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You talking to me? Journalists and the big conversation

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“My readers, I realized, had become my collaborators.”

Dan Gillmor (2004), *We the Media*

“Hardcore commenters can be exhausting to engage with.”

Nick Denton (2012), in a Gawker comments thread

Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver* asked: “You talkin’ to me?” as he posed in front of a mirror. He was talking to himself, something which many journalists do on a regular basis as they publish to the internet, asking and answering their own questions, but often failing to engage and respond to their readers. Journalists are notable by their absence in the majority of comment threads.

In his book, *We the Media*, (2004) citizen journalism advocate Dan Gillmor looked at the real-time, interactive possibilities of the internet which he argued would transform journalism from a lecture to a conversation. Readers, collectively, knew more than media professionals. Journalists needed to bring them into the conversation in order to create a new media ecosystem of professionals and citizen journalists. And that conversation would have all the constituents of insight, expertise, editor’s eye, feedback, and opinion. Journalism would be more relevant and transparent and public journalism would have what it was missing – the public.

Gillmor castigated Big Media for its failure to engage and criticized reporters who did not leave their email addresses at the bottom of their articles. Nearly a decade on from his *cri de coeur* most journalists leave their contact details at the bottom of their work, and they have tools such as blogs, forums and social media to express and exchange ideas. Journalists are breaking the ice with readers but many of those who have been ‘flamed’, harassed and trolled by commenters are justifiably angry, bemused

and defensive. Being part of the conversation is not always a pleasant experience.

This chapter looks at the challenges facing journalists when much of their interaction with readers is in the public domain, often and specifically in the internet domain. The conversation, once private is in full view and open to all. It can be combative rather than polite, questioning rather than reverential. It can contain many voices, form its own community and be viewed as editorial content. People can log on to their computer, read an article and comment on it providing feedback or a different point of view. They are often referred to as commenters rather than readers. And those who seek to leave abusive comments, inflame opinion or manipulate it are viewed as trolls and have become the scourge of journalists who have to monitor and moderate discussions.

Value in below the line commentary

Despite all these challenges, broadcast, print and online outlets actively ask readers for their opinions. The Guardian's 'open journalism' venture has made it policy for journalists to engage with readers by opening up new comment sections and actively encouraging readers to comment, write, submit content and shape the editorial discussion at its daily news conference. It holds open days for the public to come to its offices and chat to journalists. And it consistently asks its readers for feedback. Comment editor, Becky Gardiner, in an explanatory video for readers entitled, 'We ask our readers what we should be writing about' (2012) describes a shift in editorial perceptions so that comments below the line now have a place above the line.

The 'commentariat', once the intellectual domain of professional journalists, has expanded to include what was formerly referred to as the audience. The word audience in itself is problematic as it denotes a passive role in communication. Criticism and opinion, however, are no longer consigned to the ghetto of the letters page. Journalists are getting used to feedback on their articles and blogs but still grappling with the best way to respond to it, if at all.

Internet sites such as Gawker are looking at comments as content with editorial and commercial appeal. In a bid to ad-

dress concerns about those that love to upload abuse, poke fun and manipulate, it is rolling out a new feature so that each contributor, whether anonymous or not, will now be given the power to moderate the conversation. Gawker's owner, Nick Denton, took to his own website in a post entitled 'Why anonymity matters', (2012) to explain his rationale. "Give the source the ability to tell us what they know, then let the reader determine whether they've satisfied the critics, just as one would in judging a panel debate or a courtroom cross-examination." And when challenged he replied in the comments field.

Big Media and new online entrants such as Gawker are trying to stoke the conversation. The BBC regularly asks listeners to 'tell us what you think' and local newspapers feature 'Have your say' sections. The New York Times says it wants to actively encourage its best commenters. Why and how they are doing this and the challenges it presents to journalists will form the discussion contained in this chapter. While some journalists are embracing the challenge, others are still trying to figure out what this new relationship means for them and their journalism. Others have their faces turned to the paywall (and are having that conversation on other sites such as Facebook and Twitter). Many journalists fear what they see as an army of commenters who cloak criticism and abuse behind online anonymity. Media organizations blow hot and cold on the issue exhorting readers to join in but then limiting their involvement via word count, moderation or sign in rules.

The challenges are also practical – how, why and when sometimes just boils down to having the time to read a thread. The internet is unscalable and feedback (once just a sack of letters delivered daily) is now a 24-hour, global torrent. If we are all now members of the chattering classes, how do journalists make sense of all the clatter?

