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Valérie Belair-Gagnon

► **To cite this version:**

Valérie Belair-Gagnon. 'Getting it Right!:' How did social media transform BBC News journalism?. Communiquer dans un monde de normes. L'information et la communication dans les enjeux contemporains de la " mondialisation ", Mar 2012, France. pp.235. hal-00839288v2

HAL Id: hal-00839288

<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-00839288v2>

Submitted on 23 Jul 2013

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'GETTING IT RIGHT!:' HOW DID SOCIAL MEDIA TRANSFORM BBC NEWS JOURNALISM?

INTRODUCTION

The uses of social media are still in their early developmental stages at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Social media, which includes audience material and user-generated content (UGC), and is associated with content production such as the activity of blogging, a platform such as microblogging on Twitter or messaging a friend on Facebook, or a tool used to achieve specific objectives such as social networking sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace, Tumblr and Twitter, started being used at the BBC News during the July 7, 2005 London bombing attacks, commonly called "7/7" (Newman, 2009).

What occurred in the newsroom and on the site of the attacks in terms of social media use literally challenged the ways journalists produce news stories. Early in the morning, journalists were unable to access the sites of the bombings. However, in the Television Centre's newsroom (TVC), journalists started receiving texts, videos and images from internet users who were witnessing what was happening on the site of the events. The new phenomenon made this event particularly important in terms of audience participation (Boaden, 2008).

Following 7/7, the uses of social media in the production of international news stories suddenly became increasingly quantifiable at multiple levels. The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, the 2009 Iranian elections, and the 2011 Arab Spring are amongst the international news stories broadcasted on BBC News where the role of social media in journalism was important for the institution; not just at the UGC-level but also in terms of social media uses in journalism.

Questions, such as how social media has changed the fundamentals of BBC News journalism through the sequence of occurrences, has yet to be studied in-depth. This paper is thus the result of a larger research project that asks how social media changed the fundamentals of journalism at one of the biggest transnational news organisation: BBC News. In this project, the organisational structure, the news values and norms, as well as the corporate ideology and professional identity are analysed: all of which are interconnected facets of a fundamental journalistic transformation.

In this paper, I will look at two seminal watershed news events that have challenged the corporate ideology of impartiality and accuracy at BBC News: the 2008 Mumbai terrorists attacks and the debate over curation v. journalism during the 2011 Arab Spring. It argues that in the social media turn, the corporate ideology has been re-interpreted within the traditional journalism framework of the public broadcaster. It supports the thesis that, by positioning itself in the media sphere, BBC News has reasserted itself as a distinctive player in the media industry.

This analysis bring us to an important discussion that is presented in the final section of this paper: what is the role of the public service broadcaster in the potential renewal of a public sphere? To help answer this question a discussion on the facets of a public sphere in relation with the uses of social media at the broadcaster level will be held. But first, I will lay out the theoretical orientations and methodological framework.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

Contrary to the Technological Determinist Approach to news production (Pavlik, 2000), (an approach emphasising the evolutionary way in which people integrate innovation into their practice), this paper supports the Social Constructivist Debate emerging on the future of journalism and as a response to sociologist Simon Cottle's call for a revival in traditional ethnographies of news production (Cottle, 2000). The Social Constructivists study the process which leads to the appropriation of new technology and its context.

Like the Social Constructivists, this paper is influenced by the tradition of ethnographic research of news production processes of the 1970s and 1980s (Fishman, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). Rather than emphasising news production routine's influence on the news output, as it was done by traditional news production studies, this paper will, like the Social Constructivists do, emphasise the change that innovations, in this case social media, bring to journalism (Domingo, 2008).

