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

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’.
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)

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)
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:**


  - **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 **sign-posting 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: