

## *WHO'S REPORTING THE PROTESTS?*

*Converging practices of citizen journalists and two BBC World Service newsrooms, from Iran's election protests to the Arab uprisings*

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### **Abstract**

The 2009 protests in Iran and the 2011 Arab uprisings took place in complex and fast evolving media ecologies. The BBC's Persian and Arabic language services, which reach millions, drew heavily on content created by ordinary citizens to cover events. This paper traces the flow of this content through the news process to examine how collaboration between newsrooms and citizen journalists changed from 2009 to 2011. The article argues that participation in the news process hinges on the congruence between newsroom practices, and the practices of those producing content on the streets. Such congruence requires mutual knowledge of broadcasting requirements. It finds that by 2011 journalists felt more comfortable and effective integrating UGC into their news output. Importantly, UGC creators appear to have taken on board the broadcaster's editorial requirements, making them savvier content creators.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring; Iran; newsroom; participatory journalism; protest movements; UGC

### **Introduction**

During the 2009 protests in Iran and the 2011 protests across North Africa and the Middle East ordinary people shot photos and videos, tweeted, blogged and sent text messages to document and communicate events. Commentators were quick to recognise that social and digital media played an important role in the protests, and by extension could become catalysts for political change (Cottle, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Shirky, 2011). Others are more sceptical about the role of digital media (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009). Nevertheless, it is important to understand the wider media ecology, understood somewhat permissively as the way different informational process and media platforms interact and interrelate (Fuller, 2005), within which protests were being communicated (Cottle, 2009). For instance large amounts of user-generated content distributed through social media platforms were used by news organizations in their coverage which is broadcast to an audience of

millions in the region. (*Vide infra*) Where smartphones and Internet are not available, a satellite dish or radio is rarely far away. Social or broadcast media are not dualistic choices, as Jenkins points out ‘we do not live on a platform; we live across platforms. We choose the right tools for the right job.’ (Jenkins, 2010) An interesting aspect of the media ecologies within which these protests erupted is the convergences between consumers and producers of media and the ways in which content moves across platforms. This paper explores these very convergences that are taking place in the Persian and Arabic media ecologies; the convergences between protestors as producers of social media content on the one hand and the BBC’s Arabic and Persian services as proprietors of broadcast content on the other.

BBC Persian and Arabic are multi-platform services; including satellite TV, radio, linear and non-linear online content, and dedicated websites. The latest additions to the services were an Arabic language TV channel launched in March 2008 which by recent estimates reaches an audience of over 13.5 million a week; and a Persian language TV channel launched in January 2009 which reaches 4 million people a week of which 3.1 million inside Iran. (BBC Trust, 2011a, 2011b) Across platforms the Persian service reaches about 5 million people, while the Arabic service reaches over 21 million. (BBC Trust, 2011b) The BBC also played an important role during the Iranian protests and the Arab uprisings, as suggested by Falko Mortiboys, Senior Digital Insights Executive at BBC Global News, audiences turned to BBC Persian and Arabic during the protests. For example, in June 2009 demand for BBC Persian’s live TV stream was up 15-fold, while usage of on-demand video was up 700%, and unique visitors of the Persian website were up by 270% as compared to the average week in 2008. Similarly in February 2011 BBC Arabic’s live TV stream reached 8.4 million people, and increase of 955% and requests for on-demand video were up 565%. During the height of the Egyptian protests BBC Arabic’s website reach was up 300% and requests for the mobile site were up 274%, all compared with the average weekly reach in 2010.

Both the Persian and the Arabic services are part of the BBC’s international broadcasting arm, the World Service, and serve audiences throughout the Persian and Arabic speaking world from London. Such international broadcasters are said to be trusted sources of news, especially where domestic media is regarded as bias. Covering the 2009 protests in Iran and the 2010-11 Arab uprisings were particularly challenging for both channels due to restrictions in access; as well as the fast pace of unfolding events. Iranian and Syrian authorities, for instance, attempted to instate an effective news blackout. (Reporters Without Borders, 2011; Fathi, 2009) As a result, both services became heavily reliant on protestors and lay journalists in their coverage of the Iran protests, and eighteen months later the protests across North Africa and the Middle East. Ordinary citizens armed with smartphones, twitter accounts, blogs and email sent in eyewitness accounts and images from the streets. BBC newsrooms in London processed torrents of user-generated content (UGC), while journalists were under pressure to decide what would go in the news. Lack of access to event as they unfolded on the ground meant that the broadcast media had effectively become reliant on social media. At the same time, protestors could settle into their sofas and watch footage they had shot being aired on the evening news.