In line with Pablo J. Bockovski's (2004) findings of newspapers and their move towards online communicational platforms, the paper thus analyses the process by which social media has been interpreted and re-interpreted within the organisational context of BBC News. As stated, in this paper, I will look at two watershed moments: the 2008 Mumbai terrorist and the 2011 Arab Spring debate over curation v. journalism. While, unlike most research in the field, which tends to focus on the dimensions of news production process, including the organisational (Paulussen and Ugile, 2008), the news values and norms (Van Dam, 2011; Williams et al., 2011), as well as the professional identity and corporate ideology (García Avilés and Carvajal, 2008; Robinson, 2010; Singer et al., 2011), this paper's emphasis is on how corporate ideology, more particularly the concept of impartiality and accuracy, is articulated and re-interpreted in a social media context. It suggests that social media's appropriation and re-interpretation might be the result of homogenous aspects of social media as well as homogenous and heterogeneous aspects of communication practices in the industry and BBC News.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data presented in this paper is based on a qualitative study of BBC News, with an emphasis on a 90 hours ethnography of the London Television Centre (TVC), which includes BBC UK News and World News. One reason for limiting the empirical study to the London TVC is that I was guaranteed access by a BBC News executive to this newsroom in the early stages of the research project which provided me with the full collaboration of the journalists in the newsroom. An additional advantage was that the multimedia newsroom in TVC is the host of the user-generated content (UGC) Hub since 2009, which is the main official institutionalised unit in charge of dealing consistently with social media within the news organisation.

In addition, I gained access to the network of international news correspondents through the BBC World Newsgathering Editor that I met in the newsroom. I also met with journalists in other divisions of the news organisation across the UK, including BBC Wales, which was the division that originally helped me to gain access to the TVC, BBC London and BBC World Service. This was helpful, since the news production process is embedded in the interactions across these different instances of the news organisation. The ethnography focused on the news production process and the organisational settings, the actors involved in the process, and the role of social media in this process.

Additionally, I conducted 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists at different levels of the news organisation such as editors, producers, technicians, international news correspondents and senior executives. Some of the interviews were conducted during the ethnography, but the vast majority of them were conducted after: most preeminently with international news correspondents on the telephone or through Skype. Each of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour and emphasised the use of social media in journalism. The interviews with senior executives, however, focused on the organisational and historical development of social media at BBC News, the challenges that it might have on its journalism and what they expect to transpire in the future of social media and journalism.

Because the time that I spent in the newsroom was limited and because one of the possible disadvantages of the interview process is its self-reflective nature: referring, in this instance, to the interviewees answering what they think that the interviewer wants as an answer, I also supplemented the empirical data with official documentation factual analysis retrieved from bbc.co.uk and BBC College of Journalism websites. I also consulted reports on social media issues, such as the Social Media Guidances, and attended the BBC Social Media Summit held on 20 May 2011.

It is also important to note that this paper is not research that was carried out or was sponsored by BBC News. This enabled me to have a decent amount of flexibility in the process and possibly develop a more critical account of the data that I collected.

The next section will discuss the data collected for this paper.

Research Results: The tale of two watershed events that transformed impartiality and accuracy

There are two watershed moments that illustrate how impartiality and accuracy were redefined in the social media turn at BBC News. As mentioned above, the first one is the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai and the second one occurred in 2011 during the Arab Spring, particularly over the debate on curation v. journalism which I describe in greater detail below.

The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks

At BBC News, during the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the questions of balance, fairness, accuracy and ultimately the principle of impartiality were debated in the media sphere (Nic Newman, 2010, p. 10). As it happens, the minute by minute journalist and news feed as well as aggregator's BBC News website describing the overall narrative of breaking news stories unfolding through blogs, a selection of tweet feed (150 characters updates), eyewitness evidence like videos clips, images, voice clips, news agency feed, links, and journalists eyewitness evidence, was put under strain.

During an interview¹, a social media editor told me this website posed several challenges for reporting that news events and pressured the principle of impartiality and accuracy of the news organisation not simply because of the structure of the aggregator, but because of the nature of social media content (Sutcliffe, 2008). What happened is that on Twitter a false rumour circulated claiming that the Indian government had asked people to stop tweeting about military operations for fear of helping gunmen. BBC News journalists immediately posted the false rumour generated from the unsubstantiated and inaccurate use of Twitter information on the automatic Twitter feed of the As it happens website.

A series of reactions inside and outside the news organisation and towards that series of news events during the Mumbai attacks emerged, many questioning the principle of accuracy and impartiality. For instance, in the British newspaper online The Independent, columnist Tom Sutcliffe (2008) wrote that "given that several 'Tweets' instructively contradicted the official line on what was happening you might argue that this enlistment of an army of virtual stringers improved the BBC's coverage," but "they'll pass on

rumour as readily as a fact, and there is absolutely no way of telling which is which.” Concerns over the legitimacy of the uses of tweets in reporting news events at BBC News was raised by The Independent columnist and echoed within the news organisation’s journalists.

