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Digital Media
Research Centre

Live blogs, sources, and objectivity

The contradictions of real-time online reporting

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MeCCSA Annual Conference, University of Leeds, 12 January 2017



Introduction


- Definition: news format on which “*time-stamped content [on a specific topic] is **progressively added** for a **finite period***” (Thurman & Walters 2013: p. 83)
- Popularity:
 - 2015 Digital News Survey (RISJ): across 17 countries, **14 percent** of respondents had used a live blog in the previous week
 - Readers’ desire to be kept **up-to-date** with developments *as they happen* rather than receiving a broadcast summary in the evening or following up in the newspaper the next day




Last day of Supreme Court Brexit case

5 Dec 2016 06:00

Read more: [Court 'won't overturn Brexit vote' - All you need to know about Brexit](#)



Day 3
BBC News



Daily Politics
BBC Two

Summary


- Supreme Court case ends with reminder it's not about stopping Brexit
- Government appealed against ruling it needs MPs' approval to trigger Brexit
- Judgement is expected in January
- Watch highlights of each day via clips above, or scroll down to see how events unfolded

Live reporting

By Jackie Storer and Alex Hunt

8:23
9 Dec

Watch: Highlights of Thursday at Supreme Court




The latest on the case that will define how the UK starts the process of leaving the EU.

Share

3:30
9 Dec

Supreme Court 'won't overturn Brexit'



The Brexit hearing draws to a close with a reminder the court will not overturn the referendum.

Read more >

Share

BBC.com. "Last Day of Supreme Court Brexit Case", 5 December 2016, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/live/uk-politics-37976580>

Strictly Come Dancing

Strictly Come Dancing: the semi-final – as it happened

Updated


It's the big push now ... and our four couples had to dance TWICE to try and make the Grand Final. Let the glittery games begin

Heidi Stephens

Monday 12 December 2016 07:00 AEDT

f t e

5:38am
SUNDAY NIGHT RESULTS SHOW
UPDATE!



Will Ore and Joanne make it to the final with their Argentine tango to Kylie? Photograph: Guy Levy/PA

7:00am
07:00

So our finalists are Danny and Oti, Louise and Kevin, and Ore and Joanne – it's a Clifton double and the hottest dancer in *Strictly* history (I'm talking about Oti, btw). Should be a hard-fought final, so join me next Saturday at 6.40pm for a glitter-tastic night in.

Thank you all for joining in, feel free to swing by Twitter @heidistephens and say hello, otherwise I'll see you next Saturday!

f t G+

Guardian.co.uk. "Strictly Come Dancing: the semi-final – as it happened", 12 December 2016, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/live/2016/dec/10/strictly-come-dancing-the-semi-final-live>

Historical Perspectives (1)

- One of the **first occurrences** of the 'live blog' term: 6 May 2004, *St Louis Post-Dispatch*; alerting print readers to a live blog their reporter would be writing during the last episode of the TV series 'Friends'

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

NEWS

ONLINE TODAY

33 words

6 May 2004

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

SLMO

FIVE STAR LATE LIFT

A2

English

Copyright 2004, St. Louis Post-Dispatch. All Rights Reserved.

As "Friends" calls it quits tonight, read Gail Pennington's **live blog** during the finale.



Historical Perspectives (2)

- Even **earlier example**:
'Hour by Hour' story on
the general election as
covered by the
Manchester Guardian
goes back as far as **1923**!
- Same characteristics of
today's live blogs:



Reverse chronological updates marked by timestamps and brisk, conversational, **informal tone**

Critical issues: Transparency (1)

Transparency:

- **Potential errors** during the reporting process can be **sign-posted**:
- Live blogs' "*provision of 'supporting evidence' and 'conflicting possibilities' from a relatively wide range of sources, and their **transparent attribution practices***" (Thurman & Walters 2013: p. 98)

Transparent corrections

9.25am: Standard & Poor's has said it won't downgrade South Korea's credit rating following the death of Kim Jong-il.



Our ratings on South Korea take into account temporary uncertainties associated with North Korean security risks as well contingent liabilities arising from a possible reunification of the North and South.

But it warned that South Korea's rating or outlook could be revised if the succession plan was not smoothly implemented or if there were other

Guardian.co.uk. "Eurozone crisis live: UK refuses to contribute to €200bn IMF package", 19 December 2011, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2011/dec/19/eurozone-crisis-live>

Critical issues: Transparency (2)

But: clash with **professional established standards?**

- Members of the press “*must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text*” (IPSO 2016)

The Code

The Code – including this preamble and the public interest exceptions below – sets the framework for the highest professional standards that members of the press subscribing to the Independent Press Standards Organisation have undertaken to maintain. It is the cornerstone of the system of voluntary self-regulation to which they have made a binding contractual commitment. It balances both the rights of the individual and the public's right to know.

To achieve that balance, it is essential that an agreed Code be honoured not only to the letter, but in the full spirit. It should be interpreted neither so narrowly as to compromise its commitment to respect the rights of the individual, nor so broadly that it infringes the fundamental right to freedom of expression – such as to inform, to be partisan, to challenge, shock, be satirical and to entertain – or prevents publication in the public interest.