This paper offers an explorative study of the relationship between content created by protestors and content produced by journalists in two BBC newsrooms. It observes the changing dynamics of their interactions over an 18 month period, through a

newsroom-side study of the ways UGC was acquired and processed, as well as its impact on shaping the news. We find important changes in the attitudes of journalists; in the practices of both journalists and protestors; and in the technical infrastructure. We argue that Iran was somewhat of a testing ground for the coverage of what came to be called the Arab Spring. We further argue that there has been a major shift in newsrooms from the *ad hoc* use of UGC to its integration into newsroom routines. Newsrooms have improved submission routes for material. There are now improved procedures and routines around processing and verification. In 2011, journalists also say they are more comfortable with UGC, and have greater confidence in using it. Some evidence also suggests that practices have changed in the production and sharing of UGC by protestors. Our findings indicate that as the BBC became more reliant on content provided by lay journalists, practices converged through emergent models of collaboration. Journalists and UGC providers reflect this in the way their practices co-adapted, as they responded reciprocally to one another's needs. Leaning on these findings we argue that participation in the news process is not only a matter of newsroom and journalistic practices, but depends crucially on establishing shared routines and models of collaboration that enable participation in the news process in the first place.

### **Literature review: User-generated content, citizen journalists and protestors**

How do ordinary people who capture images, videos, and audio, to report stories from the streets interact with the BBC's international broadcasting arm in order to communicate the events they participated in and to shape coverage which they will later witness as news audiences? This is not a question about the promise of social media, but about the convergence between producers and users; journalists and audiences; and between the technological platforms of social and broadcast media. One domain of convergence is the newsroom, where a longstanding interest in the participation of ordinary people, called such various things as 'citizen,' 'participatory,' 'public' or 'grassroots' journalism, has generated substantive literature. (Bowman & Willis, 2002; Gillmor, 2004; Haas & Steiner, 2006; Nip, 2006) For our purposes of tracking the production and use of UGC a further distinction between participatory and networked journalism is of interest. In networked journalism the "news process itself [...] changes from a linear to a networked process" that is strongly collaborative (Beckett & Mansell, 2008, p. 93). Though there is a range of concepts differing sometimes in nuance and other times in substance, all concepts address the phenomenon that news making is no longer the exclusive bailiwick of professional journalists and their newsrooms.

Research on the participation of ordinary people in news processes initially took its cue from the wider discourse on crisis in public communication (S. E. Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). The hope was that increased citizen participation, especially enabled through the Internet, could produce democratic renewal (Coleman, 2007; Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2001, 2003, 2005; Downey, 2007; Simone, 2006). The emergence of audience or user-generated content represents a new iteration in this narrative, at least partially blurring the distinction between what it means to produce and what it means to consume news. The promised potential for democratizing the media depended in part on transforming the relationship between news organisations, newsrooms and journalists on the one hand and those 'formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2008, p. 163) engaged in the production of content through letters, blogs, photos or videos, on the other.

We theorise this changing relationship as one of converging practices between journalists and UGC providers manifested in emerging models of collaboration. Jenkins (Jenkins, 2004, 2006) understands convergence as a dialectical process fuelled by the tension between conflicting logics of production. On the one hand, top-down logic of cross-platform content dissemination and multi-platform newsgathering, and on the other the bottom-up use of various platforms and technologies to influence the flow of information and gain voice. This tension, at the heart of convergence, is reflected in the way content flows across multiple platforms, and the way it is transformed in the process. It also raises questions about “power relations, agency and the role of media industry in shaping ‘media’ practices.” (Ardèvol, Roig, Cornelio, Pagès, & Alsina, 2010, p. 264) In this regard, talk of convergence may disguise what remain asymmetrical power relations. (Ibid,(Couldry & Langer, 2005). In any case, if participation is to happen, journalists and UGC providers will have to find shared models and practices that enable collaboration in the news process. These models involve mutual knowledge about production practices, and (editorial) conditions for appraising content, suitable to the news process. We argue that models of collaboration emerge through a process of co-adaptation, and that it is the configuration of these models that shapes power relations in the news process. Though much research has been conducted around newsroom practices, to our knowledge no extant literature examines the relationship between newsrooms and the UGC providers (more specifically protestors), leaving somewhat of an empirical and theoretical blind spot.