Along these lines, Tom Suncliffe pointed out the possibility that through social media uses there is an exponential possibility that inaccurate information will be posted on BBC News platforms, if unverified by the news organisation in a social media context. This practice could potentially hurt BBC News’s trusted and valued relationship with their audience, the licence fee payers. In this context, the use of social media on the As it happens webpage was not aligned with the vision that the news organisation must be impartial and accurate.

In response to Tom Suncliffe’s column, Steve Hermann (2008), who at the time was the BBC News Editor, acknowledged in a blog post on the BBC Editors blog that BBC needed to take more care of “Twitter uses of unsubstantiated citizen posts from Twitter.” The idea that journalists should only be passing on the information on that platform was therefore questioned, wrote Alfred Hermida (2010). By acknowledging The Independent columnist Tom Suncliffe concerns, the former Editor, positioned the news organisation in the media sphere.

Even though the unsubstantiated use of Twitter on the BBC website led to that controversy, the BBC News Editor agreed that social media contributed to feed the storyline and have a clearer account of what was happening on the ground of the event, an access that journalists did not have, mainly for logistical reasons. Along the same line, Hermann (2008) wrote: “Some of the many e-mails we received and the follow-up contacts contributed directly to our reporting, with first-hand accounts of the events including that of [Andreas Liveras](#), who was, sadly, later killed in the violence.” Other journalists also acknowledged the value of social media in their reporting during the course of these unfortunate events. “Mark Abell, a British lawyer caught in his Mumbai hotel room a few floors above a group of terrorists holding scores of people hostage, [gave the BBC](#) regular, real-time updates about his situation,” said BBC UGC Editor Matthew Eltringham on the BBC College of Journalism blog (2011b).

In summary, the general feeling at the time was that Twitter and other forms of social media helped journalists to see and share what people were seeing and experiencing on the site of the attacks and gather eyewitness accounts of the events unfolding in ‘real time.’ These reactions from BBC journalists show that, like during other breaking news stories such as the London bombing attacks in 2005, during the Mumbai terrorists attacks, reporters in Mumbai and London were able to gather information and access sources that would otherwise not have been possible to have if there was no reporter eyewitness account. What is important to note is that beside the controversy over the augmented risk of inaccuracy in a social media context there was a value attributed to social media uses in terms of newsgathering added-value.

As the story above illustrates, social media access, according to Hermann (2008) and Eltringham (2011b), helped journalists to immediately construct the rich evolving storyline. But, despite this stated advantage the news organisation was putting its reputation at risk as Twitter feeds reported remained unconfirmed even after publication of the tweet on the news website. This was not taken lightly by the news organisation because it directly attacked the core of their corporate ideology: impartiality and accuracy, which, in the minds of the organisation’s journalists, differentiates them from other news organisations in the media landscape. Another important related point to note is that the structure of the website created a communication blur between different sources of information, such as internet users or journalists sources. Indeed, on the As it happens webpage there was an apparent blur between official statements, correspondents reports, bloggers, emails, Twitter in the course of the reporting of the news events. To resort to that technical situation, which in part led to that controversy, subsequently, the news organisation implemented several institutional changes in the way social media was to be employed in the course of these unfolding news events. For instance, editors decided to more clearly label the information posted on their website As it happened. They made it clearer for the audience to differentiate the provenance of the source of information. They kept the logo of the social media source beside the source of information posted. Social media material was therefore symbolically differentiated from BBC journalistic material, such as journalists’ accounts of the events.

Which ‘facts’ they use, which they leave out; how they frame their story; who to approach and why; whose testimony they accept and whose they reject, nor that they should be secretive and evasive about themselves or their sources, unless they have to be,” was put forward. Transparency was considered key in using social media material. This practice also shows that categorisation of journalistic sources and non-journalistic sources were emphasised openly.