It is the responsibility of editors and publishers to apply the Code to editorial material in both printed and online versions of their publications. They should take care to ensure it is observed rigorously by all editorial staff and external contributors, including non-journalists.

Editors must maintain in-house procedures to resolve complaints swiftly and, where required to do so, co-operate with IPSO. A publication subject to an adverse adjudication must publish it in full and with due prominence, as required by IPSO.

1. Accuracy

i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.

ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.

IPSO.co.uk. “Editor’s Code of Practice”, 1 January 2016,
Independent Press Standards Organisation,
<https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/>

Critical issues: Sourcing

Sourcing

- Frequent appearance of **journalists and other media and news agencies as sources**: Live blogs' frequent quoting of other media sources *"may be interpreted positively as a strategy aimed at providing readers with as complete a picture of an event as possible, together with various interpretations of the event"* (Tereszkiewicz 2014: p. 308)
- But: **reliance on secondary sources** potentially a result of **increasing pressures to publish fast and frequently**, and **decreasing newsroom resources** which keep journalists **desk-bound** and less able to **cultivate specialist knowledge** and **independent sources**



Key challenges (1)

Methodology: in-depth interviews with senior British journalists

- **Verification:**

- On live blogs, there is *“less onus”* to be *“close to 100 percent sure”* about the accuracy of statements than there is on *“proper stories”* (BBC World News journalist, personal communication, 16 September 2014)
- On live blogs, it is more acceptable to not be *“fully accurate or give the full picture”* because you are telling it as you see it at a particular moment, with the knowledge that the facts may not *“stand the test of time”* (Yolande Knell, BBC Middle East Correspondent, personal communication, 29 September 2014)

- **Speed vs accuracy:**

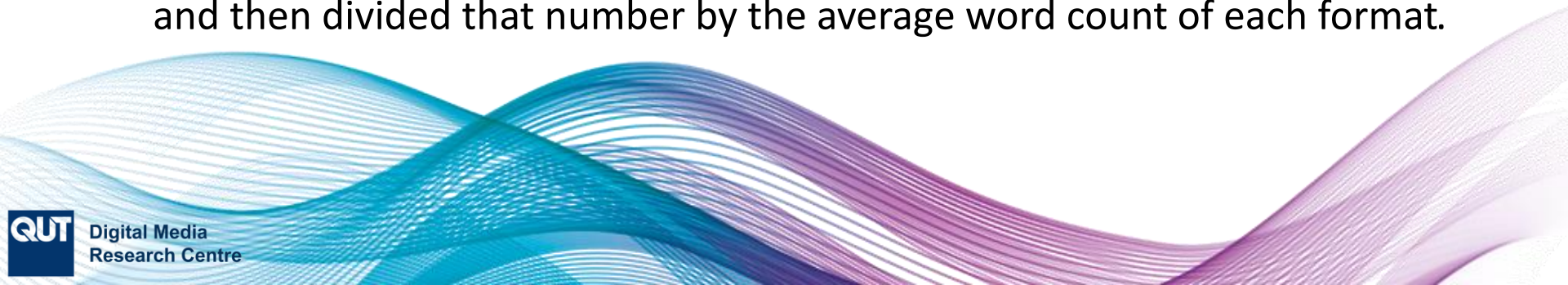
- Rivalry with other news outlets – such as *Sky News* – about who could publish first, with *“competitions”* sometimes decided by *“fractions of seconds”* (BBC World News journalist, *ibid.*)
- *“If you’ve got airtime to fill ... you end up ... elaborating on things you shouldn’t really be elaborating on ... the focus on speed versus accuracy within journalism is a huge challenge”* (Laura Roberts, former journalist at The Daily Telegraph, personal communication, 02 October 2014)

