Participatory journalism at British news websites

7th International Symposium on Online Journalism, University of Texas, USA, 8 April 2006.

Neil Thurman
Avril Williams

Peter Bale

Stewart Kirkpatrick

Pete Clifton &
Mike Smartt

Richard Burton

Pete Picton

Tracey Corrigan
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<tr>
<th>Web site</th>
<th>Polls</th>
<th>Have your say</th>
<th>Chat room</th>
<th>Q&amp;A</th>
<th>Blogs with comments enabled</th>
<th>Message boards</th>
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Use of message boards at ten UK news websites

- Guardian.co.uk: 1221 (Pre-moderated)
- DailyMail.co.uk: 1165 (Pre-moderated)
- ThisisLondon.co.uk: 389
- Telegraph.co.uk: 0.116
- FT.com: 9
- Independent.co.uk
- TheSun.co.uk
- TimesOnline.co.uk
- Scotsman.com
- News.bbc.co.uk
Wednesday April 20

Is the Tory promise to put off council tax rises to between 2006 and 2007, first made in a bid to win back the swing seats lost in the 2001 general election, to be implemented?

Voters now know that the Lib Dems will be replaced by a local income tax, according to reports.

And if they return the Tories they know about will happen. It's simple, it's true, it reflects that council tax is one of the core issues in British politics. It's gone up in cost, it's gone up in value, it's gone up in percentage terms and it's gone up in total cost.
My Day in Iraq: US aid worker

As part of the BBC News website’s One Day in Iraq coverage, we heard from people from all walks of life, all over the country.

"Susan", a US aid worker based in Dohuk in the Kurdish autonomous area of northern Iraq, told us about a day spent working with local communities to improve awareness of the burgeoning political system.

“It was the second day of a three-day workshop in Mangesh focusing on the Iraqi constitution and elections.

The night before, I stayed at the home of friends near Dohuk. There were 12 of us sleeping in two rooms on mattresses. Luckily, it was a cool night!

We had problems getting people here from Baghdad as the road is dangerous and we didn’t have time to organise flights, but locals managed to

Will extra hours at school be good for children?

The Education Secretary Ruth Kelly has launched a £680 million initiative to keep schools open from 8am to 6pm, with schools running breakfast clubs and a range of after-school programmes. She said the extended hours would help “latchkey kids” and allow schools to become community centres. But teachers’ unions question whether the scheme is adequately funded, and whether parents will have to pay

E-mail your view on the new scheme, using the form below

This scheme will benefit middle class working parents, like me, who are prepared to pay for their children to be supervised before or after school, while the parents are still at work. I doubt if it will benefit those "alienated from society" who will have neither the funds nor the inclination to sign their children up. However, as most current after school clubs have great difficulty finding staff to work the hours I can’t see that it will ever be available to all children. Elaine Winter, Cambridge

Thank goodness for this. Our daughter starts school in September, at the moment she's thriving in a private nursery. My husband and I both work in flexible jobs, but cannot see how we would be able to continue without relying on friends or neighbours. I’m fed up with people trying to make us feel bad about working and having children - get back to the 50s or wise up to the realities of modern life. Jo O’Hare, Alderton, Wiltshire
Editors’ concerns / local constraints

1. Spelling, punctuation, editorial selection, accuracy & balance
2. Introducing blogs would result in a style of journalism more inclined towards personality and opinion
3. Making user generated content initiatives pay
4. Uncertain legal environment
5. The management of the journalists involved in user-generated content initiatives.
6. The information systems involved in the eliciting, processing and publishing of reader contributions.
1. Editors’ concerns: Spelling, punctuation, editorial selection, accuracy & balance
“[the reason people] buy a newspaper or a magazine is to read a well-crafted news story or feature by someone who is trained and experienced in that field”

Pete Picton, editor, *Sun*

[ 10 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“On any user-invited feedback, most people are making the same point. You'll find that there will only be about, maybe, ten points of view so hundreds and hundreds will all be making the same points in different ways or the same way”

Mike Smartt, ex-editor, BBC News Website
“[I] strongly believe … that there is a premium to be paid for editing experience…readers want you to sift out content for them. That’s why they prefer different brands to others.”