To understand how models of collaboration emerge through process of co-adaptation, we must first gain an understanding of the different agents involved, the competing logics of production, and the divergent interests that give rise to processes of convergence. Protest movements and news organisations are both protagonists in the public sphere. Protest movements are part of civil society, they animate debate in the public sphere with the aim of inflecting state decision-making (Calhoun, 1993; Castells, 2008; Downey & Fenton, 2003). News organisations provide information and spaces for public debate. Though much of the literature cited addresses itself to social movements and national news organisations in the West, insofar as we can understand both as protagonists in the public sphere, many of the insights about their relationship can be applied to other contexts as well. Following Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) the relationship between movements and the broadcast media can be theorized on a structural and a cultural level.

On a structural level, the question is how dependent news organisations and movements are on one another? In most circumstances news organisations do not depend on protest movements to do their work. Protest movements on the other hand need the media to mobilize their constituents, to expose and validate their cause, and to broaden the conflict by drawing in more parties (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Before the introduction of the Internet and social media movements were often considered to be fundamentally reliant on broadcast media, with some claiming that movements that did not receive coverage, did not exist (Dieter Rucht cited in: L. Bennett, 2003). With the introduction of such horizontal means of communication, which were central to Iran’s election protests and the Arab uprisings, this movement-media relationship is said to have changed, affording movements expanded communicative opportunities and improving their standing in the public sphere, and arguably reducing their reliance on broadcast media (See: Cammaerts, 2007; Cammaerts, 2011; della Porta, 2005; Garrett, 2006). It has also been argued that the

hybridization between online and broadcast media has changed the power relations between those shaping the news (Chadwick, 2011). Nevertheless, and even as they have gained new communicative opportunities, we maintain with others, that broadcast media remain important to protest movements, particularly when it comes to gaining new supporters and broadening constituencies (Cottle, 2008; McCurdy, 2012; Uldam & Askanius, 2011). Certainly the surge in demand for BBC content during the protests in question would support this argument (*vide supra*). Meanwhile, as UGC becomes more prevalent, scepticism and sometimes even hostility towards the participation of ordinary people in newsworld seems to persist in many newsrooms (Domingo et al., 2008; Gillmor, 2004). Where news organisations need ordinary people only as audiences and not as content providers, journalists appear to prefer maintaining a clear separation, and let audiences be audiences.

On a cultural level, the relationship between broadcast media and protest movements is about editorial control over the interpretation of and meanings given to events; over the way they are represented. Newsworld “cannot be divorced from the processes of meaning-making, interpretation and re-articulation that, by definition, shape the public sphere. (Goode, 2009, p. 1291) News is not just reported, it is constructed (Tuchman, 1978). Who then gets to construct it? This is a question about voice. The “principle that people’s ability to give an account of their lives is an irreducible part of what must be *taken* into account in any form of social, political or economic organization.” (Couldry, 2009, p. 580) Protestors want to have their voice heard, which also involves shaping the way their actions are understood and represented. Journalists have an interest in maintaining editorial control, particularly where protestors are seen as partisan (Peters, 1999; Schudson, 1999). Journalistic gatekeeping is said to ensure impartiality, which is why there is a concern that opening the news process to non-professionals could see editorial judgement usurped by popular (but not necessarily sound) judgement (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; see also: Singer, 2010). The same reservations seem to extend to the use of UGC (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle, 2010). Empirical work on its adoption in newsrooms has shown that it is more often treated as a repertoire of material to be skilfully harvested for content, than as a source of hard news (Harrison, 2010; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010). Here we can then see the afore mentioned tension between top-down and bottom-up logics of production at work, which accounts for the limited adoption of participatory journalism. For protestors using communicative opportunities to shape flows of information and content to their advantage, it is nothing less than their voice and the wider success of their actions that is at stake, while journalists risk their ability to exercise editorial control and maintain the integrity of their profession as they know it. Viewed thus, tensions and potential power struggles involved in convergence become palpable.

As protestors become providers of content, and the importance of the broadcast media persists, understanding the converging relationship between protestors as producers and journalists as producers remains central to understanding the media ecologies in which protests are mobilised and through which they cascaded. As agents in the public sphere the relationship between movements and media can be understood structurally as one of inter-dependence, and culturally as a struggle over the definition of events (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Protestors want to have their voices heard, and journalists want to protect the norms and routines they see as guarantors of their professional integrity. Existing research suggests that their relationship remains an unequal one, not least because professional attitudes continue to be sceptical towards

UGC and the participation of ordinary people in the news process. We are also reminded that journalistic routines are ‘sticky’ (as economists would say) or remarkably consistent over time (Domingo, 2008). While we do not expect this relationship to change fundamentally, we hypothesize that expanded communicative opportunities for protestors coupled with attempts to create a news blackout could potentially produce new models of collaboration and convergent practices between audiences and producers, protestors and journalists. Viewed from the perspective of newsrooms, we ask how this relationship has changed, and if at all, what models of collaboration have emerged and how. We explore changes that have taken place in the routines and attitudes of both journalists and, in as far possible, of UGC providers, from Iran’s election protests in 2009 to the Arab uprisings of 2010-11.

