**Chapter 1: Introduction**

1.1 A brave new world

The future of newspapers is once more under scrutiny. Each step forward in communication technology, whether it be the invention of the telegraph, radio or television, has brought with it fatalistic cries predicting the demise of the printed press. The internet has added further voices to this battle-cry due to its comparatively rapid arrival and spread. Yet whilst News Corporation boss Rupert Murdoch proclaims that he can “see the day, maybe 20 years away, where you don’t actually have paper and ink and printing presses” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.60), there is another school of thought that argues that newspapers’ ability to adapt to changing circumstances has always provided them with a survival strategy and secured their future (Franklin, 2008). But what form newspapers of the future will take is open to great debate. Although 84 per cent of editors worldwide are optimistic about the future of their newspaper there is an increasing swing towards online journalism as the platform of preference for future news (Burke, 2008). It could be argued that Murdoch and Franklin are both right. Newspapers will continue to exist in the future but could increasingly exist as electronic rather than printed products. Indeed in early 2011 Murdoch launched his first electronic newspaper *The Daily* on the iPad computer tablet and within a year it had achieved 100,000 subscriptions - a fifth of the original profitability target (Preston, 2012). As technology rapidly advances in the early 21st century the boundaries between newspapers, newspaper websites, electronic newspapers and newspaper digital offerings (smart phone applications, social media) are becoming increasingly blurred. The move appears to be away from the printed product towards existing or new electronic devices creating an online newspaper in a variety of formats. The focus of this study is the transition from printed newspapers to newspaper websites and newspaper profiles on social media platforms.

The introduction of online news content, particularly via newspaper websites, has been developed by publishing companies in Britain, and worldwide, during the last decade and billions of pounds has been poured into new media technology. This is in response to the growing British appetite for internet usage which according to the Office of National Statistics research reveals that 77 per cent of households in Britain have access to the internet and 93 per cent of those are connected using broadband (ONS, 2011). A further 45 per cent of internet users have used a mobile phone to connect to the internet. The newspaper industry is attempting to remain relevant to its readers and “find salvation” by embracing innovation and integrating digital media (Paulussen, 2011). Meanwhile the British government argue that to be without the internet is to be disadvantaged – both economically and socially (Digital Britain Final Report, 2009). This notion of the internet as an empowering force for good is put forward by technological determinists who believe the spread and development of technology itself will satisfy all information and communication needs of all segments of the population (Mansell, 2009). One such theorist, Daniel Bell (1979) is believed to have first referred to The Information Society and argued that technological innovation would open up power relations and work to the benefit of all citizens. Yet there are others who work within an endogenous framework and look upon the human factors that lead to the potential opportunities and disadvantages of technology and do not believe technology in isolation will assuage social and economic problems (Mansell, 2007).

When looking more specifically at journalism and the online environment it can said that there is a growing field of scholarship which supports the view that the internet holds great potential for the empowerment and engagement of citizens; particularly in the creation of grassroots journalism which challenges the established hegemony of traditional media conglomerates (Hermida, 2010; Gillmor, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). They argue that the move from a top down to a bottom up approach to journalism is changing the content of news, the role of professional journalists and the role of readers as pro-sumers, contributors and collaborators (Domingo *et al*, 2008; Allan, 2007; Bowman and Willis, 2003).

The model of journalism which previously witnesses journalists, columnist and leader writers handing down authoritative opinions in the manner of ‘tablets of stone’, is retreating to make way for a new journalism which seeks to encourage readers to join journalists in a more open and interactive discussion (Franklin, 2008, p.307).

The balance of power is said to be changing (Benkler, 2006) and with it the gatekeeper role of journalists is being redefined (Singer, 1997). Journalists no longer have exclusive access to mass audiences, as the internet potentially allows anyone with access to become their own broadcaster or publisher to a worldwide audience. Some scholars argue that in the online environment journalists can no longer stake their claim as being “the ones who decide what the public needs to know, as well as when and how such information should be provided,” (Domingo *et al*, 2008, p.326). Others are more cautious and refer to the numerous resources and exclusive access to information journalists’ still maintain (Reich, 2008) and their reluctance to relinquish control (Singer, 2009; Hermida and Thurman, 2008).

This research therefore aims to analyse how and to what extent the gatekeeping model is changing online and this common debate is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. For Gillmor (2006) the role of the journalist is to shape larger conversations, whilst Charman (2009) talks of journalists as news curators and Singer (1997) predicted more than a decade ago that journalists would increasingly become the digesters and analysers of volumes of information. Meanwhile others argue that journalists are retaining their gatekeeping role in their control of user generated content on professional news websites (Domingo *et al*, 2008; Franklin, 2008; Hermida, 2008).

The deterministic view that audiences will automatically become active in journalism simply because the technology enables it has been challenged by many. Audiences often do not want to participate even if they can and furthermore Paulussen *et al* (2007) argue that the large majority of citizens are still unlikely to play an active role in the news making process. And when audiences do participate it can be of limited value other than discussing matters of personal interest or making abusive comments (Singer, 2009). Valuable online participation remains in the domain of elites rather than empowering the masses (Deuze, 2007; Haas, 2007; Dahlgren, 2001). Arguably the internet is an extension of the offline world filled with monopolies, gatekeepers and political elites where audiences are increasingly targeted by the media as consumers rather than citizens.

This capitalist approach to journalism has been attributed by scholars (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001; Herman, 1997) to the conglomeration of media companies into multi-national corporations that rely on large profit margins. As a result the concentration of power leads to a dependence on advertiser support and a responsibility to shareholders rather than opening up controversial public debate and political engagement (Herman, 1997). Habermas (1989) argues that the 18th century capitalist structure persists today because there is more money to be made in broad, popular content, than in controversial, diverse and independently operated media, supporting the argument that readers are viewed as paying consumers rather than empowered citizens. As Garnham (1986) succinctly points out the liberal (market) free press is a contradiction between economics and politics. Conglomerates also have the resources and finance to have the most visited websites which become the “privileged centres of online communication” (Singer, 2009) maintaining power and market share. Furthermore Bourdieu (2005) maintains that the journalistic field is paradoxical with economic and cultural capital in constant conflict. As this study explores these capitalist controls can cause constraints in the newsrooms as resources are cut to maintain share prices and therefore journalists are unable to open up the conversation to audiences even if they desire it. Furthermore even when equipped with the appropriate technology to enable greater reader participation, journalists may not have the time (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008) to facilitate it.

This situation became more acute in the British local media during 2008 to 2010 when the industry faced significant challenges brought about by structural changes and the global recession. Scores of local newspapers closed and thousands of journalists lost their jobs (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009), leading to squeezes in the newsroom just as the internet was striding into Web 2.0 and flourishing with social media, multimedia content and the capability to talk directly to audiences. All of these themes are explored further in Chapter 2 but first it is appropriate to explore the current landscape of the British local newspaper industry as it tries to tackle widespread technological and cultural shifts.

This chapter provides an overview of the current state of newspapers (1.1) before moving on to explain the key terminology (1.2.1) used in this thesis. The chapter then moves on to discuss the historical evolution of local newspapers (1.2.2) and the historical context of the internet (1.3). The next section looks at the emergence of Web 2.0 (1.3.1) and the impact this has had on audience collaboration and participation (1.3.2). This is followed by a brief introduction to the theory of the public sphere (1.4). The final section of this chapter outlines the field of inquiry (1.5) of this PhD research, the research questions (1.5.1) and the structure of the thesis (1.5.2).

1.2 The turbulent British local newspaper landscape

Each week more than 40 million people in Britain pick up a local newspaper – a staggering 65 per cent of the population. A further 37 million web users log onto local news websites each month. According to the Newspaper Society (2010) there remain 1,300 core newspapers and 1,500 websites in the British local media, a sign that the industry, in statistical terms at least, is most definitely not in decline. If the figures are to be believed local media in Britain is reaching more people than ever before across multiple platforms that also include 600 niche titles, 43 radio stations and two television channels.

But despite this strong market presence local media are struggling to compete with the growth of the internet and subsequent drop in advertising revenues (Singer *et al*, 2011). A paradox exists where the consumption of online news is increasing substantially yet publishers are unable to transform this increased demand into profits (Ripolles and Castillo, 2011). As Briggs (2012) reasons "it's not a readership problem; it's a revenue problem" (p.14) and the web has to some degree saved newspapers by adding millions of readers through websites and digital products. Yet the financial predicament is so severe in the UK that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport launched an inquiry in 2009 to examine the local media landscape and propose industry changes.

The local media organisations that operate on traditional platforms argue that the increased competition for people’s media consumption and advertising revenues, as well as issues such as the exploitation of search engines of the media’s content, has effectively caused a crisis in traditional local media (Culture, Media and Sport Committee,2009, p.3).

A large part of this report examined local newspapers, which the authors acknowledged as the starting point of journalism, from which local and national television and radio take their cues, in the so called “news pyramid” structure (p.11). This is fundamental to the choice of research subject in this study which is developed later in this chapter in section 1.5. Meanwhile the government report also provided evidence that local media gave a “trusted source of public service information and accountability to local communities” (p.8) and audiences trusted local and regional news in particular. However falling sales and advertising slumps have damaged trusted newspapers in recent years. Changes in buying habits, fragmented audiences and competition online have all contributed to the drop in newspaper sales (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009; Franklin, 2008; Bowman and Willis, 2003). Revenues at regional newspaper publisher Northcliffe Media fell by nine per cent in 2011 and operating profit fell by 23 per cent. This has led to profits falling £4million year-on-year to £8million and according to half yearly figures released in May 2011 circulation revenues in the period were down six per cent with advertising revenue down 28 per cent (Kirwan, 2011). Northcliffe’s flagship newspaper the *Leicester Mercury* saw daily circulation figures fall seven per cent between December 2009 and December 2010 (ABC, 2011). By comparison Newsquest publication the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* saw a four per cent decrease in circulation during the same period.

The biggest blow has been the loss of advertising revenue which makes up to 90 per cent of local newspapers’ profit over the cover price. The internet is “stealing” traditional newspaper advertisers (Aldridge, 2007, p.37) as classified advertising has been swallowed up by specialist websites (Singer *et al*, 2011) such as Ebay, and property, motoring and recruitment have also moved to specialist websites such as rightmove.co.uk, autotrader.co.uk and jobs.nhs.uk. Government recruitment advertising has increasingly moved away from local newspapers and “the changing way in which people search for jobs, property, cars and other products has undoubtedly resulted in advertisers prioritising the internet as a host for their campaigns” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.13). The effects have arguably been more dramatic for local newspaper journalists than their national counterpart, as local reporters have found themselves on “the front line of an industry in crisis” (Dickinson, 2011, p.8). To what extent this is a cyclical or structural change is under debate but industry experts and scholars alike concede that there is definitely a structural shift to online content (Nguyen, 2010; Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009) even if newspaper advertising income streams are showing signs of recovery at the end of the economic downturn.

The adverse impact that the growth and popularity of the internet has had on newspaper purchasing and advertising does not look set to reverse. There is a significant generational shift in reading habits, and the internet is fostering a younger generation of electronic news consumers on which newspapers need to capitalise (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.17).

One striking, recurring theme in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee report was that newspapers must “adapt to the digital world if they are to survive” (p.5). But they must adapt not only their content but also their advertising platforms. Nguyen (2010) argues that competitors in the online world come not only from the traditional news industries but also from “online natives” like Yahoo!, Google and Facebook. This is compounded by the fact that search engines account for almost 60 per cent of total online advertising revenues in the UK and US (p.238).

Not only are there fragmented advertising markets on the internet but news content itself is much more diverse online due to the relatively low running costs. Whereas the majority of British local newspapers are owned by large publishers such as Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Northcliffe and Newsquest, local websites are run by these traditional media groups but also by community groups, individuals, content aggregators like Google News and public service broadcaster the BBC which has a network of 60 local websites (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.9). The online environment could therefore be viewed as far more competitive even if it is still dominated by traditional media gatekeepers, who have the history, brand and marketing finances behind them.

All of these factors have created challenges for the local newspaper industry and a failure to find an effective business model to date has hit local newspapers hard. Northcliffe Media, the fourth largest regional newspaper publisher, launched a cost cutting programme in 2005 which led to savings of £35million and a reduction of 1,000 staff by September 2006. Further cuts were made during the following four years and by 2010 staff was down more than 50 per cent from 8,013 to 3,817 (Kirwan, 2011). Furthermore the National Union of Journalists documented the closure of 60 local newspapers and more than 1,500 job losses in local newspapers from May 2008 to May 2009 (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.12). Ironically the internet, argued as the potential future of printed news media earlier in this chapter, is also the newspaper industry’s economic Achilles heel.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee report concludes that local newspapers must embrace the internet in order to continue their valuable role in society. However publishers are still scratching their heads about the best way to do this and ultimately this means the most profitable way to do this within the traditional understanding of local media news markets.

Local media performs numerous functions in society. It scrutinises and holds to account local authorities and institutions, it informs people of news and events in their communities, and it forms part of the local identity of an area...It is therefore vital for local newspaper publishers to innovate to survive by continuing to develop websites and utilise internet technologies (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.3).

Having sketched the current debates surrounding the challenges faced by the British local newspaper industry and the move towards online platforms – both of which underpin this study - it is now appropriate to discuss a number of key terms that will be referred to throughout the research.

1.2.1 Key terms

**Local newspapers**

Some explanation is required to explain the terminology ‘local newspapers’, defined in the research problem later in this chapter and referred to thus far. Britain has a complex newspaper structure made up of the national, regional and local press, and their subsequent websites. ‘National’ newspapers refer to the daily and Sunday tabloid, mid-range, broadsheet and Berliner publications which cover stories of national and international significance and are distributed across the country. The newspaper editorial departments are London based. These publications include *The Sun, Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, the *Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, the *Observer*. Their circulation figures range from approximately 300,000 to three million per day according to ABC circulation figures (2010). Although these newspapers sometimes include stories of a local orientation this would be due to their national public interest value or their unusual nature which would be of interest to the national public. In contrast daily, weekly and Sunday regional and local newspapers account for all other newspaper publications in Britain which are only distributed in specific geographical areas and have largely localised content. As Aldridge (2007) outlines in her book *Understanding the Local Media* it is a complicated landscape with many variations. In the late 20th century daily regional news papers covered large urban and rural areas and were printed in the morning. Meanwhile city based daily papers were printed in the evening. Furthermore weekly newspapers tended to be based in small towns and were often referred to as local papers, according to Aldridge (2007). However due to the closure of presses and merger of newspapers the distinctions are even less clear cut today. Many city daily papers now print in the morning rather than the evening and break news online instead.

Although local newspapers may contain a few pages of national and international news coverage they are predominantly filled with stories, advertising and promotions relevant to the geographical area in which they are sold - or distributed for free in the case of the free weekly newspapers. Therefore they have much more limited circulation figures than the national press ranging from approximately 2,000 to 126,000 (Newspaper Society, 2010). Their readership is varied like the national press, with the largest age category in the 35-45 bracket, and most readers aged 35 and over (Jic-in-a-box online, 2010).

The term regional newspapers is often used to refer to newspapers that cover a large geographical area such as a county - the *Yorkshire Post* (Yorkshire) - or several counties - *Western Daily Press* (Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire). Within these regional areas are more geographically localised newspapers, in terms of distribution and content, often based around one city or town –*Sheffield Star*, *Daventry Express* - or a collection of towns – *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* (Northampton, Daventry and Towcester). However the terms regional and local are often interchangeable due to the complex nature of the makeup of non-national British newspapers. For example the *Wiltshire Gazette & Herald*, despite having the name of a county in its title does not represent the entire county in its content orientation or in its distribution. Instead the *Wiltshire Gazette & Herald* covers the towns of Chippenham, Calne, Corsham, Devizes, Pewsey, Marlborough and Malmesbury, whilst its sister paper the *Wiltshire Times*, also owned by Newsquest, covers the other towns and surrounding villages in the county such as Melksham, Trowbridge, Warminster. Therefore these two newspapers could be arguably described as local newspapers rather than regional ones as their countywide titles imply. To add further confusion, many of these local and regional newspapers have localised editions, so each town they represent will have approximately two to five pages of news specific to that area within the same newspaper title. If you pick up a copy of the *Wiltshire Gazette & Herald* in Chippenham and then buy one in Malmesbury it will have a different front page and some internal pages will also vary. As Aldridge explains weekly town-based newspapers are closest to the term local papers but “many of these, too, have several locally based editions and a wider ‘reach’ than their title implies” (p.14). It must also be noted that the synonymous term provincial press is also used, particularly in the historical context of newspapers based outside London (Hobbs, 2006; Walker, 2006; Jackson, 1971). Furthermore Cranfield (1962) refers to the county newspapers of the 18th century and Hobbs (2006) reasons that the terms provincial and country were used interchangeably in the Provincial Newspaper Society’s 1886 jubilee publications. These historic terms are therefore synonymous with the terms local and regional press more commonly used in the 20th and 21st century.

However, despite this complexity , for the sake of simplicity this study adopts the term ‘local newspaper’ when referring to all non-national 21st century British newspapers, to represent all those newspapers that cover a single town, city or county and also those that represent a selection of towns, cities or counties. They all cover a ‘localised’ geographic area in their content and distribution, hence the use of the term local rather than regional. It is also the most commonly used term employed by Franklin and Murphy (1998) in their comprehensive book *Making the local news: Local journalism in context* and sits in accordance with the Newspaper Society (2010) which does not distinguish between local and regional newspapers:

Question: What is the definition of a regional or local newspaper (UK)?

Answer: Any publication in written form on newsprint or a similar medium, published in the British Isles (excluding the Irish republic) at regular intervals not exceeding seven days and available regionally rather than nationally (ie, not available throughout all or most of the British Isles). It contains news and information of a general nature, updated regularly, rather than being devoted to a specific interest or topic (FAQs, question 2).

**British**

The word British has been chosen in this study following close examination of the terms British, United Kingdom and England. Due to the complex historical-political make-up of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Northern Ireland and surrounding islands, it would be incorrect to use the words England, UK and Britain interchangeably. England refers to only the country England, whereas the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (abbreviated to UK) includes England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Meanwhile Britain is a more multifaceted word than it first appears as it can be divided between Great Britain and the British Isles. Great Britain refers to England, Scotland, Wales whereas the British Isles includes England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, (Republic of) Ireland and surrounding islands such as the Isle of Man, Isle of Wight, Isles of Scilly, Orkney and Shetland Islands, Channel Islands etc. Since British Isles is the broadest term this study has adopted the term ‘British’ instead of UK, however it must be noted that this refers to newspapers of the British Isles and not simply Great Britain. The main justification for the choice of terminology is that local newspaper companies often own newspapers across all corners of the British Isles. For example publishers Johnston Press own local newspapers in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland and surrounding islands including the Isle of Man and Isle of Axholme. Therefore their publishing portfolio reaches beyond the boundaries of the UK and into the wider remit of the British Isles. Thus this research also falls under the umbrella of ‘British’ local newspapers.

**Audiences, readers and users**

People who consume media are often referred to as the audience within both scholarly studies and the industry. Yet the word audience implies a group of spectators or listeners which is not an appropriate term for people who read traditional print newspapers and is more suitable for broadcast media. Journalists working within the newspaper industry refer to their readers instead, and online journalists refer to users. However due to the increasing amount of technological, cultural and audience convergence discussed in Chapter 2, these words are also becoming blurred. If a person reads a newspaper website but also watches a video on the website and comments on a story, is she or he a reader, audience member or user? This study prefers to use the term audience even when talking about newspapers and websites due to the widespread contemporary and historical literature which uses the phrase active audiences rather than active readers or active users (also discussed further in Chapter 2). However it must be noted that the terms reader/s and user/s will also be referred to depending on the context but for the purposes of this study they are both synonymous with the word audience/s. The use of the word readers when speaking to journalists is explained further in Chapter 4.

1.2.2 Evolution of local newspapers

This chapter has set out the broad debates surrounding the emergence of online journalism and the potential for audiences to participate via the internet, although these are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. This emerging participatory journalism is set against the backdrop of a local British newspaper industry which is increasingly moving its products online in order to survive in the marketplace - as discussed in section 1.2. However in order to get an insight into the makeup and role of local British newspapers in the 21st century it is appropriate to take a step back and explore its historical context. Therefore in this section this study looks at the origins and development of the British local press.

The evolution of British journalism is arguably indebted to the growth of both democracy and a free market economy. Whilst the histories of journalism and democracy are closely linked (McNair, 2008) the local press as it is recognised today peaked in the late nineteenth century in direct correlation to the growth of capitalism and with it advertising (Franklin and Murphy, 1991). This process evolved over two centuries and dates back to the mid 1600s.

During the 17th century the printing trade was greatly restricted by the 1663 Printing Act which not only acted as a censor but also only licensed printers in London and the two university towns of Cambridge and Oxford. This meant that in the provinces only the rich could afford to subscribe to the London newspapers or hand written newsletters (Cranfield, 1962). However once the act lapsed in 1696, the restrictions ceased and the newly found freedom of the press encouraged an abundance of new titles to spring up in London. The market quickly became saturated and printers started to look further afield, setting up printing houses in provinces such as Bristol, Shrewsbury and Norwich in the 1690s. The first local newspapers then began to emerge in 1701, 80 years after the first recorded London newspaper the *London Gazette*. By 1760 there were 130 newspapers printed outside the capital (Cranfield, 1962). Cranfield refers to the newspapers printed outside of London at this time as the country newspapers, but as discussed previously in section 1.2.1, they later became known as the provincial press and today are referred to as the local or regional press. These country newspapers were cheaper than London papers as they were printed weekly and there was no postal cost, therefore they appealed to the property owing middle class of shopkeepers, farmers and merchants (Harris, 1996). Many of them were run by middle class reformers and the papers “reflected and expressed the views of an increasingly powerful political grouping, the industrial middle classes” (Walker, 2006, p.378). The non-London newspapers also became increasingly opinionated and reacted to the poor living and working conditions that the industrial revolution brought to urban areas, yet they also continued to flourish in rural areas.

The proliferation of these papers in the first half of the 18th century helped in the growth of literacy, political education and the formation of an almost “national public opinion” (Cranfield, 1962, p.vi). Since the views of country newspapers were mostly in opposition to the London newspapers they created a semblance of political balance previously lacking in the press and by the mid 1700s they were well on their way to becoming the Fourth Estate (Cranfield, 1962). Indeed Barker (1998) argues that as in London, newspapers and public opinion in the provinces were linked. And despite political differences “provincial newspapers shared a common set of beliefs about not only the importance of public opinion and ‘the people’ in the nation’s political affairs, but also who ‘the people’ were” (Barker, 1998, p.177).

These provincial /country newspapers also filled a gap in the market by selecting and filtering the best information from the numerous London papers which were awash with rumours, false reports and unreliability (Cranfield, 1962). As a consequence the content of 18th century country newspapers was predominantly national and foreign news which was further compounded by the fact that printers were initially cautious about publishing local news items for fear of upsetting their readers. Indeed the local section of a country newspaper was initially “brief and extremely uninteresting” (Cranfield, 1962, p.91). The lack of local news can also be contributed to the country newspapers’ circulation which covered large areas of several counties therefore making it difficult for printers to localise their news to any great degree (Walker, 2006). Interest in national politics was furthered in 1771 when Parliament ceded control of the press reporting of its proceedings, opening up a wealth of interesting copy available every day.

However by the end of the 18th century competition was increasing as country newspapers began operating closer to one another, reducing the territory and allowing for more local news (Walker, 2006). From the 1780s onwards local news was the key to success and many newspapers beat off competitors due to their rivals’ neglect of local news. Although provincial newspapers had initially been reluctant to show political allegiance for fear of alienating sections of their diverse readership or provoking the litigious government (Jackson, 1971), with the rise of competition a newspaper’s political stance became one of its selling points (Walker, 2006). Furthermore as the nation’s economy grew, trade lists and trade news also became increasingly popular particularly in the provincial newspapers of industrial and port towns. This growth similarly had an impact on the commercial operation of provincial newspapers and the number of local advertisements grew in number. Advertising was not a major source of profit in the early years of provincial newspapers as they were funded by sales, political parties and philanthropists (Hobbs, 2011) but advertising became increasingly important as production costs rose and the market economy expanded into the 19th century. Provincial newspapers were no longer amateurish cut and paste merchants but “potentially highly profitable commercial ventures” with entrepreneurial flair (Barker, 1998, p.97).

The biggest impact on provincial newspapers was arguably the abolition of taxes on knowledge - Advertisement Duty abolished in 1853, Stamp Duty abolished in 1855 and Paper Duty abolished in 1861 - in the second half of the nineteenth century following a campaign for a free market press by the reconstituted Peoples’ Charter Union in 1848. Pressure had been mounting on the government from the middle classes to abolish the taxes on knowledge and open up expansion of the popular press (Curran, 1978) and Parliament eventually conceded. This dramatic change gave newspapers freedom from state economic control and opened up the market to a mass audience as the price of newspapers dropped. A daily regional press emerged that reflected the dominant values of society and an expansion of the market led to an industrial revolution in the press (Curran, 1978). However Curran maintains that the campaign to mobilise the working class and expand the provincial liberal press was due to a need to stabilise the country and secure the loyalty of the working class to social order rather than a “libertarian commitment to freedom and diversity of expression” (p.61). Led by the middle class entrepreneurs the newly formed free market capitalist press seized the opportunity to develop expensive technology and service a mass audience. The resulting rise in production costs coupled with the reduction in retail prices brought about by tax abolition meant newspapers were sold at a loss and began to rely heavily on advertising for profit.

From 1847 to 1877 the number of provincial newspapers increased by more than 300 per cent to 938 titles. And although circulation figures were low around 10,000, the readership was fair higher at 150,000 per newspaper, as an average 15 to 25 people read just one copy of a newspaper (Walker, 2006). By the early years of the 20th century there is evidence that provincial newspaper proprietors pursued their newspaper interests “as commercial enterprises rather than as political projects” (Walker, 2006, p.374). Furthermore the political agenda was starting to fade in the late 19th century in part due to increasing political centralisation which meant local government had less power and therefore was less newsworthy in terms of political stories to fill local newspapers (Walker, 2006). As far back as the turn of the 20th century local newspapers were turning to more sport, crime and human interest stories in order to compete with the rising popular national tabloid press. This move towards more popular content and the pursuit of commercial interests over public affairs accelerated in the 21st century. Globalisation in the second half of the 20th century saw small family newspaper businesses swallowed up by multi-national conglomerates via widespread acquisition and mergers (Fenton *et al*, 2010; Freer, 2007; Jackson 1971). In particular the relaxation of ownership rules in the Broadcasting Act of 1996 and 2003 Communications Act led to an even greater consolidation of the newspaper industry. Consequently local newspapers have been left in the hands of a few major profit driven corporations, some with American parent companies, and the monopolies seen today, and outlined later in this chapter, have emerged.

Newspaper consolidation has led to the current situation whereby corporate power and profits are working alongside falling circulation and readership. Less resources in local newspapers due to declining sales and advertising revenue married with an emphasis on profits has led to a shift in focus to human interest and consumer heavy news rather than democratic concerns (Pilling, 1998). Franklin (2008) agrees that the reason for this shift is broadly economic and this “featurisation” of news (p.311) is due to print journalists no longer breaking news to the same extent that they are discussing existing news. This is supported by the 2008 World Association of Newspapers report (Burke, 2008) which indicates that 67 per cent of editors see a brilliant future for opinion and analysis. In 2010 *The Independent* openly rebranded itself as a ‘viewspaper’ and this is arguably filtering down to the local press which have even more constraint and online competition as discussed earlier. Another shift in the content of news is the move towards niche tailor made content facilitated by internet innovations such as RSS feeds and search engines. When print news moves online it can be customised to an individual’s personal interests rather than broader issues of public interest and as publishers are identifying, this specialised niche service might be “a good way to do business on the web, via either paid content or niche advertising” (Nguyen, 2010, p.235).

This is particularly interesting when set against the historic backdrop of the local press which flourished under capitalism and therefore has perhaps always been motivated by the free market rather than societal responsibilities of giving people independent information to enable them to govern themselves (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). As Croteau and Hoynes (2001) argue markets are undemocratic and do not necessarily meet societal needs thus the market is driven to serve the consumer, rather than the citizen (Herman, 1997). And in Britain, aside from publically funded broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4, the media have no legal societal obligations. However steps have been taken by the industry to address this, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

This largely market driven approach does appear to somewhat contradict the notion of local newspapers as being embedded in the community and serving out the pledge to inform and represent their readers, expressed by Franklin and Murphy (1998). In reality local British newspapers have to find a delicate balance between the demands for profitability from shareholders and the demands for representation from readers. For Fenton *et al* the scales are now tipped heavily in favour of profits.

It is clear that in a commercial environment, large news organisations with rising profit expectations foreground rationalization and marketization at the expense of ideal democratic objectives in a way that has led to both homogenization of content across the board with news in the regions and locally that is less and less relevant to people, (Fenton *et al*, 2010).

Audience participation online, the central theme of this research, is a prime example of this growing conflict between consumers and citizens. Although the potential participatory and collaboration opportunities of online journalism have been sketched earlier in this chapter, there are some who strongly argue that participatory media are also being driven by capitalism. Vujnovic *et al* (2010) talk about media participation in terms of branding, consumer loyalty, building website traffic and beating the competition. The authors present a convincing case that participatory media created in newsrooms do not stem solely from democratic goals relating to fostering a culture and empowering the public but instead are driven by economics and multiple ways of selling content to consumers (p.3). This conflict between encouraging free participation and a capitalist desire to make profit is also reflected in the complex nature of the web which is a melting pot of private lives being played out in public, where freedom of speech and access to information rubs against surveillance, censorship, data collection and cybercrime. It is an environment dominated by conglomerate monopolies like Microsoft and Google, yet it is also a space which allows one person to have a global audience. Microsoft owner Bill Gates has described the web as “a barrier to a state trying to control a nation,” whilst Aleks Krotoski describes it as “a digital arms race between citizen and state” (Virtual Revolution, 2009, episode 2). In the same way it could be seen as a race between citizens and conglomerate news organisations. It is an ambiguous playing ground where participation via newspaper websites may enable greater democracy whilst also being driven by economic imperatives.

In order to better understand the evolving roles of the internet and the web, it is appropriate to take a look at their history and development, both of which were underpinned by a liberal philosophy and were only later seized upon for their potential as commercial tools.

1.3 History of the internet

The 21st century is transitioning into a new era of the information age where via the internet individuals, institutions and businesses constantly wade through an increasing volume of text, pictures and videos at the touch of a button. Information is the new currency, on which economies and democracies are built and politicians and journalists thrive. According to McQuail (2005) this ‘information society’ is the next evolutionary stage of society following the agricultural era and the industrial era of previous centuries. The impact of the information society is one of information overload, increased flow of information, convergence of activities, growth of networks, globalization, loss of privacy, depoliticization and dependence on complex systems (McQuail, 2005). Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power but it comes with the aforementioned caveats.

Although the development of the internet was originally initiated by the American government, its infancy was embedded in liberal traditions. It originated as an offspring of the Pentagon in the United States and was originally designed as a military tool. Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the internet was a protection against a possible nuclear attack from the USSR. When the Soviet Union launched the first space satellite in 1957 the US Defence Department responded by establishing the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to mobilize American universities and research laboratories behind the country’s Cold War effort (Curran, 2004, Reddick and King, 2001). One of the agency’s first projects was to establish a connected computer network which could withstand a nuclear attack, due to there being no one central hub. The main criteria was to create a communication system that would be invulnerable to a devastating attack. By 1969 a computer network (ARPANET) was established, funded by the defence department, with nodes in four American universities. Although it was funded by the military, the academics who invented the network were given much freedom and eventually the defence department lost interest and it became an academic tool. During the 1970s scientists used it to exchange research data and correspond through email. Therefore to a certain extent the early internet reflected a liberal approach to open, shared information.

According to conventional accounts, the early internet reflected the freedom-loving values of American scientists who designed it, and of the grass-roots activists that took it up. This love of freedom was then secured by the freedom of the marketplace, ensuring that the internet became a great engine of human enlightenment, (Curran, 2004, p.244).

The next stage of development was the opening up of the internet in the 1980s to wider computer networks and usenet groups through virtual communities, mainly via academic institutions. This counterculture developed the internet as a campaign organiser giving collective emancipation and power to the people. But it was not until the invention of the World Wide Web by British computer scientist Tim Berners Lee in 1989 that the internet was opened up to a global audience. By creating hypertext, he was able to get internet-enabled computers to communicate to each other in a common language (King, 2001). Shortly after this, researchers at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications developed a programme called Mosaic which was made up of a graphical user interface. From this development the online revolution “moved into full gear” (King, p.23). From there on in the internet became increasingly commericialized rather than an academic or public mobilizing tool (Curran, 2004) as global consumers could be reached by businesses with limited overhead costs.

The way in which the internet has evolved over the past four decades has been reliant on its openness and the ability for users to become producers (Howe, 2008). It is not developed or controlled by governments, instead it is a public entity that could arguably be said to belong to everyone and no-one. However it must be recognised that there are centralised controls such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) which co-ordinates domain names and IP addresses. But ICANN does not control content on the Internet. “It cannot stop spam and it doesn’t deal with access to the Internet. But through its coordination role of the Internet’s naming system, it does have an important impact on the expansion and evolution of the Internet” (ICANN, 2010, About). The lack of internet control has enabled open source software to be used by anyone to modify the internet which has been key not only to its technological development but also its cultural, liberal philosophy (Castells, 2001, p.38). Furthermore Lewis argues that “the open-source movement, as a fusion of social, cultural, political, and technological influences, should be understood as both a practical desire for open technologies and a philosophical belief in serving the public good through openness” (2011, p.3).

The ability to self-publish and the lack of censorship, in Britain at least, also underpin the internet’s liberalism, which is reflected in the liberal economic market model that now exists online. Its contradictory nature however means that although it appears democratic in its design and function the internet in reality is market based, and markets are historically undemocratic, as discussed earlier. In fact many would argue that the internet is not a perfectly level playing field as its mere scale enables it to intensify the contradictions of the offline world, for forces of good and evil (The Virtual Revolution, 2010). It is filled with charities, support groups and democratic forums, whilst also being plagued with terrorism, fraud, paedophilia and governmental control. There is also a digital divide between those that have the internet (information rich) and those that do not (information poor). As Castells (2001) outlines, the internet is neither utopia or dystopia, it is simply an expression of ourselves. The internet gives people a publishing platform, scrutinises governments, stages public debate and informs the public yet it is dominated by monopolies, used to as a surveillance device to track users’ social, political and consumer patterns, and the price of freedom of speech is arguably the loss of privacy.

Having outlined the history of the internet and raised some of the debates about its contradictory nature it is also important to look at the modern make-up of this phenomenon and in particular the emergence of Web 2.0. This latest stage of the internet has arguably had the most dramatic impact on the production of news and the role of journalists and therefore the following sections will examine this subject in more detail.

1.3.1 Web 2.0

The internet is arguably changing the structure, characteristics and culture of the newspaper newsroom in Britain and around the world, whether journalists embrace it or not. Jane Singer has been one of the most prolific researchers of American and British national and local journalists in recent years, particularly during her UK-based employment at the University of Central Lancashire, sponsored by local newspaper publisher Johnston Press. Her studies (2009; 2001; 1997) have shone a spotlight on journalists and how they are coping with the changes to newsrooms brought about by the internet. Cultural and technological convergence and audience participation are reoccurring themes in her work and she has highlighted the anxiety felt by print journalists at the turn of the 21st century. The internet has changed the way journalists research, communicate and interact with both sources and audiences, and every newspaper has realised they must have a website in order to survive. Hargreaves (2005) and Singer (2009) have noted that British newspapers both national and local were slow on the web uptake, and initially somewhat reluctant to put investment into websites. But since the turn of the century newspaper websites have been flourishing. In 2000 Trinity Mirror, Britain’s largest newspaper publisher, announced a £150million internet investment plan (Trinity Mirror, 2000). During the past decade the company has continued to rapidly expand its digital portfolio which now incorporates more than 60 newspaper companion websites and more than 100 hyper-local websites serving specific postcodes with local editorial and user generated content. Trinity Mirror are supporting their free editorial content by buying up greater shares of the online advertising market and in recent years have acquired networked recruitment and property websites.

Northcliffe, Newsquest, Johnston Press and independent local newspaper companies have all followed suit and invested millions into internet technology and a corresponding web presence. Much of this was in response to the realisation that the dot.com bust was not the end of the internet but simply paved the way for what O’Reilly and Battelle refer to as the second coming of the web (2009). In the early stages of local newspaper websites the emphasis was on creating an online product often mirroring the offline newspaper, to give audiences an alternative medium. It was a simple product with text, a few pictures and crude archives and forums, with an indirect connection to the audience. However the arrival of Web 2.0 around 2005 has brought a new dynamic to newspaper websites. There are now multimedia, multi-purpose, networked, participatory websites with a direct connection to the audience. Prior to Web 2.0 audiences could visit websites to look at the content and possibly add a comment in the forum, but their involvement stopped there. By 2010 the web landscape had dramatically altered and Web 2.0 was celebrating its fifth anniversary. There is disagreement over what the term Web 2.0 means but it is most often cited as having originated from the Web 2.0 conference in 2005 created by Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009). This conference was designed to rebuild confidence following the dotcom bust. O’Reilly and Battelle (2009) define Web 2.0 as harnessing collective intelligence and refer to the likes of YouTube, Wikipedia and Amazon.