Pete Picton, editor, the Sun

[10 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman]
“99 per cent of the blogs are extremely dull or are of very marginal interest”

Peter Bale, editorial director
[ 14 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]

“there are a lot of very mediocre blogs out there”

Richard Deverell, BBC News Interactive
[ 3 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“[the contributors were]... a bunch of bigots who were shouting from one side of the room to the other and back again without even bothering to listen to what the other side of the room were saying. If someone did try to put a reasonable, balanced view it was an exception.”

Martin King, editor, THE INDEPENDENT ONLINE EDITION

[ 16 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“we are slightly more comfortable [now that] we are not putting things on the website which we are not happy to have there”

Tracy Corrigan, editor, FT.com

[ 13 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
2. Editors’ concerns: Introducing blogs would result in a style of journalism more inclined towards personality and opinion.
“the message is the only thing that is important. No one knows you, no one cares about you. The reader wants information . . . [the] traditional journalist [...] is a fly on the wall [...] delivering information”

Richard Burton, editor, telegraph.co.uk

[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“[bylines are only used] as a reward for special pieces of work, or when we need to make clear who is providing the analysis ... if you put them on every straight news story ... they'd become meaningless”

Pete Clifton, editor, BBC News Website

3. Local constraints: Making user generated content initiatives pay
“[we had to] cut down the number [of user generated ‘Discussions’ because] if you do lots and lots of them then it is quite resource intensive”

Tracy Corrigan, editor, FT.com
[13 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman]
“[I think readers’ contributions can add] another dimension to our stories. If I had more resource I would like to get these people to write for me. For example it would be fascinating to hear about day-to-day life in Baghdad. Is it worrying to go out and get your milk and paper? What do you do about dropping your kids off at school? Are there days when you don’t go out because you think it is dangerous?”

Martin King, editor, The Independent [16 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman]
“[they are] motivated because they just want to write their experiences...the question of getting paid isn't a major issue”.

**Mike Smartt, ex-editor, BBC News Website**


“[user contributions are treated in] a traditional news-gathering way. We interview them, thank them and that would be the end of that”

**Pete Clifton, editor, BBC News Website**

[8 November 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“people love it, they are very loyal to it...the number of pages per visit for those people is very, very high...about forty to fifty per cent of the DailyMail.co.uk's traffic is made up of the [message boards]”

Avril Williams, DailyMail.co.uk

[ 22 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“[we] were getting very substantial pages impressions. Something like 20-30 thousand page impressions a week from just the Middle East chunk [of our message boards but that was from] about 220 [users]”

Martin King, editor, *The Independent* [16 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman]
“it's difficult, it's really difficult to get them out of message boards”

Avril Williams, Daily Mail

[ 22 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“[we use] intelligent hyperlinks within postings. So if someone writes 'Weller' then that 'Weller' would become a link to the 'Weller' website…[it is the price users] have to pay for their message boards”

Avril Williams, Daily Mail

[ 22 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“On the day of the Buncefield oil depot explosion we received about 6,000 emails and 3 – 4,000 video clips, stills, and eyewitness accounts. TV news were coming to the website for material.”

Pete Clifton, BBC News Interactive

[ 31 January 2006, personal conversation with Neil Thurman ]
4. Local constraints: Uncertain legal environment
“[Libel laws are] holding publishers back and certainly give me cause for concern”

Stewart Kirkpatrick, editor, Scotsman

[20 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman]
While the G8 waters down its plans to combat climate change, the Antarctic ice sheet is melting far faster than we thought. The consequences could be devastating.

“This is definitely not science fiction ... it could happen”

By Rob Edwards, Environment Editor

Lord Fraser McLatchie should reveal taxi expenses

By Paul Hutcheon, Scottish Political Editor

Rebate row will mean ‘lame duck presidency’

Blair’s tenure to be ‘hard going’

By James Cusick, Westminster Editor
5. Local constraints: The management of the journalists involved in user-generated content initiatives.
“Maybe we would do more blogs if we had lots of people who had time to write but I think it is difficult to get journalists to commit to doing very long term blogs when they are doing full-time jobs as well”