Where once the journalist was on the inside looking out telling the audience what was happening to them it is now the audience telling the story alongside journalists whether that be in their own blogs, participatory journalism ventures such as hyperlocal community sites or user generated content and comment often commissioned, often unsolicited. Editors ask readers to submit their opinions, photos, blogs and videos and journalists are increasingly under pressure to know what is significant and relevant to their readers. They can no longer rely on instinct

or focus groups or a brand or the occasional glorious scoop. And they have to think about attracting traffic to their sites.

What was formerly referred to as the audience is still the subject of focus groups and surveys, advertisers, direct marketers and social media strategists but Dan Gillmor reminds us: “While it’s possible to learn something from a focus group, or a scientific survey, those techniques don’t add up to listening,” (2004: 69). There is little evidence to suggest surveys have determined the editorial content of a newspaper or a TV station. But the comments section and the wisdom of crowds contained within it can, at best, be a valuable source for journalists.

Unravelling the comments thread

Sceptical? Journalist Jack Hitt is a fan of long string comments. Writing about its value in the *New York Times* he says: “These days, the comments section of any engaging article is almost as necessary a read as the piece itself.”

It is certainly an acquired taste. In ‘Science and Truth: We’re All in it Together’ (2012) he cites the case of readers who over a number of years conversed on the web to disprove the reported existence of an ivory-billed woodpecker which had reportedly been spotted for the first time in 50 years in an Arkansas swamp. “Sure, there is still the authority that comes of being a scientist publishing a peer-reviewed paper, or a journalist who’s reported a story in depth, but both such publications are going to be crowd-reviewed, crowd-corrected and, in many cases, crowd improved. (And sometimes, crowd-overturned). Granted, it does require curating this discussion, since yahoos and obscenity mavens ten to congregate in comment sections.”

The challenges for journalists are well described in the quote above. And it is clear that if journalists don’t join the conversation readers will give them the bird anyway. Millions have already migrated to the blogosphere. The internet has changed the role and practice of the journalist and presents a new set of challenges for those who want to engage with readers and join the conversation.

According to Gillmor a hyperlink can spark a conversation online and offline. This chapter looks at what we have learnt so far and offers some practical ideas for journalists who, while quite accustomed in their professional lives to speaking and lis-

tening at the same time, are still finessing the art online.

Opening gambits

Conversation: *noun* “Talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged’ - Oxford Dictionary

Interacting with readers has always been a challenge for journalists. Those that are circumspect about the way the internet has transformed communication into a collaborative and participatory culture point to the fact that a good journalist meets the reader on a daily basis, talking, networking, quoting and maintaining relationships within their ‘beat’. But, it can be argued, that even those within a local community who have reported it for a lifetime can never really get a true picture about those inhabit it. And what about those who are interested in the subject matter who exist beyond the boundaries of it?

Journalists can be defensive and dismissive when it comes to the notion of engagement with readers. The tensions are described in research by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen in *Journalists and the Public* (2007), which found that the traditional hub of community engagement, the letters page was a source of both pride and irritation for newspapers. And the notion of the audience as dumb, passive and unresponsive is not restricted to journalists, either. It can form a dominant strand of popular thinking. “Audiences are seen as mindless, ignorant, defenceless, naïve and as manipulated or exploited by ‘mass media’” (*Media Audiences*, 10 :2005).

For those not convinced by the argument that the internet has wrought positive changes in the relationship between reader and journalists – transparency, accountability, collaboration – the us and them debate still holds true and is illustrated by Oscar Wilde’s provocation in his essay, *The Artist as Critic*: “There is much to be said in favour of modern journalism. By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community.” But what if Wilde, the great journalist and conversationalist had held his salons in the blogosphere, and used Twitter for his aphorisms, would he have thrived or would he still have the same disdain? Famous for his excoriation of his critics who he accused of hiding in the letters page, would he have used the web to continue the conversation?

Wilde, almost certainly would have been a social media darling beloved by editors who could rely on his intellect for traf-

fic to their websites, his flamboyance for YouTube, and his love of a bust-up with bloggers. Perhaps his audience would be his judge and jury. But, of course, he could have been a complete failure unable to understand that conversation, dialogue, is a two way street and perhaps a blogger such as buzzmachine.com's Jeff Jarvis would have reminded him that the internet is the first medium owned by the audience, the first medium to give the audience a voice.