Chief among our insights was that ‘the network as platform’ means far more than just offering old applications via the network (‘software as a service’); it means building applications that literally get better the more people use them, harnessing network effects not only to acquire users, but also to learn from them and build on their contributions. From Google and Amazon to Wikipedia, eBay, and craigslist, we saw that the value was facilitated by the software, but was co-created by and for the community of connected users. Since then, powerful new platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have demonstrated that same insight in new ways. [Web 2.0 is all about harnessing collective intelligence](http://www.oreillynet.com/go/web2). Collective intelligence applications depend on managing, understanding, and responding to massive amounts of user-generated data in real time (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009, p.1).

The impact of Web 2.0 on newspaper websites meant this community of collective users could also be harnessed for gathering news content and could also actively participate online rather than passively consume their news via forums, comments, blogs, and social media. Furthermore O’Reilly and Battelle also talk of Web Squared (2009) where the internet works in real time, collecting, presenting and responding to user generated content. This is increased exponentially by user participation and news is ever more driven by the collective work of users online and the ability for news to spread instantaneously in real time through social networking sites such as Twitter.

Advances in technology have also made the internet a rapid multi-sensory interactive experience giving users the ability to see, hear and touch web pages, whilst also interacting via SMS alerts and email. Hyperlinks enable audiences to jump from one website to another with the click of a mouse button or touch of a screen. Meanwhile broadband has made watching video and listening to audio a quick, smooth process and uploading content is increasingly becoming the norm. Audiences can now upload photos, videos and comments directly to newspaper websites, and become fully immersed in the news making process. There is a spectrum of multimedia approaches (Deuze, 2004) which result in varying levels of interaction between journalists and audiences, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Furthermore in recent years social networking has become the biggest phenomenon on the web and has overtaken pornography as the number one activity on the web (Techradar, 2008). Newspapers are linking into this networked community and using it as a means of exporting their stories to a wider audience, but also as a new tool to enable greater interaction with their audiences and search out information and sources. It is also now easier than ever for audiences to communicate to one another, rally support and start campaigns online – potentially engaging in greater political action whether through a local newspaper website or an independent site. Robin Murray, co-author of the Young Foundation report (2010) argues that the 21st century is entering an age of participation enabled by the internet. If the 19th century was the era of the market and 20th century the era of the state, then Murray claims that we are now entering the century of community. Within the context of this study it raises many questions about how Web 2.0 enables local journalists to interact with their audience and whether it leads to greater participation, interaction, communication and engagement or simply the same amount and standard of participation through a different medium. As already discussed in section 1.2 the internet is key to the survival of local British newspapers and therefore it is relevant to explore what economic role Web 2.0 will play. There are also questions about the value of this communication within the context of Web 2.0 which will be explored in the research questions set out later in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

As set out in section 1.1, this study is concerned with understanding the dimensions of interaction, participation and collaboration between journalists and their audiences, and the idea of a network society (Castells, 2001) is crucial to this area of inquiry as will be discussed in the next section.

1.3.2 An age of collaboration and participation

Recent research has indicated that getting news is becoming an increasingly social act with 75 per cent of online news consumers in American receiving news forwarded through email or posts on social networking sites on a regular if not daily basis.

News is a socially-engaging and socially-driven activity, especially online. The public is clearly part of the news process now. Participation comes more through sharing than through contributing news themselves (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010, p.6).

According to the study online social networks are increasingly being used to filter, assess and react to news and online users are not only sharing news, but also to a certain but lesser extent creating news and commenting on stories. Furthermore quantitative research in Canada by Hermida *et al* (2011) revealed that users on social media platforms were more comfortable receiving news from friends than directly from news organisations or journalists. Hermida *et al* suggest that these new social media networks “allow for new relations that disrupt authorial structures and established flows of information,” (2011, p.2). The networked audience is connected to one another in a many-to-many structure supplanting the one-to-many hierarchy enjoyed by traditional media organisations prior to the internet.

Although similar research has not been carried out in Britain, there is evidence of increased use of both online news consumption and social networking in the country (UK Online Management, 2010). Social networking proved to be the most popular activity among 16 to 24 year old internet users in 2011, with 91 per cent saying they took part in social networking on websites such as Facebook or Twitter. However, this was not an activity limited to the younger age groups, with almost one fifth of internet users aged 65 and over indicating that they participated in social networking (ONS, 2011). Sharing information is central to the idea of the network society which consists of “open structures, able to expand without limits” (Castells, 2000, p.501). For Castells the network society is a society where key social structures and activities are organised around micro-electronic based technologies. But his is not a deterministic approach as he argues that influences such as religion, culture, politics and social status all shape the network society. These influences can either raise or hinder these societies as “networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture” (Castells, 2000, p.500).

This network society of public, sharing virtual communities has blossomed further with the creation of social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. By 2009 social networking in Britain had become a mainstream online activity among all age groups, with 80 per cent of the total UK online population having visited a site in the category in May (Comscore, 2009). This has in turn led to a rise in individual self-publishing on the web, due to ease of accessibility and cultural acceptance. In his evaluation of the large quantities of user generated content produced by the public during the 2005 London Bombings and subsequently picked up by traditional media companies, Allan (2007) explores how the rise of Castells’ term “mass self-communication” is challenging institutionalized power relations across the breadth of the network society.

The familiar dynamics of top-down, one way message distribution associated with the mass media are being effectively, albeit unevenly, pluralized. Ordinary citizens are appropriating new technological means (such as digital wifi and wmax) and forms (SMS, email, IPTV, video streaming, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, and so forth) in order to build their own networked communities (Allan, 2007, p.2).

Allan further argues that online news is increasingly “collaborative”, engendering a heightened sense of locality, yet relayed around the globe in a near-instance ( p.19). This mass collaboration has been defined by some researchers as “collective intelligence” (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009; Jenkins, 2008) and as evidence of the way in which new media are empowering those who participate. Jenkins builds on the work of cybertheorist Pierre Levy and describes collective intelligence as “none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills” (Jenkins, 2008, p.4). It is the total sum of information held individually by members of a particular group (Jenkins, 2008, p.27).This is what Gillmor refers to as journalists accepting that readers collectively know more than media professionals do (2006, p.111). Hermida agrees (2009), viewing the collective intelligence of social network Twitter as a great tool for journalists to provide early warnings about trends, people and news (p.6). However these are to be used in conjunction with the professional skills of a journalist who rely on objectivity and accountability (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008) resources (Reich, 2008) and training, rules and structures (Singer *et al*, 2011) which are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

Public collaboration and participation is not new to journalism but the nature of this participation online does however vary enormously between different medium types, different media companies and between different newspaper titles even within the same company. There are multiple interaction and participation models set out by researchers which are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. These enable audiences to take control of news in the mainstream media to varying degrees along the stages of production, selection and distribution (Jenkins, 2008). In a study of newspapers across the world Domingo *et al* (2008) found that participation was mostly used as an opportunity for readers to debate on current issues rather than take part in news production and when participation is allowed it is still controlled by professional journalists. But as discussed in section 1.1 there is a growing school of thought that journalists, reluctant as they may be, need to share control in order to compete and survive (Paulussen *et al,* 2007). The alternative participatory movement in Britain that emerged in the 1960s and the public/civic journalism movement in America during the early 1990s are examples of how this more participatory, collaborative approach has been attempted in the past.

The alternative movement in Britain surfaced in resistance to the increasingly commercial local press. Whilst mainstream local newspapers were relying on stories from official sources - police, courts, councils, health authorities, MPs, companies and charities, the alternative press turned to the public. Harcup (1998) describes how a host of alternative newspapers such as the *Liverpool Free Press* and *Leeds Other Paper* were independently and usually co-operatively owned and provided ordinary people with an alternative to the mainstream media.

Instead of covering the usual round of fires and crimes, or regurgitating the opinions of local bigwigs, the alternative local press reported the views and actions of people living on housing states, of those involved in community groups, of rank-and-file trade union activists, unemployed people, and the views of those active within the women's and gay movements and the black communities, (Harcup, 1998, p.106).

Although by the 1990s the alternative local press had been wiped out by the power of the market and domineering mainstream press, its legacy remains today. The established press was forced to take note of ordinary citizens and community groups, and the public began to speak for themselves through fanzines, lobbying groups and ultimately the web (Harcup, 1998). Post Web 2.0, Atton (2008) described alternative journalism as amateur journalism which included individuals, blogs and fanzines that encouraged contributions from diverse, multiple parties to create an alternative public sphere/s. Alternative journalism is the practice used to create citizen journalism (Atton, 2008) and it continues to thrive today in websites such as indymedia.com.

Across the Atlantic in the United States a related movement known as public or civic journalism developed slightly later than the alternative press in Britain, during the late 1980s. Glasser and Craft (1998) outline how this grassroots reform movement grew in response to a widening gap between citizens and government. The final straw was the “dismal press coverage” (Glasser and Craft, 1998, p.205) of the 1988 US presidential campaign which Glasser and Craft describe as a backstage tour looking at strategy over political substance. Rosen, Merritt and Charity were front runners of the public journalism campaign which held as its main premise the assumption that democracy was in decay and the role of the press was to promote and improve public life rather than merely report on it. Different techniques to implement public journalism have been trialled in America as Charity (1995) explores in his Book *Doing Public Journalism*. The *Charlotte Observer* covered a six week special on a single high crime neighbourhood drawing help and suggestions from across the entire city, whilst the *Cape Cod Times* consulted a panel of representative citizens to set priorities in covering the 1992 campaigns. Like the alternative press movement in Britain public journalism had limited influence but has arguably been revitalised by the internet.

Public journalism has been criticised by some (Haas, 2007; Peters, 1999; Schudson, 1999) and is clearly still a topic of academic debate. It has been suggested that public journalism is now entering a second phase (Nip, 2006) which is dominated by self-publishing on the web. Leonard Witt (2004) chair of the Civic Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, recognises this new opportunity for the otherwise diminishing realm of public journalism.

Public journalism’s tenets have the best chance of being advanced by the public using Weblogs and other electronic communication tools. Citizens, who are so much a part of the public journalism philosophy, no longer have to be invited into the mix. They are part of the mix, (Witt, 2004, p.3).

But Nip (2006) in her study of American newspapers believes online journalism has a long way to go before it fulfils its role as a facilitator of public journalism since “user contribution is solicited within a frame designed by professionals” (p.12 ), a view supported by the findings of Domingo *et al* (2008) discussed above. It could be argued however that participation will open up online to audiences within then local British newspaper industry as there is now an economic imperative to do so, as already outlined in this introduction. This is something which this study seeks to explore, as set out in the research questions in section 1.5.1.

1.4 Public sphere

Since this study aims to address questions of audience participation it has been considered appropriate to set the research against the theoretical framework of Habermas and the public sphere which is discussed at length in Chapter 2 but outlined briefly below. There has been great debate surrounding the structure and role of the public since Habermas’ original publication of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlicheit:Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* in 1962. Further criticism, particularly in Britain and the United States was published following the translation of Habermas’ book in 1989 under the English language title *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Calhoun, 1999; Eley, 1999; Schudson, 1999; Zaret 1999; Robbins, 1993), some of which put forward alternative public sphere models based on multiple spheres (Fraser, 1999) and sphericules (Gitlin, 1998). There has also been much debate about the media as a public sphere (Butsch, 2007; Johansson, 2007; Garnham, 1986) and whether this is possible within a capitalist society (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001; Herman, 1997). Furthermore since the inception of the World Wide Web in 1989 the debate surrounding the public sphere has evolved further (Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2001; Dahlgren, L., 2001; Sparks, 2001) speculating as to whether the web could become the new public sphere. It is within this field of thinking that this study is situated. Coleman and Blumler (2009) examine the potential of Web 2.0 as an alternative to a civic commons, enabling people to communicate through collective intelligence and networks, instead of through a formal sphere between the market and state. If new media have been reconfigurated as a public sphere then there are implications for both journalists and audiences and these will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In particular questions about the nature and value of participation and the motivation of local British newspapers to interact with audiences, will all be examined within the realm of public sphere debates.

1.5 Field of inquiry

This study has identified that local British newspapers find themselves in a challenging but potentially innovative era. However this industry is relatively understudied, particularly with regard to its development within Web 2.0.

As in the case of debates about the potential of Web 2.0, there is much hype and speculation with far too little systematic empirical research on the ways in which technologies are being appropriated (Mansell, 2007, p.11.)

Indeed recent research by Harcup (2011) indicates that journalists-turned-journalism-educators identify areas of research which would prove particularly useful as: the continuing impact of technological convergence on what journalists do; the role of journalists in an information-rich world in which anyone can become a publisher; journalistic uses of social media and crises in local newspaper (p.30). As the Culture, Media and Sport Committee report (2009) suggests local newspapers find themselves in a unique position which differs to the national press, yet they are fundamental to the underpinning of all journalism in Britain. John Fry, Chief Executive of Johnston Press, illustrates in the report:

There is a bit of a pyramid really, where locally we create the bottom layer of that pyramid. We have 11,000 journalists around the country and they create huge numbers of local stories. People further up the pyramid then take some of them and develop them. At BBC News what they do every day is they come into work. They buy the local newspaper. They look on our websites and they select from that....If you do not have our journalists doing those 50 stories at the bottom, the whole pyramid does not work anymore (p.11).

Furthermore the report authors conclude that “many journalists on national newspapers and television broadcasters started their professional career in local newspapers... this further demonstrates the importance of the role performed by local newspaper as a source of entry and training in the profession of journalism” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, p.11). Even in their historic context local newspapers have always arguably been crucial to the newspaper landscape and as Cranfield (1962) advocates as “small, badly printed and primitive as these early newspapers may at first sight appear, they were a far more powerful force that is generally recognised,” (p.v).

However despite this significance many scholars have overlooked the output of provincial (defined as local in this study) newspapers since their inception in the early 18th century. Walker (2006) argues that “the history of England’s 19th and early 20th century journalism needs to take greater account of the relationship between the provincial and national press than had hitherto been the case” (p.375). Therefore when examining the broader themes of the changing nature of journalism in Britain, and the participation of audiences online, it is wholly appropriate, if not fundamental, to examine the root of the industry, as this study proposes.

Local newspapers and their websites also hold significance for audiences as they are where journalism gives “answers to questions of direct and immediate concern to readers” (Freer, 2007, p.89) and these publications have “closer connection to community” than their national counterparts (Aldridge, 2007, p.57). Furthermore with their strong local connections local newspapers are “well poised to connect with their communities as technology and media use patterns evolve” (Greer and Yan, 2010). Singer, who has carried out a range of research at local newspapers in Britain and America (1997; 2001; 2009) agrees with this line of argument, yet acknowledges it is an overlooked area of research.

Local journalists, a relatively understudied group, have a traditionally close proximity to their communities: readers have always reacted and contributed to these papers (Singer, 2009, p.1).

Singer goes on to reason that the impact of Web 2.0 and influence of audience participation “is arguably greater for community papers, which have always been geographically and culturally close to readers and sources” (p.139).

Yet the bulk of research on new media and newspaper newsrooms has been carried out in America (Singer 1997; Singer, 2001; Dupagne and Garrison, 2006; Robinson, 2010) and has to date focussed on convergence and journalist attitudes rather than the changing relationship between journalists and audiences within networked communities. As Nguyen (2010) suggests:

Unfortunately, 15 years after the introduction of online news, empirical knowledge is still limited about the influence of the attributes of online news on the way it is adopted, used and integrated into daily life. Most previous research into this is US-centric and, more importantly, focused on the adoption of online news without sufficient attention to the consequences of this adoption (p.224).

There has also been some research in continental Europe looking at national newspapers (Aviles and Carvijal, 2008) again focusing on convergence. Similarly in Britain the impact of the internet on journalists and journalism is currently a popular research topic, but the focus is almost exclusively on the national press (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Thurman and Lupton, 2008; Sparks, 2003). There is limited research in the field of local British newspapers (Dickinson 2011; Aldridge, 2007) despite their close connection with readers and significance within the national news media framework, as argued above. Indeed local journalists offer a potentially “highly fruitful source of data on the media and social change” (Dickinson, 2011, p.2).

Another understudied area of research is the audience view of the changing local newspaper landscape in Britain. Studies to date are sparse and tend to focus on niche publications (Ingham and Weedon, 2008). There is also limited research on the quality and value of audience participation and as Domingo *et al* (2008) suggest “researchers should question whether user generated content improves the overall quality of news products, journalistic work and the public sphere” (p.340).

This study therefore identifies that further research is required in the field local British newspapers due to three factors: their unique challenges, their importance in the pyramid structure of journalism, and the lack of empirical research in the field. This study has identified Web 2.0 and local British newspaper journalists and their audiences as a unique topic of research and a contribution to knowledge.

1.5.1 Research problem

As explored in the earlier part of this chapter, this study aims to look the changing relationship between journalists and audiences at British local newspapers within the context of Web 2.0. This will be explored through a series of research questions addressing both journalists and audiences. The overarching question will examine the relationship between the two sets of actors and how it is being disrupted. A secondary part of this research question will be why these disruptions are occurring, addressing issues of motivations on behalf of publishers, journalists and audiences. This motivation could be explained through the normative ideals of the societal role of journalism or through economic incentives as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

**RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers?**

**RQ1b: What is the motivation for this change?**

This will be followed by further questions investigating the scope of audience participation and interaction to gain an understanding of its social and cultural significance. This will also examine the value of participation which will be measured against theories of public sphere and deliberative democracy as outlined in Chapter 2.

**RQ2: What is a) the nature and b) the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?**

The third area of research will look at how this participation impacts upon the roles and responsibilities of journalists.

**RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?**

This will be completed by a final research question which will consider the possibility of future models of journalism.

**RQ4: To what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers within Web 2.0?**

1.5.2 Structure of thesis

The thesis consists of 13 chapters with the Introduction constituting Chapter 1. Chapter 2 the literature review provides a detailed background of the key theoretical framework and discusses how journalism is being redefined within Web 2.0. It also explores the interaction and participation models existing scholars have developed and their wider theoretical framework. Chapter 3 discusses the validity of case study research and why it has been selected for this particular study. It also introduces the two case study newspapers and their websites. Chapter 4 is a detailed examination of the methodology design and the multiple approaches taken. In order to conduct this study and address the questions posed in Chapter 1 an in-depth insight into both local British newspaper journalists and their audiences is required. A triangulation of quantitative and qualitative research methods has been chosen as “both approaches have value and triangulated studies that use both are often the most persuasive” (Priest, 2010, p.11). The study will involve the selection of two local British newspapers as case studies and the same mixed methods will be used at each newspaper. The qualitative methodology will include semi-structured interviews with editorial staff from reporters to editors across a broad spectrum of positions including sport writers, specialist reporters, news desk staff, feature writers, photographers and sub editors. The second qualitative approach will be direct news room observation at each of the newspapers for a period of time. This will include attending editorial meetings, shadowing reporters and sitting on news desk, but not being a participant in the proceedings. Quantitative methodology will be used to gather information from audiences through an online questionnaire, on the relevant newspaper website and via social media websites. A content analysis will also be carried out analysing the content of social media and reader comments. The validation of each of these approaches will be explained in detail in Chapter 4.

The case studies have been selected due to their similarities and differences which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Although this case study approach will only give a snap shot of two daily local newspapers rather than be representative of the whole industry the study will be able to draw parallels from the results which can be correlated to the wider industry. The first case study is the *Leicester Mercury*, a daily newspaper owned by Northcliffe Media, the fourth largest local newspaper publisher in Britain in terms of circulation and newspaper ownership. It is also a division of [Daily Mail & General Trust](http://www.dmgt.co.uk/). The Northcliffe group had the fastest growing major network of regional news websites in the UK in the second half of 2009 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (Press Gazette, 2010). It is the newspaper with the biggest circulation in Northcliffe Media and the tenth biggest local newspaper in Britain with a current circulation of 54,000 (ABC, 2011). At the time of the study it had around 60 editorial staff and its editor Keith Perch was an advocate of new media, himself keeping a regular blog and Twitter updates. The website grew 34 per cent year-on-year in 2010 reaching 388,000 monthly unique users (ABC, 2011). The newspaper also worked alongside *Citizens’ Eye*, a non-professional community news agency in Leicester which had its own independent website and published a regular supplement in the *Leicester Mercury*.

The second newspaper case study is the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which is owned by Newsquest Media, a subsidiary of Gannett UK Limited which is part of international media and marketing solutions company Gannett, which also owns USA Today. Newsquest’s website network was the UK's third most visited newspaper group in January 2011, with 4.8m unique users ranking only behind *Mail Online* and the *Guardian.co.uk*. Newsquest Media owns 158 local media websites with a year-on-year growth of **30 per cent (Newsquest Digital, 2011).** The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* currently has a circulation of 28,000 (ABC, 2011) and the website grew 24 per cent year-on-year during 2009 to 2010 to 382,000 monthly unique users (ABC, 2011). The newspaper editor is Neal Butterworth who is also responsible for around 50 editorial staff.

Detailed information about the design of each of the case studies is given in Chapters 3 and 4. These are followed by eight findings chapters (5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12) focusing on results, analysis and discussion from the case study sites that provide an opportunity for empirical comparison. These chapters chronologically address the six research areas outlined in the four research questions above. Chapter 5 explores the changing nature of audience participation in British local newspapers, pre and post Web 2.0. Chapter 6 then examines the next research question by exploring the motivation for these changes for both audience members and journalists. Chapter 7 looks in depth at the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers. This is followed by Chapter 8 which examines in detail the levels of interaction in comment threads at the two case study websites. Chapter 9 then turns to the question of the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers, again for both journalists and audience members. Chapter 10 then looks at how Web 2.0 is impacting on the role of journalists as traditional gatekeepers. Chapter 11 also examines the impact on gatekeeping but looks more specifically at the role social media platforms Twitter and Facebook play within the two case study sites. Due to the volume of data collected in this study from these two social media platforms, and also due to their unique nature, it was deemed most appropriate to dedicate a separate chapter to this topic rather than merge it with Chapter 10. The final results chapter, Chapter 12, is an internal case study which examines the unique collaborative journalism project at the *Leicester Mercury* with citizen journalism organisation *Citizens' Eye*. This draws together three research questions addressed previously in Chapters 7, 9 and 10, but explores them from one specific view point therefore it was fitting to separate this into an autonomous chapter. Finally, Chapter 13 is the concluding chapter which tackles the final research question and draws together the findings of the study, identifies areas for further research and puts forward pragmatic approaches to tackle the future of local journalism in the UK.

**Chapter 2: Literature review**

2.1Introduction

With the arrival of what is known as Web 2.0, a term coined by online innovators O’Reilly and Battelle (2009), newspapers are facing many new challenges, as they are forced to compete against digital journalism. Furthermore the gatekeeping authority of journalists is being contested as readers have gained the ability to publish direct to the web, express themselves and learn from their peers as much as from traditional sources of authority (Rusbridger, 2010). Technological and cultural shifts are enabling news organisations and audiences to converge resulting in the blurring of the lines between professional authority and amateur citizen.

Many scholars herald a new era of collaborative journalism (Hermida *et al*, 2011; O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009; Gillmor, 2006) between journalists and audiences, whilst others warn of “churnalism” (Davies, 2009), speed over accuracy (Bruno, 2011; Phillips, 2010) and poor quality content (Williams and Franklin, 2007; Singer, 2009) underpinned by commercial motivations rather than normative journalistic ideals (Fenton *et al*, 2010; Currah, 2009).

These debates have been outlined in Chapter 1 but this chapter seeks to examine in more detail the existing literature surrounding these arguments. It will also draw upon theories of the public sphere and concepts of convergence, gatekeeping and collective intelligence to analyse to what extent Web 2.0 is changing the relationship between journalists and audiences.

This chapter will begin by defining and exploring the nature of convergent journalism (2.2) and how this has impacted on the role of journalists as gatekeepers (2.3). Another component of this discussion which is equally significant is the role of audiences and how they are interacting with news organisations and their peers in the age of the internet. In this section the concepts of collaboration and collective intelligence (2.4) raised in Chapter 1 will be explored in depth. This leads into an assessment of the public sphere (2.5) and whether the media (2.5.1) and indeed Web 2.0 (2.5.2) can act as a public sphere due to greater audience participation or if it, as Habermas suggests (1989), will always be undermined by capitalist constraints.

This evaluation will help to inform the focal point of this study which seeks to research audience participation and the changing role of journalists to analyse whether a new paradigm of collaborative journalism is emerging. This is an environment where the balance of power is thrust toward collective intelligence and away from individuals or single organisations. Central to this debate is whether this collaborative approach is being driven by commercial or normative motivations. It is therefore also pertinent to discuss the professional identity of journalists and the role of audience participation (2.6), which is outlined in the penultimate section of this chapter. Finally, the last section defines the term collaborative journalism (2.7) in the context of this study drawing on the definitions of numerous scholars.

2.2 Convergent journalism

Convergence is the noun describing the instance of the coming together of opinions or effects (Collins, 1999). When used in the context of ‘convergent journalism’, the adjective ‘convergent’ describes a type of journalism that sees the coming together of different news mediums, most often print and online. However Quinn (2005) maintains that convergent journalism has a broad scope of definitions varying from country to country and from culture to culture, which also varies within countries and within companies. Convergent journalism can be divided into different types including ownership, tactical, structural, information gathering and storytelling or presentation (Quinn, 2005) but in its broadest terms it is most commonly understood to be an “evolutionary form of journalism that is emerging in many parts of the world” (p.3). This convergent journalism usually sees the coming together of different news platforms in terms of both production and ownership, hence incorporating both journalistic and economic convergence, as outlined below.

Paulussen (2011) refers to the economic model of convergence which evolved at the end of the 20th century in the print media.

Faced by a general decline of readership and ever increasing competition from new players in the information market, print media companies hoped to find salvation by embracing innovation and integrating digital media, (Paulussen, 2011, p.59).

This media convergence strategy was “guided by old economic motives of cost efficiency, productivity and profit consolidation” (Paulussen, 2011, p.60) and enabled companies to produce more news for the same or little more money, across multiple platforms. Quinn (2005) similarly talks of ownership convergence where one media company shares content across print, online and television platforms owned by the same company (p.4), for example Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp which hosts Sky News footage on *The Sun* newspaper website. In local British newspaper publishing companies this type of convergence was mostly restricted to cross promotion of content between newspapers and websites, as few of these companies also owned local television or radio stations. There is also evidence of some content sharing across media companies, for example a local BBC radio station giving an audio clip to a local newspaper website in the same town, although again this is still relatively rare, due to competition for audiences.

Quinn (2005) argues that the convergence of production practices is having the most dramatic impact on journalists particularly “information gathering convergence” (2005, p.6) which requires journalists to become multi-skilled and news desks to think about presenting a story in more than one medium. This is particularly prevalent in the British local press due to financial constraints discussed in Chapter 1 (Fenton *et al*, 2010; Freer, 2007). Print reporters are increasingly expected to produce written copy for the newspaper, a different version for the website and in some instances photographic, video and audio content for the website. This may also extend to writing a blog, hyperlinks to other websites and updating social media website accounts. This information gathering convergence is heavily reliant on technological convergence in particular using the internet as a multimedia platform to harness “the best qualities of text, print, data, sound and visual media” (Rusbridger, 2010). The rise of mobile technology has also enabled this technological convergence to branch away from static desktop computers to laptops, mobile phones, tablets and hand held devices all with access to the internet and therefore multimedia content.

In most newsrooms journalists file breaking news copy for the website first followed by copy for the print product hence they need a range of online and print production skills. However many journalists express concerns at their lack of multimedia training, lack of time available to provide content for multiple platforms and the reduced quality of the output. Quality appears to be the common-denominator concern amongst print journalists which reoccurs in research wherever it is carried out across the world whether it be at the two converged newsrooms in Spain studied by Aviles and Carvijal (2008), the two newspaper websites in South Africa observed by Verweij (2009) or the Trinity Mirror multimedia local newspaper website in Britain scrutinised by Williams and Franklin (2007) and described below.

There is also criticism that economics is driving technological convergence rather than a normative desire to create better journalism and service the public. If more platforms can be resourced by the same amount of people, there are great financial efficiencies to be gained. Therefore there is great reluctance amongst journalists to embrace convergence. Instead as Deuze (2004) describes convergence has become a reluctant collaboration and piecemeal integration of formerly distinct media operations. However he makes the significant point that it is not simply the coming of the internet that has caused a multimedia approach as this type of journalism has existed in the past particularly in terms of print journalists acting as writers and photographers. But rather than being an essential and valuable part of the job, journalists now feel the rapid convergence of the last decade has been forced upon them and it is not necessarily a beneficial change (Deuze, 2004). A major report by Williams and Franklin (2007) within the largest British regional publisher Trinity Mirror in 2007 drew similar conclusions. The report discovered journalists felt convergence had brought about a greater workload, but had not introduced extra pay or extra staff to offset this and that there was insufficient training and the resultant journalism was poor quality.

The final significant element of convergent journalism to consider is that of the relationship between journalists and audiences which is fundamental to this research. On the web non-professional content by audiences is coming together with the work of professional journalists, in the form of user generated content, as will be discussed in detail in section 2.4 of this chapter. This type of convergence also raises questions about the quality and accuracy of such journalism and whether it is being utilised for democratic and journalistic means or for economic ones - or both - a theme this research will return to. Jenkins (2008) argues that it is possible for the two to exist together, albeit often in conflict. He makes that valid observation that top-down corporate convergence which sees the merger of companies and content for profitable gain coexists alongside bottom-up grassroots convergence, where audiences become involved in the production of media. These, he argues can reinforce one another and create closer more rewarding relationships but at other times the two forces are at war (p.18). As Howe (2008) persuasively argues, labour can be organised more efficiently in the context of a community than it can be in the context of a corporation. Hermida *et al* (2011) describe social networking sites, particularly Twitter, as spaces where journalists and audiences can work collaboratively in a system that privileges distributed over centralised expertise and collective over individual intelligence. It is an online platform where the two actors converge to share, comment on and verify information as part of the news making cycle. However the community needs “benevolent dictators” to guide it (Howe, 2008, p. 284). Research suggests that innovative journalists are becoming increasingly aware of these converging roles and see their roles as working with “gifted amateurs” to form a “profitable cooperation of hybrid activity” (Lewis, 2011, p.4) however this use of audiences as co-workers although a growing trend, is still limited in scope amongst mainstream news organisations Heinonen (2011).

As discussed above scholars and journalists have acknowledged that there is a cultural shift in the way in which audiences receive, interact and participate with news. There is an expectation that news should be available on demand, 24 hours a day from any location, on a variety of devices. As Murdoch (2005) outlined in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 2005 there was a revolution happening amongst new consumers:

They don’t want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don’t want to rely on a god-like figure from above to tell them what’s important... Instead, they want their news on demand, when it works for them. They want control over their media, instead of being controlled by it.

This has fuelled the continuing debate over the active nature of media audiences. The argument of active versus passive audiences in cultural studies is a historic one preceding the arrival of the web. ‘Audience’ has long been a collective term for receivers of mass communication (McQuail, 1997) with mass audiences being perceived by theorists in the Marxist Frankfurt School as victims of manipulation by capitalist media. However over the past 60 years cultural theorists have challenged the view that audiences are passive dupes and have argued that audiences actively negotiate and resist dominate codes embedded in cultural products (Hall, 2004) and there is a spectrum of audience activity from audience control to audience autonomy (McQuail, 1997). Expanding on this line of thinking McLuhan (2001) suggested that different media invited different degrees of participation, interpretation and activity on behalf of the audience. Furthermore Biocca (1988) reasoned that it was almost impossible for the audience not to be active.

In more recent decades audiences have been conceptualised as “changing from passive saps to interactive critics” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, p.120). Prior to the web Curran (1991) argued that the mass public was not as malleable or passive as feared and Croteau and Hoynes (1997) pre-Web 2.0 took a measured approach describing audiences as active but not fully autonomous due to a variety of structural constraints such as education. However Ross and Nightingale (2003) claim that the web is forcing scholars to rethink the concept of the audience because “being an audience is now a much more active and interactive experience than in the broadcasting era”, (p.161). McQuail proposes that instead of viewing the typical audience role of that of passive listener, consumer, receiver or target, the role should be seen as encompassing any of the following: “seeker, consultant, browser, respondent, interlocutor or conversationalist”, (p.129). Indeed the term web ‘user’ implies a level of activity by the participant that goes beyond viewing, reading or listening to media content.

The current growing school of thought is one which conceptualises the internet and subsequently Web 2.0, as having heightened the activity of audiences, due to technological accessibility and cultural expectations. Bowman and Willis (2003) talk of an expectation of interaction online and users actively chasing discovery rather than passively being informed, whilst Reich (2011) declares that an unprecedented number of people now want to be heard. Rosen (2006) refers to these users as The People Formerly Known as the Audience and talks of a shift in power whilst Lewis (2011) asserts that the digitalisation of information and its social context has enabled and encouraged greater user participation. Heinonen (2011) argues that online news allows users to choose what to receive and what to share with others, making the process more engaging than watching television or reading a newspaper headline. Howe (2008) explores how the assumption that television had created a generation of passive consumers was challenged by the Pew Research Center in 2005 when its research revealed that more American teens were creating content for the internet than merely consuming it. Howe further explains how audiences are “not primarily motivated by money” and instead are motivated by “the cause” as they perceive being involved reward in itself (2008, p.29). This is echoed by Vujnovic (2011) who contends that users contribute their time and effort voluntarily not for wages but for a sense of “being part of an online community” (p.150).

However there is much debate over the ways in which audiences are becoming more active and the level to which they are interacting or participating with the news. Greer and Yan (2010) suggests that consumers are actively participating in the dissemination of news via blogging, commenting and sharing news whilst Heinonen (2011) argues that audiences not only receive information but also search out their own information, produce additional content and interact with other participants in the process. In doing so individuals are realising McQuail’s (2000) active participants in journalism. A recent international research project by Singer *et al* (2011) suggests that journalists themselves still maintain a conservative and traditional view of the role of audiences casting audience members as active recipients of the news rather than as active participants in the process of constructing it. Audiences are expected to react to the news, be sources of information and be members of online communities but are only occasionally collaborators.

From the perspective of most journalism professionals the public continues to be distinctively an audience for the media product – even if the relationship has more interactive features than before, enabling formerly passive audience members to be more directly present in the everyday work of journalists (Singer *et al*, p.52).

This PhD thesis seeks to explore how Web 2.0 is changing the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers and how this participation manifests itself. Furthermore it addresses the extent to which audience participation impacts on the traditional roles of journalists.

Having sketched the debates surrounding convergent journalism and active audiences within the context of Web 2.0, this study now seeks to explore the impact these converging worlds are having on journalists, in particular their traditional role as authoritative, top-down gatekeepers.

2.3 Gatekeepers and curators

Throughout the 400 year history of the press the role of the print journalist has never been under more scrutiny and subject to such change as it is today due to the impact of Web 2.0. As newspaper journalists are increasingly expected to become multi-skilled print and online journalists, whilst also embracing social media networks, and audiences are increasingly expecting to have more input into the news process, the role of the journalist as gatekeeper is being redefined. In the online world where anyone can publish directly to the web, what sets journalists apart from anyone else with an internet connection? As Donsbach (2010) suggests “the very definition of journalism and what it means to be a journalist is no longer as clearly defined as in the past”, (p.43). To understand the modern role of a gatekeeper it is appropriate to take a step back and explore how the concept originally emerged and how it has evolved through the decades.

The theoretical concept of gatekeeping which dates back to sociological schools of the late 1940s and early 1950s has never been more prevalent today as academics measure its standing in modern day journalism. Sociologist Kurt Lewin is credited with coining the term ‘gatekeeping’ in 1947 however he used it in a social setting rather than in media analysis. His example was to describe a wife or mother as the person who decides which meal ends up on the family's dinner table by first selecting food from shops, then selecting ingredients from the cupboards and from those making a meal. The gatekeeper therefore is the person who decides what shall pass through each gate section, of which, in any process, there are several. Although Lewin applied it originally to the meal production chain, he then added that the gatekeeping process could include a news item winding through communication channels in a group (1947).

David White (1950), a student of Lewin, was the first to adapt his mentor’s concept and apply it to communication theory. He analysed the content sent into an American newspaper through the wire that did not make it to the final printed product and the reasons given by the wire editor. His research identified that the editor went through a process of choosing and discarding news that was highly subjective and reliant on value judgements. This was an example of just one of the gates which information travels through before it appears or does not appear in print. In modern new rooms there are a series of gates from the reporter, through the news desk or department editor, to the sub editor(s) and finally the editor. Along each of these stages information – which, at that point is unknown to the public - can be rejected and may never join the public arena. The team of journalists therefore have great control over which information reaches the public domain and what they think the public ‘ought to know’.

But the internet has turned this process on its head and unlike television it provides more opportunity for audiences to interact with journalists and one another (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Publishers no longer have exclusive publishing rights as anyone with an internet connection can publish information online, thus audiences are joining the “process of journalism” (Gillmor, 2006, p.xiv). Newspapers and journalists can be bypassed, and people, businesses, institutions and public bodies can put information into the public domain without being restricted by the gatekeeping process utilised by journalists and their news organisations which may decide to keep certain information out of the public’s reach.This allows for new relations that “disrupt authorial structures and established flows of information,” (Hermida *et al*, 2011). The public can also communicate and share news and information with one another, again without the censorship of gatekeepers overseeing the information they want to let through the gate.