## **Method**

The best way to observe changing relationships and roles between media audiences and producers, as well as changes in associated practices and routines is to observe them in process of convergence. To do so this paper draws in part on [author’s name] Doctoral research, and is based on semi-structured interviews asking open-ended questions conducted with 13 journalists working for BBC Persian over the spring of 2010, and eight interviews with BBC Arabic staff members conducted during the summer of 2011. Participants were selected to represent journalists with editorial responsibilities who had experience working on different stages of UGC processing. Semi-structured interviews asking open-ended questions seemed suitable for exploring somewhat uncharted territory, while allowing sufficient flexibility in responses for journalists to bring their own frameworks to bear on our questions (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Interviewees were asked about the role of UGC in news coverage, their attitudes towards it, and the kind of procedures and routines in place for processing it. Interviews were supplemented with several days of newsroom observations in the spring of 2010. The names of interview participants from 2010 have been omitted as per consent agreement that included anonymity, and where they are quoted no names were given. Participants in the 2011 interviews agreed to be named in this paper. Interview transcripts were coded using a computer-assisted thematic analysis, utilising the NVivo software package for qualitative analysis. The last two interviews in every set were used to gain feedback from research participants on the outline findings that were starting to emerge. Additionally, in the penultimate round of coding attention was directed to try to identify cases that that would dispute or contradict thematic patterns that had emerged in analysis.

## **Changing attitudes to UGC**

When protests erupted after Iran’s disputed presidential election in 2009, the BBC Persian Service lost access to Iran. News agencies were permitted to continue operating inside Iran if they did not share material with BBC Persian. Every news wire story from Iran came with a disclaimer to this effect. BBC Persian TV, which had launched less than six months earlier, was still in the process of establishing itself. The service had made meticulous plans to cover the election based on careful studies of previous elections. These plans had to be discarded in a matter of hours, making the Iranian election a turning point for the use of UGC at BBC Persian and BBC Arabic. Hitherto, the use of UGC was more of an exception. Journalists explained how they tried to avoid using it: “Before the election the question was can we trust UGC and do we need it. Now the question is, can we do without it?” As Ahmed

Ibrahim a TV and multimedia strand editor said in his interview: “It was very exceptional to use [UGC] before 2009.” After the 2009, election journalists started to use UGC as a source of news routinely. Faced with this necessity, many journalists expressed a real sense of frustration having no alternative source of news and material than UGC. As another journalist commented back in 2010:

“When you don’t have pictures and when you don’t have first hand reports from Iran then it makes your job more difficult, then you have to go to other sources for your news and information. You don’t have a reporter in Teheran who does all the research and tells you what's going on, and also there are so many interesting stories that, you know, we can’t do, but because, I mean, we don’t have access we cannot do much.”

The attitude was one of resignation to a *fait accompli*, a bad situation with which one has to accommodate oneself. One journalist remarked about the content provided by users and audiences: “We used them; we had no choice but to use them.” There was a marked sense of uncertainty about how best to use UGC, where to get it from, how to process it, and the impact that its use might have on the quality of journalism. Overwhelmingly, journalists felt uneasy and not entirely confident about the place of UGC in the news process. There was also a marked sense of unease about those providing the content. Who is the person behind the tweet? The selective and sparse use of UGC before the 2009 protests meant that journalists had a very different kind of relationship to their audiences and to those among their audience that produced content. They rarely needed ordinary people as producers, and might pick up a piece of UGC on occasion, when it suitably supplemented a story.

During the Iranian protests UGC was used out of necessity and in an *ad hoc* manner. One and half years later, the picture had shifted and newsrooms had established practices, processes and routines for the use of UGC. By the summer of 2011 journalists at BBC Arabic had gained many lessons from the experiences at the Persian service. They seemed far more comfortable with UGC, and appeared to have built relationships and working practices with UGC providers. Using UGC “was difficult before 2009. But because there is no source and this is the only source, [...] the mentality of BBC, which is the most conservative organisation about news, started to change.” (Ahmed Ibrahim) Everyone the authors interviewed in 2011 seemed far happier, more confident, and at ease about using UGC as compared to journalists interviewed sixteen months earlier in 2010.

