

Journalism taking up a curatorial role

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Steve Herrmann is the editor of the BBC News website, since 2006. He is in charge of BBC News editorial coverage online, and oversees operations across the website and on demand services. Since 2011, he has also been leading on the overall editorial development of BBC News' digital presence. He joined the BBC News website in 1997 just after it launched and has worked in a variety of journalistic roles, including periods in the Balkans and East Africa, since beginning his BBC career in 1985.

How audience empowerment is changing journalism, is it transforming journalism in a way?

I think it is transforming journalism and I think that is for a number of reasons. The audience has ways to express themselves far more easily than they could before and they can make their views known. They can put out information on social media networks or blogs. If they see something that a journalist has written on our broadcast that they disagree with, that they like, or that they have a view on, they can talk about it. I think the effect on journalism is that a sort of accountability has arisen as result of people having the ability to speak out instantly on social media platforms. Which I think is a good thing because it means that journalism is being scrutinised and people are able to comment on it, to debate on it and to talk back.

If I understand you well, your opinion is that journalism is becoming more accountable to the public or to the audience?

Whether is it actually becoming more accountable I couldn't say, but I think there is an opportunity for accountability and transparency that is presented by social media. Also, journalists can see what people are thinking and saying about their work. There is a challenge there as well. The challenge is how you respond to that and how you engage with that.

Engaging with the audience is becoming more and more a defining feature of journalism. In academic circles the concept of participatory journalism has been introduced. Could you reflect on that concept?

It is impossible to operate in a vacuum and to pretend that you know everything. That you will tell people your story and report on what you have to say, without paying attention to what other people are saying about it. Journalism is a two-way process now. People are talking about what is happening. People are often aware of it before you are, almost always if it is breaking or developing story. They will be reporting on it in some shape or form, using their mobile phones or Twitter or on social media platforms. Journalists have to be involved in that process and cannot afford any more just to be talking in one direction without listening. The old broadcast model where you were broadcasting to many, with no return path, is over.

In your working routine or in the working routines that you observe, how are the audience voices integrated into journalism content?

One of the most important ways in which audience is integrated is in the process of news gathering which is at the heart of the journalism. An integral part of news gathering now is to look up what people, who are close to the story either geographically or cognitively, know about it. One of the most effective ways of doing that is through the social media. Online platforms are very good for asking people, "Do you know something?" "Have you seen something?" "Can you send us pictures?" "Can you send us a video?" On every significant story, we are looking to see what the public can tell us about it. One recent example is the story about hurricane "Sandy" in the USA. People were taking pictures and videos of things that were happening to them, things that they were seeing, they were witnesses to. One news organisation alone would never be able to get that amount of coverage and be in that many places at once. Even all the news organisations combined would not be able to be in that many places at once. So, making use of the material, videos, pictures and eye witness reports is an integral part of telling that story. That is one example. Another example would be when you are reporting on a specialist subject like a health story. If you publish the story and ask people, "What do you think?" "Do you know anything about it?" You will often get people who have some experience around the condition, such as experts, doctors or others who have an interest in a story, to be able to add to the story.

So a community of interest forms instantaneously around the story, and people come together and discuss about it, debate it and feed in extra information.

Talking about audience participation you have stressed the importance of the audience as the source of information. But once the text gets published, is it really finished? Because, audience can interact with a story in so many different ways, how do you manage audience feedback as an editor in the news organisation?

Sometimes publishing the stories is just the beginning because then you get a reaction and get people telling you more information, sometimes even contradicting some of the information. The challenge then is to make sure that you have systems in place to monitor what is happening, to listen and to follow up the story. An important question is whether discussions on social media drive journalism. I think there is a balance. The audience does not necessarily set the agenda. But once we publish the story, we will often look at what people are saying about it, what they're interested in, and then sometimes we will add to a story. We will do a follow-up coverage as a result of feedback that we have had about a story.

Would you say that journalists still have the power to set the agenda for the public discussion?

To give you the short answer, I would say yes because I think that newspapers, TV channels, radio programs still have audiences and they have big audiences. The broadcast news still attracts very big audiences. I do not think social media and online media have replaced them, rather they have added to them. Equally I think it is increasingly clear that the agenda can be set by people on the social media as well.

Could you reflect on the changing role of journalism in society, compared to their traditional role?

One of the aspects of a journalist's role that is becoming increasingly important is the ability to act as a guide. Nowadays a whole range of sources are available to people. Journalist should find the best and vouch for them. To say this source is worth listening to, this person is worth following, this video is worth watching and to bring together the best things to help tell the story. So in other words, not necessarily to tell the entire story completely, but also to help the audience find the best of the other things that are around; this is an increasingly important role of any journalist.

Could we say that it is an orientation role?

The word that is used quite often is curation. So choosing, finding and presenting a selection

of the most valuable and the most interesting pieces of material, sources and links for your viewers, readers and listeners. It is an important part of what journalists need to be doing now. In some way that is what journalism has always done. Journalists have always had sources that they trust, and they were always looking for new sources. However, the range of sources and the places that you can look for has expanded hugely. Knowing how to navigate that landscape, to find the good sources and good stories in that landscape, is a really important skill.

Would you say that the normative predispositions of journalism haven't changed much?

I think there are some things that haven't changed. The fundamental purposes of finding out information, reporting it, establishing that it is true and making that appealing to the public, are still very much what journalists are doing. However, the way in which that happens has changed. The tools have changed. With the advent of digital media, the quantity of information and the ease with what we can get hold of has changed. The speed with which the information comes out has also changed, now information travels much more quickly than it used to. All of those things place new demands on journalists and change the way they do their business. The fundamental aspects of journalism are still there but in order to carry them out, journalists have to adapt to new ways of working.

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