But despite the fact that the web creates an open access publishing platform mainstream media still dominate the online world, grabbing the most readers due to their financial resources and historical positioning in the media market place (Curran, 2004). As we have seen in Chapter 1 the online audience for mainstream newspaper websites is accelerating at a rapid rate. And although mainstream media organisations maintain a grip on the market Jenkins (2008) reasons that gatekeepers do not hold all of the power over information:

Some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power. Again, the truth lies somewhere in between, (p.18).

Gatekeeping is a dominant theme in the research of Singer (2011; 2009; 2001; 1997), who returns to the subject regularly in her studies of national and regional newspapers and their websites in Britain and America. She concedes that the role of the gatekeeper is not diminished but is in the process of being redefined (2001; 1997). Journalists will always be needed but not necessarily to choose what information to make available to the public, rather to make sense of the glut of information available (Hermida, 2009; Singer, 1997). In 1997 Singer suggested professional journalists were needed to make sense of multiple sources of information. A decade later Charman (2007) continued this argument, defining journalists’ roles as curators with an active knowledge of a topic, an understanding of the material being assessed and the ability to communicate why it is important. Therefore in their post Web 2.0 role journalists become analysers and context providers within an expanding sea of online information. Bruno (2011) argues that in the future there will be more reporter-curators as technology advances and verification will be the only added value professional journalists can offer in the era of the 1440 minute news cycle. Hartley (2000) puts forward a more pessimistic view criticising the role of the journalist as simply an editor of information. He refers to this as the ‘redactional society’ and argues that in this role journalists are no longer dedicated to the public sphere or setting the agenda for public affairs. Instead the sensation seeking public set the agenda and journalists move closer towards public relations (Hartley, 2000). The opposing optimistic rationale put forward by Gillmor (2006) is that journalists have a vital role as gatekeepers who shape larger conversations and provide context as much as gathering and reporting facts.

Another scholarly argument that has followed the advent of Web 2.0 is that the gatekeeping status quo has remained in the creation of news but a second layer of audience gatekeeping is occurring in the reaction to the news (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) and the growing role of web analytics, also known as the clickstream, is central to this (Anderson, 2011; Dickinson, 2011, Örnebring 2010a). Shoemaker and Vos make a convincing case for audiences as “secondary gatekeepers” who become active once the mass media process stops (2009, p.7). For instance audiences share stories on traditional news media websites by emailing them to friends, or posting them to their open social network profiles and in doing so tell journalists what stories are popular. Quantitative research on Canadian online users by Hermida *et al* (2011) strongly indicates that “sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news” (p.7) and a person’s social circle is taking on the role of news editor, deciding whether a story or piece of multimedia is interesting or entertaining enough to recommend. Furthermore research by Shoemaker *et al* (2008a) indicates that readers use different criteria for gatekeeping decisions than journalists do for news selection. News items about unusual events and public welfare play a much bigger role when readers decide to send news items than when journalists select events for news items. The increase in the use of web metrics or analytics to measure most-read stories, most-commented stories and most-shared stories is beginning to shape journalistic decision. This is supported by research into a UK local newspaper website (Dickinson, 2011) and a study of news rooms in Philadelphia (Anderson, 2011). Both studies conclude that audiences are not impacting on the gatekeeping process via user generated comment but are influencing news selection via web metrics. Journalists are not necessarily comfortable with the use of analytics as it conflicts with the “social responsibility canon” to give readers what they need, not what they want (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). This can lead to a change in news values to soft over hard news, quirky over substantial, visual over non-visual and an overall preference for sensationalism (Örnebring, 2010a).

There are a number of further concerns amongst journalists about the changing nature of gatekeeping and its impact upon quality, accuracy and credibility (Robinson, 2010, Singer, 2009, Chung, 2007) discussed in further detail below. Journalist attitudes appear to fall into different categories from those ready to embrace technology and a conversation with their audiences, to those who desperately cling to the old ways of top down communication. Chung refers to innovators on one side, purists on the other and cautious traditionalists placed in the middle. Innovators welcome the exchange of ideas, purists see their role as traditional one way communication and cautious traditionalists represent the majority of producers who are uncertain how to tackle the online medium. Robinson’s (2010) more recent research sees the camps dividing more clearly and believes journalists are increasingly being separated into convergers and traditionalists with no middle ground. Convergers (younger and hired more recently) think users should be given freedom within news sites whereas traditionalists (who tend to be over 40 and have been at the newspaper for number of years) want to maintain their hierarchal gatekeeping relationship with audiences. This clash between the parties has resulted in “a grand confusion in the industry about who has ultimate textual privilege and the role that audiences should play in online news sites” (Robinson, 2010, p.126). But since the convergers, on the whole, are the next generation coming up through the ranks, it would be justifiable to assume that this modern open gate policy is likely to become the dominant feature in the future.

As suggested above there is a strong argument amongst some scholars that the gatekeeper approach still dominates in online newspapers particularly through the moderation of user generated content (Franklin, 2008; Singer, 2009). Editors tend to view user generated content as complementary to professional journalism rather than replacing it (Hermida and Thurman, 2008) therefore they tailor, filter and moderate it to their own needs, to protect their brand:

While news organisations are opening their doors to the public, they are also retaining the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists, as witnessed by the shift towards moderation (p.353).

Recent research at newspaper websites in 10 western countries adds further support to this claim. Hermida (2011b) says that while digitalization and convergence have blurred the distinctions between producers and audiences “established news institutions have tended to rely on existing norms and practices as they have expanded into digital media” (p.30). The content of professional journalists is distinguished from the content of citizen journalists, which is labelled as such or published on a separate part of the website. Furthermore hard news remains the preserve of professionals (Hermida, 2011b).

The research draws up a news production process table shown in Table 2.1 which explores the stages at which audiences are involved. Hermida (2011b) observed that although the first stage of information gathering was open to the audience, stages two (selection) and three (editing) were closed to the public and they could only re-enter the news production process again at stages four (distribution) and five (interpretation). There were some exceptions to this, but the norm was to exclude the audience from the traditional gatekeeping stages. Furthermore the research found that most of the available participation options framed the user primarily as a “consumer of journalism”, rather than a collaborator in gathering, selection, production and dissemination of news (p.14).

Table 2.1: Source: Participatory Journalism (Singer *et al*, 2011)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Stage* | *Description* |
| 1. Access/observation | The initial information gathering stage at which source material for a story is generated, such as eyewitness accounts and audio-visual contributions |
| 1. Selection/filtering | The gatekeeping stage when decisions are made about what should be reported or published. |
| 1. Processing/editing | The stage at which a story is created, including the writing and editing of an item for publication. |
| 1. Distribution | The stage at which the story is disseminated or made available for reading, and potentially, for discussion. |
| 1. Interpretation | The stage at which a story that has been produced and published is opened up to comment, and discussion. |

Örnebring (2008) also questions whether the blurring of the user and producer represents a real shift of power from traditional news organisations to audiences or whether it is simply a means for newspapers to gather content for free. Journalists may be willing to let audiences respond to and interact with already produced material but they are less willing to give them any real influence over the news process by engaging or collaborating. And when participation does take place it happens largely within the controlled walls of traditional mainstream media (Deuze, 2006) appearing on newspaper website as moderated content in forums, comment boxes or user generated content identified areas rather than merging seamlessly with the professional content. And participation outside traditional media through blogs usually comments and reacts to mainstream media rather than creating original content (Reese *et al*, 2007).

The stages at which audiences are participating in journalism in their largest numbers are at the beginning and end of the news process. As outlined above Shoemaker and Vos (2009) have created a model which sets out a secondary level of audience gatekeeping in response to news originating from the mainstream media. However as Hermida *et al* (2011; 2009) and others (Bruno, 2011; Messner, 2011; Allan, 2007) indicate the first stage of news production is where the gates are at their weakest and audiences are able to break news and information direct to the web without the need for a journalist as gatekeeper. This has accelerated in the past five years due to the proliferation of social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and most significantly Twitter. As of October 2011 Twitter had more than 100million active users publishing 230million tweets – or messages - a day (Twitter, 2011). The open nature of Twitter (as opposed to Facebook where friends are accepted or rejected) enables users to read the tweets of anyone on Twitter, excluding the minute minority who set up private accounts. This has led to an environment where information about major news stories is now most likely to break on a social media platform before being published or broadcast in the mainstream media. Newman (2009) and Messner (2011) both recount how information about the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks and 2009 Green Revolution in Iran first broke on Twitter whilst Bruno (2011) examines how journalists utilised the rapid flow of information coming from Haiti during and immediately after the 2010 earthquake. Major events whether human or natural, are now most likely to be revealed via social media networks first, from public on the ground in the heart of the action, before the professional journalists arrive, as was the case in Haiti.

Thanks to the rapid and easily accessible flow of information coming from Haiti, a lot of news media outlets could report the event with first-hand, real- time witnesses from the ground, long before their correspondents were able to reach the Caribbean island. Micro-posts on Twitter, pictures on Flickr and amateur videos on YouTube were used by big news organisations in the immediate aftermath of the quake (Bruno, 2011, p.3).

Bruno has labelled this the “Twitter effect” (p.5) and suggests that social media tools are central to the reporting of crisis events and enable more in-depth coverage and visibility to threatened voices. More importantly she says “it promotes an idea of a journalism more orientated to the process of news making and more open to a diversity of sources than traditional mainstream coverage could produce today” (p6). In recognition of this shift towards real time real people reporting, mainstream media outlets like Sky News and a number of British national newspapers, have dedicated Twitter reporters who constantly scour social media for breaking news stories. Subsequently news organisations are “abandoning attempts to be the first for breaking news, focusing instead on being the best at verifying and curating it,” (Newman, 2009, p.2).

However the process is a continuous flow of information between the public and journalists, with information sourced from social media networks being incorporated into a mainstream news story before being disseminated by the news organisation or an individual journalist via social media networks again. And even when a story does not originate from social media networks it is becoming common practice for news organisations to use social media networks as marketing tools to promote their brand and direct people to their website or newspaper (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Phillips, 2011). News organisations are increasingly aware of the key role played by online users in spreading content via email and social media websites, including news stories. This has led to a situation where news organisations amplify diverse voices on social media networks, as illustrated by Bruno’s examination of the coverage of the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake (2011), whilst simultaneously social media networks amplify the news published and broadcast by traditional news organisations. As Phillips ( 2011) suggests “even at the level of the smallest news website the impact of social media on the circulation of information is considerable” (p.8). However there is some evidence to suggest that news organisations are still maintaining a one way communication model in their approach to social media networks by using software that automatically tweets or posts headlines rather than engaging in a two way conversation (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Hermida *et al*, 2011) despite there being a demand for a more personal approach.

Although social media networks are used by journalists to enhance newsgathering by curating information from breaking news events and as a marketing tool to disseminate news they are also an important tool for sourcing information and ideas for non-breaking news stories, soliciting feedback and for building brand loyalty (Dickinson, 2011). In particular, Dickinson’s 2011 study of journalists at local British newspaper the *Leicester Mercury* found that all informants expressed an awareness of building a personal brand via Twitter. The final, but most underused, function of social media networks for journalists is establishing relationships with readers (Broersma and Graham, 2011) to stay closely connected to their audience (Dickinson, 2011) thus securing brand loyalty and legitimising their position as a public watchdog.

As the existing literature illustrates it cannot be denied that the traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers is changing and this also impacts upon local British newspapers and their websites. What is still under question is the extent to which it is changing or being disrupted and what shape gatekeeping currently takes. This study aims to address this problem through RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?

This research question relates to the wider debate about the changing nature of journalism within Web 2.0. If the gatekeeper role is changing and audiences are gaining a greater level of control over news content does this mean journalism is becoming more collaborative with the public? This is the final theme to be addressed in this study through RQ4 which asks: Is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers under Web 2.0? Therefore the next section of this chapter examines the literature surrounding this concept of collaborative journalism.

2.4 Collaboration and collective intelligence

The collaborative power of the press and the public through online communication, in particular social media networks, is a prime example of the changing media landscape and how journalists can no longer hold all the keys to the gate.

It is no longer the journalist who should be considered as the central authority in the news making process, but rather the citizens themselves. Journalists should not only open up the news process, turn journalism from a lecture into a conversation with citizens and encourage citizens to participate in the different stages of the editorial news making process. Above all, they should learn to acknowledge that they can no longer claim control over the gatekeeping process, but have to share this control with the public, (Paulussen *et al*, 2007, p.137).

According to Rusbridger (2010), editor of one of the world’s most popular English-language news websites guardian.co.uk (Halliday, 2011) and its associated newspaper the *Guardian*, news organisations are turning to the public to share the news making process, particularly in handling of large amounts of data or overcoming legal restrictions. This mass collaboration (Mansell, 2009) sees a large and diverse labour pool constantly come up with better solutions than the most, specialised workforce (Howe, 2009). The *Guardian* used the power of the crowd on Twitter to overturn a secret injunction enabling them to legally report a story about oil trader Trafigura dumping toxic waste off the Ivory Coast in 2009.

[The Guardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/theguardian) story announcing that it had been restricted by an existing high court order from reporting certain parliamentary proceedings had been published online for just a matter of minutes before [internet](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/internet) users began tearing apart the gag... blogs and the [social networking](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/socialnetworking) site [Twitter](http://twitter.com/) buzzed as users rushed to solve the mystery of who was behind the gagging attempt.. 42 minutes after the Guardian story was published, the internet had revealed what the paper could not... All the while, efforts were continuing to persuade Trafigura to alter the terms of the order to allow the Guardian to report the parliamentary business, and at 12.19pm Carter Ruck emailed the Guardian agreeing to do so, (Booth, 2009).

The same year the *Guardian* launched a crowdsourcing applicationasking the public to trawl through thousands of pages of documents relating to MP expenses. The dedicated tools asked readers to dig through the documents of MPs' expenses to identify individual claims, or documents that merited further investigation (Guardian, 2009). Managing and analysing data on the internet is a massive challenge but as O’Reilly and Battelle insist “we are all its collective parents” (p.3). In many situations collective intelligence is a far greater tool than the selective information held by an individual reporter or newspaper. Gillmor (2006, p.111) takes the approach of “they know more than I do” when talking about the former audience and advocates the collective approach, using technology to facilitate conversations between professionals, citizen journalists and users. But he readily admits that not everyone wants to be active, concluding that although the masses may not care about all the issues, individuals care about some of them (p.103). Franklin (2008) agrees, stating that society has reached a new type of journalism that encourages readers to join journalists in a more open and interactive discussion. Meanwhile Jarvis argues the case for “networked journalism” even more vehemently claiming collaboration is a state of natural equilibrium.

This, I believe, is the natural state of media: two-way and collaborative. The one-way nature of news media until now was merely a result of the limitations of production and distribution. Properly done, news should be a conversation among those who know and those who want to know, with journalists – in their new roles as curators, enablers, organizers, educators – helping where they can. The product of their work is no longer the publication-cum-fishwrap but instead a process of progressive enlightenment (2008).

There is a growing body of evidence surrounding the concept of collective intelligence as the basis for contemporary media consumption. For instance Jenkins (2008) argues that consumption has become a collective process. Each of us know something and we can piece things together if we pool our resources, as happened in the aforementioned Trafigura oil scandal story.

Newman (2009) also advocates partnerships between traditional news organisations and audiences as a means to tell stories in new ways. However this is not to undermine professional journalism. On the contrary it will complement and strengthen it giving journalists a more important role in sorting fact from fiction. As Deuze (2008) explores, there is a move towards top down journalism tapping into the emerging bottom up participatory culture to produce a co-creative commons-based news platform. The individual pieces of user generated content make up a larger piece of collective work which is then combined with the professional role of journalists verifying facts and gaining access to official comments. Collaborative journalism can therefore harness the power of crowdsourcing, which as a collective enterprise has value far exceeding that provided by any individual participants (Howe, 2009; O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009).

This merge of audience and journalist has created what many refer to as pro-sumers or produsers – users or consumers involved in the production of news (Bowman and Willis, 2003). It is out of this new environment of collaboration and conversation that the notion of Howe’s (2009) crowdsourcing has emerged. In journalism this is the practice of mainstream news organisations asking the public to send in information whether it be eyewitness accounts, photographs or video footage of a specific event (Charman, 2007) to complement the professional content gathered by journalists. This was particularly prevalent in the hours following the London bombings in 2005 due to journalists being unable to access the underground where some of the explosions took place, for security reasons. Media organisations such as the BBC had to rely on photographs, video footage and accounts from the public, with the most newsworthy photographs being taken by the public rather than professional journalists (Allan, 2007, p.12). In this event the media crowdsourced the public for information at little or no cost, to build a picture of the whole story.

With limited resources at local British newspapers editors view crowdsourcing as a potentially effective way to connect to audiences whilst also gaining quick, free content (Maguire, 2011). Dickinson, (2011) proposes that local journalists are more likely to embrace this form of innovation because they “find themselves on the front line of an industry in crisis and therefore more aware of the need to cement relationships with audiences” (p.8). In their report to the Media Trust Fenton *et al* conclude that collaboration between local newspapers and communities is also vital for democracy.

Establishing a more collaborative relationship between news organisations, individuals and civil society should be encouraged in order to enable participation, increase effective engagement, expand the public sphere and enhance democracy (p.9).

The involvement of audiences as citizen journalists, collaborators and providers of user generated content balanced against the role of journalists in the context of Web 2.0 is fundamental to this study. In order to understand the significance of participation and how it impacts on broader debates relating to democracy and community engagement, this study will now look to the theory of the public sphere and its evolution within Web 2.0.

2.5 Public sphere

This research seeks to explore whether audience participation is changing in nature and what is the motivation for this change from both the audience’s and journalist’s perspective. As suggested in Chapter 1, in this context there are normative ideals struggling against economic forces, particularly in the British local media landscape. Greater participation could lead to greater public engagement and valuable open source journalism but this could be compromised by an underlining motivation to maintain high profit margins, perhaps at the cost of accuracy and quality. RQ2 of this study examines in further detail the nature and value of audience participation for both parties. RQ2a evaluates the nature of participation whether this is for example commenting on a story on a website, emailing journalists, writing a blog, providing photographs to a newspaper website or joining a newspaper social network group, amongst many other forms of participation.

This study also seeks to understand the value of such participation from the perspective of both readers and audience members. In order to address RQ2b, which asks what is the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in local British newspapers? it is important to define what it meant by the word 'value'. As Miller (2008) explains the word value has an "extraordinary semantic range in the English language" (p.2). Value represents two opposing extremes as the word can mean the work involved in giving a monetary worth to an object and therefore it is "synonymous with price" (Miller, 2008, p.3). However value can refer to something that has significance because it can never be reduced to monetary evaluation, such as "the value we hold dear in relation to family, religion and other inalienable possessions" (Miller, 2008, p.3). Blaug *et al* (2006) also describe value as a term with various meanings:

To some it means economic value, how much a product or service is worth relative to other things as indicated by its price. Value can also relate to preferences and satisfaction with a particular service at a specific point in time. Finally, values such as security and integrity derive from moral and ethical debate and will always be hotly contested (p.23).

The economic use of value can also be measured in terms of willingness to give up resources, such as time (Mulgan *et al*, 2006) whilst public value can be the morals, principles or ideas that serve as guides to action (Mason, 2002).

These seemingly contradictory notions of value are useful definitions when referring to audience members, journalists and newspaper companies. As outlined later in this chapter, newspaper companies are increasingly driven by economic motivations and therefore economic value is the most important factor to them. However for audience members value is largely subjective and therefore it is more useful to look at value in terms of the moral and ethical impact participation has on audience members. It is also useful to consider the democratic value of participation because as discussed throughout this chapter, local newspapers have a role to play in the provision of platforms for debate and deliberation. The criteria to measure the value of audience participation is therefore laid out in detail at the end of this section.

As also discussed throughout this chapter, journalists are caught between social and economic obligations meaning the value of participation to journalists is potentially one that holds both public and economic value. In order to measure the public and economic value of participation this study will now draw on theories of the public sphere and deliberative democracy. This section will also use this context to explore the motivation behind participation.

Modern democratic theory tends to be divided in two camps with the first emphasising the role of votes and voting arrangements and the second emphasising participation and deliberation (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003). Through participation democracy can enlighten and educate its citizens and enable them to reach mutual understanding of the common good. This participation often takes the form of deliberation which enables citizens to find out if political decisions are correct by hearing counter arguments which are freely voiced. Marcus (1988) suggests that taking in new information and considering and evaluating it, and then possibly changing your mind is exactly what is required in order for a democratic society to function. As Ross and Nightingale (2003) maintain there is no requirement for consensus in democracy but it does require a respect for different viewpoints and decisions which the majority can accept. The news media fulfil an important function for democracy by providing a public forum in which these views and opinions can potentially have an influence on the decision of politicians or at the very least have an influence on the voting decisions of other citizens (Ross and Nightingale, 2003). The point at which citizens come together to discuss, share, argue and deliberate politics is commonly referred to as the public sphere, a theoretical concept originally proposed by Habermas in his 1962 book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit:Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* which grew in influence when it was translated into English in 1989.

Habermas (1989) situates the public sphere as existing within a particular point in time during the late 17th and early 18th century in England, and argues that it has been in demise ever since. The public sphere is where private citizens come together to form a public and deliberate politics through rational critical debate in order to reach a common judgement and influence political decision-making. As Eriksen and Weigard (2003) explain this form of deliberative democracy is a system within which citizens rule themselves through participation and where only the outcomes which are approved by everyone in an open debate are regarded as legitimate. The public sphere is therefore where power must find its justification. Habermas (1989), and later Eagleton (2005), identified the forum for such debate on public matters as the coffee houses of London, where middle class men met. Eagleton (2005) reasoned that this deliberation was born out of a struggle against the repressive European state which led the bourgeoisie to carve out “a distinct discursive space, one of rational judgement and enlightened critique rather than of the brutal ukases of an authoritarian politics,” (p.9).

In order for the public sphere to genuinely exist Habermas (1989) set out certain conditions that had to be met first. Since the private sphere was bound up in economic activity Habermas classified private citizens as property owners – those with private interests - and as a consequence educated (Habermas, 1991, p.56). He argued that due to the liberal model of capitalism anyone with skill, talent, hard work and luck could enter the bourgeois, become an educated property owner and therefore enter the public sphere (p.87). The public sphere therefore became a vehicle of public opinion which mediated between the private sphere and public authority. Habermas further reasoned that the public sphere must be inclusive in order to operate effectively, despite defining private interests as those of male property owners. Much of the criticism of Habermas’ public sphere has centred around the issue of exclusivity. Even if in theory the liberal economy could allow anyone to enter the bourgeois and become a property owner, Habermas is in fact only referring to men. He also relies on the aforementioned “luck” as much as hard work, skill or talent for men to enter this private realm.

The exclusivity of Habermas’ male, bourgeois public sphere has received a number of persuasive critiques. Calhoun (1999) argues that Habermas’ public sphere is prejudicial and ignores gender, sexuality, identity, nationalism, religion, science and social movements of the time. This results in an overestimation of the degeneration of the public sphere. A more pluralistic, open approach to conceptualising the public sphere is therefore needed, claims Calhoun, who argues for an inclusive and much more plural network of public spheres operating as clusters of communication with each other. Fraser (1999) extends this argument when she claims that the bourgeois were never the public and the notion that women were excluded from the public sphere was ideological rather than a reality. Alongside the bourgeoisie public arose counter-publics including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s public and the working class. Eley (1999) supports this view of competing publics reasoning that “the positive values of the liberal public sphere quickly acquired broader democratic resonance with the resulting emergence of impressive popular movements” (p.304). Critiques of Habermas therefore argue for a broader public which Habermas recognised himself more than 30 years after the publication of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlicheit:Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* Habermas when he conceded: “Culture of the common people was apparently no backdrop, a passive echo of dominant culture, it was a recurring revolt with official celebration and disciplines,” (Habermas, 1992, p.427).

Fraser (1999) adds weight to the debate by suggesting that as the non-bourgeois entered the public sphere, society was polarised by class struggles and the public fragmented into competing interest groups. Furthermore Fraser argues that even if it was possible for interlocutors in the public sphere to bracket status differentials and deliberate as if they were social equals, as Habermas suggests, in practice they would not be treated equally and the public sphere would always be advantageous to dominant groups and disadvantageous to subordinate groups such as women. Fraser therefore argues that multiple public spheres are the solution to dominance-subordination conflicts. She states this as a move towards greater democracy rather than a step away from it, as one public sphere cannot address the needs of everyone. Her alternative model is a series of subaltern counterpublics, a “parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities interests and needs,” (Fraser, 1999, p.123).

This study acknowledges that inclusivity is fundamental to any notion of valid participation, and this should reflect all sections of society (age, gender, sexuality, socio-economic group, ethnicity etc.) rather than simply the male bourgeoisie. However it must also be recognised that Web 2.0 is currently not accessible to all as some lack the technology, skill, knowledge, finance and literacy to access the internet. Therefore for the purpose of this study, participation in local British newspapers will be analysed as having value to its audiences if it firstly enables *anyone* with internet access to participate and secondly allows a *variety* of communication channels to offer alternative arenas to dominate and subordinate groups.

Inclusive access to the public sphere is only one criteria of its non-economic value, as its content is equally important. Habermas (1989) argued that the public sphere should be restricted to deliberation about the public common good and not private interests. But there is a growing counter argument that it is difficultto differentiate between private and public interests, and in practice there is no way to know in advance whether the outcome of the deliberative process will be for the common good (Fraser, 1999). Furthermore what is of common concern can only be decided through “sustained discursive contestation” (p.129), therefore no topics should be ruled off limits before that contestation. This view is particularly pertinent in today’s society where public and private interests continuously overlap, and people live publically on the internet through the networked society, extending the existing patterns of communications. Johansson (2007) argues that private matters discussed in the British press can serve as routes into indirect political discourse as stories such as celebrity exposés raise issues on society, wealth and morality. In addition, by creating a sense of community and connectedness, Johansson argues that tabloid newspapers can give people a voice and open up political discussion, therefore creating a more inclusive media public sphere.

Eley (1999) explores this theme further by examining the varying types of private and public realms from the classical left wing tradition. The democratic model has a clear separation of public from private with constitutional rights of autonomy such as freedom of speech, property rights and privacy rights. The socialist model sees the public sphere extended to the economy through nationalisation, welfare state, education, trade unionism and public health care. Finally, the utopian model is democracy radically extended to social relations, domestic living arrangements and some form of communitarianism. Looking at Britain today it could be argued that it represents Eley’s democratic *and* socialist model, with personal autonomy set against a supportive welfare state and universal National Health Service. Therefore the private and public have become merged. The motivation for this shift towards private matters is discussed in more detail below and in section 2.6, and forms an important element of this research which also examines the motivation for participation. Do journalists enable interaction and participation to facilitate a stronger public sphere or is it driven by economic demands? Conversely do audiences interact with journalists and news content to engage in the public sphere or to further their private needs and desires? Or is the picture more complex and do both public and private interests motivate journalists and audiences, to the value and detriment of the public sphere?

For the purpose of this study the content of valuable participation can be of public or private interest depending on the context, which draws on the work of Fraser (1999) and Johansson (2007). It may also have a wider remit than simply political matters, as moral and ethical issues can also serve to inform indirect political discourse (Johansson, 2007) and the media public sphere can help people to learn about the world around them (Dahlgren, 2001). Media organisations enable citizens to make sense of events, relationships and cultures, constituting a public arena in which the public come together (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). This is because media are the main cultural institution of public expression in contemporary society.

The importance of information and discussion about local communities is also particularly important in this study which focuses on local newspapers, with largely geographically based content. From its inception local newspaper journalism has purported to be a reliable source of information for the local community to which they pledged a commitment. Mitchell’s *Newspaper Press Directory* of 1846 spoke of the influence of the local press and its capacity to act as people’s champion (Mitchell, 1846). Local newspaper content reflects the interests and attitudes of readers and the values and expectations of community leaders and minority groups (Jackson, 1971). The functions of a local newspaper are as a watchdog, pump-primer, booster and reflector which enable it to project itself as a “community conscience, idealist, standard bearer of local pride and record,” (Jackson, 1971, p.273). Jackson provides a useful framework for understanding the key function of the local press. He outlines four roles in *The provincial press and the community* (1971, p.279):

1. The promotion of a sense of **community identity** and cohesion and the fostering of the individual’s integration within local society
2. The provision of **political, institutional and cultural information**. This in turn serves as a permanent record of community affairs.
3. The provision of a **platform for debate and complaint**, accessible to institutional spokesmen, minority groups and individuals

4. The **publicising of goods and services** available, situations vacant, announcements and notices

Furthermore Franklin and Murphy (1998) identify that "the idea of community has always formed an important element in the way the local press portrays itself" (p.56). Meanwhile Harrison (1998) argues that local newspapers have to pay particular attention to the concerns and sensitivities of the community as local readers have “intimate knowledge” of the world reported in the local press. Beamish (1998) adds that local newspapers therefore need to be geared to the needs of their local communities.

Local newspapers have a role to play in connecting with their communities but they also serve as a democratic mouthpiece. Couldry *et al* (2007) talk of a mediated public connection where citizens address shared concerns through the media they consume. Currah (2009) also makes the bold statement that local newspapers are pivotal to community life and democratic governance. As Aldridge (2007) illustrates for the majority of people life is still local and their desire for local news is driven by practical and material concerns such as the quality of schools, hospitals, issues of crime, employment and houses prices. Aldridge advocates a local public sphere to tackle local issues and therefore communication through local media is essential.

In this study the value of participation when measured against the various interpretations of the public sphere will therefore be defined as such: *moral, ethical, political or community communication* irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest.

Drawing on Jackson’s (1971) framework and critique of the public sphere outlined above, RQ2b will measure the value of audience participation against the following three gauges:

For Web 2.0 audience participation in local British newspapers to be valuable to audiences it must:

1. enable *anyone* with internet access to participate

2. allow a *variety* of communication channels to offer alternative arenas to dominate and subordinate groups

3. contain *moral, ethical, political or community* communication irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest

As discussed earlier in this section, the value to journalists can be to enable the above criteria and/or to seek economic value, more in line with the aims of the newspaper company as will now be discussed.

2.5.1 Public sphere and the liberal market

The public sphere became a political force through the growing newspaper industry of the mid 18th century furthermore as literacy increased amongst the population there was more demand for printed material and the publishing houses and newspapers began to flourish. However although Habermas (1989) deems the press as the crucial agent between the public sphere and the state he appears to overlook the partisan and bourgeois nature of the pamphlets, journals and later newspapers, particularly as many politicians funded the national and local press to defend their position in Parliament. Curran (1991) describes the newspapers as celebrating propaganda for the bourgeois rather than the embodiment of disinterested rationality (p.40). This raises two problems with Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere. The first is that there is no separation between civil society and the state if the press is partially funded by representatives of the state. Secondly the content of press publications is not an independent consensus of public opinion, if it is partisan in nature. Each newspaper will be representing either a politician’s interest or a selection of the public with particular political ties. However it could be argued that the local press in Britain only truly came to represent public opinion and the public sphere, when it cut its ties with political finance, and became independent by relying on advertising for revenue in the late 19th century. As discussed in Chapter 1 it was in the early years of the 20th century that local newspaper proprietors pursued their newspaper interests “as commercial enterprises rather than as political projects” (Walker, 2006, p.374), situating themselves in the market as impartial recorders of facts rather than party propaganda machines. Yet it is at this point that Habermas argues that the public sphere was in decline. He reasons that as the press became increasingly commercialised it moved away from transmitting rational critical political debate to becoming consumer driven in content.

Therewith emerged a new sort of influence i.e media power, which, used for purposes of manipulation, once and for all took care of the innocence of the principle of publicity. The public sphere, simultaneously prestructured and dominated by the mass media developed into an area infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contribution, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behaviour while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible,” (Habermas, 1992, p.437).

The welfare state and intervention of the state in civil society also weakened the public sphere according to Habermas, and private and public interests merged in the process of ‘refeudalization’. As Habermas explains, this came about in the modern 20th century society when public opinion became something to legitimate the power of governments rather than critical publicity of the public sphere. The role of public relations and manipulation of the media also became increasingly important as public opinion was manipulated by politicians. Yet as argued above it could be proposed that the public sphere did not exist prior to this period despite Habermas’ idealised claim because it was exclusive and politically motivated, rather than objective and an independent channel for public opinion.

On the contrary there is growing consensus that the media of the 21st century represent the public sphere ideal more closely than its 18th century counterpart, due to their diversity of voices, and the ability for the public to participate via Web 2.0.

The public sphere is a concept which in the context of today’s society points to the issues of how and to what extent the mass media, especially in their journalistic role, can help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt, (Dahlgren, 1991, p.1).

Modern media remain active as a public sphere in Dahlgren’s interpretation and they exists as a vehicle for information, rational-critical debate, and influencing political decisions through action. But rather than Habermas’ despondent view of the decline of the public sphere in the 20th century, Dahlgren wants us to embrace it to “fuel our utopian imagination, not leave us apathetic or paralytic,” (1999, p.9).

Wessler and Schultz (2007) are also strong advocates of the mass media as deliberators and argue that they have become the most important forum for truly public deliberation in modern societies. However they acknowledge not everyone can speak equally due to varying levels of knowledge and access. They conclude that print media are better for developing rich arguments and television is more suited to challenging views spontaneously. This study would therefore tentatively argue that as a converged medium the internet can provide both.

But there is still support for this strong claim that British media view news as synonymous with entertainment and this inhibits their role within the public sphere. Sparks (1991) claims that all British newspapers bar the *Financial Times* devote more space to sport than to Parliament, but equally the press history has always had a mixture of serious material and entertainment.

The shift from public to private in the news media is often blamed on the rise in capitalism, something which Habermas himself laments. There is more money to be made in broad, popular media content, than a controversial, diverse and independently operated media. As Garnham (1986) succinctly pointed out, before the era of new media technology, the liberal free press was a contradiction between economic and political realms. This is at the heart of this study which explores the motivation behind participation in the online public sphere in an environment where journalists are constantly battling against economics and publishing companies are chasing profits. Garnham defines the political realm as a set of individual rights within an agreed structure with social goals for the public good. Meanwhile the economic realm views the individual as a consumer and producer and private rights are exercised through purchasing power in pursuit of private interests. There are constant frictions between the two realms as the market is against state censorship yet capitalist control of the media is potentially an obstacle to free political communication. Since news media are commercial operations *and* political institutions, Garnham argues the two will always be in conflict, a view which this study reflects.

In theory the liberal market is arguably the best media model as it creates a competitive environment which meets people’s needs, has diverse products and ownership, and is democratic. It is private and self-regulated, forcing companies to behave in a way that best serves the public (Croteau and Hoynes, 2001). However in reality it is a much more homogenous picture. Rather than creating greater diversity, competition within the journalistic field leads to homogenisation (Webb *et al*, 2006), as Bourdieu (2005) argues:

One of the paradoxes is that competition, which is always said to be the precondition of freedom, has the effect, in fields of cultural production under commercial control, of producing uniformity, censorship and even conservatism (p.44).

Furthermore markets are undemocratic because they create inequality in society, put media power in the hands of wealthy individuals and do not meet social needs as everything has a price. The bottom line for any cultural text produced by journalists is “whether or not it has a market and is economically viable” Webb *et al* (2006, p.184).

The main claim of critics of capitalist media and the liberal market is that the concentration of media power makes publishers dependent on advertiser support and shareholder profitably, ultimately endangering citizens’ ability to participate in public affairs and the effective working of democracy (Herman, 1997). The modern free market has lead to conglomeration and private control of media by a small number of powerful elites, such as tycoon Rupert Murdoch who has huge stakes in newspapers, television channels, films and book publishing in Europe, North and South America, Asia and Australia. This kind of scale, Herman argues, leads to less diversity, a politically conservative approach and support of the status quo. Rupert Murdoch critic Fallows (2003) argues that the media tycoon is “principally a businessman of conventional business-conservative views” (p.81) and that he has a “cool concern for the bottom line and the belief that the media should be treated like any other business, not as a semi-sacred public trust” (p.98). And whilst McKnight (2010) agrees that Murdoch has a “particular brand of conservatism” (p.313) he argues that it is due to an ideological stance rather than an economic motive. This conglomerate conservatism is reflected in the British local press, with four publishing companies dominating the market and owning hundreds of titles each – a share of 61 per cent of the British local newspaper market (Newspaper Society, 2010). The largest company (in terms of circulation figures) Trinity Mirror owns 134 titles with a total circulation of 9.5 million and the second largest company Johnston Press owns 285 titles with a total circulation of 7.9 million.

According to Herman (1997) this homogenised, centrally owned market results in a preference for entertainment over controversy, delivery to targeted advertiser-friendly affluent audiences and a re-enforcement on consumption to maximise profits. Although Herman argues that this can open doors to oppressed people he also acknowledges that in the long term it strengthens materialistic values and individualism, rather than a sense of community and political engagement. And although the liberal market champions competition in reality this merely leads to monopolies and a lack of choice. There is simply a creation of more of the same as companies are not prepared to take risks and target middle market with bland content that will have a universal appeal (Curran, 1991). The internet is seen as a possible alternative future model, due to free, potentially easy access to all, but it is still dominated by monopolies such as Google rather than by citizens.