### **The media content life cycle**

The 2009 Iranian protests were a testing ground of sorts for the use of UGC in hard news and for building relationships with UGC providers. The changes are reflected in the attitudes journalists expressed about the place of UGC in their work. In 2011, we concluded our interviews by asking, “So you feel more confident about using UGC today?” The response was unequivocal: “Yes definitely!” To understand what changes took place in the newsrooms and the news process we must examine the life cycle of user-generated media content. (Fig.1) The metaphor of the life cycle, referred to by some journalists, offers a snapshot of the convergence process, tracing the flow of content within the media ecologies of the Persian and Arabic speaking worlds. The life cycle starts when someone on the ground creates a piece of content – shoots a video, takes a photograph, records a piece of audio, or composes a text. She then

shares it, either on a social media platform or by submitting it directly to the BBC. Journalists at the BBC harvest public material from social media platforms and add it to the repository of material submitted directly. UGC material is then processed. This entails authentication and verification, after which it is made available to program producers. Thereafter authenticated content is ingested into news stories which are broadcast over satellite TV, radio, streamed online or published on the website. Sometimes, BBC journalists shared news items on the same social networking platforms from which original UGC content might have originated; i.e. Facebook or Twitter. Often BBC news stories are curated by users and re-shared across social media platforms. Content therefore circulates, or as Jenkins puts it ‘cascades’ across various platforms, being modified and ingested into new content along the way (Jenkins, 2006). To observe the process of convergence, of emerging relationships between UGC providers and journalists, and the changing practices related thereto, we will now examine two important segments of this life cycle – that of content, creation, sharing and acquisition, and that of processing UGC and using it to produce news stories. We will examine changes in each segment chronologically.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

### **Creating, sharing & acquiring content**

UGC providers make their content available by sharing it on social media platforms; as well as submitting content to news organisations. In turn, news organisations, such as the BBC, acquire and source UGC for use in their coverage of events particularly in places where few other sources of news and content are available. There are two sides to this process. One is the person on the street in Iran, Syria, Libya, Bahrain or elsewhere who produces UGC and another is the journalist’s in newsrooms based in London. From 2009 to 2011, some changes took place in the kind of content produced, the way it was shared, the process through which it was acquired and in the workflows through which it was processed. These changes relate both practices and technical infrastructure, on both the side of the journalist and that of the UGC provider, be she a protestor, onlooker, security personnel, or whoever.

In 2009, when drawing on UGC became a necessity there was initial panic on the side of newsgathering, as the process of acquiring it was *ad hoc*. Though journalists recognised the potential of UGC, material would initially come in through various routes in an uncoordinated manner. Journalists would search across social media platforms, such as YouTube, call friends, colleagues or contacts inside Iran, and receive some submissions by email. Presenters, journalists and producers would get responses and material sent to them through their personal “pages on Facebook, Twitter, and also [through] their emails, and their mobile.” This process was chaotic and had not been mainstreamed into journalistic routines, this led to a sense that no matter how much UGC you had, it would simply not do. Though direct submission routes to the newsroom existed, they were hardly utilised, nor were they advertised to audiences.

One journalist described how in 2009 they would:



“turn to hundreds of websites or web blogs. The good thing with them is that if anything happens [...], in a few minutes time it may appear in a web blog, which is great, but the problem is you can't confirm it. [...] You] cannot rely on the web blog, or hundreds of web blogs, you cannot rely on them so you have to find a way to confirm the news.”

The lack of a systematic approach was reflected on the side of UGC providers in the way they shared and submitted their content. People uploaded content to social media platforms and submitted some of it to the BBC using available routes (emails, personal websites, or even by calling in and sharing a story over the phone). The consequences of this somewhat random approach, in the view of many journalists, was that while people wanted to share content, they were not quite sure how to do so to best effect. There is a sense among journalists that just as their own competencies in acquiring UGC were not well honed; the competencies of those providing UGC were also nascent, with the result that they produced and shared content *ad hoc*. It was argued by some journalists that those submitting UGC were probably unclear about who they were creating it for, who they were sending it to, and consequentially must have lacked an *ex ante* idea about where their content might go and how it might be used. With hindsight Mohamed Yehia, Online and Interactivity Editor at BBC Arabic reflected back on what happened after 2009:

“At this time it took us by surprise a little bit, we did not have working processes in place to harness the user generated content and extract the newsworthiness from it. But it started when the UGC hub worked very closely with BBC Persian, they formed a joint team to scour the Internet, and YouTube, and all other social media, file sharing websites and, you know, it was very effective. The material was captured, was shared around the BBC, and from there the awareness [grew] of what we need to do [...] and we felt that when the Tunisian revolution happened we were exactly on the ball and knew what to do. We, the Arabic Service, worked with the UGC hub based on the model that was established by BBC Persian and the UGC hub forming a joint team, verifying material, sharing it, and trying to crowd source material.”