In addition, following the 2008 Mumbai attacks the UGC hub developed an expertise in verifying social media content which appeared less rigorous prior and during the attacks. In an interview, a UGC hub producer confirmed that the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks was a watershed moment in terms of social media verification practices developments. For instance, following the attacks, strategies including, but not exclusive to, checking against existing sources, examining the weather and the location the events take place, working with reporters on the ground to verifying that the accents and languages connects with the location the material comes from, and asserting the geography, were developed, added the UGC Hub journalist.

These verification tactics and processes were organised around the following main themes: verification of journalistic sources, trust

of the level of prestige of the sources, accuracy, responsibility and verification against already acquired knowledge. For instance, in terms of the level of prestige of the source, journalists tended to verify sources that had already been successful in the past and give them more credit rather than crediting automatically social media sources, said a World News producer in an interview. Similarly, social media sources were not taken for granted. They were processed within the traditional journalistic framework, which in this case relates to the editorial concerns over impartiality and accuracy, transparency in the news production process, good verification processes in newsgathering, and the controlled newsgathering processes of the UGC Hub, who is structurally entrenched in the Newsgathering unit in the TVC.

The concern for asserting accuracy and verification was at the centre of the UGC Hub duties and developing strategies following the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks coverage controversy. To quote a UGC Assistant Editor, everything the UGC staff “sees goes through the verification process.” This happened “before we give our opinion on it. If it says it comes from the [social media](#) sphere, we question it until we’re happy that the claims being made stack up,” wrote Alex Murray (2011), the UGC Assistant Editor. The 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks seminal news event was therefore a watershed moment in re-interpreting impartiality over the repertoire of terms of accuracy and verification processes.

Contrary to technological determinist’s arguments, the availability of social media did not guarantee a revolutionary social change in journalism. Rather, like the Social Constructivists argue, social media was re-interpreted within the traditional journalism framework of the news organisation. One important feature of this social media context was that journalists, more than ever, needed to ‘get it right!’, an expression that is often used in journalism circles when they talk about how social media is used in journalism. The second watershed moment, the 2011 Arab Spring case, illustrate this claim.

The 2011 Arab Spring case: curation v. journalism

As mentioned above, another important watershed moment is the 2011 Arab Spring discussion over curation v. journalism. The debate started when a US National Public Radio (NPR) Social Media Strategist, Andy Carvin, aggregated and tweeted the sequence of news events. This innovative news production method popularised by Carvin, in the sense that in the British discussion over journalism change that journalist is used as the main example of curator of news events, was discussed in great length within BBC News and amongst the actors of the news industry. For example, a full session during the two-days BBC Social Media Summit that I attended, in May 2011, was dedicated to discussing the strategist’s methods. The observation of that story happened when I was in my field work and illustrates how impartiality was defined around accuracy and transparency.

The debate started with the Washington-based Social Media Strategist, Carvin, who gathers tweets, Facebook, YouTube, Internet links and eyewitness sources to construct an image of what was happening during news events. Carvin describes his practice of curation on Twitter as a real-time newsgathering operation, or ‘anchor in coverage’. In a post on the BBC College of Journalism blog, Elthringham (2011a) distinguished Carvin’s approach from traditional journalism. While reflecting on a debate between Neal Mann ([@fieldproducer](#)), a Sky journalist, and Carvin ([@acarvin](#)), the BBC Editor compared traditional journalism v. curation and presented the differences among the two.

On one hand, Mann’s, said Elthringham (Ibid), uses of social media is geared towards informing traditional journalists. He uses social media as a traditional newsgathering tool. Carvin, on the other hand, curates, compiles and collects streams of tweets while adding context, narrative and analysis to the tweets. This distinction between journalism and curating is important, as during the assessment of Carvin’s journalism, the importance given by BBC News journalists to impartiality became apparent.

Indeed, in response to Carvin, during the summit, a BBC UGC journalist said that it was more important to build a network of trusted people that would give trusted eyewitness accounts rather than translating opinions of people made through social media. In this instance, the journalist referred to native people who speak the language of the region and could give information about what is going on in the field of the news event v. the concept of curating social media.

In addition, for this journalist, what was found in social media was still raw news material and, he added, it is the role of the journalists to make sense of this material before disseminating it to their audiences. The role of journalists as gatekeepers of impartiality and accuracy thus seems valued and is highlighted by this journalist. The journalist’s reaction towards curation, at least symbolically, shows that trusted newsgathering journalistic networks and sense-making are important for him in defining journalism.