Dahlgren (1991) recognises this ultimate contradiction in the media public sphere and points to the emergence of a two-tier system with a dominant mainstream media and an alternative movement media. This observation was made almost two decades ago and with the rise of the internet this pattern has gained far more momentum particularly with the growth of citizen journalism and independent grassroots websites such as Indymedia and Now Public. Even in 1991 Dahlgren saw that new media was enabling a plurality of dynamic alternative public spheres. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this two-tier model is now converging with alternative media such as social networking sites and citizen journalism, combining with mainstream media in a form of collaborative journalism. It is perhaps within this new model that a diverse, inclusive public sphere can exist, as this study will now explore.

2.5.2 Public sphere and Web 2.0

With the rise in collaborative journalism within Web 2.0 as outlined in section 2.3 and 2.4 it could be argued that this is a signal of the creation of a new online public sphere in the 21st century. This section seeks to explore the advocates of the internet as a public sphere but also those who raise questions about the depth and inclusiveness of public engagement that it sustains.

The critiques of Habermas and the public sphere in section 2.5 put forward Fraser’s (1999) concept of counter-publics which supports the growing field of scholarly work framing the internet as a facilitator of multiple public spheres. Due to the complex, diverse and heterogeneous character of contemporary society a universal public sphere cannot represent all without marginalising some. The internet is a vehicle for decentralised dialogue with both individual and collective voices (Poster, 1995) and society is moving away from a single public arena as technology facilitates a plurality of publics (Gitlin, 1998). These publics can manifest themselves via collective intelligence and be distributed through collaborative journalism.

It (net) will probably not alter present constellations of power, but can at best serve to generate more counter-public sphere, as well as deepen – and widen – the dominant, mainstream, public sphere, (Dahlgren, 2001, p.51).

According to Hermida *et al* (2011) social networking sites represent an evolution of the public sphere where the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by public networks. Furthermore Thurman and Walters (2012) contest that live blogging may also be reshaping news-at-work consumption by increasing audience's interest in public affairs content and their inclination to participate.

However the notion of Web 2.0 as a platform for any formation of the public sphere whether it be single or multiple, must be approached with optimistic caution. As Papacharissi maintains (2002) access and the ability to participate online does not guarantee an actual increase in audience participation and although the internet inevitably opens up more channels of communication the measurable outcome of this is debatable. Counterarguments to the internet as a public sphere claim that the glut of information and voices make valuable participation obsolete, there is too much focus on private interests, and the internet reinforces the gap between elite audiences who are already active and those that remain passive. Research by Sparks (2003) supports this claim as he illustrates how British broadsheet newspaper websites contribute more to the public sphere than tabloid newspapers, due to the quality of their social, political and economic content. In the one month period examined, the *Guardian* online had 51 million page impressions compared to just 17 million on *The Sun* website. The *Guardian* also had more than twice the number of unique users online than *The Sun*, despite its print readership being almost a tenth of the size of *The Sun* newspaper. This research gives credence to the argument that newspaper websites strengthen the social divide and as Sparks argues it is exerted more strongly online, narrowing access to public life to only the “educated elite” (p.125).

The work of Coleman and Blumler (2009) builds upon this research and outlines three key debates situating the internet as a public forum. These arguments view the internet as reinforcing the status quo; undermining democracy due to volumes of simplistic arguments; or producing market instability and political unrest on a global scale. But Coleman and Blumler point to a fourth, optimistic way where the internet can empower citizens and create deliberative forums, under the right conditions. They argue that the internet is an empty space of power which is vulnerable to state-centric strategies but also open to occupation by exemplary citizens (2009, p.9). Due to cheap access and potential for interaction it is more democratic than broadcasting, and criticism of the internet as a public sphere can be overcome.

Papacharissi (2002) is less optimistic and maintains that the internet curtails the public sphere due to information inequalities, fragmentation of political discourse and data storage capabilities of the online world. He argues that these factors will cause the internet to adapt to the current political culture rather than create a new one. Meanwhile Gerhards and Schafer (2010) are yet to be drawn on whether the internet is a better public sphere but like others they suspect that it has the potential for multiple actors, diversity and a democratic public sphere. They argue for a strong wide reaching public sphere that is structured, open to public participation and has a societal impact, something which the mass media could facilitate online (p.145). However they acknowledge that there is a lack of empirical research in this area, a gap which this study seeks to partially fill.

This study proposes that the relationship between the internet and the public sphere is fundamentally all about potential. Papacharissi (2002) recognises that technologies carry the promise of bringing people together and encouraging grassroots democracy on a global scale, but it does not ensure people from different backgrounds gain a greater understanding of one another as outlined by Dahlgren (2001). In fact political expression online may in fact leave people with “a false sense of empowerment,” (Papacharissi, 2002, p.16), more in line with Marxist false consciousness. However this study does not take such a pessimistic view as Papacharissi due to the rapidly changing nature of internet access. Seven years after Papacharissi’s paper, the internet is reaching more than 77 per cent of the British population (ONS, 2011). As explored in Chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter social media networks are growing at a phenomenal rate, increasingly breaking news stories, and are enabling people in otherwise oppressed regimes like Iran and Burma to voice their opinions and enter the public sphere/s.

The potential for citizen journalism online and the ability for anyone to be a publisher does feed the democratic imagination and fosters the possibility for news as a conversation (Goode, 2009). But potential alone is not enough. This model of democracy and public sphere needs more than peer-to-peer horizontal conversation. Goode argues that a vertical conversation is needed with politicians joining the conversation. The internet also runs the risk of equating democracy with populism, much like its mass market tabloid counterparts in the British press. For a successive public sphere rational-critical debate and understanding of other perspectives is required rather than a policy of those who shout the loudest get heard. As research on American news website comment threads (Trice, 2010) illustrates, interactive dialogue is occurring but it is difficult to surmise whether this leads to true debate and deliberation.

Due to the persuasive arguments depicting the internet as a network of public spheres representing multiple disperse and diverse collective voices, this study considers Web 2.0 as a potential platform for multiple public spheres. Although British local newspapers may represent the traditional dominant public sphere, through collaborative journalism and collective intelligence they also arguably connect with alternative public spheres thus fulfilling their role of “providing a platform for voices from outside the media” (Heinonen, 2011, p.35).

This study therefore seeks to understand whether audience participation in local British newspapers is changing to a more collaborative approach and therefore creating a valuable public sphere/s online. Having explored the theoretical context of participation and the public sphere to underline research questions 2a and 2b in further detail (What is the nature and the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers) it is now important to look at models of participation online and how they also inform these research questions. This raises further questions about the professional ideology of journalists and whether enabling audience participation is part of this identity, as discussed in the next section.

2.6 Professional identity and audience participation

Before discussing models of interaction and participation online it is important to understand why journalists would wish to involve audiences. As discussed in Chapter 1 there is a commercial imperative for the British local press to embrace Web 2.0 and all it entails to reach fragmenting audiences, maximise the marketing potential of social media and remain relevant to readers. However whilst the capitalist drive for audience engagement must be acknowledged, the normative ideals of journalism must also be recognised. As discussed earlier in this chapter, editors like Rusbridger (2010) and Maguire (2011) are enthusiastic about Web 2.0, collaborative journalism and the ability to listen to previously unheard voices. Rusbridger argues that this is a tradition started by newspapers in Britain which has allowed people to express themselves freely for centuries and Web 2.0 is expanding this trend, for the greater good of journalism. Like Habermas (1989) and other scholars outlined earlier (Hermida *et al*, 2011; Wessler and Schultz, 2007; Dahlgren, 2001) Rusbridger understands the role of the media as a facilitator of the public sphere, to give people a voice and influence political action.

But in 21st century Britain do all journalists still see their role in this normative light or is their job simply to entertain and sell a product? Apart from publically funded broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4, the British media have no legal societal obligations. Broadcast news providers which are regulated by independent regular Ofcom have an obligation to objectivity but no such rules exist in the press, which has a long history of self regulation, although this is currently under scrutiny by the ongoing Leveson inquiry. Nether-the-less, as outlined in Chapter 1 and section 2.5.1 of this chapter, historically the British press has positioned itself as a watchdog of the state. And although local newspapers flourished in the late 19th century as the press shifted toward a dependence on advertisement, they have always reflected the needs of their local communities and engaged heavily in political reporting.

However although the British press has no legal obligation to government or the public there are certain “unwritten obligations” that are often respected in practice, as McQuail (2005, p.162) identifies. Media are influenced by professional values, what the public expects, governments and an environment of expectation and scrutiny (McQuail, 2005). As Donsbach (2010) reasons, journalism has a long public service tradition and a social role to ascertain truths. Journalists also notably define themselves by their strive for autonomous principles and a professional code of ethics which often include “a commitment to truth, accuracy and freedom of speech, the public’s right to know, unbiased reporting and independence” (Webb *et al*, 2006, p.183). These professional values are outlined in more proscriptive detail by Deuze (2005) who identifies professional journalism ideology as being made up of the five ideal traits of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. Journalists fulfil these traits by observing and informing, commentating, and providing a platform for outsider voices (Heinonen, 2011). But despite these unwritten obligations and professional values, the press have frequently come under criticism for not acting in the public’s interest.

During the 20th century in America and Britain there were a number of reports looking at the social responsibilities of the press, following criticism about increased sensationalism, commercialism and political imbalance. The Hutchins Commission in the United States was a public inquiry into the failure of the press during World War Two. The report coined the notion of social responsibility and concluded that a responsible press should be truthful, comprehensive, intelligent, contextual, a forum for criticism and comment, carrier of public expression, representative, and should clarify goals and values of society (McQuail, 2005, p.171). Meanwhile in Britain in 1947, a Royal Commission on the Press was established following public concern about the state of the press and pressure from the National Union of Journalists, which had maintained its own code of conduct since 1936 (McQuail, 2005). Over the decades it looked at press ownership, advertising and public complaints procedure and laid down the groundwork for the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) established in 1990. The PCC set out an Editors’ Code of Conduct addressing the ethical considerations journalists must address and their responsibilities in reporting matters of public interest, rather than matters of interest to the public (Press Complaints Commission, 2012). But it was the establishment of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) in Britain that originally set out ethical guidelines and training for the press, particularly those in the regional newspaper sector, and attempted to formalise journalism as ‘profession’ to be obtained via examinations. Although the NCTJ qualifications were not an entry requirement into the industry as a whole, they did become an unofficial requirement for entry into local newspapers and today almost all job specifications require trainees to have achieved their preliminary NCTJ qualifications (Hold the Front Page, 2012).

Founded in 1951 to run the newspaper industry’s training scheme, the NCTJ was a response to the findings of first Royal Commission on the Press (NCTJ, 2010), which said:

The problem of recruiting the right people into journalism, whether from school or from university, and of ensuring that they achieve and maintain the necessary level of education and technical efficiency, is one of the most important facing the Press, because the quality of the individual journalist depends not only on the status of the whole profession of journalism but the possibility of bridging the gap between what society needs from the Press and what the Press is at present giving it. The problem is the common interest and the common responsibility of proprietors, editors and other journalists, (NCTJ, 2010).

Journalism in Europe and America has moved further towards professionalization in the last 20 years due to the growing number of university degree courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level which specialise in many different types of journalism. Indeed Örnebring (2010b) argues that one of the criteria for journalism professionalism is a specific body of knowledge which is acquired through special education and due to the acceleration in the number and range of journalism degrees journalism is now a de facto graduate occupation.

But despite this move towards professionalism and an acknowledgement of the ethical and social responsibilities of journalists there are still many who argue that the press is moving away from its public service function towards one of “infotainment”. Donsbach (2010) identifies three streams of journalism which exist today. The first is the professional norm of objective journalism seen most strongly in Britain and America, the second is subjective campaigning journalism which is more prevalent in Europe and the third is the economic journalism which has come to the forefront of journalistic identity. Donsbach (2010) claims journalists are increasingly driven by a “necessity to reach the widest audience” (p.41) and there is a risk that journalism will lose its social function. This concern builds on the work of Bourdieu (2005) who positions journalists as operating within a journalistic field structured by opposing poles, in constant friction. At one end of the spectrum is economic capital which is ruled by circulation, advertising revenue and audience ratings and at the other pole is cultural capital based on intelligent commentary, in-depth investigative reporting and seeking out independent stories. The economic capital exists at the heteronomous pole whilst the cultural capital sits at the autonomous pole. The journalistic field is therefore an arena of struggle “in which individuals and organisations compete, unconsciously and consciously to valorize those forms of capital which they possess,” (Benson and Neveu, 2005, p.4). The journalistic field is a contradiction between peer recognition and recognition by the mass market, but is increasingly dominated by economic capital as journalists become obsessed with what their competitors are reporting and “pack journalism” (Phillips, 2010, p.96) takes hold. Furthermore the journalistic field in which journalists operate is structured by rules and regulations which means “journalists are caught up in structural processes which exert constraints on them such that their choices are totally preconstrained” (Bourdieu, 2005, p.45). It is this “impossible autonomy” (Champagne, 2005, p.50) which journalists constantly struggle with. Within the field of journalism, cultural capital is prized (Phillips, 2010) yet journalists are operating within an increasingly heteronomous field. And indeed as Bourdieu argues, the freedom of action of journalists depends on where they are located within a particular field (Phillips *et al*, 2010) which depends on their job role, seniority and the company they work for.

Due to this increase in economically-driven journalism there has been a dedicated movement in America to reinstate journalism with a public purpose. Public journalism as discussed in Chapter 1, seeks to improve the quality of civic life by fostering participation and debate, a trustee model rather than a market or advocacy one. It is based upon the assumption that journalism and democracy are linked and genuine democracy depends on a form of journalism that promotes citizens participation (Haas, 2007). Yet Glasser and Craft (1998, p.213) acknowledge that public journalism does not have an answer to address the clash between journalism and advertising and it must exist within market liberalism as philanthropic support is not enough. This follows Garnham’s (1986) claim discussed in section 2.5.1 that economics and politics in journalism will always be in conflict.

Haas (2007) still argues that journalists should seek out all views rather than pander to the majority or those who shout the loudest. Taking public journalism a step further Haas argues against the notion that journalists should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions. Instead Haas reasons that journalists should hold citizens accountable and act in the public interest, again so no form of exclusion prevails (p.45). Transparency over editorial decisions is also a key factor in public journalism according to Haas. Within Web 2.0 this is increasingly possible particularly as many editors turn to blogging to explain their policies, motivations and values. But websites are not necessarily providing the answer to journalism’s malaise. Haas (2007) argues that community websites, including those of local newspapers, tend to focus on private interests and view local communities as unified sites with shared goals and values, failing to acknowledge they are fragmented multiple social groups with conflicting interests. Indeed this reflects the multiple public spheres Web 2.0 facilitates as discussed in section 2.5.2. In order for participation to have value there must be diverse channels of communication in local British newspaper websites, as set out in section 2.5. But in order for this to occur, journalists need to re-evaluate their roles and the function audience participation plays within it. As discussed in section 2.3 journalists have diametrically opposed viewpoints on the amount of control they are willing to hand over to the public. Singer *et al*’s 2011 international research reveals that although some journalists stress the democratic benefit of including reader participation and user generated content others fear doing so undermines the very basis of journalism (Quandt, 2011). Polarised views exist according to which supporters of participation see journalism as a social function to serve society by offering public debate on relevant issues whilst sceptics see journalism as an institutionalised profession with requires training, rules and structures (Quandt, 2011). This spectrum of viewpoints has been divided into the three camps of the conventional journalist, dialogical journalist and ambivalent journalist (Heinonen, 2011). Conventional journalists see a clear demarcation between journalists writing facts and readers writing opinion and argue that the public want journalists to remain in this traditional, professional role. The dialogical journalists see a blurring of boundaries between users and journalists which can result in better journalistic performance when users are viewed as companions rather than competitors. The ambivalent journalists, who make up the majority, view a mixture of the conventional and dialogical roles as necessary.

Turning to the perspective of the audience, as discussed earlier in this chapter there is debate over which audiences are participating in collaborative journalism within Web 2.0 and the content of their participation. Paulussen *et al* (2007) argue that currently participatory and collaborative journalism has a narrow base and the majority of citizens remain passive and unlikely to play an active role in the news making process. But Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) dispute this “myth” and claim everyone is interested in something and will engage in varying levels of participation depending on the topic. Their Theory of the Interlocking Public (p.24) outlines three broad levels of public engagement. They argue that “the notion that people are simply ignorant, or that other people are interested in everything, is a myth,” (p.24). Their interlocking model is divided into the following three categories. Involved public: with a personal stake in an issue and a strong understanding; Interested public: with no direct role in an issue but still affected; Uninterested public: pays little attention and will join, if at all, after the discussion has been laid out by others. Under this model everyone is members of all three groups and we move between them depending on the issue at stake.

Yet even if people do participate in the news process there is still a certain amount of pessimism about the commodification of the audience as they are increasingly targeted as, and behave like, consumers rather than citizens. This commercial drive is reflected in journalism and there are also concerns (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Paulussen *et al*, 2007) that collaborative journalism is being market driven rather than civic orientated. Journalists themselves acknowledge that the incorporation of user generated content has economic benefits of building brand loyalty, boosting website traffic and remaining competitive (Vujnovic, 2011) and these are the real motives behind efforts to create a sense of community among web users. Currah (2009) identifies this as a recurring pattern in British local newspapers affirming that “the core problem with the publicly listed commercial model of news publishing is that it is necessarily driven by the pursuit of profit and creation of shareholder value” (p.40). Journalists also recognise that the drive towards audience participation is being market driven by publishing companies (Paulussen *et al*, 2007). This leads to users being exploited for free content (Moretzsohn, 2006) meaning news organisations can cut back on staff and legal expertise via crowdsourcing.

Furthermore personalised and niche information online is turning audiences into consumers of targeted advertisements rather than citizens participating in the public sphere. Quandt (2011) surmises that the demands of the marketplace mean that journalists may select information based on the potential to attract large audiences and as discussed in section 2.3 there is an increasing reliance on web metrics to understand audience preferences. This trend is already reflected in the consumption of online newspapers where readers acquire less information about national, international and political events than print newspaper readers (Tweksbury and Althaus, 2000). Singer’s (2001) research corroborates this claim revealing that newspaper websites are more local online and have narrower content than their print counterparts despite the web being a global platform. Her study discovered that print products had twice as many news, sports and business items than the online version, partly due to commercial constraints and lack of resources. But she warns that this is a dangerous trend to fall into.

We do not exist in isolation, and we do not exist only through our personal interests. We exist as members of a real community that extends well beyond our newspapers' primary circulation area. We always have relied on our paper to remind us of that (p.78).

However interactive elements on websites mean readers can navigate the parts of a website of interest to them and acquire increasingly personalised knowledge (Tweksbury and Althaus, 2000). Users are also personalising the news they read via RSS, Twitter and email feeds which filter out subjects that are not of interest. In American 27 per cent of users are now personalising their digital news to fit their interests (Greer and Yan, 2010).

There is also scepticism about the motivation of audiences to participate in collaborative journalism, together with criticism about the newspaper industry’s rationale. Some argue that there is evidence for narcissism driving audiences to participate (Paulussen *et al*, 2007), the ability to engage in reckless behaviour with no consequences (Bowman and Willis, 2009) and to further their own private interests (Deuze, 2006). But the strongest arguments to date are that audiences are keen to engage in political conversation, share their experiences and harness the potential of the web for democratic debate (Rusbridger, 2010; Gillmor, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). In their book *We Media* Bowman and Willis (2003)set out a list of motivations for audience participation both altruistic and self-interested. These include: to gain status, to create connections, for sense-making, to inform and be informed, to create and to entertain and be entertained. There is growing evidence for this as Allan’s (2007) report on public participation during the London Bombings illustrates, and Newman’s (2009) report on the rise and influence of social media explores. Despite some research on how and in what instances audience participate there is little empirical evidence on why audiences choose to participate and what motivates them, particularly within the British local newspaper industry. This study therefore aims to not only examine the motivation of journalists to interact with audiences but also the motivation of audiences to interact with either journalists as individuals or news organisations more widely as well as with each other. When discussing interaction from a reader’s perspective this can also be defined as participation, as discussed below. RQ1a asks: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers? Followed by RQ1b which looks at the perspectives of journalists *and* audiences to ask: what is the motivation for this change?

In order to put these questions into context an understanding must be gained of the definition of participation. A recurring problem in this field of research is the lack of consensus between scholars in categorising terms such as participation, user generated content, citizen journalism, and interaction. They are often described in contradictory manners, or new definitions are created such as alternative journalism (Atton, 2008), meta-journalism (Goode, 2009), mass self-communication (Castells, 2007), open and closed journalism (Deuze, 2008), networked journalism (Jarvis, 2006), participatory journalism (Hermida, 2011b; Bowman and Willis, 2003) amongst others.

For some user generated content, or UGC, is content made by amateurs who are not professional journalists and it is published either on an amateur platform or increasingly it is published within professional news organisations (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). It is therefore adaptable to both amateur and professional environments as “websites such as YouTube, MySpace and Wikipedia provide platforms for so-called UGC where citizens can publish their own comments, photos, videos and more online" (p.343) and this has now broadened to participation in established news organisations as UGC is “a process whereby ordinary people have an opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications," (p.344). However Allan (2007) refers to this as citizen journalism rather than UGC, and defines is as a process whereby non-professionals collect news content for amateur and mainstream media distribution. But for others citizen journalism can only exist and be published in a non-professional environment (Nip, 2006) such as the website Indymedia and it cannot be labelled citizen journalism if it appears in the established professional media. Charman (2007) further complicates the picture by referring to citizen journalism as more than submitting UGC, but also investigating through Freedom of Information requests, fact-checking the work of professional journalists and asking for input into professional stories in the development stage. Meanwhile Goode (2009) understands that citizen journalism has a wide definition and suggests it could include rating stories, commenting, and tagging stories online, in a term he calls metajournalism.

Whether citizen journalism, user generated content or metajournalism, all of these forms of communication make up audience participation which this study seeks to examine. Bowman and Willis (2003) describe four stages of open to closed participatory journalism with varying levels of control between website hosts and users, allowing content, comments and moderation to be controlled by different actors depending on the level of openness. For them participation is when citizens play an active role in collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information (p.9) which could arguably encompass both of the terms UGC and citizen journalism. Nip (2006) also defines four categories of journalism with varying levels of control between citizens and professionals or users and website hosts. The first is traditional journalism which manifests journalists as gatekeeping, gathering opinion from officials, with little input from the general public. The second category is interactive journalism which fits with Chung’s (2007) interaction model which sees audiences interacting through comments and email, and navigating multimedia content online. The third category is participatory journalism where users have the chance to express their views about public affairs but their contribution is situated with a frame designed by professionals, in line with Hermida and Thurman’s UGC (2008). Finally for Nip, citizen journalism is the gathering, producing and publishing of news with no professionals involved. But Deuze (2008) argues that participatory journalism is more than just UGC submitted to professional media and it relies on a form of collaborative journalism with professionals and amateurs working together. It is about “linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product,” (Deuze, 2008, p.108). But there is little agreement in this definition as Blood (2006) distinguishes between collaborative and participatory journalism, reasoning that collaborative journalism happens outside mainstream media in websites like Flickr and is therefore bottom up, whereas participatory journalism is controlled top down by news organisation. The definition of collaborative journalism seems more in-keeping with Nip’s citizen journalism. However this study would argue that collaboration cannot occur without professional journalists as the very word ‘collaboration’ infers a working between two or more, different parties. And in order for collaboration to occur between citizens and journalists, some form of participation and interaction must happen.

Participation and interaction can occur on varying levels, with a spectrum of controls. RQ1a asks: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspaper journalists? Chung (2007) reasons that although the way in which news stories are told online is diversifying through multimedia, who is telling the stories is not changing as journalists continue to assume control as the senders of information with limited avenues for user participation. She identifies two interactivity models of human interactivity user to user, and medium interactivity of user to medium. In the latter model the user uses the technology to choose their navigation path through a website and click on hyperlinks and multimedia features. Her interviews with journalists revealed that they preferred the medium model rather than the human one, being reluctant to create dialogue with users. Although this research is useful in adding weight to the argument that journalists are reluctant to shake off their gatekeeping role and engage in a conversation it overlooks the significance of user generated content as a form of interaction and the expansion of social media networks, as instead Chung focuses on message boards and comments. Chung develops her model into four categories by 2008, to illustrate that different news organisations should use different interaction features to attract their identified audience, but her expanded model is still limited in scope and makes no reference to a collaborative relationship within social media networks and talks more of news customization.

For some there is a close correlation between interactivity and participation with interactivity defined as the ability to manipulate or modify someone else’s content or to add new content as an audience member (Robinson, 2010). Participation as described above is similarly the ability for audiences to collaborate with journalists, submit their own content and comment on the content of others whether it be through blogging, social media networks, comment boxes, forums, rating stories, or any other online means. Participation also infers a level of interaction by journalists in terms of responding to audiences and communicating with them.

A pilot study carried out at the start of this research sought to understand how journalists define interaction and participation and this was used to inform definitions set out in this chapter. Twenty journalists at a daily local British newspaper were asked to define both words and explain if there were any differences between the two. The researcher found very little consensus amongst journalists regarding either word. One senior journalist said:

Online interaction I would define as the ability of the readers to interact some way with the newspaper be it through message boards, emailing in, that sort of thing. I think they sound a little bit similar to me but I would imagine, I think if there is a distinction, participation would be involving people in actual direct contributions, be it in the form of photographs or articles and so on.

Meanwhile a sports journalist saw interaction as active and participation as passive.

Interaction is when they can post comments and interact with other people that are writing, like a two way conversation. Participation is just reading it, participating like that.

When asked if they could differentiate between interaction and participation almost 70 per cent of the journalists said they had the same meaning. When they did distinguish between the two words most described interaction as a two way process where readers take part and journalists respond, whereas participation was one way communication where readers took part in the news process but did not receive a response. A political reporter put it succinctly: “Interaction is when you have a two way relationship and participation doesn’t necessarily mean a two way relationship”.

Due to the diversity of scholarly and practical interpretations of the word interaction it may be useful to look more closely at its technical definition which derives from the verb interact which means to “act on or in close relation with each other” (Collins, 1999, p.499). Furthermore the noun interaction is defined as “reciprocal action, effect or influence” and in physics refers to “the direct effect that one kind of particle has on another” (Dictionary, 2011). These definitions do not specify communication between two parties but rather an influence on one another, and indeed the physics definition only refers to one party having an effect on another, and no reciprocal relationship. As discussed above interaction in the digital era also implies the involvement of technology, which in this research project relates to the internet and newspaper websites. This study therefore uses the words interaction and participation synonymously and in particular the word interaction has been chosen when speaking to journalists during interviews because the pilot study identified that this was the term they most easily understood. This study seeks to explore how the nature of audience participation is changing under Web 2.0 but part of this analysis will be the extent to which the participation involves a two way relationship with journalists, or is simply interaction with the newspaper as a product (Chung, 2007), or interaction with other audience members. This will also help to inform the question of how Web 2.0 is impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers, which seeks to identify how the role of journalists’ is adapting and whether it is encompassing more dialogue with audiences and a more personal approach.

The second term that needs clarification in this research is the word participation, which as outlined above, also brings with it multiple interpretations and can be understood as synonymous with interaction. To participate is “to become actively involved in” something (Collins, 1999) but this leads to further confusion as it enables multiple interpretations of what being active means. This study has therefore built on existing research and developed the definitions by Bowman and Willis (2003), Nip (2006) and Hermida (2011b). The following model illustrated in Table 2.2 has been drawn up to define audience participation and the various levels it can occur during the news production process. It must be noted that audiences may participate in the news process by collecting raw data but they may not directly participate with journalists or news organisations, however this material may be crowdsourced by journalists and incorporated into their professional content, enabling indirect participation. Dissemination and responding may occur simultaneously.

Table 2.2: Web 2.0 participation model

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Type* | Newsgathering | Production | Disseminating | Responding |
| *Description* | Collecting raw information, photos, video footage, audio and publishing online or sending to journalists | Producing news stories, video, audio, photos for professional publication | Distributing professional content to a wider audience | Giving feedback, analysing and interpreting professional content |
| *Examples* | UGC, tip-offs, leaks, ideas, blogging, data trawling | Selection, reporting, editing | Sharing via email and social media networks, tagging, bookmarking | Comments, email letters to editor, email journalists, liking / recommending posts, polls, rating content |

The contemporary role which participation plays in local British newspapers will be examined via the following research question:

RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers?

The motivations for these changes outlined in RQ1b refer to the motivations of audiences to participate with newspaper websites and newspaper journalists online and the motivations for journalists and publishers to enable this participation.

Having viewed the fluid nature of the terms surrounding interaction, participation and participatory journalism, this study now aims to set out one further definition central to this research classified as collaborative journalism.

2.7 Collaborative journalism

The world of journalism is in flux and as this chapter and Chapter 1 have explored Web 2.0 is changing the roles of audiences and professional journalists, with many traditional walls beginning to crumble. Journalism is no longer in the hands of those who own a printing press, as anyone can potentially be a publisher online in the ultimate Liebling’s revenge (Hargreaves, 2005, p.77). Citizens can participate in journalism and are frequently providing content, comment and analysis to traditional news organisations via websites and social media. In fact audiences increasingly expect to be able to take part in and influence their media (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Deuze, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). This has manifested itself through an unprecedented quantity of collective intelligence online and citizen collaboration with professional journalism, as examined in detail in Chapter 1 and section 2.4 of this chapter. It is this collaboration that this study identifies as the key turning point in contemporary journalism under Web 2.0 and it will be examined in detail via RQ4: To what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers within Web 2.0? Therefore the term ‘collaborative journalism’ has been adopted to encompass what many other scholars refer to as participation, UGC, interaction and citizen journalism, as discussed in section 2.6.

Drawing on the work of Allan (2007), Hermida and Thurman (2007), Bowman and Willis (2003), and Deuze (2008) discussed above, the definition of collaborative journalism in this thesis is as such:

* The combination of professional and amateur content within the field of journalism. This incorporates user generated content, citizen journalism and participatory journalism where it is distributed either within a professional organisation or involves the work of professional journalists. There may be varying levels of moderation.

The important term to acknowledge is ‘journalism’ which in local British newspapers represents a level of specialist education or NCTJ qualification as discussed in section 2.6. A journalist working in a local British newspaper must work full time, part time or on a regular freelance basis for a recognised newspaper in order to hold a press card from the Newspaper Society and practice under the title of journalist. Similarly only a bona fide journalist may gain access to areas where the public are excluded for example certain circumstances in court hearings and council meetings. Therefore the definition of collaborative journalism above emphasises that in order for work to be categorised as collaborative journalism there must be professional involvement. This may be via placing content (blogs, comments, pictures, text, video, audio, hyperlinks etc.) on a traditional local newspaper website, but could also include professional journalists communicating through social media networks, or using content sourced from non-professional sources. Therefore a website or content on social media network that had no connection to professional journalists could not be classed as collaborative journalism. As Nip (2006) argues this content is citizen journalism as it is produced and distributed within an entirely non-professional environment. However once it enters the mainstream media this study would argue that it then transforms into collaborative journalism. For example the state controlled media in Iran may not have published details about the 2009 election protests, but as soon as citizens placed comments on social networking site Twitter, they were incorporated into the reporting of professional journalists in other countries around the world, thus creating collaborative journalism. This study therefore seeks to understand if this new form of collaborative journalism is emerging in local British newspapers within Web 2.0, and to what extent this content is moderated by professional journalists and how much of their traditional gatekeeping role still remains.

As outlined in this literature review this study seeks to draw together concepts of gatekeeping with the theory of the public sphere to understand whether under Web 2.0 journalists (gatekeepers) and audiences (public sphere) are being brought together in a dialogue via participation. Many studies have researched these two factors individually but this study is an attempt to examine the relationship between the two.

As will now be discussed in detail in Chapter 3 and 4, this study will examine the role of collaborative journalism in local British newspapers, via a case study method of two newspapers. In order to analyse the four research questions set out in Chapter 1 the study will involve a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies including semi-structured interview with journalists and audience members, news room observation, content analysis, and a questionnaire of audience members.

**Chapter 3: Case study research**

3.1 Introduction

The case study is a common research method but one with a chequered history. This chapter therefore aims to explore the suitability of the case study as a valid and robust methodology and rationalise why it was the most appropriate method for this particular research topic. In doing so this study aims to contribute to the wider field of case study methodology and develop its standing as an accepted research method. Therefore it has been considered necessary to focus on the general context of case study research in this chapter alone. This is followed by an in-depth explanation of the individual components (interviews, observation, questionnaires, content analysis) of the case studies chosen for this particular research project in Chapter 4.

As outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 there is a seismic shift happening in the British local newspaper industry which warranted this investigation. Prior research has centred around the national press in Britain and Europe and the national and local press in America but there has been a gap in empirical evidence from the British local newspaper industry as identified in Chapter 1. To this end this research project aimed to investigate the unique environment of local newspapers using an in-depth research design. In order to examine the research questions which address the perspectives of multiple actors – journalists and audiences – a case study approach was deemed appropriate. This allowed scope for qualitative and quantitative research methods and the use of multiple evidence in a triangulation approach.

This study follows a phenomenological tradition in social science research which is a post-positivism approach examining a “reality which is socially constructed rather than objectively determined” (Noor, 2008, p.1602). This is in contrast to the positivism approach often taken in natural science where the scientist adopts the position of objective researcher who collects facts about the social world to build up an explanation of social life (Noor, 2008, p.1602).

As this chapter will explore the case study is an increasingly popular phenomological method of choice amongst social scientists particularly in the field of education (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1995), healthcare management (McConnell, 2011) and business (Woodside, 2010), but it is increasingly being utilised in journalism studies (Erdal, 2009; Aviles and Carvajal, 2008; Deuze *et al*, 2007; Garrison and Dupagne, 2003). It allows researchers to gain access into the inner sanctum of news rooms and explore complex structures from the inside out. It is an especially appropriate method to study a “contemporary phenomenon within its real life context” (Yin, 2003, p.13). As previously outlined local British newspapers are facing a unique challenge due to the emergence of Web 2.0 and the impact of the current economic down turn, therefore it is suitable to investigate the industry from within the context of the newspaper news room, at a given point in time.

The research questions outlined in Chapter 1 are also appropriate for a multi-method research design due to the existence of multiple actors and the specific set of circumstances that are unique to the local British newspaper industry during a particular timeframe. In order to gain a real life context with triangulated results a case study is appropriate. Within a case study it is possible to carry out interviews, corroborate them with observation whilst also gaining statistical, quantitative evidence through a content analysis. It is also possible to conduct a questionnaire via the case study. These multi-methods which will be explained individually in more detail in Chapter 4, allow for triangulation and a greater validity of results. Each of the research questions will be approached by the most appropriate method to create a holistic view of each case study.

In order to give validity to the results the study takes a multiple comparative case study design approach, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, investigating two newspapers under ownership of two different publishing companies. As Sapsford and Jupp (1996) discuss:

Without a carefully constructed basis of comparison we should not be able to say precisely what has been found out... The act of comparison is a central logical device for establishing the validity of a line of argument within research, (p.22).

The two comparative case studies have been selected as each of their ownership companies are ranked within the top four of local newspaper publishers in Britain and are based on a shareholder capitalist model (see Table 3.1 below). They both have websites and social media networks used for interacting and participating with their audiences. Each newspaper forms an individual unit of analysis and the collection of multiple evidence at each unit was replicated as precisely as possible. Each case study involved the investigation of four sources of qualitative and quantitative evidence: semi-structured interviews with editorial staff, news room observation, online content analysis and an audience questionnaire, supplemented with a sample of interviews with audience members. More detail about the selection of these cases will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Table 3.1: Top 4 Regional Press Publishers (Newspaper Society, 2011)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Weekly circulation rank* | *Weekly circulation* | *Publisher group name* | *Number of titles rank* | *Number of titles* |
| 1 | 10,863,102 | Trinity Mirror plc | 3 | 167 |
| 2 | 7,488,342 | Johnston Press plc | 1 | 265 |
| 3 | 6,568,067 | Newsquest Media Group | 2 | 191 |
| 4 | 6,007,958 | Northcliffe Media Group | 4 | 123 |

The first part of this chapter seeks to justify the use of the case study approach (3.2) whilst acknowledging some of criticisms the method faces. The second section gives an overview of the different types of case study (3.2.1) and the one most appropriate for this study. The final section then outlines the best practice for designing a case study (3.3) and justifies the multiple methods used in this research design which seek to address the aforementioned research questions.

3.2 Case study approach

In order to address the research questions set out in Chapter 1, this study needs to examine the three elements identified by Schramm in 1971, which Yin (2003) continued to advocate three decades later. Schramm indicated that a case study tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions, and more significantly why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result. This research project first asks how Web 2.0 changes participation in RQ1 (illuminating a decision), followed by what is the motivation behind participation in RQ1b (why decisions are taken). It then looks at the nature of participation in RQ2a (the types of participation) followed by what is the value of this participation in RQ2b and what is the impact of this participation on the gatekeeping role in RQ3 (with what result). A case study approach is therefore appropriate in this instance to address the why, how and what questions set out above. Yin (2003) concurs that the case study method is a fundamental method in answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions, and Soy (1997) also states that “the questions are targeted to a limited number of events or conditions and their inter-relationships”, (p.2).