Tracy Corrigan, editor, FT.com

[ 13 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“What you can end up doing is forcing somebody into something by saying ‘when you are out on this story we want you do a blog’. Reporters are trained in certain ways and they look for certain things, they work to certain deadlines. They work to a brief. Giving somebody an open-ended, ‘have a bit of a rant’ brief doesn't necessarily suit them professionally”

Richard Burton, editor, telegraph.co.uk

[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
6. Local constraints: The information systems supporting the processing and publishing of reader contributions.
“[I considered a] bulletin board structure...a technological beast in which people can write in and they can be published straight to the web or they can be filtered and monitored [but in the end was] worried [that we would be] going into an area that was just too complicated...the monitoring worried me. The people weren't trained to any discernible standard to watch for problems”

Richard Burton, editor, telegraph.co.uk

[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“[My] journalists … know what they are doing. We don’t have any nonsense up there. Cutting and pasting into XML and just subbing it on the run seems to be a lot easier and more fun and just produced fewer problems”

Richard Burton, editor, telegraph.co.uk

[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“Blogs worry me. Blogs are the ultimate publishing tool. It means anybody can be a journalist ... this idea with blogs and particularly wikis that you can go in and edit stuff and all join the party. It is a load of fun but it just detracts from what a traditional idea of journalism is. I think we have to be quite careful”

Richard Burton, editor, telegraph.co.uk

[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
"We are keen to introduce blogging in a way that is different to our rivals and make it relevant for an urban London audience"

Avril Williams, [Daily Mail](https://www.dailymail.co.uk)
[ 22 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]

“[blogs can] look quite attractive [they are] something I want to examine”

Richard Burton, editor, [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk)
[ 7 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“When John Peel [the popular British DJ] died we had, in total, over 100,000 emails. On the first day we had 35,000. Because our approach is to read and sub everything that we put up, we just couldn't cope. We must have delighted about 50 people by publishing their comments but the other 34,500 must have thought, ‘I've spent all this time crafting this beautiful poem and you've just ignored it’”.

Pete Clifton, editor, BBC News Website
[ 8 November 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“We have to accept that we have got to be a bit more relaxed about letting user comments come into a well flagged up area of the site where people will know we haven't gone through these with a fine tooth comb”

Pete Clifton, editor, BBC News Website

[ 8 November 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
“We’re looking at software eBay uses called Jivesoft, which would allow readers to access comments in different ways. We would still have the BBC selection which is what we do now but in addition you could invite other readers to rate each comment on how interesting or useful they found it. Then the best ones would rise to the top”

Richard Deverell, BBC News Interactive

[ 3 November 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]
‘Popular’ ‘Have your says’:
100,000 page views
2,000 contributors (0.05% of readers)

For comparison:
Popular stories get 500,000 page views
BBC News website gets 3.5 – 4 million unique users / day
French riots: What now?

Should emergency laws in France be extended?

The French President, Jacques Chirac, has said the riots in his country have revealed a crisis of identity, and has vowed to fight what he calls the 'poison' of discrimination in France.

Mr Chirac, who has been accused of weak leadership during the crisis, also said the rioters must be brought to justice.

France's National Assembly has approved plans to extend state of emergency laws by three months.

What do you think of the tough measures imposed by the French government? What do you think the causes of the violence are? What will be the long-term impact? Send us your comments.

Published: Thursday, 10 November, 2005, 12:51 GMT 12:51 UK
Conclusions

- High variance in reader involvement -- reflects legal environment & local personnel, technical & resource conditions.
- Some sites ‘burnt’ by inappropriate submissions have withdrawn forums.
- Editors’ attachment to traditional standards not firmly fixed, inhibit less than local conditions.
- User forums generate loyalty in niche groups, profitability unproved.
- User generated content initiatives often justified in terms of what they bring to the print or broadcast parent: but novelty will wear thin.
- Sites should:
  - (1) more fully integrate their user contributions into their mainstream journalistic enterprise.
  - (2) find ways of satisfying unmet and growing demand from readers to contribute & be published.
“We have this huge resource of opinion, of really quite vocal readers . . . so how do we get them in the paper? Because if we get their names in the paper they are more likely to buy it”

Stewart Kirkpatrick, editor, Scotsman.com

[ 20 December 2004, telephone call with Neil Thurman ]