In a similar vein, during interviews many journalists alluded to me that curation was not highly valued at BBC News during the Arab Spring. For example, an international correspondent told to me² that he did not use, to a certain extent, social media while covering the Egyptian revolution during the Arab Spring. He used social media in two main ways: first, he used Facebook to search for sources. Second, he employed social media on a particular story that became the social media story of the news event. Curating was not part of the news production process of that journalist during the Arab Spring like it was for Carvin.

The empirical data presented above shows that in striving to remain impartial and accurate, the journalist's role, in a social media context, is to verify, develop a trusted network of sources and make sense of social media. Though, it is important to note that it was not argued that BBC News totally rejected Carvin's curating approach. Yet, in that early conversation over curation v. journalism described in this paper, the journalists highlighted some of the important features of how they dealt with corporate ideology in this context. Accuracy, verification, transparency and sense-making, as concepts, seem to have become points of reference to sustain the principles of impartiality at the public service broadcaster in a social media context.

The principle of impartiality is far from having disappeared in the social media context. Verification does not replace impartiality, to quote BBC former Global News Director, Richard Sambrook (2010), and former BBC College of Journalism Executive Editor Kevin Marsh (2010). A set of terms to re-define the corporate ideology of impartiality though arose in this context. To use the sociologist of news organisations' Philip Schlesinger's (1978) terminology, these sets of terms are re-interpreted to sustain the principle of impartiality which remains a central tenant of the news organisation's corporate ideology and professional identity that results of it.

Thus, after a period of being bounced back by social media, the news organisation re-positioned itself in the media sphere as a public service broadcaster providing accurate and impartial journalism. By positioning itself in the media sphere, BBC News has reasserted its role in the public sphere.

In this context, it is therefore important to ask if social media has thus helped the news organisation to take an active role in the renewal of the public sphere. The following section will conceptually discuss the role of the public broadcaster in reproducing a public sphere in a social media context based on the empirical data that has been presented throughout this paper.

DISCUSSION

This paper will end with a conceptual reflection on the public service broadcasting. It will discuss the possible renewal of a public sphere, and its relation with social media's impact on journalism transformations. I will argue that instead of reproducing the 17th and 18th century public sphere, an ideal that is represented in the writings of Jurgen Habermas (1989), by re-branding itself after a period of having been challenged by social media, like the Social Constructivists have argued, the BBC has bounced back and re-asserted itself as a public service broadcaster. I will add that this led to the possible development of media public spheres. Rather than merging completely with social media, the social media turn is seen as an opportunity for BBC News to re-asserted its role as a public service broadcaster in the public spheres.

OPEN CONVERSATION V. CONTROL

One of the most important claim of the idea of public sphere is the openness of a conversation. Open conversation is often associated with social media availability. However, this paper demonstrates that the conversation with the internet users still occurred within the conception of BBC News editorial control and newsgathering processes.

Several practices indicate that the broadcaster retain the control over the public debate, although the news organisation claims and strive discursively to engage in a conversation with the internet users. As a result, the idea of formation of common public opinion has not been reached. To illustrate this point, as an example, a series of processes both at the organisational and procedural levels were created to control the public debate held in social media spaces online. These organisational and procedural levels included, but were not exclusive to, verification of sources and content and the centralisation of audience material structural in the UGC Hub.

Jon William, BBC World Newsgathering Editor, even claimed that the news organisation is promoting citizen participation, although it was more accurate to talk about it in terms of citizen newsgathering (Jon Williams quoted in Lee-Wright, 2010). This journalist's claim demonstrates first, symbolically, that public opinion is controlled editorially. Second, citizen participation is introduced within the constrains and the newsgathering framework of traditional journalism. Consequently it appears that we are far from Jurgen Habermas' public sphere idea that the conversation is open.

ACCESS V. EXCLUSIVITY

Another category underlying in the idea of open conversation is the necessity to access the space where the open conversation takes place. The potential of universal access to knowledge and discourse is what made the internet so promising for being the incubator of a renewed public sphere (Dahlgren, 1996). The speed of communicational flow and cheap access sustain this possibility. Studies have shown, however, that internet access is constrained by several factors such as nation, classes, and internet technical access

(Witte and Mannon, 2010).