As outlined in the introduction, the use of case study is apt when a researcher wants to investigate contextual conditions and believes they are pertinent to the study topic (Soy, 1997, p.13). As demonstrated in Chapter 1 the British local newspaper industry has a unique set of economic, social and technological circumstances which are related to a particular window of time and it is necessary to explore these within a contextual framework. Furthermore Bryman (1989) maintains that case study research is useful for providing an understanding of the functions of organisations which are not well documented. As previously illustrated local British newspapers are currently an under-researched field and therefore the case study approach would be useful for shedding light on this industry.

A case study does not aim to be representative but it is a snapshot of a contemporary phenomenon, within a set of boundaries which studies a group, institution or individual (Bryman, 1989). It takes a holistic approach and can be used to provide a round picture based on multiple sources of evidence. Meanwhile the case study unit of analysis can be an event, decision, programme or organisational change according to Yin (1994, p.22). However Stake (2006) describes a case as a noun or entity for example a newspaper or group of journalists, rather than a programme, which is the function. The quintain is the 'phenomenon' being studied and in this research project it is audience participation within Web 2.0. In order to understand its role within local British newspapers the researcher will study it through its manifestations in two case studies. It is therefore the quintain which the researcher seeks to understand as a multiple case study and it is “not so much a study of the quintain as it is a study of cases for what they tell us about the quintain”, (Stake, 2006, p.7).

In this study the case studies are the two individual newspapers and the holistic unit of analysis is the Web 2.0 programme with embedded units of analysis being the journalists and online audience members (more detail in section 3.2.1). Yin also states that the unit of analysis needs boundaries such as a time frame and actors involved, and that it is important for the unit of analysis to be similar to previous studies for comparison purposes. The boundaries within this study are that the research was carried out at each of the newspapers within an eight month time frame during 2010/11. From the producer perspective the boundary was restricted to editorial staff and did not include other departments such as advertising, human resources or general managers. The receiver perspective focused on audiences who engaged in online journalism rather than those that did not. The same unit of analysis was replicated at each case study.

There is debate over whether the case study approach is the best way to develop theory or to test existing theory, but it could be argued that both processes are legitimate practices and each depends on the type of research and the research questions posed. For Yin (1994) “theory development as part of the design phase is essential” (p.27), therefore a theoretical framework is needed before the case study research is carried out, and the empirical results will perform a role in developing that existing theory. Yin also reasons that two or more cases supporting the same theoretical framework will make empirical results more potent. For example in this study the multiple case studies will be used to answer a series of research questions based around the concept of the emergence of collaborative journalism rather than the continued existence of traditional journalism. However for Bryman (1989) case study research can be used as an exploratory measure, to test theories or to confirm findings of other studies. Similarly Tellis (1997a) describes three case study research methods each with a different theoretical approach. The exploratory case study collects data prior to the definition of a research question and hypothesis; the explanatory case study is used for casual studies where theory is used to explain outcomes; and descriptive case studies begin with a descriptive theory and the data is then compared with theoretic patterns to form a hypothesis and cause-effect relationship. The use of theory and a theoretical framework therefore depends on the type of case study undertaken and the research questions under investigation. In this study the theoretical concepts of collective intelligence, gatekeeping and public sphere have been used to develop a framework, which have informed the research questions. The research itself will use this framework to expand upon existing theoretical concepts and develop them via the case study analysis.

When deciding how to design the case study method for this particular study it was important to build upon the pattern of case studies which have been carried out by researchers in other parts of the world, as indicated later in this chapter and Chapter 4. According to Roberts (2005) as case studies are built up, patterns emerge and it becomes possible to generalise. This study can therefore be placed within an international framework and help to build a knowledgeable and empirical in-depth picture. However it must be noted that each approach to case study research is varied and there is no template a researcher can follow. Each project will differ and this will depend on the case(s) being studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) take a blunt view stating that “no study conforms exactly to a standard methodology; each one calls for the researchers to bend the methodology to the peculiarities of the setting” (p5). Therefore it is important to use multiple sources of evidence and cross checking between research methods is crucial to add validation to the results. Different sources will corroborate evidence, therefore the “researcher must avoid becoming dependent on a single informant, and seek the same data from other sources to verify its authenticity” (Tellis, 1997b, p.8). As Gillman (2000) explains by using a range of methods you can “put together a more adequate picture” and “the case study exemplifies this approach” (p.81). Brewer and Hunter (1989) agree, stating that overreliance on any one type of method is problematic because it fails to guard against the specific sources of error which threaten that method. For example interviewing is a method to record what people say rather than what they actually do (Arksey and Knight, 1999) therefore observation can be used to corroborate the interviewees' accounts. Similarly a questionnaire could be used alongside interviews, as is the case in this study as a sample of questionnaire respondents will be interviewed.

A questionnaire might be used to get an indication of attitudes, reasoning or behaviour in the target group at large and then interviews might be use to explore what lay behind the findings of the questionnaire study, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.17).

This study therefore aims to validate the results through multiple research methods as used in similar news organisation case studies. For single and multiple case studies the most common methods of collecting data are observation, interview, content analysis and data management (Stake, 2006). Garrison and Dupagne's (2003) single case study exploration of Media General’s converged Tampa News Center in Florida cross checked interviews with document analysis, whilst Erdal (2009) used the triangulated approach of textual analysis, interviews and observation in the study of a converged Norweigan public broadcaster, and Aviles and Carvajal (2008) combined observation and interview when researching multimedia news rooms in Spain. Following on from this good practice, in this study of local British newspapers news room observation will be used to corroborate interviews with editorial staff, and interviews with a sample of respondents will be used to elaborate upon the audience questionnaires. The content analysis on the case study websites and social media networks discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 will also be used to cross-check data from the interviews, questionnaires and observation. In this respect the research design aims to use triangulation as a means of confirmation and completeness (Arksey and Knight, 1999). The confirmation is to overcome problems of validity via corroboration as described above. The rationale is that “cumulatively the weaknesses of one research method are offset by the strengths of the others”, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.23). Completeness triangulation seeks to understand multiple viewpoints and why and how they diverge or converge. This means that differences in data do not invalidate the results but have the potential to enrich analysis and explanation and reveal social reality as multi-faceted (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Further advantages of triangulation are that it enables different but complementary questions within a single study to be addressed, such as this study which has four inter-related research questions. The research can also be closer to the research situation via triangulation which is particularly important in case study research, and this deep insight can contribute to a “more nuanced understanding” of the focus of the study (Arkey and Knight, 1999, p.25).

Despite the methodological advantages of a triangulated, multiple method case study approach this research recognises that there remains some criticism amongst scholars about the validity of the case study as a methodology. This may be in part due to the contradictions over the implementation and interpretation of case studies.

Although much of what we know about the empirical world is drawn from case studies...the case study method is held in low regard or simply ignored. Even among its defenders there is confusion over the virtues and vices of this ambiguous research design...The case study survives in a curious methodological limbo (Gerring, 2004, p.341).

A common concern about the use of case studies is that it is difficult to generalise on the basis on one or a small number of cases. But this is widely contested (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2003) by advocates of the methodology as an unsubstantiated misconception. Yin (2003) explains that case studies, like experiments, can be used to generalise theoretical propositions although not to generalise populations. Therefore in doing a case study "your goal will be to expand and generalize theories and not to enumerate frequencies" (Yin, 2003, p.8). In their definition of case study research design Seawright and Gerring (2008) indicate that generalisation is the ultimate goal: “the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) analysis of a single unit or small number of units (the cases), where the researcher’s goal is to understand a large class of similar units” (p.206).Flyvbjerg, in his defence of the case study method, outlines five misunderstandings, including the notion that one cannot generalise on the basis of an individual case, therefore the case study cannot contribute to scientific development (2006). Instead he argues:

One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas the force of example is underestimated (p.395).

Furthermore the use of multiple case studies, as illustrated in this study, can help to enhance the generalizability of research and comparisons can allow the unique features of cases to be more readily identifiable (Bryman, 1989). Therefore on the basis of the evidence given above this study aims to use the case study as a means to generalise the specific research questions within the definitive context of British local newspapers, their online presence and their audiences. As argued earlier in this chapter this research is situated within a field of existing case studies, and can therefore be compared to other studies to build a larger pattern with greater generalizability.

Having been informed by the arguments and evidence supporting the use of case study research this study has employed the method, but not without caveats. Like any methodology there are strengths and weaknesses which must be acknowledged. The case study allows for an in-depth study, considering real events, which facilitates theoretical explanation and development. Arguably its ambiguous nature is of merit as it allows for flexibility and adaptation if hidden or unexpected factors arise. It can also uncover detail in complex situations and respond accordingly, whilst using a range of qualitative and quantitative sources to corroborate data. But if not designed and carried out correctly case study analysis can lack validity. It is therefore vital that the research design meets the tests of validity considered later in this chapter and developed in Chapter 4.

3.2.1 Case study types

Choosing to use case study methodology is only the start of the process in defining a research design. As has already been examined the case study approach is flexible at best and confusingly ambiguous at worst. More complexity emerges when discussing the ‘type’ of case study a research project is to formulate, as there are varying definition by scholars about the categories of type (Seawright and Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2003; Soy, 1997; Tellis, 1997a; Stake, 1995). This chapter will now explore the most relevant of these diverse types and outline which form this study takes.

It is perhaps appropriate to start with Yin (2003) who traces the use and importance of cases studies to a wide range of disciplines and has written many of the most detailed modern publications on the subject. Yin begins with outlining three broad types of theoretical strategies to case study – explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. Deciding which strategy to use depends on the research question, the extent of control the researcher has over behavioural events and the degree of focus on contemporary over historic events (Yin, 2003). Exploratory studies tend to be used to develop hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry and often take the form of a pilot study. Descriptive cases are used to describe the natural phenomena which occur within the data in question (Zainal, 2007, p. 3) and look at the strategies used by actors. The researcher will describe the data as it occurs, for example the journalistic description of the Watergate scandal by two reporters (Yin, 1994). The explanatory case study examines the data both closely at the surface and at a deep level. On the basis of the data the researcher may then form a theory, or an explanatory case may be used in casual studies to investigate certain phenomena in very complex and multivariate cases (Zainal, 2007). In this PhD study there is a series of how and what questions which seek explanation based on a theoretical framework and description gained from the data collection. It therefore takes an explanatory and descriptive approach. Yin argues that it is possible to use two strategies and the different approaches have large overlaps between them (2003). However in the design of this study it is also helpful to look at the case study categories of Stake (1995) who often uses a multiple case study approach. Stake distinguishes three types: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The intrinsic approach is a method used when there is a particular interest in a case rather than a general problem, and therefore it is very specific to the case in question. An instrumental case study is the opposite approach and is used to understand something external to the individual case based on a set of research questions which can then lead to generalisation. The collective approach is similar to Yin’s multiple case study design and involves more than one instrumental case study. Stake argues that balance and variety are important in the selection of cases, and they may be chosen due to their accessibility, dissimilarity to other cases, or their ability to help the researcher understand the problem. Although his method is used in the field of education it is a useful analogy for journalism. Two local British newspapers may be selected because they are best suited to describe, explore and explain the problems facing local papers set out in Chapter 1. This study aligns itself with Stake’s collective approach based on instrumental cases, but acknowledges that the strategy is an explanatory one with descriptive elements.

It is also worth noting the case study approach outlined by Soy (1997) which argues that cases must be selected because they are a) unique b) typical or c) represent a variety of geographic, size or other parameters. This study has set the parameters as two commercial local newspaper publishers both within the top four sellers in Britain. They also represent different geographical areas and different sizes, however they are also typical cases, but each has a unique approach to Web 2.0 as is the nature of editorial independence. Therefore there are difficulties with Soy’s criteria when choosing individual newspapers as cases. Due to editorial independence and individual editors each newspaper is unique, yet they often have some homogenised elements such as website templates and use of agency copy which is standardized across the whole media group. For example *Leicester Mercury* will be a unique case to the *Lincolnshire Echo*, despite both newspapers being owned by publishing company Northcliffe Media. One editor may embrace blogging, social media and audience participation and the other may maintain a gatekeeping role and limited interaction with audiences. Yet some elements of the newspapers and their websites will not be unique and will be rather typical. For example the design of Northcliffe Media websites is the same across all publications and uses a companywide template (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). Furthermore many of the departments at individual newspapers such as advertising and sub-editing have merged into larger centralised hubs which may cater for several titles simultaneously which inevitably leads to the homogenisation of content.

Figure 3.1: Home page [thisislincolnshire.co.uk](http://www.thisislincolnshire.co.uk)

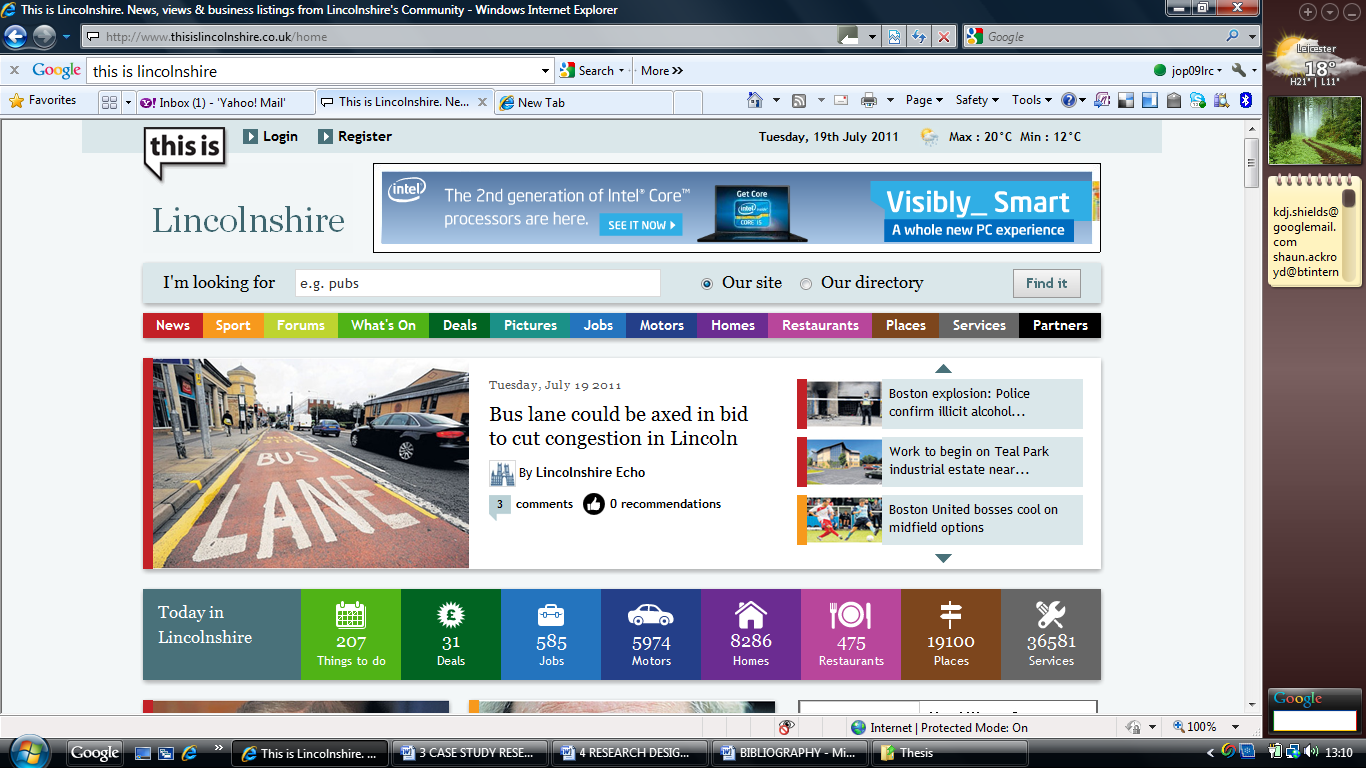


Figure 3.2: Home page [thisisleicestershire.co.uk](http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk)



This research is made up of two case studies - the *Leicester Mercury* and the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, which are both daily local British newspapers with a print edition and website. In line with Yin’s (2003) description of holistic and embedded units of analysis this study is structured as follows: within each of the case studies the research has identified the holistic framework as audience participation within Web 2.0. As described in Chapter 1 this is a multimedia online environment with a networked community linked via websites external to the newspaper’s own websites such as facebook.com; twitter.com and flickr.com. Within the holistic framework there are two embedded units of analysis, firstly the journalists and secondly online audience members. Using a theoretical framework the research aims to collect data from the case studies to address the research questions and develop existing theoretical concepts, in an explanatory approach.

Having identified that this study has employed a multiple case study approach some discussion is required over the structure of a multiple research design. There is debate over whether multiple case studies should follow the replication model advocated by Yin (2003; 1994) or a diversity model such as Soy’s variety of geographic, size or other parameters, or Seawright and Gerring’s diverse case. Yin’s argument is that multiple case studies make for more compelling evidence but only as a replication logic. Each case should therefore be selected to predict similar results for literal replication or to predict contrasting results for predictable reasons, for theoretical replication. However as already argued, comparison and divergence are also a key component of social science research comparison (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Bryman, 1989). Deuze *et al’s* 2007 study of four international newspapers chose four different case studies for valuable comparison but also to see which elements were replicated. Therefore the two case studies in this research were selected on a comparative basis, to identify areas of similarities and differences. The variables are the newspaper ownership, newspaper location and the circulation of the newspaper.

3.3 Case study design

To design a case study a series of components must be incorporated in order to create an applicable theoretical framework. A case study must address a research question/s, answer propositions which are possible answers to the research question/s, be made up of units of analysis, logically link data to propositions and have robust criteria for interpreting findings (Yin, 1994). As set out in Chapter 1 this study seeks to answer four research questions through data collection. Two British newspapers have been selected as case studies. Each case has been chosen as a ‘typical commercial but Web 2.0 embracing example’, rather than through a sampling process. As discussed earlier in this chapter, in case study methodology cases are predominantly selected due to their unique or typical nature and never by sampling (Soy, 1997). As reasoned above due to editorial independence within a commercial structure local British newspapers are a complex mixture of homogenous corporate elements and unique components, therefore every case is arguably unique but will have comparative typical elements. The *Leicester Mercury* and Bournemouth *Daily Echo* have been selected due to their editor’s positive outlook on audience participation online and because both newspapers have taken active steps to incorporate Web 2.0 into their daily routines, albeit in varying ways. The editor of the *Leicester Mercury* Keith Perch was previously managing director of Northcliffe Electronic Publishing, followed by director of digital development for Northcliffe Media, overseeing strategic development online. Mr Perch is a regular blogger, advocate of journalists communicating via Twitter and supporter of *Citizens’ Eye*, a non-professional organisation that publishes news stories about Leicester online and in the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper. Meanwhile the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* has a strong web presence with a digital team including a digital projects co-ordinator post with responsibility for managing social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, You Tube and Delicious. Due to this post and a digital team of three employees the newspaper is able to embrace Web 2.0 through multimedia content and multiple social networks. In recognition of this work the website bournemouthecho.co.uk won Website of the Year at the 2010 EDF South of England Media Awards.

Yet although there are unique elements at both these newspapers they can also be viewed as typical as they are both owned by two large publishing companies which both sit within the top four local newspaper publishers in the UK. Northcliffe Media owns 123 publications with a total circulation of more than six million whereas Newsquest owns 191 publications with a total circulation of 6.5 million (Newspaper Society, 2011). Both newspapers are commercial businesses like the majority of local papers in Britain, and are therefore appropriate cases to explore the conflicts of economic imperatives and normative journalistic values set out in Chapter 1 and 2. Similarly both the cases are local British newspapers each covering a specific geographic area in terms of circulation and content, and they each publish a newspaper daily, six days a week whilst having an official newspaper website, which is typical of the average local daily newspaper in Britain. The similar but diverse nature of the selected cases is supported by Stake’s multiple case study analysis which argues that cases need to be similar in some ways but “balanced and variety are important”, (2006, p.26.)

For the purposes of comparison the cases have also been selected due to their differences. Comparison is useful for the validation of an argument (Sapsford and Judd, 1996) and is a common practice in journalism research. Deuze *et al* (2007) compared four cases in four different western developed countries to explore participatory news practices. Each case was chosen as a “useful, prominent and diverse example” (p.325), so they were each different and unique in some way, but they were also selected from similar democratic systems, so they were also similar and typical. The authors therefore argued that the cases were representative of the emerging patterns in such countries. Each of the cases had further similarities as each of their approaches to participation was a hybrid one between institutional/commercial and community engagement. The cases were also chosen because of their distinctive operational approaches and some of them also had national recognition for a unique brand of citizen journalism therefore they would all fit with Stake’s instrumental, collective model as they sought to explore something external to the individual case which could lead to generalisation. The similarities and differences of Deuze *et al’s* case study are thus reflected in this study which has selected typical cases with unique elements with a view to narrow generalisation. Furthermore Aviles and Carvajal (2008) used a comparative case study in Spain to explore convergence in regional new rooms producing content for print, radio, television and internet. As the authors outline case study research has been used as a tool for the analysis of complex issues and to describe changes in professional role of journalists in Finnish Public Broadcasting (Rintala and Suolanen, 2006, cited in Aviles and Carvajal, 2008), to study reactions of journalists (Singer, 2004) and to analyse new journalistic competences in multimedia news rooms in Catalonia (Scolari *et al*, 2006, cited in Aviles and Carvajal, 2008). This is evidence of a growing field in case study research in journalism. Aviles and Carvajal selected Novotecnica as a pioneering, and therefore arguable unique, case and La Verdad as a company with a strong regional position. The two cases selected from 14 converged news rooms could also be described as Stake’s instrumental cases in a collective model, which this study seeks to replicate.

As explained above the newspapers were selected due to their unique elements within a typical commercial framework and because the case study design sought comparison rather than replication. The *Leicester Mercury* has a relatively large circulation of 54,105 compared to the 27,864 of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (ABC, 2011). Leicester is a largely urban area with a 40 per cent non white British population including 26 per cent Asian, and a younger than average population. It currently has an unemployment rate of 5.9 per cent and average weekly earnings of £415. The total population is estimated to be 304,000 (Leicester City Council, 2011). By contrast Bournemouth is a rural area with an 87 per cent white British population, with lower unemployment (3.3%) and higher weekly earnings (£460). It also has a higher than average elderly population. The total population is estimated to be 165,000 (Bournemouth Borough Council, 2011).

As described above the research design of this study is an instrumental collective case study with two embedded units of analysis – journalists and participatory online audience members. The study is focused upon audience members who participate online rather than those that participate via traditional methods or those that do not participate and the rationalisation of this is examined in Chapter 4. The embedded units of analysis allow for wider analysis exploring both sides of the relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their audience members. In the single case study of a converged Norweigan public service broadcaster by Erdal (2009) embedded units of analysis allowed the researcher to widen the scope of the investigation. The units of analysis were made up of two parts of the organisation first the central news room and secondly the regional office. Two units were selected to cover the complexity of the organisation and not to only focus on the central news room. Erdal also argues that the units allowed for a comparative perspective to analyse similarities and differences between large and small news rooms. In this study the units of analysis will enable comparison between the views of journalists and the views of audience members to understand whether there is a gap between their opinions and experiences of interaction and participation.

In Chapter 4 the multiple methods employed in this research design are discussed in more detail, but first it is important to map out questions of validity. The research design tests as laid out by Yin (1994) and reaffirmed by Soy (1997) are construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. The construct validity ensures that the correct methods are implemented for the concepts being studied. For example if a research question asks ‘what are journalists' attitudes towards audience participation?’ it would be appropriate to carry out semi-structured interviews with journalists or possibly a questionnaire but a content analysis of the newspaper would not address this research question appropriately, as it would represent data of content, rather than intent, opinions or attitudes. Therefore in this study a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods have been developed in order to address the four research questions suitably.

The second test of internal validity establishes a causal relationship that certain conditions lead to other conditions. For example this research may conclude that the development of Web 2.0 and subsequent cultural and technological convergence has led to more collaboration between journalists and audiences in local British newspapers. The third test of external validity establishes a domain in which a study’s findings can be generalised. Soy argues that the more variations in places/people/procedures a case study can withstand and still yield the same findings, the more external validity. Therefore this study has three variables of ownership, location and circulation. The final test for case study research design is that of reliability. The process must be transparent and the data collection procedures designed in a manner that could be repeated and still yield the same results. This is where multiple sources of evidence are particularly important to allow for cross-checking of information and confirmation triangulation (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

There are also skills which are advantageous to possess before embarking on a case study research project. These include good communication skills, flexibility and precise note taking, all traits of journalists themselves.

Investigators need to be good listeners who can hear exactly the words being used by those interviewed. Qualifications for investigators also include being able to ask good questions and interpret answers...Investigators need to be flexible in real-life situations and not feel threatened by change, missed appointments or lack of office space, (Soy, 1997, p.3).

In this study the researcher has seven years experience working full time as a qualified journalist in two different local British newspapers therefore these skills were developed to a high standard. The researcher is experienced in interviewing, used to working under tight deadlines, familiar with working in a fluctuating, dynamic environment and had 100 words per minute shorthand to take accurate notes. Singer (1997) also notes that “the researcher relies on tools used and respected by good reporters: powers of observation, interviewing skills, basic legwork” (p.75). Furthermore Harcup (2012) maintains that journalists-turned-journalism-educators enjoy an advantage over other researchers who have not worked as practitioners because "they enjoy easier access to news rooms and are more able to engage and identity with the working lives of their subjects," (p.25).

Furthermore when carrying out a research project within the journalism industry one barrier may be an understanding of the news room terminology and vernacular such as the terms 'lead' 'subs' 'strapline' 'byline' 'nib'. However as explained above as a former journalist the researcher in this study had good working knowledge of news room vocabulary and procedures, overcoming any potential communication problems. However the researcher acknowledges that the skills involved in social science research are unique to the discipline and therefore they should not be reliant on professional journalism skills only. As discussed in the next chapter each of the research methods (questionnaire, interview, observation and content analysis) have their own set of proficiencies which must be developed by the researcher to maximise design validity and reliability.

**Chapter 4: Research design**

4.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 3 this research takes the form of a case study made up of a variety of triangulated quantitative and qualitative data. A complex and lengthy research design procedure was required in order to gain rich detail from both journalists and readers. It was therefore essential that in the planning, designing and conducting of the research that a logical, structured progression was taken. As shown in Figure 4.7, this process was divided into five stages which were supported by a theoretical framework from the beginning. The literature review outlined in Chapter 2 underpinned the research design phase and informed the construction of interview guides, observations guides, questionnaire design and content analysis coding, thus strengthening the validity of the research. It was felt that a theoretical framework was needed before data was collected in order for the results to help develop existing theory.

The content analysis in discussed section 4.5 was especially challenging as the researcher had to design a unique coding system that was both reliable and robust. This was particularly difficult as the subject of study existed in an emerging field of research where there was relatively little comparative methodology to draw from. This chapter therefore presents a thorough description of how the research was designed with the aim of informing other researchers working in this new field who may be faced with similar obstacles.

The chapter begins with the design of the questionnaire (4.2), before discussing the development of the semi-structured interviews (4.3) and observation (4.4). The second half of the chapter focuses on the content analysis (4.5) which is then divided into three elements: coding comments (4.5.1), coding Twitter (4.5.2) and coding Facebook (4.5.3).

4.2 Questionnaire

As explored in Chapter 1 the audience perspective of Web 2.0 and the changing local newspaper landscape has received little academic attention with the focus predominantly on journalists’ roles and attitudes. It is therefore vital in this collective case study to examine the experiences and opinions of audience members to place their perspective against that of journalists, and therefore answer RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers?, RQ1b: What is the motivation for this change? and RQ2: What is a) the nature and b) the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?The question of value will be addressed later in this chapter.

Since a two way relationship was being researched and analysed data from the two actors had to be collated in the case study. In order to address RQ 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b a questionnaire was designed to sample the views of audience members who participated in either the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* or the *Leicester Mercury* online. The same questionnaire was designed for both cases to strengthen reliability. It must be noted that the questionnaire was seeking the views of those who participate ‘online’ rather than simply on the newspaper ‘website’. This was due to the social networks external to the case studies’ official websites which were nonetheless utilised to communicate with newspaper audiences and enable them to participate via for example Facebook, Twitter and Flickr.

Initially a focus group approach was explored to collate the views of audience members but following a pilot study at Southampton Solent University of four sets of 18 to 22-year-old male and female students, it was decided that the method was impractical and unreliable. The pilot exposed the difficulty of a single researcher with limited resources and manpower being able to both moderate and record the focus groups simultaneously. Editors at the two case studies also raised concerns about the validity of focus groups due to poor turnout in previous research projects and the researcher in this study being unable to offer a financial incentive. Stake (2006) also indicates that focus group methodology within case study research is limited as although it does sometimes develop unexpected revelations it seldom provides good evidence for the issues the researcher wants to talk about. Due to the broad scope of this study it was felt that the more focused and structured methodology of a questionnaire would therefore be appropriate in the first instance to prevent digression from the research questions. This could then be supplemented by qualitative evidence via a selection of follow-up interviews.

A questionnaire was also identified as a more suitable method to collect data from audience members due to the disperse nature of this group and its large quantity with each case study having a least 380,000 monthly unique users (ABC, 2011). Conversely interviews were selected as the appropriate means to collect data from journalists due to their proximity in one location and smaller population number of 50 to 60 editorial staff at each case study. The questionnaire itself was made available online by being placed on the case studies websites' home page and/or news pages and added as a link to the case study social media networks via the web editor and individual journalists. As discussed later in this section, due to the nature of the population being sampled – audience members who participate online – the most appropriate means of conducting the questionnaire was identified as being via the internet.

Sampling is an important factor in questionnaire design but one which faces many more methodological complexities in the online environment. The usual probability and non-probability methods of random, systematic, stratified, cluster, quota, purposive and convenience are not always appropriate, applicable or possible when conducting a questionnaire via the internet as this study proposes. Therefore discussion of alternative, reliable methods is required.

The benefits of an online questionnaire is the speed of creation, distribution and data return, together with low printing and posting costs (Watts, 1997) plus the ability to access a large number of diverse, hard to reach people in a quick turnaround time (Zhang, 2000). There is also a lack of interviewer bias and analysis of closed questions is relatively straightforward plus respondents' anonymity can be guaranteed. As discussed above, an online questionnaire was identified as the most appropriate method for collecting data from audience members due to their large and disperse number. By hosting the questionnaire online it was also possible to automatically capture the sample population of online participators and as Watt’s examines “Computer product purchasers and users of internet services are both ideal populations” (1997, paragraph 2). Online surveys have been previously used by researchers to seek insights and concerns about new technologies (Zhang, 2000; Kovacs *et al*, 1995; Ladner and Tillman, 1993) but have been used to limited effect in journalism studies which predominantly uses qualitative methods such as observation and interviews. This is partially due to a focus on journalists rather than audiences, as discussed in Chapter 1, but where audience questionnaires have been used it is most often via an offline questionnaire or a mixture of online and offline (Nguyen, 2010; Mersey, 2009). Therefore this study not only seeks to contribute to knowledge through its subject matter and audience perspective as discussed in Chapter 1, but also via its methodological design.

Selecting an online sample is a complex challenge as it is often difficult to identify the population size, composition and response rate. Although newspapers have records of the number of unique users to their websites and some basic information like their age range these statistics are not always completely accurate or reliable. Furthermore it is currently almost impossible to calculate accurately the number and composition of users on social media networks, an area where newspaper audience members increasingly participate. By its very nature the internet is largely anonymous so there is often little data about respondents. With no finite figures or information about the composition of the population online questionnaires often rely on self-selection sampling where the respondents volunteer themselves. Bradley (1999) explores one solution to this methodological problem by suggesting the use of Talmage’s plausibility sampling which is a sample selected because it appears plausible that the members are representative of a wider population without any real evidence (1988). However this could be viewed as methodologically weak and would not be appropriate for this study which seeks to explore the views of a specific population group rather than the represent the wider population.

Instead this study turns to the work of Watt (1997) who devised three online screening sampling methods: unrestricted, screened and recruited. Unrestricted sampling is close to plausibility sampling in that anyone on the internet may complete the questionnaire, which can result in poor representativeness and in this study would not represent the target group of participating audience members of the *Leicester Mercury* or the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. At the other end of the scale is recruited sampling which uses a targeted population to invite people to take part in the questionnaire. They are recruited prior to the questionnaire launch online by telephone, email or in person and have to meet a certain set of criteria to qualify. This is a much more controlled process and more in keeping with offline questionnaires which often use quota sampling. However for the purposes of this study this would not be a reliable sampling process as the population may not be identifiable through other methods such as directories or the electoral role. Watt’s third alternative, screened sampling, was therefore the most appropriate method. This adjusts for the unrepresentative nature of self-selected unrestricted sampling by imposing quotas such as gender, income, geographic region or product-related criteria. In this study the quota will be ‘audience members who participate online in the *Leicester Mercury* or Bournemouth *Daily Echo*’. For the purpose of this research the minimum requirement for someone to ‘participate’ online was that they read/viewed a newspaper website or their corresponding social media website posts. These respondents will be identified through the placement of the questionnaire on the corresponding newspaper websites and social media networks. There was also a question built into the questionnaire that checked whether the respondent used the newspaper website or social media networks. This was to counter-balance the risk of someone who accidentally visited the two case study websites or social media networks answering the questionnaire without having actually participated.

This form of screened sampling uses an internal sampling frame, by using respondents found on the internet (Bradley, 1999) via websites and social media networks. The use of announcements, invitations and email directories are all recognised types of sampling sources for online questionnaires. For this study the questionnaire was announced on each of the case study websites via a short news story written by the researcher. This appeared on the website home page and/or news page (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2) for a two week period at both case studies and remained in the website archives indefinitely.

Figure 4.1: [thisisleicestershire.co.uk](http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk) online questionnaire story

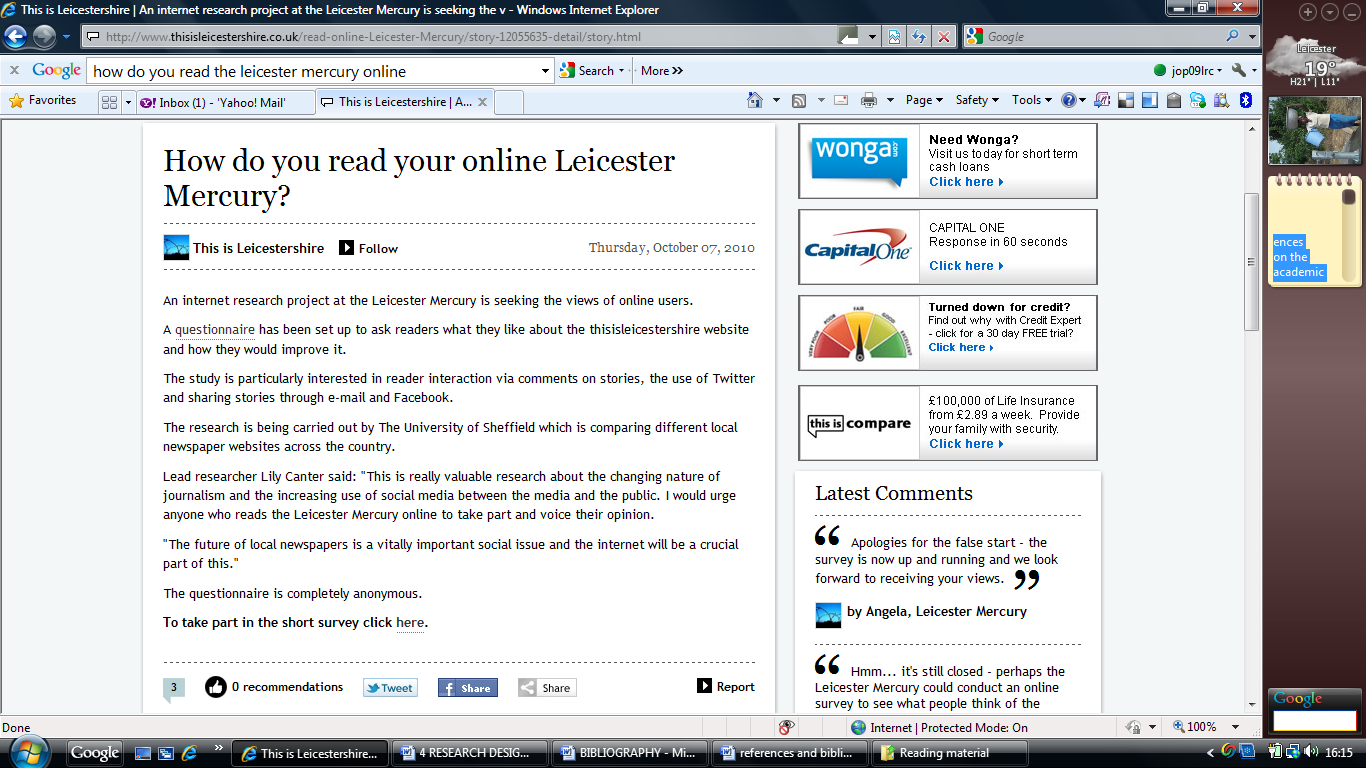


Figure 4.2: [bournemouthecho.co.uk](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk) online questionnaire story



Respondents were also invited to answer the questionnaire via the newspaper social media networks. For example a message on Bournemouth Echo Sam Facebook wall had a link to the questionnaire and message which read: “If you haven’t, please consider filling in this anonymous questionnaire – we have a PhD student who is researching how newspapers use the internet and she’d really like your help.” Meanwhile at the *Leicester Mercury* the web editor and two journalists tweeted messages and links to the questionnaire. Rugby correspondent Martin Crowson put this message and link on his *Leicester Mercury* Twitter feed: “Can you help out a media lecturer who has been at Merc Towers for the last few weeks working on her Phd? <http://tinyurl.com/3ajrus4>”.

