshot showing the much referred-to 'line' with an article above and comments below:

Article 'Contributor'

Article: 'above the line'

commenter

Comment: 'below the line'

Comment is free Cif America

To boldly go to a commercial space age

The space exploration paradigm has moved on since the days of Apollo. To make progress, NASA must embrace private industry

Kevin Pong
guardian.co.uk, Friday 16 April 2010 16:00 BST
Article history

It's not surprising that people are all bent out of shape over Obama's plans for NASA and its human space flight programme. Aiding Constellation means job losses and the abandonment of long pursued programmes of science and engineering, for some people it is the end of their exploration dreams. But among the disgruntled is Neil Armstrong who for once has decided to break cover and make himself heard. In his view Obama's plans risk ending the United States's pre-eminence in space exploration to emerging superpowers and display a fatal lack of vision.

But the space exploration paradigm has moved on since the days of Apollo. NASA's budget, as a fraction of the country's GDP, is an order of magnitude less than it was around the time of those missions. Gone are the days when things could move so quickly or command such resources. From Kennedy's utterance of the words 'before this decade is out' to Armstrong's historic small step, took eight years. No NASA programme of recent times has proved anything like as agile or successful.

Armstrong's message is that if you have a vision you've got to stick with it, believe in it and resource it properly. True, but it's the resource that is the sticking issue here. In embracing the commercial sector NASA looks to solve the problem of sustainability, hoping that private contractors can drive down the cost of access to space. If it works this will be a game changer, leaving private industry to do the donkey work of hauling people and payload into low Earth orbit, while NASA gets on with the business of developing new, advanced exploration technologies.

If the US wishes to continue its human space exploration endeavours in the century it must find a new, more sustainable strategy and commercial providers hold the key to this. The question is not 'if' but 'when' they should start to rely upon private industry to do some of the things that their national space agency used to. Getting the timing wrong would decimate NASA's army of aerospace engineers, leave their astronauts without a ride and irreversibly damage their space exploration capabilities.

The direction in which Obama is taking NASA is new, bold and necessary in the long run. The plans lack nothing in the way of vision but risk a great deal in their potential prematureity. It is like the Armstrong fiasco and with good reason. But if Obama can negotiate this risk, and find a rational way to smooth the transition from old to new, then what we will witness is not the end of an era but the birth of a new space age.

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Appendix 2: 10 possible principles of ‘mutualisation’

These were discussed at the mutualisation breakfast meetings hosted by Alan Rusbridger from April 2010:

1. It encourages participation, It invites and/or allows a response
2. It is not an inert "us" to "them" form of publishing
3. It encourages others to initiate debate, publish material or make suggestions. We can follow, as well as lead. We can involve others in the pre-production process
4. It helps form communities of joint interest around subjects, issues or individuals
5. It is open to the web and is part of it. It links to, and collaborates with, other material (including services) on the web
6. It aggregates and/ or curates the work of others
7. It recognises that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest
8. It aspires to achieve, and reflect, diversity as well as promoting shared values
9. It recognises that publishing can be the beginning of the journalistic process rather than the end
10. It is transparent and open to challenge - including correction, clarification and addition

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