

Conversational style of journalism

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James Ball is a data journalist working for the *Guardian* investigations team. He joined the *Guardian* from Wikileaks, and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. He is the Washington Post Laurence Stern Fellow for 2012.

How would you describe the journalism transformation due to audience empowerment in the new media environment?

I think you've got two factors. One is where the audience is shifting. They are obviously moving online, which for someone like the *Guardian* is both a really big treat and a really big opportunity. The *Guardian* is losing print circulation very fast, it is down to less than 200,000, and that really hurts. The flipside of it is that the *Guardian* has always been a very small newspaper, but it has a huge website. Therefore 200,000 people get a print paper each day, 4 million read it online every day, and 608 million different people each month look at the website, resulting in a mix of a massive treat and a massive opportunity. More people are consuming the *Guardian* news than ever before and it's hard not to like that. So, there is a bigger audience for journalism, I think than ever before. The other thing that changes is actually how they interact and how we interact with them. People are much more able to check into a new story, and just comment on the bottom. In some places the journalist just writes a story while comments are just left aside. In the *Guardian* you are very strongly encouraged to read your comment threads and to be in them. If you comment early in the news thread, the tone is usually better and a lot more on the topic, because people know that you are reading what they're saying and you get less abuse and more conversation. That is built in E-thought of the *Guardian*, which they call an open journalism; trying to recognise that on a lot of areas some of the people who read the *Guardian* will

know more about it than the journalists do.

You seem to be talking about participatory journalism, because your audience is contributing to the content or you produce the content almost together?

Yeah, I think to an extent that has always been done. Let us say you are doing a complex investigation where you cannot prove everything. If you hit a dead end, one of the things you can think about is publishing what you've already got. It may not be that strong of a story, it may not be page one, and you risk tipping someone else to look into it. You publish what you have got and see if anyone responds to that. In fact my second story has not finished yet, but I published the story a few weeks ago and 3 or 4 people got in touch to say, "Yeah you're right and there's more." Some of them could give me evidence, and gave me the stuff I hadn't been able to get the first time around. So the ability to do that kind of stuff is good. I also quite like some of the conversational aspects of journalism now. Twitter can be awful but it can also be really good. It is incredibly easy to find a journalist on there and to communicate with them about story. It's like asking a room full of people their opinion on your story, they are strangers so they are more likely to be honest. You get feedback in quite interesting ways and you get to see who likes the story and who doesn't and why. People may also link you to similar stuff. Also I have had people who got in touch over Twitter. If I get a sense that this person knows more about something, I start chatting to them and ask if there is a chance to send me a private message with their phone number; then you've got a source to follow up. I like this kind of conversational style of journalism. There are things that work, and some things that don't, especially what you do on projects. I do investigations, on which I usually can't talk about what my next story is going to be, moreover sometimes I work for three to four months on a story. I still use a lot of traditional methods, but there are a lot of times when you got to go out there.

How would you name it, because we heard expressions like multi task, multimedia, multi skill journalists? Could you phrase it in one phrase?

I like the *Guardian* term for it – I'm doing an open journalism, even conversational journalism. It almost seems like such an obvious way to take advantage of the internet, that I don't even think that it does need a term.

Do you think that the roles of journalists are changing from their traditionally defined roles?

People like and trust journalists to prioritise the news for them, and different journalists do in different ways, and that's why we have them. Papers are much more shaped by their audiences than shaping their audiences. I think the role has changed, but in society, the big picture has changed less. How it is carried out has changed a bit more. I think it is much

more conversational. There is a shift towards a little bit more personality. I don't think we are throwing out fairness, objectivity and so on. It is a little bit more ok now for journalists, because your audience wants to talk with you, wants to engage with you on different platforms, at different levels of formality. This sort of anonymous impartial reporter image is fading a bit because obviously the people are engaging with you on Twitter, on other networks, in comment threads and so on. Bits of personalities start to come through. I think that journalists are flashing a bit of personality along with analysis and news. That is a real thing and should be paid attention to. It is often called "journalist as brand", when journalists add a bit of personality.

You are suggesting that the tone of journalism is becoming more personal?

I don't think that means that everything should start moving towards a chatty tone "my opinion is". I think I have used the word "I" in journalism maybe 3 times in 5 years, and any time I do I pause and try to get it out. There are very few occasions when you have to. I think that it is a good thing if people know a certain journalist, especially if they work in the analytical field, data or economic analysis, to have a bit of a sense about where they are coming from, or what approaches they take, or how they do certain things. I would love it if every journalist said how they voted, or what charities or institutions they prefer, than being quiet about pretending to be impartial. Keeping a view secret is like pretending that you do not have it. Here is how I vote, judge if I'm biased or not. I feel that's better. A little bit of personality and a bit of engagement, but I do not think we have to throw out anything. I think this is happening on its own, and papers do not need to encourage it, but be aware of it. For some journalists, it means that paper might come to rely on them as much as they rely on paper. I think smart news organisations will adjust how they operate.

There was a trend among news organisations to push journalists to run their own blogs. Is it still going on?

I think to an extent yes, but I think more and more people are trying to make blogs to where there is a point to making a blog. The idea that every journalist should have a blog is a bad one. There are a lot of instances where they are useful. Some journalists don't come across very well on blogs. It's not their tone. The tone of a blog is different, it's more conversational, less formal and you tend to be catering to a smaller regular audience in a way that you are not with news stories. A general reporter starting a blog does not make much sense. However, a health reporter starting a blog and using that to cater to health professionals is using that to cater to the general audience, which is actually a smart idea. That reporter should have a blog, especially if he or she is showing that they are good in using it in that way. In a lot of instances journalists should be bloggers, but not always.

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