All of these sampling sourceswere Computer Assisted Self Completion Interviews (CASI) which had been used in previous online research. A combination of sampling sources is typical practice in previous studies (Zhang, 2000; Bradley, 1999). It must be recognised however that one of the chief disadvantages of the online questionnaire method is that it can lead to biased samples which are not generalizable to the whole population and only generalizable to internet users or the questionnaire respondents (Zhang, 2000). However since this study seeks to understand the views of people participating online with local British newspapers, it only expects to generalize the results to that specific population in line with the research questions which address this narrow group of people. Other problems with the method are the possibility of multiple responses, respondents not filling out the whole questionnaire and unintended people responding thus undermining validity. Screening sampling as discussed above is therefore important to decrease the margin of error. As Zhang (2000, p.58) reasons “the most challenging aspect of survey methodology is how to conduct studies efficiently and effectively whilst retaining validity.” A large part of this is the difficulty of calculating a response rate if the population and sample size is unknown. This study therefore aims to follow the practice of other researchers who have reported the number of responses rather than calculate the response rate (Zhang, 2000, p.59).

The questionnaire was designed using free online software eSurveysPro which was flexible and easy to use. It also analysed the results and closed the questionnaires after a set period of time. The questionnaire was developed from the literature review in order to input into RQ1a (change), RQ1b (motivation), RQ2a (nature), RQ2b (value), RQ4 (collaboration) regarding audience behaviour. The questionnaire was divided into five sections. The first section was demographic information such as age, location, income, education. The second section looked at changes in consumption patterns to set the research into the context of a shifting media environment and inform RQ1. Questions focused on frequency of visits to the newspaper website and social media networks, newspaper and website use, level of participation before and after website was introduced, preferences between the newspaper and website, most popular features of the website and expectations. The third section looked at reader participation to inform RQ2a. This asked how often respondents participated in different activities online, how much content they shared and what areas they participated in. The fourth part addressed motivation (RQ1b) and value (RQ2b) of participation via questions on reasons for visiting the website and attitudes towards reader comments and user generated content. The final section tackled collaborative journalism (RQ4) and the way in which news breaks, as well as the way in which journalists work with readers plus questions about increasing participation levels.

The literature review also identified that audiences/readers fall into different categories - across the spectrum from passive audiences to audiences that share content and onto active audiences. This was reflected in the participation questions which built in responses which would indicate whether a respondent was passive, sharing or active. In particular research by Bowman and Willis (2003) on what motivates audiences to participate was integral to the questionnaire design. This was incorporated with the view that narcissism is driving audiences to participate (Paulussen, 2007) and the rise of sharing virtual networks (Castells, 2000) has lead to social participation where “participation comes more through sharing than through contributing news” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010, p.6). Section 4 of the questionnaire which focused on motivations for participation, incorporated answers such as gaining status, creating connections, being informed/informing, creating, sense-making and entertainment, all identified by Bowman and Willis as motivators for active audiences. For example Question 18 asked: What motivates you to participate in the newspaper online? (other than reading/viewing the website and social media pages). Tick all that are relevant.

The answers included:

I don’t participate (passive)

It makes me feel part of the newspaper (creating connections)

Satisfaction from seeing my content in the paper/website (narcissism/creation)

I like to interact with the journalists (connections)

I like to share news with friends (entertainment/social)

It makes me feel more up to date with the news (informed)

I like to be able to have my own say (narcissism/status)

I find it fun and entertaining (entertainment)

It helps me to make sense of complex issues (sense making)

Other

The question of value was built into the motivation and value section of the questionnaire. As outlined in Chapter 2 in regards to this research for Web 2.0 audience participation in local British newspapers to be valuable it must contain *moral, ethical, political or community* communication irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest. Question 18 asked respondents to tick each of the statement that applied in regards to what participation meant to them. The answers were:

I don’t participate

Gives me a sense of community

Enables me to share information and news with others

Enables me to take part in moral, ethical or political debate

Empowers me to take further action outside the newspaper/website

Helps me to vent my anger / dissatisfaction

In order to construct a robust questionnaire the researcher made the questions clear using a range of simple question types. These included selected responses for factual questions (yes/no, age brackets, income brackets), opinion questions and behaviour questions. Some questions allowed for more than one answer and some asked for a top three choice. There were also a limited number of scaled questions (4 out of 30) in the consumption pattern section which were largely factual and included for ease of analysis. There were a small number of open questions (8 out of 30) allowing for qualitative responses. In particular these were used in opinion questions to explore options not given in the set responses. These were to address the problem raised by Gillham that you don’t know what lies behind responses selected “or answers the respondents might have given had they been free to respond as they wished”, (2000a, p.2). Open questions were however kept to a limited number due to a need for robust quantitative data and the difficulty of coding and analysing hundreds of qualitative answers. Furthermore deeper qualitative data was apprehended when a sample of respondents were interviewed following the questionnaire (more details below).

The questionnaire response style was also consistent rather than mixing styles such as ticking boxes and underlining words. In total 75 per cent of questions required a tick and 25 per cent a written response. The questionnaire began with questions of fact, before more complex questions of opinions, beliefs and judgements, and finally questions about behaviour, thus following Gillham’s recommendations on questionnaire structure (2000a). There were 30 questions in total. To increase the completion rate the questionnaire was just five pages in length and this was clearly stipulated on the first page. In both case studies 71 per cent of respondents completed the questionnaire. To avoid respondents skipping questions the software used did not allow them to continue to the next page until they had all questions on the existing page. A full version of the questionnaire and sample responses can be found in Appendix 1a.

For ethical validity the online questionnaire was preceded by a cover note explaining the purpose of the research, confirmation of confidentiality and a brief description of the questionnaire. The respondent was not able to proceed to the first page of questions unless they marked a box agreeing they had read and understood the cover note. This enabled the researcher to validate implied consent. A full copy of the questionnaire cover note can be viewed in Appendix 1b.

The questionnaire was piloted during a two week period in August 2010 at the *Liverpool Echo*. This newspaper was selected due to its similarities to the *Leicester Mercury*, as a daily city newspaper with a larger than average circulation of 87,000 (ABC, 2011) and demographically diverse population. It also has a strong web presence and the questionnaire could be placed on the newspaper website and associated social media networks replicating the post-pilot case studies. The questionnaire was promoted on the liverpoolecho.co.uk home page for four days as a puff object (a photo blurb that enables users to click to a short article which linked to the questionnaire online), and on the local news section for nine days. It was also promoted by the Liverpool Echo's Twitter @LivEchoNews (it was retweeted by two other users) and on the Liverpool Echo Facebook page. Along with piloting the questionnaire at the *Liverpool Echo* to analyse response rates, measure the effectiveness of the questionnaire structure and to diagnose any problems with the online mechanisms, the researcher also piloted the questionnaire on five individuals living in Northampton, who were users of the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo* online. The questionnaire was piloted via email and face-to-face. This newspaper was chosen due to its similarities to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* with a circulation of approximately 17,000 (ABC, 2011), an urban and rural readership in a moderately affluent area. In this particular pilot the researcher also asked for open feedback on the user-friendliness and layout of the questionnaire, the wording of questions and their understanding of the questions, to diagnose any problems in the delivery and structure of the questionnaire. This feedback was semi-structured in nature via a list of topics such as title, information given, appearance, user-friendliness, language, comprehension, motivation to complete, missing elements and improvements. The results of the two questionnaire pilot studies lead to a series of changes outlined below.

The *Liverpool Echo* questionnaire received 98 responses which was considered a low response rate given its monthly unique user rate of 1 million. Therefore whilst the researcher was conducting the final case studies they made sure the link to the questionnaire was repeated by journalists on social media networks more than once and the story was placed on the website home page more than once. The questionnaires were also left open for one month. This resulted in a higher response rate, up to three times higher than the pilot questionnaire. Feedback from the one-to-one questionnaire led to a number of adaptations such as a simplification of the title and questions using less academic language and shorter sentences. This made it less alienating to respondents and aimed to increase the response rate and comprehension levels. The term ‘audience’ was exchanged for ‘reader’, as feedback indicated that people who read newspaper websites identify themselves as readers rather than audiences or users, as previously discussed in Chapter 1.

Despite measures to validate the questionnaire by identifying problems via the pilot study and subsequently making necessary modifications, this study acknowledges that the methodology itself is prone to vulnerabilities.

Questionnaires are rarely adequate as a research method on their own. Indeed this is true of every method, especially when you are dealing with a complex real-world situation (Gillham, 2000a, p.81).

In particular opinion questions are problematic as “You don’t know what lies behind the responses selected or answers the respondents might have given had they been free to respond as they wished,” (Gillham, 2000a, p.2). With a questionnaire there is also no opportunity to check the seriousness or honesty of answers. To overcome this methodological difficulty this study aimed to verify and corroborate the case study questionnaires with a sample of respondent interviews.

A questionnaire might be used to get an indication of attitudes, reasoning or behaviour in the target group at large and then interviews might be used to explore what lay behind the findings of the questionnaire study, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.17).

On the last page of the questionnaire in this study the respondent was asked if they would be willing to be contacted to answer further questions and if they answered yes, they were asked to give a telephone number or email address. This is a form of recruited sampling (Watt, 1997) from the screened sample. The researcher then collated all of the willing respondents and contacted all of them via telephone or email to follow up whether they were available for an interview. Respondents were given a range of dates and times from 9am to 9pm Monday to Saturday over a one month period. The researcher conducted telephone interviews with all of the respondents who responded to this correspondence and who still were available and willing to take part. This convenience sample resulted in five *Leicester Mercury* readers and 12 Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers. For ethical validation each respondent had to confirm consent via email before the telephone interview took place (see Appendix 1c). The interview took the form of a semi-structured interview using their questionnaire responses as a guide. The reader was asked to explain or expand upon their closed and open answers from the questionnaire in further detail. The researcher soon identified a number of key topics from the initial interviews and used these as a guide for subsequent interviews. These included consumption patterns, sharing content, reader comments, reader content, breaking news, website improvements and collaborative journalism. The interviews were recorded using shorthand notes due to the difficulty of recording interviews on the telephone at the researcher’s place of study. The interviews were then coded according to key statements and reoccurring themes before being organised into a thematic table. The detail of this coding strategy and the use of semi-structured interviews as an appropriate methodology is discussed in the next section.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews

In depth interviews have been called “one of the most powerful methods” in qualitative research because they allow investigators to “step into the mind of another person, see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988, p.9). Within this collective case study interviews were carried out amongst editorial staff (reporters, photographers, editors, sub-editors, department heads) and triangulated with news room observation, which will be discussed in more detail in section 4.4. Interviews were undertaken with a systematic sample of questionnaire respondents to triangulate results and add further qualitative insight to the questionnaire discussed in section 4.2.

The advantage of the qualitative interview as a research methodology is that it is more adaptive and responsive to people’s individualistic perceptions of the world and can explore beliefs in sub-cultures such as print journalists or newspaper readers. Interviews can also explore “areas of broad cultural consensus and people’s more personal, private and special understandings”, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.4). Unlike quantitative research qualitative research is less interested in measuring and is more interested in “describing and understanding complexity” (p.4). Whereas a questionnaire was deemed appropriate to initially measure audiences in this study, the sub-culture of journalists lends itself to a more individualist and subjective approach via an interview methodology. Yet this subjective construction of opinions and knowledge does not occur in isolation as “we share similar (but not identical) understanding of things that are common experiences and subject to society-wide implications”, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.3). In their discussion of relativist and positivist perspectives Arksey and Knight construct a continuum model of understanding from individual and distinctive to more shared and communal. This study sits within the centre of the model within the “sub-cultural level” and on the border between “unusual contexts” and “new contexts with clear, familiar features” (p.3). Arksey and Knight (1999) explain that as researchers move towards more personal events that meanings are still socially shaped but they are more diverse, and as we enter new situations (such as Web 2.0) the understandings we construct are less governed by social rules, norms and conventions and more likely to be individualistic, therefore more qualitative approaches are needed to understand these meanings. However as discussed earlier in this chapter triangulation remains a vital factor in social science research and has been incorporated into the research design to strengthen validity as discussed below.

Having identified interviews as an appropriate research method this study has explored the spectrum of interview techniques from closed to open, also known as structured, semi-structured and unstructured. It was felt a structured interview with closed questions would not match McCracken’s definition of stepping into the mind of another person (1989) with regards to the journalist interviews and would not be an appropriate corroboration method for the audience questionnaire, being too similar in design. Similarly it was viewed that an unstructured interview may result in extremely diverse results that did not answer the research questions, were difficult to analyse and could not realistically yield valid results within the available time schedule. The approach of a semi-structured interview for journalists and audiences members was therefore taken to address all four research questions. Interviewing journalists collected data to answer the following research questions, together with data from other methods (see Figure 4.6). RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers? RQ1b: What is the motivation for this change? RQ2b) What is the value of Web 2.0 audiences participation in British local newspapers? RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers? RQ4: To what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers under Web 2.0? Meanwhile the interviews with audience members sought to answer RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ4 but not RQ3.

The semi-structured interview of journalists was carried out with an interview guide which had a mixture of closed questions for factual information and open questions, plus a checklist of topics to be covered relating to the research questions. This enabled the interviewer to improvise and use their judgement to explore themes without being constrained. The interview guide and checklist is in Appendix 2a. Not all questions were asked of all participants due to time constraints or some questions not being relevant to their job position. The checklist was relied upon more heavily than the specific questions as many of the guide questions were answered in response to other questions due to the organic flow of conversation in the interviews. This also supported feedback from two one-hour pilot interviews carried out with two journalists from the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo.* The pilot participants felt that following a strict guide of questions led to repetition, a longer interview and a less relaxed approach, and one participant suggested the use of the checklist which was then implemented.

It should be noted that the researcher referred to the term ‘reader’ where other researchers might have used the definition user or audience. This was due to the journalists’ familiarity with the term reader in both their print and online products. The interview subjects routinely referred to online readers rather than the more commonly used term (in scholarly work) of online users. It was therefore felt that readers was a more appropriate and mutual definition than users.

Prior to the interview each participate received an information sheet (Appendix 2b) which explained the objective of the research. Furthermore the interview opened with a description of the significance and motivation of the study and an explanation of how the interview would be conducted. Confidentially and consent were reaffirmed as was permission to use a dictaphone to record the interview. Participants were given three anonymity options: complete anonymity, job title only, name and job title permitted and signed a consent form (see Appendix 2c). The interview questions began with factual elements such as confirmation of their job title and role, and years employed at the newspaper. Probes were also built into the interview guide to ask for elaboration, clarification and specific examples (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Complex questions were left until the later stages of the interview and the interviewer made sure to establish mutual understanding by summarising each of the interviewee’s comments. With the flexible nature of a semi-structured interview, the interviewer was able to listen for contradictions and raise them and use prompts such as asking for examples and referring to their observations from their time in the news room. All of these checks and balances increased the validity of the results and enhanced the “craftsmanship” of the researcher (Kvale, 2007, p.123). The interview concluded with an indication of how valuable the interviewee’s responses had been and confirmation of what would happen next, following the university’s strict code of ethics.

All, bar three, of the interviews were conducted face to face in a private room within the newspaper offices. Two interviews at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were conducted on the telephone due to the journalist involved working from a different location and the citizen journalist interview at the *Leicester Mercury* was conducted in the community media cafe. The face to face interviews were recorded with a dictaphone and later transcribed verbatim. The telephone interviews and citizen journalist interview were recorded with the use of shorthand notes. In total 20 journalist interviews were conducted at the *Leicester Mercury* (including one citizen journalist) and 18 journalist interviews were conducted at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. At both newspapers the interviews included editorial employees from the editor to trainee reporters and incorporated all editorial departments including news, web, business, sport, features, photographic and subbing. The participants included senior managers, middle managers, specialist reporters, and general reporters / photographers. Most interviews were an average of 45 minutes, ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

As outlined in section 4.2 the reader interviews were selected through convenience and availability sampling from the questionnaire responses. A different technique was used to sample journalists due to there being no equivalent questionnaire. Snowball, convenience and strategic sampling is prevalent in journalism studies research (Birks, 2010; Vujonic *et al*, 2010; Thurman and Lupton, 2009) particularly when interviewing journalists within a news organisation and therefore a combination of these methods were identified as appropriate for this study. This type of purposive sampling allows units to be selected due to their theoretical significant rather than being statistically determined due to their representativeness (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). It is common practice in studies of news rooms for journalists to be selected on this strategic basis. In a study of campaigning journalism Birks (2010) selected interviewees according to seniority and area of content, whilst Vujonic *et al* (2010) in a study of political factors in participatory journalism selected journalists for interview by choosing executives in charge of news room strategy, news editors and journalists directly dealing with audience participation. In this PhD study prior to the journalist interviews at each of the case study sites, the researcher had spent a minimum of one week observing the news room and editorial staff. This enabled the researcher to identify appropriate strategic journalists to interview (such as the website editor), who had then recommended other journalists to interview. The aim of this sampling technique is to keep interviewing people until saturation is reached which is indicated when all the diverse opinions start to be repeated by different interviewees and the interviewer is not hearing anything new (Kvale, 2007). The benefit of this approach is that “sponsorship encourages cooperation” (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996, p.81) but it can be unrepresentative. Therefore a triangulation of methods is a vital component in this research.

The use of multiple sources of evidence is just one of the characteristics of this study which increases validity. Other measures have been taken to ensure validity is enhanced and the methods are replicable at each case study. The use of triangulation ensures that all of aspects raised by the research questions are addressed, as shown in Figure 4.6. Trust and openness is also an important factor to achieving validity and cooperation and this was built into the research design in a number of ways. As noted earlier an information sheet was given to all interviewees prior to the interview and they also completed a consent form which confirmed whether their responses were to be anonymous and whether the interview would be audio recorded. For ethical validity the researcher was given consent to conduct the study only once they had completed the faculty ethics procedure and their consent forms and information sheets were approved by the Journalism Studies faculty at The University of Sheffield. In order to achieve full cooperation with the largest interview subject matter (the journalists) the researcher built rapport within the news room by carrying out observation first before conducting the interviews. By the time of the interview stage all editorial staff were aware of the researcher and the purpose of their research. The interviews were also fitted around the schedules of the journalists rather than around the researcher, to minimise inconvenience and maximise time available for the interview. One of the limitations of this approach was that journalists sometimes had restricted time slots for interviews so their interviews did not cover all the themes on the checklist. Perhaps unsurprisingly the economic climate and subsequent lack of resources being explored in this research project led to journalists being restricted in the time they could offer the researcher to discuss these very factors.

Once all of the interviews were conducted they were transcribed verbatim or typed up in full from shorthand notes. Gillham (2000b) advocates full transcription in order to make sense of what the interview said including the transcription of questions asked by the researcher plus prompts and probes. The transcriptions included all of the dialogue by both the researcher and subject but did not record pauses, intonations or emotional expressions as the analysis was not investigating linguistics or social interaction. All of the interviews were transcribed by one researcher, who also conducted the interviews, enabling greater consistency and decreasing the level of misinterpretation.

The interviews were then coded to extract information to help answer the relevant research questions (see Figure 4.6). Content analysis can be a useful way to examine semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007; Schmidt, 2004; Gillham, 2000b) but it is still important to allow the subject voices “to be heard in the analysis of the report”, (Hall and Hall, 2004, p.150). A coding system was therefore designed that recorded responses into categories together with individual quotes that helped to illustrate the categories in the subjects’ own words.

The coding followed a systematic and intensive strategy informed by the theoretical framework. Firstly all of the transcriptions were read intensively and repeatedly to identify substantive points (Schmidt (2004); Gillham, 2000b). The literature review and research questions guided the researcher in this process. The researcher then made a list of all of the substantive points and began placing them into categories in relation to the research questions and underlining literature. This process is known as template analysis (King, 2007) and uses priori codes informed by the literature. The priori codes were tightened with further reading and irrelevant points were removed. The codes were then placed into a grid under headings specific to each relevant research question (see Appendix 2d). Some of the categories had a tick all that apply option and others had a dominant category system, to avoid contradiction.

The reliability of the coding grid was checked through consensual coding with a second researcher. They carried out independent coding on a five per cent sample (two interviews) and the results were compared with the lead researcher. The consensual coding had a 71 per cent reliability rate. The discrepancies were discussed and changes were made to the categories as a result. The wording of categories was made clearer and more categories were added which could later be collapsed with other categories. A second consensual test with the new categories resulted in an 80 per cent reliability rate, which was considered acceptable. The lead researcher then coded all of the interviews, making notes of illustrative quotes in the coding guide. The results were then inputted into a spread sheet to allow for a comparison.

4.4 Observation

This study chose to include news room observation to triangulate the data collected from the journalist interviews and to gain a greater insight into the working environment, norms and roles of the research participants. Observation has advantages over other qualitative methods as it gives information about the physical environment and human behaviour can be recorded directly by the researcher without having to rely on the retrospective or anticipatory accounts of others (Sapsford and Judd, 1996). Interviews are about what people say rather than what they do (Arksey and Knight, 1999) therefore observation is a complementary method which records what people actually do and also allows the observer “to see what participants cannot”, (Sapsford and Judd, 1996, p.59). The use of observation and interview is a common practice to understand the complexities of particular phenomenon within their real life economic, cultural and social contexts and has been used with success to understand newspaper practices (Robinson, 2010; Boczkowski, 2005; Singer, 1997).

However this study acknowledges the limitations of observation research as outlined by Sapsford and Judd (1996) such as gaining access, observer bias and the risk that people change their behaviour when watched. The researcher aimed to overcome these problems by securing access and written editor approval six months in advance. The researcher also selected two newspapers as case studies that they were unfamiliar with to decrease the risk of bias, and newspapers in areas where the researcher had not worked as a journalist their self and a location they had not lived in. The researcher also found that telling editors and journalists involved in the study that they were a former journalist their self put these participants at ease, and meant research participants were less likely to view the researcher as an unknowledgeable outsider. As Harcup (2012) maintains journalists-turned-journalism-educators are more able to engage and identify with the working lives of their subjects. This meant the participants in the PhD research were more relaxed during observation and interviews and the researcher hoped this would decrease the likelihood that they acted differently. This is a legitimate measure to increase observation reliability with the researcher trading on existing experience, skills and knowledge to improve their working relationship with subjects and improve their subject’s perception of them (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Junker, 1960). The researcher also had two preliminary meetings at the *Leicester Mercury* and one at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* to meet staff, answer their questions, become familiar with the environment and structure of their working day, so most editorial staff were already familiar with the researcher before the observation period began.

Like with all qualitative methods there are a range of approaches to observation on a spectrum from structured to less structured, with different levels of participation by the researcher. This study took a less structured position, rejecting the systematic positivist tradition, due to the dynamic nature of news rooms which are constantly in flux and therefore arguably need a flexible methodological approach. This flexibility also helps to reduce the risk of bias by not imposing preconceived categories. The aim of the observation was to study the attitudes, motivations and intentions of editorial staff within a specific sub-cultural context to answer RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ2a, RQ2b and RQ3 as outlined in Figure 4.6. These are the same research questions addressed by the interviews with editorial staff therefore the two sets of data could be compared and correlated to the same research questions. Combining this data with the content analysis discussed in section 4.5 enabled the researcher to “produce an in-depth and rounded picture of the culture of the group, which places the perspectives of group member at its heart and reflects the richness and complexity of their social world,” (Sapsfords and Jupp, p.61). The observation also enabled the researcher to familiarise themselves with the case study sites, and become familiar to the interview participants before the interviews took place. This enabled the researcher to gain a broader understanding of the mechanics of the news room and a general sense of the attitudes and approaches of editorial staff which helped to inform the research study as a whole.

During the observation the researcher took on the role of observer as participant as defined by Sapsford and Jupp (1996). The authors devise a scale of four types of participant observation with varying advantages depending on the research topic.

* **Complete observer:** Has no interaction with the subjects and is used for more structured positivist observation, with perhaps the subjects being unaware that they are being watched.
* **Observer as participant:** The researcher interacts with subjects but does not take an established role in the group. They are able to maintain detachment but may be viewed with suspicion.
* **Participant as observer:** The researcher takes a more established role in the group such as working for the organisation part time as a journalist.
* **Complete participant:** The researcher is fully immersed in the group, perhaps through covert research or taking on full time job in the area of study.

In this study the researcher identified the role of observer as participant as the most effective method. As a former journalist in local British newspapers the researcher was already familiar with the sub-culture under study and it was therefore not necessary to become fully or partially embedded in the group, as there was already a level of understanding and knowledge. However it was necessary to understand the case studies in depth, with the researcher having no prior knowledge of these two particular newspapers and this could only be achieved through some level of interaction. It was also felt that the subjects would be put at ease and act more naturally and openly if the researcher was not a distant clinical complete observer, but engaged in conversation with subjects to convey a willingness to learn and understand the subject’s perspectives. It must be noted however that on one occasion the researcher transitioned from the role of observer as participant to the next stage of participant as observer. This was during a breaking news story when the researcher took video footage of a live news event due to a lack of resources and equipment within the *Leicester Mercury* office. This footage was then used on the newspaper website and became part of the reporting which the researcher was observing. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

The researcher spent three weeks observing at the *Leicester Mercury* (see Photo 4.1*)* during October 2010 and two weeks observing at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (seePhoto 4.2*)* – one weekduring November 2010 and one week during January 2011. The first week of observation at both case studies was observation alone but the subsequent weeks were intersected with conducting journalist interviews. During this time the researcher observed different factions of the news room at each case study which were initially sampled purposively and then took a snowball structure, similar to the interview selection process described in section 4.3. At both case studies the researcher observed the news desk, web desk, reporters and attended daily conferences and editorial planning meetings. All areas were observed at varying times of day including early and late shifts, from 7am through to 10pm, Monday to Saturday. The majority of observation centred around the news desk and webs desk due to their strategic position in co-ordinating the bulk of journalists and online content.

Photo 4.1: *Leicester Mercury* news room



Photo 4.2: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* news room



During the observation periods the researcher recorded a variety of factual, subjective and reflective information as it happened on an electronic netbook. Less-structured observation has no fixed design and researchers are encouraged to record any data that seems “relevant or interesting” depending on the “opportunities that arise” (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996, p.81). The researcher therefore devised an observation guide and observation theme list during their initial week at the *Leicester Mercury* to record verbal and non-verbal information as illustrated in Appendix 3. The guide recorded the location, time, subject being observed, actions, conversations and comments, general environment (physical and social), subject feedback and reflection on researcher influence and observer thoughts. Validity was built into the observation process through the measures of putting subjects at ease, as discussed above, to diminish reactivity. Secondly the observations were recorded as they happened so there was no delay and no reliance on memory. Observer misinterpretation was avoided by the observer-as-participate approach which allowed the researcher to clarify details with subjects and discuss observations with them allowing for respondent validation. Thirdly the researcher continually reflected on their observations and their influence upon them, making a note in real time. The fourth validation was triangulation of data with interviews. The study therefore had the build in validity checks of triangulation, reflexivity and respondent validation recommended by Sapsford and Jupp (1996).

The reliability of the observation was tested through a pilot study which was carried out at the *Leicester Mercury* over a two day period in October 2010, prior to the official study beginning. This enabled the researcher to develop an appropriate, effective observation guide and consider what was valuable information to record and eliminate the recording of information not relevant to the research questions. It was also helpful in deciding the best way of recording observations as both handwritten notes in a notebook in longhand and shorthand were trialled and notes typed direct to a netbook. The researcher concluded that a netbook was the quickest and most accurate way of recording observations.

4.5 Online content analysis

Content analysis is a systematic, objective and quantitative (McMillan, 2000) method often used to analyse complex static data. In the field of journalism studies it is most traditionally used to study the content of newspaper pages and/or television news programmes (Lewis *et al*, 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2006; White, 1950) but in recent years it also has emerged as an effective tool to research the content of web pages and websites, including user comments (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2010; Trice, 2010), personalisation (Thurman, 2011) and user generated content (Jonsson and Örnebring, 2010). It has also been successfully used in triangulation studies combined with interviewing journalists (Hermida and Thurman, 2007) as this study will replicate. It has therefore been identified as an appropriate method to address RQ2a: What is the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers? This method will also explore the interactivity of participation and how frequently readers are interacting with one another, and how often journalists interact with readers. This will help to inform the first and final research questions: RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers? RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?

The content analysis takes three forms. An analysis of reader comments on newspaper website stories, an analysis of journalists' use of Twitter and an analysis of journalists' use of Facebook. These are described as the units of analysis.

The advantage of the content analysis data is that it is unobtrusive, accepts unstructured material, is context sensitive and can cope with a large volume of data (Krippendorff, 2004). Holsti (1996) explains the primary purpose of content analysis as describing the characteristics of communication, to make inferences as to the antecedents of communication, and to make inferences as to the effects of communication. Through RQ2a this study aims to describe online participation and secondly it aims to make inferences to the effects of Web 2.0 on journalists' communication with readers. McMillan further advocates the use of content analysis in online research explaining that “both descriptive and inferential research focused on web-based content could add value to our understanding of this evolving communication environment,” (2000, p.81). Even a decade later this is a relatively understudied field in journalism studies and Trice (2010) acknowledges that “little work has occurred that examines how people use these comment fields on new sites,” (p.3).

In order to create a valid content analysis, this study followed the recommendations of McMillan (2000) by following five steps: draw up research questions in the context of theory (see Chapter 1 and 2), select a sample (case study selection discussed in Chapter 3), define categories for coding units and context units, train coders, collect data and analyse. Selecting a sample was a simple process as the two case studies were already pre-existing samples and it was natural for the content analysis to isolate itself to these two newspapers. However drawing up the boundaries of the context units in this study was particularly challenging as it seeks to explore participation not only on each of the case study websites but also through their use of external social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook. McMillan identifies that “as analysis of the web matures entirely new context units may need to be developed to address phenomenon that are completely nonexistent in traditional media” (2000, p.93). This is discussed in further detail below.

To meet the requirements of step four, training the coder, the researcher undertook a Research Training Programme at The University of Sheffield in research methods. During this module the researcher completed content analysis exercises and gained a greater understanding of the methodology. Prior to implementing the content analysis at the two case studies, the researcher carried out a pilot on the website and social media network of the *Northampton Chronicle & Echo*, a newspaper and website the researcher was familiar with. Once coding and context units were designed the researcher tested the code on the two actual case studies and brought in a second researcher for cross coding checks and development. The resulted in several changes to the categories for all three units of analysis (comments, Twitter, Facebook). The categories for each set of coding units went through at least four versions before they were finalised. A reliability test was then carried out by a second researcher on a 10 per cent sample of each of the units of analysis which resulted in a 70 per cent reliability score. With increased knowledge about who the journalists were communicating with, the reliability increased to 90 per cent.

4.5.1 Coding comments

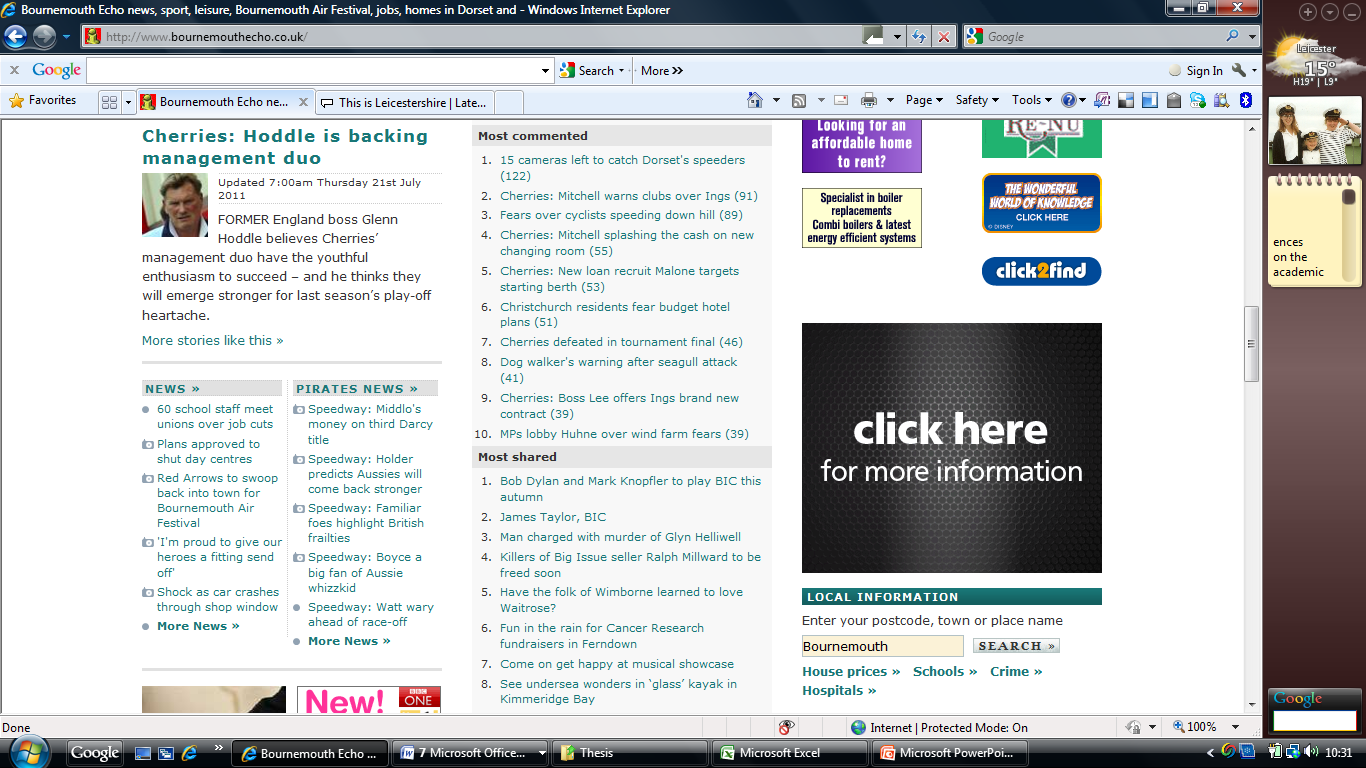
Due to the emerging prevalence of reader comments on news stories online (Robinson, 2010; Domingo *et al*, 2008, Hermida and Thurman, 2007) this study deemed it necessarily to gain a greater understanding into the nature of this type of participation. Trice (2010) maintains that comment fields are ubiquitous in social media networks and “these web applications are then mimicked by established media sites to capitalize on the phenomenon known as the social web” (p.3). This research therefore explores both newspapers’ use of social media comments (see section 4.5.2 and 4.5.3) and the more traditional approach of comments on the newspapers’ associated websites. In particular the researcher wanted to explore the richness of reader comments and how they interact with one another. Building on the work of Trice (2010) a content analysis was devised to understand how people engage with news stories, journalists and other readers via comments.

The following definitions were used:

* **Comment**: A post by an individual with a username. This is directly below a specific article on the website.
* **Thread**: A series of comments by one or more posters which appear below one specific article. This can appear in chronological or reverse-chronological order depending on the website.
* **Poster**: Someone who leaves a comment beneath a specific article on a website.

The two samples were predetermined as thisisleicestershire.co.uk and bournemouthecho.co.uk, which were the websites of the two newspaper case studies. The context unit was the Most Commented stories of the day. When the data was captured each website had a system of recording the Most Commented stories of the day (see Figure 4.3). The data was captured on each website over a 10 day period in line with when the researcher was carrying out observation at the newspaper. The top five Most Commented stories and their comments were collected each day at 6pm during the 10 day time frame. If there was duplication from a previous day only new Most Commented stories in the top five were collected. The top five were chosen because at the time of the data collection thisisleicestershire.co.uk only published the top five, whereas bournemouthecho.co.uk published the top 10. To be consistent between the two websites the top five were chosen. Since the data was collected thisisleicestershire.co.uk has changed its website and the Most Commented stories are now compiled in an indefinite list with the Most Commented at the top.

Figure 4.3: bournemouthecho.co.uk home page with Most Commented list



The context unit provided a total of 439 comments (coding units) from thisisleicestershire.co.uk and 730 comments from bournemouthecho.co.uk.

It must be noted that each individual comment was a separate coding unit and therefore if one individual poster left several comments, each which would have been counted. The content analysis did not calculate how many individual posters there were or how many comments they left on one thread.

There were five coding categories in total which reflected the richness of the comment, the interactivity level and who was interacting with who. This is important to understand the nature of participation and subsequent interaction on British local newspaper websites between different actors. The categories were developed from the four categories identified by Trice in his 2010 content analysis of comment fields on six news websites. Trice's (2010) study explored the richness of comments from simple opinions, new content to complex arguments and analysed the interactivity of comments to a more limited degree, in particular whether the comments referred directly to the story or referred to another username. This PhD study includes the added dimension of who is interacting with who, and distinguishes between reader to reader interaction and reader to journalist interaction.

The categories were defined as:

* **No relevance to article (Post)**

Comment that has no relevance to the article the stream is attached to, is an irreverent joke or are a personal attack on another user with no relevance to the article.