Arguably, journalists need to remind themselves of this, too. Perhaps their changing role as a gatewatcher rather than a gatekeeper (Bruns, 2005) complicates their daily, professional lives and perhaps it is the use of language such as “produsage” to describe the blend of producing and consuming inherent in their online activities which they find so repugnant. Nonetheless, this growing model of collective and collaborative rather than parallel (Singer et al, 2011) could be a way forward from the isolation many feel as the industry addresses the commercial impact of the internet by cutting staff and forcing many into what they view as ‘churnalism’ (Davies, 2010). While journalists can no longer view themselves as an intellectual elite, which filters and controls content they still have an important, crucial, role as a facilitator. The internet is a noisy, crowded place looking for those with a reliable track history of leading people to the truth or at least a version of the truth they can cross check themselves. Gillmor in his vision of journalism being a conversation sees no reason why professional journalists should be defensive about readers who he argues collectively know more than media professionals.

Why take part?

Journalists can choose not to respond to feedback or read comments about their own articles. They can detach themselves from the people they hope will read their articles. They don't have to blog, read or take part in forums, have a Twitter account or use Facebook. The conversation, the debate will take place with or without them and that conversation will also be between members of the community itself. The community can cut the journalist out of the conversation completely. Those within the public sphere can report its workings and investigate it without a professional qualification in journalism – many do, and are labelled citizen journalists even if they are

not familiar with the term.

But what's wrong with this picture? Firstly, most journalists want to create journalism that is relevant and significant and there are few who do not want, at the very least, a reaction. Secondly, professional journalists are duty bound to find out what people think, what is happening to them and what is happening to their community.

Not all comments threads are the same. It would be naïve to assume that threads contain golden nuggets of information or lots of leads to stories. The quality of the journalism doesn't necessarily equate to the quality of debate that follows. And there are always comedians (sometimes funny) and smart alecks (irritating, especially when they are right.) There are those who love to troll and are not interested in conversation. And there are those who are vile, racist and homophobic.

While some journalists embrace the new world of interaction with readers others have questioned its value. Helen Lewis, deputy editor of *The New Statesman* magazine, in her blog likened the worst commenters to those who use the internet as a giant lavatory wall. "I think at this point it's safe to say there are two types of writer: those who worry about their comments and those who don't read them."

But Guardian data journalist James Ball has defended online comments and says there is a third type of journalist - one who engages with readers and who would find the internet a dull place without readers being able to challenge writers. He also argues (In defence of online comments, 2012) that the debate over trolling has spilled over into a general sideswipe against comments. "The purpose of writing on blogs, community sites like Comment is Free and much of social media is to start or further a conversation - not to share a few writerly pearls of wisdom." He says if five early commenters have misunderstood something in a news story he has written, chances are that it is his fault and not theirs.

Ball points to the huge amount of traffic a site can get - the most engaged 1 per cent of the audience on any given site accounts for a huge amount of traffic.

A site such as Gawker has tens of millions of comments in its database. Sites can't afford to ignore their commenters and are actively trying to engage them. The Guardian has a team of community editors tasked to ask readers for their views, to commission their articles, to track their comments and respond to them.

Individual journalists can and are doing it for themselves and are often surprised by feedback. Deborah Orr, writing in *The Guardian*, under the headline ‘10 Things not to say to someone seriously ill’ found readers responding with their own insights and her article became a wiki of wit and wisdom. She also responded with a footnote at the bottom of the article.

How Do I RSVP?

So what are the key challenges facing journalists from reader feedback? If “The cacophonous world of participatory journalism is an exciting place,” (Singer et al, 2011) what is holding them back? Genuine concerns include:

- fear of criticism
- online abuse
- verification of genuine commenters
- scalability, keeping tabs on everything
- not enough time
- not my job

Social media such as Twitter has made it easier and faster for journalists to engage with readers. Many of them prefer to respond in this way. Instead of checking back at comments threads it is much easier to scan Twitter feeds. Conversely, keeping track often means coming back to the point of coalescence – the comments thread of specific articles in specific sections populated by specific, loyal commenters.

The conversation is there if you want to find it and take part. The challenges are many. Journalists are still having to figure out how to balance the imperatives of distance and detachment with another imperative – willing membership in the community that journalists address (Rosen, 1999). At a time when issues of ethics, trust and transparency are under scrutiny journalists are under pressure to redefine journalism. Even if they are sceptical about participatory journalism, the organizations they work for continue to encourage them to invite readers into what was a formerly closed shop agreement. Many of those organizations are feeling the commercial imperative to drive traffic, get hits and returners to their sites. It is not unusual for a site to get several hundred comments on an article – even more on a big,

breaking story. Homepages feature ‘most read’ and ‘most commented’ sections to help the reader navigate content.

The internet has enabled journalists to start a conversation and ask more questions of their readers. We can’t be surprised if they turn round and ask more of us in return. Some of these questions, as Gillmor has pointed out, will be tough conversations but are needed if journalists are to serve the community, be investigative, and present accurate, balanced arguments.