A major improvement in the technical infrastructure was the expanded use of the BBC UGC hub at BBC Arabic and BBC Persian. The BBC UGC hub is two things: A team of journalists dedicated to processing UGC, as well as an organisation wide software that acts like a giant inbox for the collection of UGC material. Within the UGC hub software each service, has its own inbox. The software can be used for processing and sorting UGC, as well as sharing material with other parts of the BBC. The mainstreamed adoption of the hub's technical infrastructure improved the way UGC is processed and delivered to program producers. In many ways, the 2009 collaboration between BBC Persian's interactive team and the UGC hub served as a blue print for processing and handling UGC. It is important to note, however, that the UGC hub was conceived as a way of processing and sharing UGC to supplement stories. The Hub was never intended to serve as a clearinghouse for the only materials that were available from the ground during a breaking news story.

But improvements in the technical infrastructure are only part of the picture. Clearly journalists also feel that workflows involved in acquiring UGC and processing it have improved rapidly after the June 2009 protests in Iran. Changing practices and routines in the newsroom for acquiring content, partially fostered through training received from the BBC UGC hub, meant that journalists learned both how to search for

material, and how to encourage it. Through this process, both BBC Persian and BBC Arabic “moved from using UGC as *ad hoc* to using it as a main source to cover” events (Ahmed Ibrahim). In addition to changes in newsroom workflows, the practices of UGC providers has also change. Mohammed Abdul Qader, Online Journalism and Innovation Editor explains that BBC Arabic now advertises across its platforms to invite people to submit content. This includes expanded advice on the kind of material that journalists are looking for, both from a technical standpoint such as recommended formats, resolutions, and the easiest submission route, for example for large files. As he explains:

“We have also commissioned a special video promo explaining to users what we expect from them. When the Arab Spring came we said to users, we are looking for your experiences in video that you have filmed from the ground using your mobile, and we show them some examples, we explain how they can send this material to us, also we made it very clear where they can expect to see this material. So after they submitted it, where they can find it.”

Therefore the learning that has gone on in newsrooms is mirrored by learning that has gone on among UGC providers, and is reflected in the changing relationship between those who were ‘formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2008) and journalists. Some journalists believe that those providing UGC now have a clearer sense of what the news media is looking for, that their submissions are more targeted, and that they now create content explicitly designed and intended for use in the broadcast news, rather than for arbitrary upload to a social media platform. In short, if the impression of these journalists is correct, UGC providers went from not having *ex ante* ideas about the purpose and target audience of their content, to having far clearer ideas. Over time, some people have also become very regular and reliable providers of content, while some YouTube channels have become sources of material on an almost daily basis, journalists feel that the quality and submission of UGC has improved, even news agencies, we are told, have started sending UGC on to their subscribers. In the period from 2009 to 2011, BBC newsrooms have learned how to better acquire UGC, especially in coverage of events in places they cannot access. However, improvements in acquiring content are not limited to the practices, routines and infrastructure of the news organisation, but also with the kind of content created by ordinary people, and with the way they choose to share it.

### **Processing UGC & producing news stories**

Once UGC is acquired, it enters the news process. This involved initial processing such as authentication (or verification as BBC journalists call it). Once authenticated, UGC can be technically enhanced by adjusting things such as brightness, contrast, colour correction, and sound levels before passing it on to program creators and editors. If appropriate, it is ingested into an existing news story or germination into a new news story. Here too developing new workflows, and adopting new technical infrastructure plaid an important role in newsrooms. Changing practices of content providers were also important to improve processing and ingestion of UGC.

Initially verification of incoming UGC is important, to ensure it is authentic, and to ensure it meets editorial standards. This is perhaps the crucial stage of the news process for the incorporation of user content into BBC news. In 2009, nascent procedures and practices around verification were more *ad hoc* and less integrated

into established routines. The difficulties in verification were compounded by the quality and attributes of UGC available at that time, by its decentralised submission routes, and by the lack of UGC processing routines. Even though the BBC's UGC hub had developed routines, not all journalists with requisite language skills in the BBC Persian newsroom were aware of them. Initially material was verified in a forensic effort of triangulating multiple items. Eyewitness accounts were compared, with available photo and video content, and all available contacts, friends and family of journalists were contacted in attempts confirm the content was authentic. Content itself rarely contained information or signposting that would help in the process. In 2009, this process felt onerous to journalists, sometimes almost insurmountable. This sense that UGC is burdensome to journalists has also been found by other studies (Williams et al., 2010). As one journalist lamented:

“You know, during the Iran turmoil, every morning you had to make some decisions, um, you know, based on very little information. In theory, you have to cover the story, get the facts right and give them to people, but in reality it is 12 o'clock; a video comes in; it hasn't been filmed by a journalistic crew, it has been filmed on a mobile phone; it shows someone is killing someone and they are both wearing plain clothes; and you have to make a decision in one hour about its authenticity; is it real, is that person a government person who is killing a demonstrator, is it a mock-up [? ... It] is a major challenge.”

While initially processing of content lacked a systematic approach, between June 2009 and the spring of 2011 routines emerged both in the newsrooms and among UGC providers that improved the process of authentication, and meant that ingestion or germination into news stories became easier and more acceptable to journalists. The more widespread adoption of the UGC hub and the creation of a dedicated group of journalists using the UGC hub that specialised in the process of authentication marked an initial change in the newsroom. As Issam Ikirmawi, a strand editor at BBC Arabic explained:

“We have assigned special journalists to sit and go through this material, because sometimes you get inundated by material. So you need to filter through and make sure that it was shot where it says it was shot and that it was dated, that it was authentic, [...] I think now we have become much better at sourcing this material, and filtering it through and making sure that it is authentic. [...] I think we have gotten to the stage where we know the source of this material, whether it's authentic or not...”

The emergence of practices and routines around processing UGC were supplemented by the introduction of more detailed policies on the use of UGC. An online and interactivity policy had existed for a couple of years, but more specific social media policies including on Twitter and YouTube were less than a year old when this article went to press. As in the acquisition of material, processing UGC is aided by the nature and quality of content submitted. As discussed previously, UGC providers have gained a sense of what the broadcast media needs. This holds true holds not only when it comes to technical properties, but also as it pertains to its editorial qualities.

The relationship between journalists and audiences/ UGC providers has been shaped, in part, by a conscious effort on the part of the BBC to communicate its editorial policies and its technical requirements. Therefore this new relationship between newsrooms and UGC providers has made those providing content more aware of

editorial processes, and has allowed them to produce content that makes authentication and ingestion easier. Journalists explain that this growing awareness on the part of UGC providers about editorial needs are clearly manifested in the kind of content they receive. For instance, more and more videos use end-boards showing date, time and location information to help verify material. Content providers have started tagging and signposting UGC in ways that enable faster processing. This clearly shows awareness on the part of UGC providers about the editorial processes within the newsroom. Samir Farah, presenter for BBC Arabic's interactive programme puts it succinctly:

"It's a circle, the use of UGC by editors, and the selection process that editors go through was picked up by people who actually record videos. So they became more aware of certain needs of editors and media organisations. Like, for example, how do you make sure this happened on this day? So they started carrying cards with today's newspaper or today's date on it, so they made it easy for editors of mass media to use this content by helping them in providing this little bit of accuracy that was needed."

The changing practices around acquisition and processing of UGC, and the changes in attitudes toward them on the side of journalists, as well as the changing practices of UGC providers, have started to shape the way the news agenda is set. As those who produce UGC get to know what will work editorially, journalists argue that they also gain a greater influence over what actually becomes news. This is particularly true for TV, because of the importance that pictures play. Samir Farah explains that:

"Television has always been run by pictures. The availability of pictures can make a story more appealing to an editor. And the availability of pictures makes certain stories more appealing, more doable, more broadcastable. And I think it made the UGC generator, the person that publishes the material more of a player in deciding which stories get published. Because they provide the pictures they are making it easy, all the time they are making it easier for editors to go for these stories because there are images associated with them."

Despite these changes, editorial control does remain to the largest extent within the newsroom. Journalists often pose the question of motive: what motivates someone to submit a piece of UGC? Reservations about the consequences of allowing UGC to shape editorial decisions persist, reservations that have been found in much existing research on the use of UGC in newsrooms. (*Vide supra*) UGC is routinely described as a useful tool, a great source, often the most important wellspring of stories, yet having it move through the 'checks and balances' of the BBC remains crucial. No one wants to rely entirely on UGC. And despite journalists being far more comfortable in their use of UGC, many still see it as a poor alternative to having reporters on the ground. Nonetheless, journalists told us that their output has changed markedly, and UGC has become far more prominent within it.