* **Refers to article (Content Interaction)**

Comment that refers directly to the article in questions including textual / photographic / audio / video content.

* **Refers to another user (Poster Interaction)**

Comment that quotes another user, refers to them by name or is a direct response to a comment by another user. All must be relevant to the article the stream is attached to.

* **Website host interaction (Newspaper Interaction)**

Includes newspaper/journalist engaging in conversation and speaking to posters or adding additional information in relation to the article, and includes posters responding directly to them.

* **New content (Advanced Content Interaction)**

Additional information or a link to material not mentioned in the article / other comments.

A dominant category approach was taken when it was felt a comment fell into two categories, rather than counting comments twice and placing them in two separate categories. For example if a comment included a poster interacting with another poster about a topic of no relevance to the article the stream was attached to this was counted as a Post rather than a Poster Interaction, or both. It was felt the irrelevance of the comment was more significant than the interaction, since the interaction was not related to the news story in question. This is illustrated in the following comment:

*Mr LFE* said: Nope, *Supporter Not Customer, England*...you’ve done it again, half a paragraph in and...zzz...

In this comment Mr LFE is interacting with Supporter Not Customer, England, but it is not in response to the article. Instead it is a remark/insult about the boring nature of the comments of Supporter Not Customer, England. By contrast in this second example below from the same thread, two posters are interacting with one another about the article in question Leicester City’s ‘Fosse Boys’ fear permanent band from the Walkers Stadium. This was therefore counted as a Poster Interaction.

*Rich, Leicestershire* said: *Steve, Countesthorpe* – if you were at the games you would notice that the standing is not an issue – the Fosse boys were in SK1 right at the top, and there has never been anyone behind them – they chose this spot on purpose as it is usually a sparse area and next the Kop.

Furthermore if a poster referred to the author of an article or letter published on the website this was counted as a Content Interaction rather than Poster Interaction or Newspaper Interaction. This was viewed as a poster interacting with the content provided by the author rather than engaging with another ‘live’ user.

4.5.2 Coding Twitter

The nature of reader participation via commenting on newspaper website articles has been addressed in this study via the content analysis described in section 4.5.1. However this is only one of the ways in which Web 2.0 is changing the way in which readers participate and interact with newspaper journalists. The use of social media networks has exploded in the past five years and due to its limited history there is little literature or empirical evidence on how this is impacting on journalists and readers. This study therefore aims to fill this gap in knowledge by exploring how Twitter and Facebook are being used by local print journalists. Due to the global interconnected nature of Twitter it is not possible to create a typology of how audiences participate in British local newspapers via this social media platform. Firstly this could only be achieved by obtaining the individual usernames of thousands of readers and secondly it would be an extremely problematical task to identify which of their tweets related to the two case studies in particular. However it is possible to explore the journalist-to-reader relationship and identify how journalists interact with their readers via Twitter, since they are much smaller in number and easily identifiable. Although this does not directly address the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers, it does conversely inform our understanding of the nature of journalist interaction with their readers. It can therefore help to explain whether this interaction is impacting on the role of journalists as traditional gatekeepers as discussed in RQ3.

Due to the different approach needed to analyse Twitter a different coding system was needed which shifted the focus from reader interaction to journalist interaction. Unlike the content analysis of comments, the researcher was unable to identify similar studies as work in this field is limited and has focused on mass individual Twitter users rather than on an individual user or organisation. Kwak *et al* (2010) for example coded 41.7 million user profiles to understand trending topics. Meanwhile other research to date has investigated the location of users around an event (Yardi and boyd, 2010), Twitter user influence (Cha *et al*, 2010), uses of Twitter (Java *et al*, 2007) and Twitter as a conversational tool (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009). This research however seeks to discover how individual staff members within specific organisations use Twitter in their professional role.

Current Twitter research tends to use searching software which is able to capture retrospective trends or key words, such as Twitter Search. It is possible to develop bespoke search software since Twitter has an open Application Programming Interface, enabling programmers to create their own applications, widgets or websites that interact with Twitter. Meanwhile some researchers (Anstead and O’Loughlin, 2010) choose to use existing Twitter search tools such as Twitter Search where they can enter specific search terms and specific time periods to capture all data that matches those criteria. However external applications like Twitter Search were not appropriate, or indeed any use, for this study as it was not analysing trends or key words, but looking at individual users and their entire output over a period of time. Therefore the only way to capture the data was to cut and paste tweets over a given time frame into a Word document. This included all information given in each tweet including usernames, hyperlinks, retweets and hashtags. The information captured was only public content and excluded direct messages. This was viewed as appropriate because direct messages have a similar function to emails and are a private interaction, therefore were discounted in this data set. Capturing the data in this cut and paste way proved problematic because due to the large volume of data, Twitter could not go back further than an unascertained number of tweets. A two week sample from each user appeared to be the maximum data set that could be collected using this method at the first attempt. A two week sample was therefore taken at each case study coinciding with the observation period (October 2010 and January 2011). However a second attempt was made seven months later in June 2011 after a new version of Twitter was launched. This version could handle higher volumes of data and a one month sample was taken from each user. These two samples enabled the researcher to compare how the journalists' use of Twitter had developed over the interim period.

Data was captured from the most prolific Twitter users at the two case studies, defining them as the context units. The two week and one month data sets included every single tweet within those time frames. More journalists used Twitter at the *Leicester Mercury* therefore data was collected from four users (see Table 4.1). During the research period only two journalists at the *Daily Echo* consistently used Twitter so data was only collected from them. In total 2,588 individual tweets were coded, made up of 1,134 from four *Leicester Mercury* users and 1,454 from two *Daily Echo* users.

Table 4.1: Twitter context units

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Username** | **Name** | **Job title** | **Newspaper** |
| martin\_crowson | Martin Crowson | Rugby correspondent | Leicester Mercury |
| David\_MacLean | David MacLean | Politics correspondent | Leicester Mercury |
| Thisisleics | Angela Bewick | Web editor | Leicester Mercury |
| Tipexxed | Keith Perch | Editor | Leicester Mercury |
| Bournemouthecho | Sam Shepherd / Sarah Cartwright | Web team | Daily Echo |
| SteveBaileyEcho | Stephen Bailey | Senior reporter | Daily Echo |

Definitions of Twitter terminology used in this study:

**Username**: The name given to each individual Twitter account. The user can choose their username when they set up their account.

**Tweet**: Each individual message posted or tweeted by a user. It must be less than 145 characters in length.

**Feed**: Each user will have a chronological, real time list of all the tweets posted by everyone they are following.

**Followers**: Each user will follow other users by signing up to their username. This means they will receive all of their tweets in their feed. The users following a username are known as followers.

**@username**: This has a number of functions. Using @ addresses a tweet to a specific username and gets sent directly to their account, although it remains public. It is also used in conversation or to make a comment about another individual.

**# (hashtag**): These were originally used to categorise themes and make tweets searchable however their purpose is currently in flux.

**Retweet**: This is when one user shares the tweet of another user to their followers.

**Hyperlink**: When a link to another website is included in a tweet. This is often shortened using external applications (tiny URL, TwitLonger) to keep the tweet within the 145 character limit.

The coding categories (see below) expanded during the cross checking and development phase with the second researcher. It became apparent that the levels of interactivity were quite complex and it was necessarily to divide them into journalist-to-reader and journalist-to-colleague although these two categories could be collapsed into one to show overall interactivity levels. The same system was carried over to the sharing categories. This coding system meant it was easier to identify how much of the social media interaction or sharing was with external actors such as readers, and how much was internal within a news room. However it should be noted that external actors could include journalists at other news organisations and indeed people working in public relations.

The categories were defined as:

* **Traditional**

Headline with link to own website story

Promotional link to own website competition

* **Informal**

Link to website story with personal message

Informal news (including live updates)

Comment (inc. comment on current affairs)

Personal message to readers

* **Personal**

Non-work related comment (inc. links, pics etc.)

Non-current affair related comment

Interactive/sharing with friend (no direct work relevance)

* **Sharing: colleagues**

Retweet colleague’s content

Share colleague’s content (inc. lists)

* **Sharing: external**

Retweet external user’s content

Share external user’s content (inc. lists)

* **Interactive: colleagues**

@ colleague

Asking a question of colleague

* **Interactive: external**

@ another user (in context of directly addressing them, not simply acknowledging them)

Asking a question of readers

Asking readers to do something (inc. send in photos)

Setting up vote

*NB: Hyperlinks can be in any of the categories*

# The traditional category also underwent several stages of development. Initially this category was labelled Automatic and was determined by tweets which were sent out as automatic feeds from newspaper websites, involving no human process. However when testing the categories the researchers noticed that there were a large number of tweets that had been written by a journalist or web editor but were essentially a rewritten headline and being used a promotional tool for the website. There could be a number of reasons for this including a failure in the automatic feed system or journalists rewriting headlines to make them more suitable to Twitter or to enhance search engine optimisation. It was felt that these tweets formed the same function as an automatic machine processed tweet and therefore the category heading was changed to allow for these. Automatic became Traditional to reflect a traditional form of gatekeeping communication which has no informal / personal traits or interactivity. For example the tweet by @thisisleic ‘New superstore plan for Braunstone Gate, Leicester <http://ow.ly/2TUx4>’ had been written by the web editor but read like an automatic feed. Technically it had been altered from the original website headline ‘New superstore in Braunstone Gate would 'transform' retail park’ and under the original coding system could not be counted as Automatic. However the revised category Traditional allowed this tweet to be coded alongside automatic feeds which serve the same function.

The category Informal was created to reflect the variety of information that is given to readers in an untraditional style. This is not a headline and a link but may be a greeting, comment on current affairs or a more casual presentation of a story and link to the newspaper website. These tweets give a personality to the user but are still linked to their professional as a journalist working for a particular organisation.

In contrast the Personal category reflects tweets which are unrelated to their profession and may be directed to friends and family although readers can still see the tweets and respond to them. The Personal category was not an original category but during the development period the Informal unit was divided into Informal and Personal. This was to reflect the interesting ethical issues faced by journalists about their professional and personal roles and the merging of the two on social media, which will be explored further in Chapter 11. Without separating the Personal non-work related tweets from the Informal work-related tweets it would not be possible to explore these issues. During the coding the researcher had to check the links included in tweets in order to determine its category and also the profile of the @username to clarify whether they were a colleague, friend or reader. If it was unclear the researcher checked with the context unit journalist.

In the original coding design the use of the hashtag # within a tweet was classed as a sharing activity as the # is used to mark all tweets on a similar subject, for example #London2012 referring to the London Olympic Games. Users can then click on #London2012 to read all of the tweets from all users on Twitter talking about that subject. It was felt that this was a way of sharing information to a wider community. However during the testing of the categories the researcher discovered that the use and meaning of the # had changed. Many users were including # in their tweets as a way of making a flippant remark, additional comment or summarising their tweet, for example:

martin\_crowson: Sepp Blatter wins FIFA vote 172 to 17. Utterly incredible. The ultimate sham. #spineless #jokeorganisation.

In this tweet #spineless and #jokeorganisation do not refer to a trend or commonality as this would be represented by #FIFA or #SeppBlatter - the subject matter being talked about. To complicate things further #SeppBlatter could also be interchanged with @SeppBlatter as a username, as they are an individual with a Twitter account as well as a trending story topic. Due to these inconsistencies it was felt that the # was not a useful determination of the content of a tweet and it was not taken into consideration. The one exception to this was the use of #ff which refers to shared content and came under the Sharing: external category. #ff stands for Follow Friday and the correct Twitter etiquette is to use it on a Friday to recommend the best Twitter users to follow.

As with the comments discussed in section 4.5.1 a dominant category system was used for coding tweets. The categories were tested three times and on the second test a dominant system was chosen over a double coding system. This ensured that the statistics were clear and there was no ambiguity. Also as there were seven categories allowing for a range of descriptors it was felt that double coding was unnecessary particularly as it was calculated that only two per cent of all tweets would be doubled coded if that system was used.

Once the final data was collected and coded it was inputted into a spreadsheet, the results of which are examined in Chapter 11.

4.5.3 Coding Facebook

The use of Facebook at the two case study sites was not as widespread as Twitter, with most journalists preferring to use Facebook for personal use rather than professional reasons. Twitter is an open social network where anyone can follow another user without permission, whereas Facebook is a private network where people are granted permission to view other’s feeds. As such both case study sites had limited Facebook profiles or pages and at both newspapers these were managed by the web team. There were also other obstacles for journalists wanting to interact with readers via Facebook, in that they are banned from accessing Facebook due to a companywide policy. Individuals could apply to have the ban lifted on their computer but this had to be agreed by the editor. As a result very few journalists could access Facebook at work and relied on the web team for this medium. Furthermore the *Leicester Mercury* did not introduce a Facebook page until half way through the research period.

Data was collected from Facebook mirroring the Twitter methodology to make results more comparable. A two week coding context sample was taken from the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* during the observation period in January 2011 and a one month sample was taken in March 2011. A sample was not taken in June, as was the case for the Twitter sample, because the digital projects co-ordinator was on maternity leave at this point and it became apparent to the researcher in June 2011 that the Facebook profile was therefore largely inactive. It was possible to go back to the active period of March on Facebook, but due to the limitations of Twitter discussed above it was not possible to do the same on Twitter. A one month sample was taken from the *Leicester Mercury* in June 2011 as the Facebook page did not exist during the observation period in October 2010 or in March 2011. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had two Facebook presences – one a profile and one a page. The page was set up first and was more traditional in nature, with automatic feeds from the bournemouthecho.co.uk website and some content from the web team. The profile was named Bournemouth Echo Sam and was managed by the digital projects co-ordinator Sam Shepherd. This was a more informal profile and was set up by Sam Shepherd because she felt people would be “more likely to be friends with an individual on Facebook rather than an organisation which might look uncool”. The researcher therefore decided data from the Bournemouth Echo Sam profile would provide richer data than its traditional counterpart, and this was the only Facebook presence to be captured.

The following definitions were used:

* **Wall**: Each Facebook profile or page has a feed where all of their posts and responses to them can be viewed.
* **Post**: Each individual unit on a wall and its responses. Sometimes referred to as a message.
* **Posting**: The act of putting something onto a wall (message, photo, video, link, comment).
* **Comment**: An external user can place a comment on a post on another user’s wall. A user can also place a comment on their own posts.
* **Like**: The act of effectively ticking a box to say you agree with a post or comment.
* **Profile**: A Facebook account of a user with their personal details. You must have permission to become their friend before you can view their profile wall.
* **Page**: Similar to a profile but set up by organisations or events. You do not need permission to view the page wall but you must Like the page in order to view it.

The seven Twitter categories were used as the starting point for the Facebook analysis but were adapted for the different functions that exist on Facebook that are not replicated on Twitter. For example on Facebook it is possible to trace when a reader engages with the newspaper (external interacting with internal) whereas as discussed in section 4.5.2, on Twitter it is only possible to trace the newspaper user when they engage with readers (internal interacting with external).

The Facebook categories were defined as:

* **Traditional**

Headline with link to own website story

Promotional link to own website competition

* **Informal**

Link to website story with personal message

Informal news (including live updates)

Comment (inc. comment on current affairs)

Personal message to readers

* **Newspaper Sharing**

Share other Facebook content

Newspaper ‘Likes’ external page

* **Reader Response**

Reader ‘Likes’ a post or comment

* **Reader Interactive**

Friend posting on wall (including community spam)

Comment from reader

* **Newspaper Interactive**

Asking a question

Setting up vote

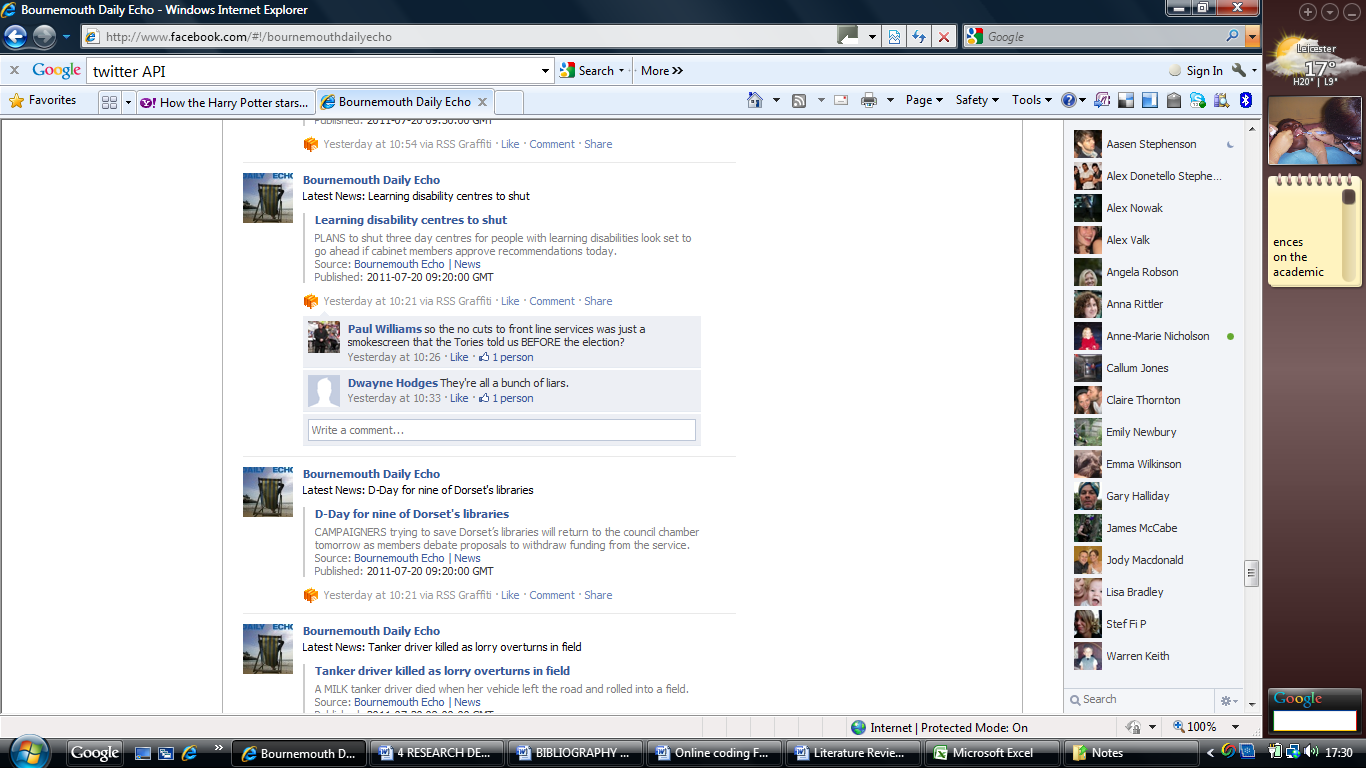
Newspaper comment in response to reader

The Personal category was dropped because during testing it become apparent that the Facebook profile was not used for personal messages or non-work related comments due to all of the followers (or friends) being readers. The implications of this are discussed as part of the findings in Chapter 11.

Facebook has a more complex interface than Twitter and as a result there are more ways to engage with the content. These ‘engagements’ can include posting a message, posting a photo, posting a video, making a friend, commenting on a message, sharing a message, liking a message, liking a comment or liking a page. Making a friend and updating the profile photo were not coded as it was viewed as a routine operation rather than an active engagement between two people or the posting of information.

Unlike the Twitter content analysis where each tweet was treated as a coding unit, on Facebook each engagement was treated as a coding unit. This is due to each individual Facebook post, the equivalent of a tweet, hosting a range of other engagements within it. On Twitter these would appear as individual tweets which referred to one another via @username, but on Facebook responses are posted within the original content. An example of multiple engagements within one post is given in Figure 4.4. In this post there are five engagements: one message from the user, two comments by readers and two comment Likes by readers.

Figure 4.4: Multiple Facebook engagements



A new category of Reader Response was created due to the ability of readers to ‘Like’ a post or comment, of which there is no equivalent on Twitter. The engagement of Liking something was viewed as a minor form of interactivity like a public gauge but it was not full interactivity as no views or information were given. It could not be classed as sharing, as the engagement did not appear on the participant’s own wall. Due to the large number of comments and Likes it was felt that more valuable results would be yielded if they were defined as two separate categories Reader Response and Reader Interactive. In the second category of Reader Interactive there are also elements of sharing as when a reader posts a comment on another Facebook Profile or Page this appears on their own wall meaning their comments and a link to the original source material is shared to an even wider audience. These two categories however could be collapsed into one category for analysis where deemed appropriate. It was not possible to create a Newspaper Response category as the engagement of Liking a post or comment does not appear on the profile wall. However the engagement of Liking a page does appear on the wall and therefore this was categorised as Newspaper Sharing.

A discussion with the second researcher took place around whether to create a Spam category for people leaving promotional messages on the Bournemouth Echo Sam wall. It was decided to include spam as a Reader Interactive due to the nature of the posts being community orientated. These could include discount offers for local services or information about events (see Figure 4.5). Some were presented informally via comments and others were messages posted on the wall. The newspaper could have removed these posts if they viewed them as spam but chose not to, therefore it was decided they were valid to count.

Figure 4.5: An example of community spam

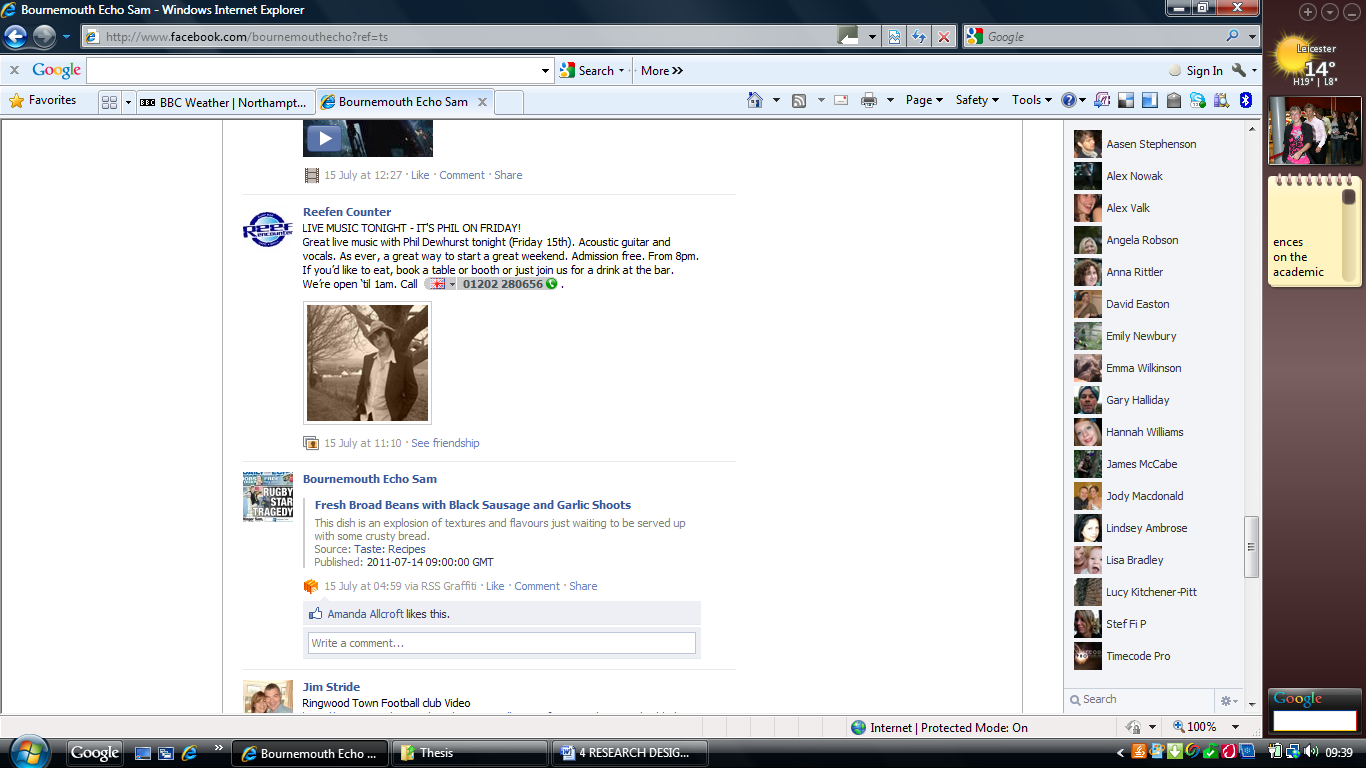


Figure 4.6: Triangulated methodology design to answer multiple research questions, copyright Lily Canter

**RQ4**

**RQ3**

**RQ2b**

**RQ2a**

**RQ1b**

**RQ1a**

Interview x2 = journalists and audience members Interview x1 = journalists

**RQ1a** = How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers?

**RQ1b** = What is the motivation for this change?

**RQ2a** = What is the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?

**RQ2b** = What is the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?

**RQ3** = How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?

**RQ4**: To what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers within Web 2.0?

Figure 4.7: Stages of a case study research project, copyright Lily Canter

As explained in this chapter the design of this research project involved fairly lengthy and detailed ethnographic fieldwork at the two case study sites. This resulted in a large amount of rich data collection. The findings drawn from these results are now discussed in the next eight chapters (Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12). These chapters each follow the same structure with an introduction, methods recap, display of results and finally a discussion of the findings with a concluding paragraph. As outlined in Chapter 1, section 1.5.2 the findings chapters follow the sequence of the research questions. The next chapter therefore starts with the results and discussion surrounding RQ1a which examines the changing nature of audience participation.

**Chapter 5: The changing nature of participation**

5.1 Introduction

For audiences the process of participating in the news has historically been a slow one, with several gatekeepers stationed along the way. Sending a letter in the post meant taking time to put pen to paper, finding an envelope, buying a stamp and walking to the post box. There was also no guarantee that your letter would ever make it into the printed newspaper as it could be spiked by journalists. With the arrival of the Internet, email made the process almost instantaneous once the send button had been clicked, but it still did not bypass the gatekeeping process and could just as easily be spiked as a letter. However Web 2.0 has introduced the potential to change this process and audiences can now publish to the web directly and in many cases can upload comments and even photographs and stories direct to newspaper websites without moderation. With the use of mobile digital technology this can happen in real time, anywhere in the world. As discussed in Chapter 2 some scholars argue that these technological advances have enabled and encouraged an increasingly active audience (Lewis, 2011; Reich, 2011; Jenkins, 2008) and furthermore audiences expect to be able to participate (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Jenkins, 2008; Deuze, 2006; Rosen, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). This is reflected in the growth of internet usage outlined in Chapter 1 and the popularity of participatory forums online such as comments on news stories, social media networks and user generated content (Heinonen, 2011; Greer and Yan, 2010).

The first research question in this study sets out to examine how the nature of participation has been changing since the introduction of Web 2.0 circa 2005 in the context of the two case studies. It seeks to explore whether participation, as set out in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2, has increased and how it has changed in nature. Drawing on the current literature the researcher expected to find an increase in activity that was also more diverse. It was also anticipated that audiences would expect to be able to participate and would expect to access their news quickly. This chapter therefore aims to explore **RQ1a: How does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in British local newspapers?**

5.2 Methods

The methods utilised to address this research question, as outlined in Chapter 4, involved an online reader questionnaire, observation within the news rooms of the two case study sites and interviews with journalists and readers.

The online questionnaire at the *Leicester Mercury* received 177 responses with a 67 per cent completion rate. The response rate at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was 328 with a 72 per cent completion rate. In relation to RQ1a the questionnaire asked five initial questions on background information relating to gender, age, location, income, education and website usage. This was followed by a further six questions about changes and preferences in the respondent’s news consumption. The full questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix 1a.

The news room observation took place at the *Leicester Mercury* during a three week period in October 2010. Observation at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* took place during one week in November 2010 and one week during January 2011. These were arranged at the convenience of the editor and editorial staff hence the fragmented time frames. The second week of observation at both case study sites was intersected with interviews with journalists. A total of 37 professional journalists were interviewed with 19 at the *Leicester Mercury* and 18 at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. Thisrepresented a third of the *Leicester Mercury* editorial staff and about 35 per cent of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* editorial staff. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide displayed in Appendix 2a which included five questions on the changing nature of audience participation, termed as 'interaction’ as discussed in Chapter 2. These questions covered how interaction is changing, whether it had increased under Web 2.0, who was interacting, how many were interacting and how it compared to printed newspaper interaction. These questions were supported by a further checklist which included topics such as expectations, breaking news, user generated content, comments, email and social media.

As explained in Chapter 4 interviewees were given three options regarding their anonymity status. Those interviewees who opted for complete anonymity are referred to in this study by the generic term reporter. Interviewees who opted for their name to be anonymous but not their job title will be referred to by their job title for example feature writer. Those that opted for no anonymity are either referred to by their job title for example deputy editor or by their name and job title where appropriate for example editor, Keith Perch. The participant code of the interviewee whether anonymous or not has been included next to the name/job title of the journalist and at the end of quotes for clarification in particular to indicate which case study site the participant is from. For example L3 or B13 - L corresponds to the *Leicester Mercury* and B to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. A list of the participants and their corresponding code can be found in Appendix 4. All of the reader interviewees were anonymous so they are referred to in the text by their code only, for example LR3 or BR3 – R standing for reader. As explained in Chapter 4 there was a smaller sample of reader interviewees and they were asked a series of probing questions in relation to their questionnaire responses to add qualitative depth to the data.

5.3 Results

In order to provide a triangulated context to the research the results in this chapter have been drawn from three methods: a reader questionnaire, journalist and reader interviews and news room observation. The results will first explore the responses of journalists together with observations and reader interview responses where relevant, under the following sub headings: rise in participation, how participation is changing, organisational restrictions, one way participation, citizen production. The second section looks in detail at the findings of the online reader questionnaire under the sub headings: audience demographics, audience consumption, audience expectation, The Web 2.0 factor. Both case study sites will be analysed simultaneously.

**Rise in participation**

The statistics discussed in Chapter 1 show an exponential rise in website users at both of the case study sites during the past year, a trend which has not seen a decline since the websites were launched. But an increase in traffic does not automatically translate into an increase in audience participation. Journalists at both case study sites were therefore asked an open question on whether they thought there had been an increase in audience participation post Web 2.0. Based on the interviewees' answers the researcher was able to identify four categories of response: significant increase, slight increase, no increase and unclassified, as shown in Table 5.1. The most popular answer was significant increase (43%), but the second most popular response was no increase at all (22%), revealing that there are still disparate perceptions amongst journalists. David MacLean, politics correspondent at the *Leicester Mercury* (L10) said participation had increased dramatically even in the past year alone:

I think in five years of reporting there was probably 10 letters in the paper that I would see directly referring to me saying oh I didn’t like what you wrote there, it would be a big occasion if there was a letter in the paper with your name on it, but now you can just stick in a search term on Twitter for the story that you’ve done, see all the responses to it and you also get a feel for it (L10).

However the editor of the *Leicester Mercury*, Keith Perch (L3), who has worked in the industry for three decades, was slightly more cautious suggesting that the readers who had always been active, were simply being even more active, and new participants were still a minority.

I think there is probably more than there was and the people that are doing it are doing more of it than they used to be in the past. I just don’t think we are yet in a position where you can say everybody wants to do it compared with the old days when nobody wanted to do it (L3).

Yet a reporter at the *Leicester Mercury* was adamant that nothing had changed in terms of participation levels, it was simply the tools that were different, describing the internet as the modern day equivalent of a “carrier pigeon” (L1).

Table 5.1: Journalist perceptive of participation increase

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **Significant increase in participation** | **Slight increase**  **in participation** | **No increase**  **in participation** | **Unclassified** |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 9 (50%) | 1 (5%) | 3 (17%) | 5 (28%) |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 7 (37%) | 4 (21%) | 5 (26%) | 3 (16%) |
| Total | 16 (43%) | 5 (13%) | 8 (22%) | 8 (22%) |

The unclassified column refers to interviewees who had only worked during the era of Web 2.0 and therefore felt they were unable to comment on changes in participation or simply responded “I don’t know”. These tended to be trainee reporters or newly qualified reporters at both case study sites. A greater number of interviewees at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* thought there had been a significant increase than at the *Leicester Mercury*, despite the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* website growth being 10 per cent less than the *Leicester Mercury* in 2009 to 2010. This may be due to the greater number of participatory channels at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and the more active approach the company takes in encouraging reader participation as discussed in Chapter 7. The results are even more striking if the unclassified category is removed from the equation as 69 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* interviewees say participation has considerably increased compared to 44 per cent at the *Leicester Mercury*.

Sam Shepherd, digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B1) said the greatest area of participation was happening off site, outside of the newspaper website but on its associated social media networks. This is an area that has been developed to a much greater extent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* than at the *Leicester Mercury* and again may account for why most staff at the company perceived participation as increasing significantly. Sam Shepherd said:

When it comes to interacting in terms of sharing the links or seeing a link on Facebook and commenting on it or retweeting something we have tweeted with a comment or all of that stuff, there is definitely more people doing that than would ever have said to their friends here I have cut this out of the newspaper for you to read as I thought you might find it interesting (B1).

**How participation is changing**

Interviewees were asked an open question on how participation was changing under Web 2.0 and the answers were then analysed and coded into five categories: more immediate, more global, more diverse, audience expect to be able to participate, same level of participation but different tools.

Table 5.2: Journalist perspective of changing nature of participation

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **More immediate** | **More**  **Global** | **More diverse** | **Expectation to participate** | **Different tools** |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 9 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 9 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Total | 18 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 4 |

Each interviewee may have identified more than one category therefore no overall percentages could be calculated. The results can be seen in Table 5.2. The figures indicate the number of journalists who identified each category.

The most popular category by far was More Immediate, with More Global, Expectation to Participate and Different Tools, spread evenly. Neal Butterworth editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B7) and editor in chief of Newsquest Dorset described Web 2.0 as a real time tennis match between readers and the newspaper online:

I always look to the idea of letters pages, if you wanted to respond to something in the paper you picked up the paper, you read it, you penned a letter, put it in the post, it got there about three days later. Now you can have a letter in the paper within seconds, you can have a letter online, you can have a response online so quickly, it’s incredible (B7).

The More Diverse category was significant at the *Leicester Mercury* but was not identified by any journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. It is therefore interesting to note that although journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were more likely to perceive participation to have significantly increased they did not relate this to a more diverse audience. This may be due to the more homogenous demographics of Bournemouth compared to the multiculturalism of Leicester as discussed in Chapter 1. The deputy editor of the *Leicester Mercury* Richard Bettsworth (L13) said readers were much more involved in the news process enabling new voices to be heard:

I think the internet has helped in a process in which we have thrown open the paper a lot more to different voices for people putting their own views forward, their own articles, their own pictures and the internet has been a means to do that (L13).

It is also worth noting that the second most common response at both case study sites was that audiences expected to be able to participate and this was a new feature that had arisen in the past decade. A reporter at the *Leicester Mercury* (L17) said a cultural shift, in part encouraged by television, had occurred:

I think they want to get involved and have some say in what is happening and I think that has come about through reality television and *X-factor* and all that kind of stuff where people do have an illusion, well it’s not an illusion I suppose, they do have a say in what happens. I think that has raised people’s expectations of their role within things and I think that is a good thing. And it is a very powerful thing (L17).

This has also led to a more media literate readership who expect to be able to produce content for the newspaper and website. A reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B10) said that readers increasingly sent in their own press releases or material written up as stories rather than simply ringing up the news desk with a story idea to be written by reporters. He questioned the quality of this content but acknowledged that it was happening more often:

For instance a couple of nights ago there was a public meeting, they didn’t want the press inside as they were going to be discussing people with learning disabilities things like that. I spoke to some people outside gave them my phone number and email address and said can you contact me with your own thoughts on how the meeting goes afterwards. One of the people when he sent through his comments sent it through as a story, as a write up with its own headline, as if I’d asked him or wanted an actual report of the story from him. But people do often these days seem to think in that media orientated content way (B10).

Another email received by the same reporter (B10) shortly after the research interview was conducted read:

I have written a piece concerning the Bournemouth Arts Collective that have (SIC) started exhibiting at the BIC. The piece is approx 350 words and has 4 photographic attatchments (SIC) containing art work of the relevant artists. The art collective were hoping that the newsdesk could publish the story in it's (SIC) entire form or a condensed form this week before Friday 18th - the day of the exhibition.

**Organisational restrictions**

At both case study sites the researcher observed that organisational structures restricted the development of audience participation to a greater extent. These were mostly due to three factors:

1. Censorship of social media websites

2. Lack of equipment

3. Lack of communication between staff

A number of staff at the *Leicester Mercury* were banned from using Twitter and a request had to be put into the central information technology department to lift this. At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* nearly all of the editorial staff were restricted from accessing Facebook apart from a few individuals on the news desk and web desk, and at the time there were no policies in place to change this. A disgruntled reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was not the only journalist to complain during the research interviews that staff had no access to Facebook.

It has probably been mentioned to you before that most of us don’t have access to Facebook, that’s definitely frowned upon, which is really stupid, it makes it quite hard sometimes when you are trying to find out about somebody (B2).

A similar frustration was felt amongst a number of sports reporters at both case study sites who felt better technology such as laptops with mobile internet and smart phones with cameras would help with audience interaction and engagement. One sports reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B12) said:

Some of the equipment that I have got I don’t feel is suitable or up to speed for some of the tasks that we are being asked to function. For example I have got a card on the laptop and sometimes it will work and sometimes it won’t. So you can be sitting at a game half way through a game it just turns itself off or you lose connection (B12).