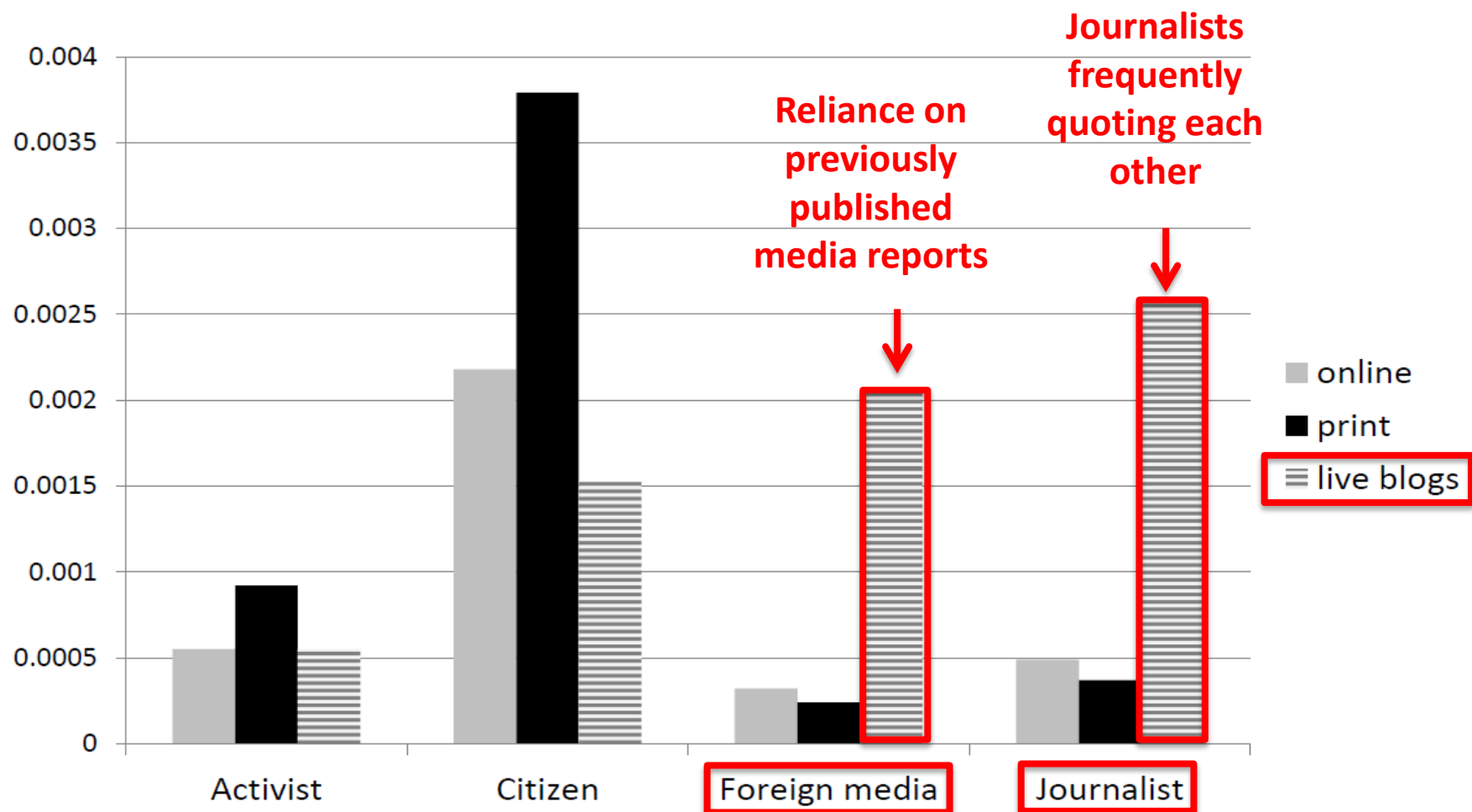


Key challenges (2)

Methodology: Quantitative content analysis

- **Reliance on secondary sources:**
 - **$N = 1,065$ news articles** (75 live blogs, 842 online articles, 148 print articles) covering the 2011 Egyptian revolution in six UK national news publishers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *BBC News*, *Channel 4 News*, *Reuters News*), 25 Jan-11 Feb 2011
 - Research goal: analysis of the **sources used**. Each source was assigned to one of 18 categories (e.g. citizen, NGO, foreign politician, etc.) determined by a deductive, explanatory approach. Separately for each format we determined the frequency with which each source category was quoted and then divided that number by the average word count of each format.





Note: This graph shows results for four of the 18 source categories identified in the content analysis. The other sources were: Analyst/expert/academic, Anonymous source, Consultancy, Enterprise, EU official, Foreign government official, Lawyer, Leaked document, Military, National government official, National government opponent, National government supporter, Non-governmental organization, and State media organization.

Conclusions

- **Other journalists** are the most common source to be found in live blogs
- Live blogs heavily rely on **previously published media reports** as a source and rarely present first-hand, unofficial sources (such as activists and citizens in the Egyptian case)
- ➔ *Even in an age of information abundance, the media tend towards imitation and mimicry to the disservice of plurality (cf. Boczkowski 2010)*
- ➔ *Journalism may be becoming more transparent (e.g. through the **signposting of errors** as exemplified in the live blogs example) yet also more speculative (through **less focus on verification** brought about by the **tension between speed and accuracy**)*



Thank you for your attention!

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Further reading:

- **Thurman, N. & Schapals, A.K.** (2016) Live blogs, sources and objectivity: The contradictions of real-time online reporting. In: Franklin, B. & Eldridge II, S.A. (eds.), *Companion to Digital Journalism Studies*. London: Routledge.
- **Thurman, N.** (2014) Real-Time Online Reporting: Best Practices for Live Blogging. In: Zion, L. & Craig, D.A. (eds.), *Ethics for Digital Journalists: Emerging Best Practices*. New York: Routledge, pp. 103-14.
- **Tereszkiewicz, A.** (2014) 'I'm Not Sure What That Means Yet, But We'll Soon Find Out': The Discourse of Newspaper Live Blogs. *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 131(3): 299-319.