A conversation with Kate Bevan, technology journalist

Kate writes for the *The Guardian* and says she has no problem answering readers even though she is one of many journalists who has experienced being ‘flamed’ online. I asked her how she reads and responds to those who engage with her online.

One commenter responded to her article on ‘booth babes’ and sexism at technology shows with:

“Tech is male. Now get over it!” She says: “I’m absolutely delighted to take part in a discussion and people raising a question but there has to be respect. I don’t write for comments. I’m up for people who want to raise a question or challenge me, that’s fine and I often have a conversation with them via Twitter or Facebook as well. I think journalists should be polite and engaging. But I’m not going to engage with the hateful, vile, sniping stuff. I don’t even acknowledge that kind of crap and I refuse to feed the trolls.”

The challenge for journalists, she argues, is that the internet has fostered a “giant sense of entitlement, the ‘cult of me’ where people say the most hateful things but wouldn’t dream of walking into the pub and saying it”. Like many journalists she prefers Twitter. “There’s more of sense of community there and people have a construct of you as a character, a human.”

She also feels that organizations should take moderation more seriously and has reservations about allowing commenters to be anonymous. “The role of the moderator is really important to stop the really bad stuff getting through. Usually it’s a case of there not being enough of them and quite frankly they are often young and inexperienced. In the old days, the role of the letters editor was really important. They verified and identified the authors.”

Online, she advises journalists to make an effort to be pro-

fessional and polite and to be open via blogs and social media but to keep the personal private. Never respond to people who are being abusive, she says, “it’s a complete waste of time. Just remember, stand away from the keyboard!”

What’s in it for journalists?

Many sites now actively try to engender a code of conduct and have warnings about civility. So, if journalists are still not convinced about tracking comments what, in a positive sense, can they get out of it?

- an indication of what is relevant to their readers
- engagement, feedback, does the journalism works at a basic level e.g .readers understand an article or graphic
- contacts, ideas
- transparency – (correction and polite acknowledgment if someone points out a genuine mistake)
- discussion in which the journalist takes part
- chance to respond, clarify (could be just a hyperlink)
- help on a story
- quotes (the best comments are often used in live blogs)
- commenters who are commissioned to write articles.

Digital curation sounds fancy but is a practical necessity. Once it was notebooks, files, cuttings and the spike. Now it more likely to be social bookmarking services such as Delicious and RSS links. Journalists intuitively screen, scan, filter and dissect and while it is not possible to respond or participate all of the time it is still worth the effort to at least listen. “You have a responsibility to look after your own digital footprint,” says Kate Bevan.

Conclusion: reading, writing and responding

Most journalists like talking a lot, it’s part of the job and it is often because the researching, reading and writing can be isolating. They like to talk about the story, how they got it, what happened, who said what and lots of stuff that is interesting but doesn’t fit in a report. These conversations used to take part in the newsroom or the pub but are now starting to happen online as journalists blog, tweet and respond to readers. It’s one way

of being transparent and accountable. There's also a growing expectation among readers that writers will engage with them.

For some journalists this is an onerous, self-defeating task particularly if they have been stung or targeted by armchair critics or worse. But for others engagement is now part of the job and they write for above the line and are happy to respond below it. Others such as Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times are happy to take the conversation on in other spheres, for example, holding an AMA session (ask me anything) on Reddit.

This pro-active way of engaging readers might not be for everyone, but at least journalists should make an effort and listen to what people are saying. The art of conversation is surely to be a good listener. Brian Solis, a digital strategist and blogger, acknowledges that scalability on the web is challenging for the media industry as a whole but in a post entitled 'The Conversation Prism' (2010) he argues that everyone has to make a start and listen in. As he says: "Influential conversations are taking place with or without you. If you're not part of the conversation, then you are leaving it to others and possibly competitors to answer questions and prove information, whether it's accurate or incorrect."

Challenging Questions

- Select the letters page of a national newspaper and compare and contrast the selection of topics discussed with the paper's website and comments from readers online.
- Analyse a breaking story via a live blog report. What are the strengths and weakness of how the journalist uses Tweets and comments?
- Reflect on your own journalism and your relationship with readers. How have you responded to readers?
- What methods do you use to gain feedback, track comment and verify information from commenters. What are the practical and ethical issues you have encountered?

Recommended reading

Read:

Dan Gillmor's blog at mediactive.com

Nieman Journalism Lab's timeline on Gawker comments :

<http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/07/for-once-nick-denton-seems-pleased-with-gawkers-commenting-system/>

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Listen and watch:

Guardian comment editor Becky Gardiner on open journalism

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/video/2012/feb/29/comment-becky-gardiner-open-journalism-video>

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