The routines and practices of processing UGC have changed noticeably from 2009 to 2011, and a real relationship between journalists and UGC providers seems to have emerged in this process of convergence. Those providing UGC have better understand what journalists are looking for, and might have gained some power over setting the news agenda. Journalists have become more adept at working with UGC. Lay journalists and UGC providers have become more savvy and literate in the ways of news organisations such as the BBC.

## Discussion & Conclusion

For many broadcasters covering the protests in Iran and the Arab uprisings UGC became a desideratum of the news process. This is in contrast to its typical use as a supplement, sometimes as a source of soft-news stories, but almost never as a means, let alone an exclusive means of covering hard-news events. (Harrison, 2010) It is clear that the circumstances of the protests provided a catalyst for processes of convergence, giving rise to what we have called models of collaboration. We have argued that understanding the media ecologies of these protests required understanding these processes of convergence, by which content circulates from mobile phones on the street to the evening news.

The article found a marked change in attitudes on the part of journalist about using UGC. While at the time of the Iranian elections journalists felt some trepidation about having to use material and sources they would rather not, by the time of the Arab spring they had grown more familiar and comfortable doing so. There was clearly a more assured understand of the place of UGC in the news process. That said, in line with other findings, familiar reservations of yielding editorial powers to non-journalists remained, and almost all journalists we spoke to would prefer to have a crew on the ground than rely on UGC. While journalists now feel far more at ease with UGC, they remain clear that there are editorial limits to its influence on the news.

Following the flow of content through its lifecycle, we found clear evidence of co-adaptive practices and models of collaboration between those producing content on the one hand and journalists in BBC newsrooms on the other. Now journalists explicitly address audiences as providers of content and stories. We can read this as a process of collaboration in the news process - one that was previously a rare occurrence (Domingo, 2008). Before 2009 routines around the use of UGC were poorly defined. Journalists were tentative in their use of UGC, and were unsure of its place in the news processes. What was the best way of acquiring, authenticating and ingesting it? Initially the use of UGC was *ad hoc*, by the time of the Arab uprisings it had become institutionalized. But importantly, the entry of UGC into the routines of newswork has as much to do with changing newsroom practices, as it does with changing practices on the part of UGC providers.

Furthermore, if journalists are correct, UGC providers are now more likely to signpost their content to facilitate the editorial process. They are more likely to produce videos and images with a composition and resolution suitable to broadcast. It is thought that if they are particularly savvy, they are also more likely to place a story on the news agenda that would otherwise not have been there. This is in line with other findings which argue that, among those shaping the news process, a power shift has been effected by digital media. (Chadwick, 2011) Journalists and UGC providers have gotten better at working with each other and established models of collaboration.

With a few exceptions the perspectives of UGC providers has received little attention (See: (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle 2010)). Our findings relating to the practices of UGC providers are also partial and based on the experience of journalists based in London newsrooms. These were conveyed to us as their observations of changes to the ways UGC is produced, shared and submitted over time. This does not complete the picture. For the purpose of this article the authors attempted to conduct face-to-face interviews with Arab bloggers, but were unable to do so due to security

concerns. Whenever the perspective of UGC providers on the ground can be added to this picture of convergence in the media content lifecycle, while ensuring the safety of both research participants and researchers, it would be important to do so.

In light of these findings, and given circumstances in which UGC become essential to the news process, we can clearly observe processes of convergence catalysed by tensions between top-down (newsroom side) and bottom-up (protest side) logics of production. Certainly participation in the news process took place in covering these protests, and was enabled through models of collaboration that shape the practices of UGC providers as much as those of journalists. Models of collaboration consist of a shared set of customs and conventions that determined the appropriateness of content for the news process as well as a shared understanding of practices suitable to newswrok. If UGC providers produce content that does not meet these conditions, or if their practices are incompatible with newswork, they are less likely to participate in the news process. Power then lies with those who can shape these customs and define appropriate practices; by and large these people remain journalists. Nonetheless, models of collaboration do give UGC providers mutual knowledge of the conditions their content should meet to make it into the evening news. As some journalists acknowledge, these models also open a window of opportunity: If UGC providers skilfully include their message in compatible package, they may be able to shape the news agenda.

Understanding the media ecologies of these protests involves understanding convergences between social and broadcast media, in this instance, the convergence between protestors and ordinary citizens on the one hand and BBC World Service newsrooms on the other. Though these are not examples of a transformation in participatory journalism, they are examples of new levels of collaboration. To best understand these processes of convergence, we have suggested that we should examine the path that content travels along as it moves from platform to platform, and as it is ingested into new content along the way. This article has attempted, despite some limitation, to observe this very process.

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