This paper has suggested that, within the news organisation, there was an unevenness in the uses of social media in journalism, journalists for instance did not use social media as much as they could, and alluded to the fact that the weight of social media debate was controlled by a few actors in the news organisation, which in this instance refers mainly to the senior executives and the techies.

However, it is important to note that the multiplication of platform enables the reproduction of the similar debate over the BBC media platforms, which refers in this instance to TV, radio, online. Social media as a distributive tool, for instance, enables the expansion of the social media conversation in journalism, such as on the As it happened website. Although, empirically, I am critical of the renewal of a public sphere through social media, there is a simulacra of possibilities to decentralise public opinion and rationale debate in society through BBC News platforms. BBC News, by expanding its news throughout its platforms, symbolically, foster the ideal of a global conversation amongst the internet users. However, control over the narrative is imminent, such as the distinction between journalism content and internet users content on the As it happened website³ showed.

HOMOGENEITY V. HETEROGENEITY OF OPINIONS

Now that we know that access is possibly expanded in a social media context, if internet users have access to the public debate, are opinions homogenous or heterogenous? In the early conception of the public sphere, a common public opinion would be formed. The British mass media would be generating that conversation outside the political, commercial and religious spheres. Rather than seeing the emergence of public opinion, social media has helped the proliferation of multiple pockets of opinions and a fragmentation of whose opinion it is. For instance, the labelling and segmentation of who says what on BBC News websites and the emphasis on journalists as sense-making shows that the dichotomy between the 'public' and the 'journalists' is fostered.

But, this claim above brings us back to the seminal concept of control in a social media turn. Although the technological platform could enable the heterogeneity of ideas and opinions, even within the news organisation, critics of the BBC suggest that the social media environment is highly editorially controlled by the news organisation, which would imply a lesser level of heterogeneity of opinions (Lee-Wright, 2010).

TRANSPARENCY V. NON-TRANSPARENCY

Transparency v. non-transparency is another important feature of the public sphere and the last feature that will be discussed in this paper. The structure of the Internet and the conversative nature of social media has pushed the news organisation to produce news stories openly and transparently, rather than in an opaque way. The structure of the web is naturally transparent. It is hard for the news organisation to produce news in a vacuum and news organisations are subject to open criticisms.

This has led BBC News to develop a more open and transparent relationship with its audience. For instance, this transparency was created through the formation of the Editor's Blog or the BBC College of Journalism blog, which were mentioned above in the paper and referred to conversation on news production processes that happened while the events occurred and following them, to publish directly on the web the process of news production and the mistakes and challenges encountered throughout the news production process.

It does not mean, though, that there are no secrecy or omissions in the process. Yet, it suggests that the web has enabled greater transparency in the news production process.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, social media has enabled BBC News to promote the idea of a public sphere. However, entrenched in its ideals of the past, the public service broadcaster, while embracing slowly the concept of social media, has nurtured the proliferation of public spheres, positioning itself in the media sphere, rendering the interaction with social media at a level of 'mediated conversations' by the broadcaster.

Social media is, nevertheless, a powerful tool for breaking news stories at BBC News, especially for generating stories angles and leads from the internet users. And, for citizens to be heard in the political process. For instance, during the 2011 Arab Spring, creating a form of a public sphere conversation in the global space of public spheres of like-minded citizens.

Nevertheless, the technology cannot solely be held accountable for the creation of a public sphere, as many authors exploring new media and the possible renewal of the public sphere advanced (Dahlgren, 1996). Indeed, the opportunities are there, but the structures, professional values and ideologies, socially reproduce a journalistic model entrenched in the idea of public service broadcasting, rendering the task to fully transform journalism as a discursive practice strenuous. In sum, to borrow Alfred Hermida (2009) expression in his study of blogging at the BBC News: 'Journalism remains business as usual.' But, I will add, at the very least social media challenges journalism and potentially transforms it!

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- 1 2011
- 2 Interview, 2011
- 3 Although access is limited structurally, the proliferation of opinions and story angles suggest an un-exclusivity of opinions. This argument would however benefit from a deeper quantitative study addressing the issue of sources used by the broadcaster.