Meanwhile the rugby correspondent at the *Leicester Mercury* (L9) complained that “getting a new phone out of this company is like trying to get blood out of a stone (L9)” and that it had prevented him from taking full advantage of the participatory elements of Twitter.

Via observation the researcher was able to establish at both case study sites that the web editor had limited involvement in the daily conference where decisions about the content of the newspaper and website were made. At the *Leicester Mercury* the web editor did not attend morning or afternoon conference. When planning for the coverage of a major rolling news story which would involve regularly updating the website, using social media networks and curating user generated content, (the English Defence League protest in Leicester city centre in October 2010), the web editor was still not part of the planning meeting with the editor, deputy editor, news editors, specialist reporters and picture editor. One news desk staff asked if the web editor should be in the meeting and a senior member of staff responded: “you can have a chat with her afterwards”. The role of the website and therefore the web editor was seen as separate from the newspaper and more of an automatic add on rather than an integral part of the news process. This was reflected by the position of the web editor’s desk in the news room which was isolated from the news desk rather than integrated into it. Opportunities for enabling greater audience participation via the website were therefore missed. Instead the policy was to respond to user generated content once it appeared rather than to plan for it or encourage it in advance. This was reflected in the rolling news coverage during the protests which saw updates on the website and @thisisleics Twitter profile but no live content such as tweets from reporters on the scene or a live blog, and there was also limited use of multimedia. The editor had spoken to *Citizens’ Eye* about community reporters providing content but this had not been formalised into the production process and occurred on an ad hoc basis. During the protest the researcher transitioned from the role of observer as participant to participant as observer, as discussed in Chapter 4, when she filmed footage of protestors breaching the police line and surrounding the *Leicester Mercury* building on her digital camera. This was due to there being no equipment or staffing in the building to do this. The web editor incorporated the video clips into the thisisleicestershire website, an example of responding to user generated content rather than planning for it or providing resources for multimedia content.

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* there was a slightly more integrated approach between the website and newspaper due to a stronger three-fold web team compared to just one web editor at the larger *Leicester Mercury*. One of the web team at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* attended the afternoon conference and weekly planning meeting. The web team felt their workload was heaviest in the morning so they were unable to attend morning conference. However this meant they were often late hearing about stories and did not have sufficient time in the afternoon to build additional participatory content for the website. One web team member (B6) commented that they were not involved in the planning of a series of features on the Cuts Debate and therefore were unable to plan in advance, therefore losing an opportunity to involve readers online.

**One way participation**

There was limited evidence to suggest that audience participation had changed into a two way process with news organisations involved in a dialogue with their readers. Instead readers sent content into the news rooms or responded to stories on the website or social media platforms, rarely receiving a response from the news organisation. A common remark by staff on the news desk at the *Leicester Mercury* was: “I read tweets, but never write them”. During observation at both case study sites it emerged that journalists read comments on website stories fairly routinely but only out of curiosity or entertainment and they never indicated that they would respond. Reporters often talked amongst themselves in an irreverent manner about the comment threads making remarks like: “at least we know there are people reading our stories” and “it just shows you can’t keep everyone happy”. Similarly during the reader interviews only 18 per cent of participants could recall journalists responding to comments with one stating that the journalists appeared “very hands off” in the comment threads (BR4). Only one *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR3) referred to any kind of response saying:

Sometimes you get feedback from the editor on comments on the odd occasion but not enough, sometimes a commenter puts ‘would the editor clear this matter?’ and there is no response but sometimes he does... I have never seen a reporter comment on a story in five years (LR3).

Again this was less the case at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* where the digital project co-ordinator made a conscious effort to respond to complaints and queries raised via email, social media platforms and in some comment threads. Two Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers said they were aware of journalists responding to comments with one being contacted for more information (BR10) and another stating that the digital projects co-ordinator responded to comments (BR3).

However further organisational structures made interaction between readers and journalists online limited at both case study sites as reporters were not encouraged to respond to comments on the website and in some cases were not allowed to due to legal restrictions. There was a concern amongst senior editorial staff members that journalists did not have time to respond to comments or doing so might compromise their impartiality. The biggest concern however was that any intervention from staff would make the company legally responsible for the comments. By operating a system whereby they did not moderate the comments the case study companies were not legally responsible for what was written in them. However once they intervened or responded to a comment it could be argued that they were moderating them and therefore legally responsible. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

It could be argued that only at an individual level could a true two way interaction between readers and journalists be seen. A handful of journalists at both case studies were responding to their readers particularly via social media platforms, as is explored in depth in Chapter 11. However two way interaction between readers was much stronger as they engaged in conversation and debates on comment threads and social media threads. Commenting on stories on the case study websites was the most popular participatory activity for questionnaire respondents and as examined in Chapter 6 users preferred interacting with one other more than they did interacting with journalists.

**Citizen production**

The most significant difference between the two case study sites was the involvement of readers in the news production process outlined in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2. Despite the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* having a greater number of participatory channels and a greater emphasis on online activity it was reluctant to use community reporters. One member of the web team (B6) commented that there was concern about the quality of the content they would produce and the lack of longevity of volunteers due to them not being paid. This was in stark contrast to *Leicester Mercury* which arguably had fair less participatory channels than the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* yet had developed a working relationship with a Leicester citizen journalism outlet known as *Citizens’ Eye*. Community reporters wrote content and produced photographs for the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper and website on a regular basis, as discussed at length in Chapter 12.

**Audience demographics**

Turning to the readership of the two case study companies this chapter now seeks to discuss the findings of the online questionnaire, first by outlining the demographics of the questionnaire participants as outlined in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Questionnaire respondent demographics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **Sex** | **Age**  **(mode)** | **Location**  **(mode)** | **Income (mode)** | **Education**  **(mode)** |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 61% M  39% F | 41-50 (28%) | Within Dorset (87%) | £20k-30k (27%) | UG degree  28% |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 58% M  42% F | 41-50 (22%) | Within Leics (82%) | £20k-30k (31%) | UG degree  28% |
| Total | 60% M  40% F | 41-50 26% | Within county 85% | £20k-30k  29% | UG degree  28% |

Although at both case study sites the mode age was 41-50 there was a difference in the number of younger readers. The *Leicester Mercury* had a higher percentage of readers under the age of 41 (40%) compared to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (31%), the largest under 41 category for both being 31-40. The statistics for readers over the age of 50 remained relatively similar between the two sites: *Leicester Mercury* (38%), Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (41%), however Bournemouth had slightly more over 60 readers (26%) than Leicester (21%). Overall this suggests that the readership of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* is marginally older than the *Leicester Mercury*. This reflects the statistics outlined in Chapter 3 which identified that Leicester has a younger than average population and Bournemouth has an older than average population. This could also suggest that there is limited digital divide in these areas in terms of age and the online population is relatively universal.

As would be expected at a local newspaper website, which contains a high percentage of local news and information, the majority of questionnaire respondents at both case study sites were from the county the printed newspaper was produced and sold in (85%). This was split equally between those living within the newspaper city/town (Leicester or Bournemouth) and those living outside the city/town but within the county (Leicestershire or Dorset). However due to the newspaper website being available globally there was a significant number of readers from outside the county (*Leicester Mercury* 9%, Bournemouth *Daily* Echo 7%) and also from outside the UK (*Leicester Mercury* 9%, Bournemouth *Daily* *Echo* 6%). This was slightly higher at the *Leicester Mercury*. This may be due to the younger more transient population in Leicester who are more likely to move outside the county or abroad, whereas Bournemouth is an area where people tend to retire to.

The income of respondents at both case study sites was fairly similar, clustered around the £10,000 to £40,000 mark, with a mode of £20,000 to 29,999, which reflects the national mean average of £26,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2010). In Bournemouth the incomes of respondents were slightly higher, perhaps reflecting the lower unemployment rate and higher average earnings rate in Bournemouth as discussed in Chapter 3. Again this may indicate that there is limited digital divide in regard to income as the findings reflect the average population.

Although education level to an undergraduate degree was the mode category recorded by respondents at both case study sites (28%) it did not represent the majority. More significantly the majority of respondents at both case study sites did not have an undergraduate degree (59%), with most having only GCSEs or equivalent or A Levels or equivalent. Furthermore as might be expected due to the town’s higher employment rate and affluence, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers had a lower percentage of respondents with no formal qualifications (10%) compared to *Leicester Mercury* readers (16%). However when taking into account postgraduate degrees the figures at the two case study sites were above the national average. According to the former Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in 2007 31 per cent of all adults aged 19 to 59 had a qualification at degree level or higher (Prospects, 2011). At the *Leicester Mercury* the percentage of respondents with an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification was 42 per cent, compared to 40 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. This may indicate that online readers at both case study websites were more highly educated than the national average.

**Audience consumption**

It was immediately apparent from the results that the majority (87%) of questionnaire respondents at both case study sites visited their associated website on a daily basis. Nearly all the other respondents accessed the website every week, indicating that the vast majority of readers regularly access the websites, checking for updates. As shown in Table 5.4 at both case study sites half of the respondents acknowledged they had switched from reading the newspaper to viewing content online. This suggests a direct correlation between a drop in newspaper sales and increased online hits with people swapping their daily newspaper buying habits for daily news viewing online. However both case study sites appeared to be attracting new audiences, particularly the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (22% compared to 14% at the *Leicester Mercury*) which had a broader range of participatory online features as outlined in Chapter 7. Both case study sites were also maintaining around 29 per cent of their print readers even when they did migrate online. It is also interesting that 60 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers preferred the website compared to just 41 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* readers. This corresponds with the higher amount of new users that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* website was attracting.

Table 5.4: Audience consumption

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **Website only (never read newspaper)** | **Switched from newspaper to website** | **Read both website and newspaper** |
| Bournemouth  *Daily Echo* | 22% | 51% | 27% |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 14% | 53% | 33% |
| Total | 19% | 52% | 29% |

**Audience expectation**

Audience expectation was also measured in relation to five factors shown in Table 5.5. Users of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* placed a greater emphasis on the expectation of breaking news whereas *Leicester Mercury* website users placed more importance on global access. This might have been due to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* updating their website at regular intervals throughout the day and deliberately staggering the times at which stories appeared live on the website to create an impression that there was often new content on the site, compared to the automatic once daily updates on the *Leicester Mercury* website. This may have created an environment where readers expected regular updates at the Bournemouth website more prominently than at the *Leicester Mercury*. The reason for global access being more important for *Leicester Mercury* respondents may in part be due to the higher number of overseas readers (9%) compared to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (6%) but also the increased likelihood of Leicestershire residents in moving abroad due to their multicultural background and younger age range outlined in Chapter 3.

Table 5.5: Priority ranking of respondent expectations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **Expectation of rolling news** | **Expectation of global access** | **Expectation of publication of reader content** | **Expectation of ability to comment** | **Expectation of mobile access** |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 2 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

It is interesting that although global access was rated as Extremely Important, mobile access was the least important expectation with a third of respondents at both case study sites stating this was Not Important at All and less than a fifth stating it was Extremely Important. This may have reflected the number of respondents who accessed the websites via static devices such as desktop computers rather than via mobiles or handheld devices. As Thurman and Walters (2012) indicate most users access news websites during the working day whilst they are at their place of employment, where they work from a static desk top computer. However with the advancement of technology this expectation of mobile access may increase in the future. The results also show that the biggest expectation for readers is that they can readily gain access to regular news content rather than participate in it. However 70 per cent of respondents at both case study sites did rank the expectation of being able to comment and the expectation that reader content will be published as Extremely Important to Fairly Important, with only a third stating it was Not Very Important or Not Important at All.

**The Web 2.0 factor**

The most striking result from the questionnaire at both case study sites was the increase in participation post Web 2.0. Table 5.6 shows that prior to Web 2.0 three quarters of respondents did not participate in the news at all. Those that did participate where most likely to write to the Letters Page (12% at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and 16% at the *Leicester Mercury*) followed by sending in a story to the news room (around 7%). Comparing these results to the activity of respondents when the questionnaire was taken shows that there has been a marked increase in participation with almost half of respondents having commented on the website within the last six months, of which four per cent at both case studies commented every day and 16 per cent at the *Bournemouth Daily Echo* and nine per cent at the *Leicester Mercury* commented every week. Commenting was the most popular participatory activity followed by taking part in question and answer sessions online (a quarter of respondents at both case study sites), then emailing journalists. Interestingly the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which had the lower participatory rate pre Web 2.0, had a noticeably higher participation rate than the *Leicester Mercury* post Web 2.0 in all six categories listed in Table 5.7. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* also had three additional means of participating via social media networks which were not available at the Leicester Mercury during the time of the study. The figures seem to suggest that with a greater number of participatory channels and greater amount of interaction, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6, the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had achieved higher levels of audience participation than the *Leicester Mercury*. This may also be an explanation for why the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had a higher percentage of new audience members than the *Leicester Mercury* as illustrated in Table 5.4.

Table 5.6: Reader participation pre Web 2.0

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Contacted newsroom with a story | Contacted newsroom with photo/video | Wrote to letters page | Contacted newsroom to complain | None of these |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 7% | 2% | 12% | 2% | 77% |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 6% | 1% | 16% | 2% | 75% |

Table 5.7: Reader participation post Web 2.0

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Comment on website content | Send in photos | Send in video | Send in stories | Email journalists | Take part in Q&A |
| Bournemouth *Daily Echo* | 50% | 14% | 3% | 15% | 22% | 25% |
| *Leicester Mercury* | 43% | 2% | 2% | 9% | 12% | 24% |

Table 5.8: Social media network participation at Bournemouth *Daily Echo*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Comment on Facebook updates | Respond to tweets | Submit photos via Flickr |
| 7% | 11% | 6% |

5.4 Discussion

The most distinct finding in response to the question how does Web 2.0 change the nature of audience participation in local British newspapers? is that it does increase participation. The “greater user participation on a seemingly infinite order” alluded to by Lewis (2011, p.1) and “unprecedented” voices of Reich’s international research project (2011, p.97) have also been identified as existing within the local British newspaper industry in this study. The findings suggest a shift in power (Rosen, 2006) but one which is not a seismic change but more of a gradual one. This change is identified in this study by journalists themselves but is more evident when looking at the participatory habits of readers, pre and post Web 2.0. Indeed the results appear to counter Papacharissi’s (2002) claim that access and ability to participation does not guarantee an actual increase in active audiences. Both case study sites had seen an increase in participation and the company with the greatest amount of participation - the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* - had the largest number of new audiences and its readers were 20 per cent more likely to prefer the website to the newspaper than those at the *Leicester Mercury*. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* appeared to be the case study with the largest participatory audience, which was indicated in the following evidence:

1. Nearly twice as many readers participated in online questionnaire at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* than the *Leicester Mercury*
2. More than twice as many readers participated in a follow up interview at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* than the *Leicester Mercury*
3. Journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were 25 per cent more likely to say that participation had significantly increased than those at the *Leicester Mercury*
4. Readers at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were more active in all six post Web 2.0 categories than readers at the *Leicester Mercury*

This appears to indicate a relationship between an increase in new audiences and participation. As discussed in Chapter 7 the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* has a greater number of participatory channels online which may also have had an influence on its new audience numbers.

However respondents who answered the questionnaire at both case study sites were perhaps by their very nature the most participatory audience members hence they chose to take part in the questionnaire. The results must therefore be viewed cautiously. Nether-the-less when triangulated with the journalist interviews it appears that there is an increase in participation in line with the Interlocking Public of Kovach and Rosential (2007) which argues that everyone is interested in something, some of the time. Furthermore the claim that the majority of citizens remain passive (Paulussen *et al*, 2007) was not reflected in the perceptions of journalists.

The second key finding was that the changing nature of participation incorporates an audience expectation to be able to take part. The next generation of news consumers expect to be able to manipulate media content according to Bowman and Willis (2003), with co-creation being an increasingly core expectation (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Journalists at the two case study sites identified this expectation (Table 5.2) as did readers (Table 5.5) although it was not a top priority and did not take precedent over rolling news, available globally. Quick readily available content still remained more important than participation.

Mansell (2009) associates this expectation of participation with the “emergence of new voices” (p.5). However the diversity of participants at both case study sites remains rather limited. The questionnaire respondents tended to be male and more highly educated than the national average. This points to the “educated elite” identified by Sparks (2003, p.125) in his study of national newspaper websites, suggesting that the internet reinforces the gap between active elite audiences and others that remain passive, hence failing to create an inclusive public sphere. But this is not the entire picture as the questionnaire respondents represented the average population in their local area in terms of age and salary. This indicates that although it is not a particularly diverse audience, neither is it an exclusive one, instead being broadly representative. This is supported by the perceptions of journalists who in the more diverse area of Leicester felt active audiences were more diverse compared to the more homogenous area of Bournemouth where diversity was not identified at all. Again this would indicate that the internet, as Dahlgren (2001) suggests can at best deepen and widen the dominant, mainstream, public sphere, although from the results of this study it is apparent that this remains limited in scope. The potential for a diverse public sphere outlined by Gerhards and Schafer (2010) is possible in local British newspapers but it needs more than peer to peer horizontal conversation (Goode, 2009). However this study found that organisational structures were preventing journalists from opening up participation and creating a more vertical conversation. As Paulussen and Ugille (2008) also concluded, participatory journalism is developing slowly more often due to news room structures and work routines rather than an unwillingness among professionals to open up to their audiences. Censorship of social media websites, a lack of equipment and a lack of communication between staff, were the three restrictive factors identified in this PhD study. This led to an environment where participation was restricted to audiences interacting with news content or with other audience members rather than with journalists. As Hermida (2011b) reasons news organisations are relying on existing norms and practices as they have expanded into digital media. Furthermore this PhD research adds weight to Örnebring’s (2008) findings that journalists are willing to let audiences respond to and interact with already produced material but are less willing to give them any real influence over the news process by engaging or collaborating.

**Conclusion**

This chapter illustrates that the nature of participation under Web 2.0 is changing in local British newspapers in three key areas: audiences are participating more, audiences have an expectation of participation and participation is potentially more diverse. However participation remains a primarily reader to reader activity with limited communication between readers and journalists due to restrictions brought about by organisational structures. It is also suggested in this chapter that enabling greater participation can attract more audiences, who in turn will in turn participate more.

The next chapter therefore turns to the question of what is motivating newspapers to enable increased participation and why more readers are participating.

**Chapter 6: Motivation for change**

6.1 Introduction

As was indicated in the findings of Chapter 5, Web 2.0 has brought about a change in the nature of participation within the two case study sites. In particular, the findings point to a gradual increase in participation and an audience expectation of participation. Yet the diversity of this participation is limited and organisational structures are restricting the potential for greater audience participation. This chapter seeks to explore why these changes are happening and what motivates newspaper companies to open up channels of communication and encourage participation. However since this research is looking at the relationship between newspaper journalists and their readers this chapter will also examine what motivates readers to participate in local newspapers online. The findings in this chapter therefore address **RQ1b: What is the motivation for this change?**

From the audience perspective it can be argued that there is an appetite for online news with growing user numbers year-on-year as outlined in Chapter 1. The deterministic viewpoint is that technology is not only creating more online users but it is also creating a more active audience as participation is made easier. The argument follows that audiences are increasingly motivated to participate because it is increasingly easy to do so (Lewis, 2011; Bell, 1979).

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, scholars have put forward multiple motivating factors for audience participation within Web 2.0 situated within the private and public sphere. Some audience members are motivated by private interests (Deuze, 2006), narcissism (Paulussen, 2007) or a desire to gain status (Bowman and Willis, 2003). However for others there is a more altruistic motivation at play such as a desire to inform (Bowman and Willis, 2003), share (Hermida *et al*, 2011; Allan, 2007) and harness the potential of the web for democratic debate (Rusbridger, 2010; Gillmor, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). The ability to bypass traditional gatekeepers is another motivating factor as it enables audiences to join the process of journalism (Gillmor, 2006) and take some control of news in the mainstream media (Jenkins, 2008). Furthermore the open source nature of the internet is underpinned by a philosophy of serving the public good (Lewis, 2011; Castells, 2001).

The literature indicates that the motivation for journalists to encourage participation is another complex field. A constant friction exists between the social goals of journalists and the commercial pressures to make and maintain profits (Garnham, 1986). This has been heightened in the Web 2.0 era as newspaper profits decline (as discussed in Chapter 1) and companies seek ways to cut costs by gaining content from readers for free (Örnebring, 2008). Journalists acknowledge that the drive towards greater audience participation is motivated by economic factors (Banks, 2008; Paulussen *et al*, 2007) to increase profits via the building of brand loyalty and the boosting of website traffic to remain competitive (Vujnovic, 2011).

To keep up with the competition journalists must strive to find exclusive stories via their sources. With limited resources local journalists can use audience participation as a means of gaining exclusive, quick and free information which helps them to remain competitive. Although this desire to use active audience members as sources may be ultimately profit driven it has also been argued that it creates better journalism by harnessing the power of collective masses rather relying on a small number of individual participants (Howe, 2009; O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009). This collaborative approach to journalism is therefore also motivated by a desire to facilitate democratic conversations (Quandt, 2011; Jarvis, 2008; Paulussen, 2007; Gillmor, 2006) and make journalism accountable (Haas, 2007).

The findings in this chapter seek to place the two case study sites within the literature outlined above to understand what motivates readers to participate in local newspapers online and what motivate journalists to encourage this activity.

6.2 Methods

This chapter addresses the research question from the perspective of journalists and readers and therefore a variety of methods were used at both case study sites. To gain insight from journalists, interviews were conducted and the news room was observed over a period of time. An online questionnaire was the primary method used to glean information from readers but this was followed up with a sample of reader interviews.

The interviews with, and observation of, journalists was conducted in the format described in Chapter 4 and 5. The semi-structured interviews were based on the interview guide in Appendix 2a which included three questions on the motivations for change. These questions covered the reasons publishers, journalists and readers may have for wanting to increase interaction and why readers like to participate. They were supported by a further checklist which included topics such as competition, branding, cheapness, commercial, sources, resources, empowering citizens, community engagement, ease, and consumers or citizens.

The reader questionnaire is also outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. Interviews with readers, as detailed in Chapter 4, were used to extrapolate additional qualitative information and were particularly relevant to this research question which explored readers’ behaviours and opinions surrounding motivations to participate. In relation to RQ1b the questionnaire asked three questions under the theme of motivation which asked what motivated readers to participate and what their reasons were for visiting the website. There was a further question which asked readers why they preferred the website to the newspaper. The full questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix 1a.

A total of five *Leicester Mercury* readers were interviewed compared to 11 Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers. This was due to a greater number of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers being willing to participate in an interview. They were asked to explain in more detail their motivations for participating in the website and to expand on the answers they gave in the questionnaire. Each reader and journalist interviewee was given a code, explained in detail in Chapter 5, section 5.2.

6.3 Results

As discussed above, the findings are drawn from a variety of methods including a questionnaire, interviews and observation. This section will first seek to understand the audience perspective by analysing the results of the reader questionnaire and reader interviews. The second part will focus on the journalist perspective and will be drawn from the interviews with journalists and news room observation.

The results are divided into four sub sections entitled website attraction, democratic and social motivations, democratization of expression and the bottom line. Both case studies are analysed simultaneously.

**Website attraction**

In Chapter 5 results showed that 60 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers (out of a total of 328 respondents) and 41 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* readers (out of a total of 177 respondents), preferred the website to the newspaper. To understand this preference, respondents were asked to tick all the answers that they agreed with. This is represented as percentages in Graph 6.1. Most respondents said they preferred the website because it was more convenient and the second most popular category was Content Interaction (for example leaving comments, sending in user generated content).

Graph 6.1: Why audiences prefer the website to the newspaper

It was also apparent that interacting with other readers (9% at both case study sites) was more important than interacting with journalists (6% at Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and 2% at *Leicester Mercury*) although this was noticeably higher at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which again has more participatory channels and higher responses from journalists as discussed in Chapters 7 and 11. Other reasons given for preferring the website were that it was free or that users lived outside of the print circulation area.

It is interesting to note that the convenience of the website was a large motivating factor why people viewed news online but also that people were drawn to the interactive content and the ability to participate. Indeed at both case study sites more than 50 per cent of the questionnaire respondents had switched from buying the newspaper to viewing the website, as discussed in Chapter 5. A reader at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* who previously bought the newspaper said: “I like posting comments on the website so I wondered why I was buying the newspaper when I was going on the website anyway” (BR4). Furthermore a reader at the *Leicester Mercury* (LR3) explained that although he bought the newspaper everyday he also specifically went online each day to comment on stories. The websites at both case study sites were therefore providing a level of immediate participation that the newspapers were not. This complements the results of Chapter 5 which indicate that there has been an increase in audience participation and an increase in expectation of participation post Web 2.0. This would further support the deterministic viewpoint that as technology allows participation to become more convenient and thus easier, participation levels increase.

**Democratic and social motivations**

The questionnaire asked readers what motivated them to participate in the newspaper online via the website and associated social media platforms. They were able to tick all responses that were relevant and the results are depicted in the area graph below in Graph 6.2. The results are based on the percentage of readers who ticked each response. Interestingly the results were similar at both case study sites although as illustrated in Chapter 5 readers at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* participated more than their *Leicester Mercury* counterparts.

Graph 6.2: Motivation for online participation (reader perspective)

The literature set out in Chapter 2 and summarised in the introduction to this chapter indicates that audiences are motivated to participate by both private and public interests. However the results at the two case study sites indicated that public interests were dominant with the most popular reasons for participation being clustered around democratic functions such as the ability for readers to Have Their Own Say (*Leicester Mercury* 11%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 17%), Be More Up To Date With The News (*Leicester Mercury* 9%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 12%), and Interact With Readers (*Leicester Mercury* 10%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 10%). If these results were calculated by removing the Do Not Participate category they would have been higher still. The results indicated that those readers who did participate wanted to be informed, to inform others and to take part in debates and discussions. They also took an active role in holding the newspaper and other readers accountable. Further comments given by *Leicester Mercury* readers in the questionnaire about their motivation for participating included the opportunity to “give an alternative point of view to the articles that seem biased and against my personal beliefs” and “to correct certain views that are misinformed or just wrong”. Meanwhile a Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR6) said in his interview: “I have commented on stories in the past. If something is incorrectly reported. Sometimes I get on my high horse.” This type of participation therefore enables audience members to be informed about current affairs and be involved in interactive debate with counter arguments so they can “reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt” (Dahlgren, 1991, p.1) and therefore take part in deliberative democracy.

The social aspect of participation also appeared to be important to readers with interaction being important for democratic purposes. A Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR2) commented in her interview: “Sharing news [online] is important to me to encourage debate. I encourage people to write to the local paper so issues can be aired and debated.” Readers also enjoyed the social aspects for more personal reasons such as entertainment purposes (*Leicester Mercury* 8%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 8%), which would suggest that private motivations are not insignificant. One Bournemouth *Daily Echo* interview (BR2) said: “The forum is interesting but it is entertaining more than anything else,” whilst another (BR10) admitted with glee: “I do comment sometimes because I have a particular opinion to put across. But sometimes I comment to be mischievous. I deliberately put on opposite opinions.”

The more narcissistic motivation of Satisfaction of Seeing My Work Published was far less significant overall (*Leicester Mercury* 4%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 4%), however for a small minority it was an important motivating factor. One *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR1) explained in his interview that he had sent in photos or stories to the newspaper because he liked the “local notoriety” and “boost to the confidence and ego” and having his “five minutes of fame.”

A further question in the online questionnaire asked readers to select their reason for visiting the website from the choices of educational value, informational value, entertainment value and social value. The vast majority at both case study sites (90%) selected informational value rather than the other three options. This reinforces the argument that online news consumption is driven by a desire by readers to be informed and indeed as Jackson (1971) argues this is an important function of local journalism which should seek to provide the community with political, institutional and cultural information. However as examined above social factors became more important when looking at what motivated readers to actively participate rather than simply consume. As one Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR2) said succinctly: “It is nice to feel there is someone sitting at the other end, writing and interacting instantly.”

When questioned further about what participation enabled readers to do respondents chose democratic purposes first, followed by social and then private, reflecting the results above. The results in Graph 6.3 below are based on the percentage of readers who ticked each response out of a selection of six.

Graph 6.3: Effect of participation on reader

Participation Enables Me To Take Part In Moral, Ethical and Political Debates was the most popular selection (*Leicester Mercury* 17%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 18%) indicating that readers are motivated by a desire to take part in debate. The second most popular selection was participation Enables Me To Share With Others (*Leicester Mercury* 14%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 14%) which as discussed above can be underlined by public and private motivations. The third most frequent choice was participation Helps Me To Vent My Anger/Dissatisfaction’ (*Leicester Mercury* 12%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 14%) which had similar results to the Sharing With Others option. Again this implies that participation can be for narcissistic private purposes to let off steam rather than engage in debate with others. It is also interesting to look at the low results for the option of participation Empowers Me To Take Further Action which was relatively minor at both case study sites (*Leicester Mercury* 4%, Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 6%). This could suggest that although participation is a good starting point for democratic debate and feedback to a newspaper it rarely leads to greater political action in the wider public sphere.

**Democratization of expression**

The nature of this research is to explore the relationship between journalists and readers therefore it is interesting to explore how journalists view their readers and whether their beliefs of what motivates readers to participate is in accordance with what readers actually say. In the interviews with journalists the researcher asked: What do you think motivates readers to participate? The most frequent reasons given by journalists were similar to the reader responses as they suggested that readers had a desire to take part in democratic debate and to express their opinions (around 30% at both case study sites). One Bournemouth *Daily Echo* web team member (B5) commented that readers were “interested in good debate” whilst another web team member (B6) said “people like to have their say and also people like to debate issues”.

David MacLean, political correspondent (L10) at the *Leicester Mercury* felt that readers were motivated by the fact that technology had enabled them to play a more active democratic role:

I think a lot of readers are frustrated that they don’t really have a voice because we are this huge media organization in the middle of the city which people have read the newspaper of for years but now most of them can’t be bothered to write letters or call in but now they instantly read something in the paper and go I disagree with that, why the hell is the Leicester Mercury covering that, or I love that story and I think they do want to take part and they do feel like they have more of a voice now.

This was echoed by the *Leicester Mercury* deputy editor, Richard Bettsworth (L13) who also took a deterministic viewpoint:

I think the internet has created a democratization of expression. It means that a lot of people feel they can have a say about a lot of topics in a way that wasn’t possible before the existence of the internet…And you are instantly published so I think that has created a much more energetically discursive society and I think that people as a result, my guess is that more people feel they can participate in the debate which is going on in society all the time and that wasn’t the case before the internet.

However other explanations from journalists were more varied and focused less on sharing experiences or informing others. Journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* were most sceptical with 50 per cent suggesting that readers simply participated to gain status amongst their peers compared to zero per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. One *Leicester Mercury* reporter (L4) said participation “makes people feel important” whilst the web editor (L8) said “some people like the fact that they have got an audience”. By contrast, at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* there was a greater emphasis on readers’ desire to interact directly with journalists and further deterministic factors such as the ease and immediacy of participation. This was perhaps not surprising given that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was more positive about reader participation and as outlined in Chapter 5 had more participatory channels. Only one journalist at each case study site referred to entertainment as a motivating factor which was significantly lower than the amount of readers who chose this as a motivating factor as illustrated in Graph 6.2. These findings would suggest that journalists only understand some of the reasons why audiences participate. Readers themselves said the ability to have their own say was appealing (Graph 6.2) and this was also recognised by journalists with a third of interviewees believing that being able to express an opinion or take part in democratic debate was what encouraged readers to participate. However journalists failed to recognise that it was important for readers to be able to interact with one another, be informed and be entertained. However journalists did identify a mixture of private (Gaining Status) and personal (Democratic Debate) interests as motivating factors for reader participation.

**The bottom line**

As discussed in Chapter 2 the libertarian free market model of newspapers which has evolved in Britain means that print journalism has a constant battle between commercial imperatives of the parent company and the unwritten societal obligations with which journalists adorn themselves. The professional ideology of journalism as explored in Chapter 2 is partly one of public service (Donsbach, 2010; Deuze, 2005; McQuail, 2005) objectivity (Donsbach, 2010; Deuze, 2005) and providing a platform for outsider voices (Heinonen, 2011) yet there is a constant awareness of economic pressures to create a popular product which will sell and make profit (Donsbach, 2010). With this in mind this study sought to explore the motivating factors driving newspaper companies’ desire to increase reader participation and whether economic factors prevailed over ideals of social responsibility.

The journalist interview responses were coded organically (see Appendix 2d) according to the answers given rather than there being predetermined categories. The most dominant answer was the one which was recorded. Graph 6.4 shows the four coded responses displayed as a percentage. The findings show that journalists resoundingly thought newspapers were being motivated by economic factors rather than journalistic or civic ones.

Graph 6.4: What motivates newspapers to increase reader participation?

At both case study sites more than 60 per cent of journalists interviewed said newspapers were motivated to increase reader participation because of a desire to remain competitive. The second most popular response was also an economic one with 30 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* journalists and almost 20 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* journalists identifying a need to increase profits as a motivating factor. The journalists appeared to be more aware of the drive towards competitiveness rather than profits which may be expected as journalists are more concerned with their day to day job which involves beating rival media organisations to stories rather than the broader organisational need to maintain high profit margins which is perceived to be the over-riding concern of senior management.

Motivations related more closely to the unwritten societal obligation of serving the public by creating robust pieces of journalism and giving readers a voice, were slight at both case study sites. Responses to the categories Creating Better Stories and Empowering Citizens consisted of less than 10 per cent at the *Leicester Mercury* and less than 15 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. Indeed no journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* saw empowering citizens as a motivating factor. Again this reflects the more sceptical nature of journalists at this case study site which was somewhat surprising given its relationship with citizen journalism outlet *Citizens’ Eye*, explored further in Chapter 12.

Being more competitive and thus remaining profitable were the fundamental motivating factors raised by more than 80 per cent of journalists at both case study sites. A sports reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B14) said the growth of the internet had levelled the playing field forcing them to adapt:

I think it was more that other people were starting to, our rivals, we haven’t got rivals as such as there are no other papers here that cover the clubs that we cover, but we have got the radio and the TV and we were kind of forced into it by them because they were starting to use their websites and social media in the more recent months to break stories and we were getting done on stories.

Meanwhile the features editor of the *Leicester Mercury*, Alex Dawson (L6) described a landscape where publishers were frantically trying to grasp readers’ attention to maintain sales.

There is a desperate need to persuade ourselves that we’re still relevant. An over anxiety to engage with the public to make them say our name, write to us, have some sort of interaction with us and maybe, maybe they’ll buy a paper somewhere down the line (L6).

The theme of remaining competitive was also detected during the observation period. The duty news editor at the *Leicester Mercury* explained to the researcher that during a routine check of Twitter she had come across a tweet from a councillor asking the paper to investigate a story about a community centre reopening. The news editor commented that “it’s great we get it before anyone else”. The value of the tweet was that it meant the newspaper could be competitive and beat its rivals rather than an acknowledgement that readers were participating in the news process. Furthermore during the English Defence League march in Leicester in October 2010 the news editor and web editor used Twitter to keep ahead of rival media such as the BBC by pooling information on the social media platform and by breaking live news on Twitter rather than on the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website. Again the emphasis from the journalists was that audience participation was a helpful tool to help them keep ahead of the competition.

The interviews with journalists at both case study sites also revealed that a large part of remaining competitive was the desire to keep hold of readers and attract new readers to the newspaper website. Brand loyalty was a recurring theme and one which this study also returns to in Chapters 7, 9 and 11. The web editor at the *Leicester Mercury* (L8) and the digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B1) both stressed the importance of getting people to return to the website and to feel a connection to the brand.

There is a drive to get more users, more visitors, to get more people interacting, participating and coming back to the site so they feel they have got a say and can be involved and get feedback as well (L8).

The word “brand” was referred to by journalists in both the interviews and during the observation period at both case study sites. During a morning conference at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* a discussion broke out about the moderation of comments on the website and how to handle complaints about abusive comments. The editor remarked “we have to remember that this is our brand” and argued that abusive comments from the public reflected badly on the newspaper. The concern was about the reputation and integrity of the newspaper but ultimately this was an economic anxiety as the editor said he was not willing to stop readers from commenting because “if we stop we will lose audience and at the moment it is going up 25 per cent a year. It is about risk and reward.” This statement was supported by web analytics which showed that as the number of registered readers able to comment on stories on the website had increased so had the overall audience. The website had seen 60 per cent growth in page impressions since 2009 and this was still on the increase. Therefore the economic incentive to allow comments and build audiences was the primary concern for the editor.

Although the graph above separates competitiveness from profits it was clear during the interviews that these two factors were interrelated. For example at the *Leicester Mercury* it was observed that there was a connection between creating brand loyalty for competitive reasons and for a resource purpose linked to increasing profit margins. Reader photographs were used in the newspaper and on the newspaper website for two main reasons. Firstly because there was the view that readers would come back to the company’s products if they knew their content would be published as Jason Senior, Picture Editor (L2) remarked: “It’s really important that the punters see that their pictures are getting to us and will be used.” Secondly reader photographs were a useful resource and could be used as free content to fill a page. By using free content to populate the newspaper and website the company could save money and in turn maintain profit margins. Furthermore building brand loyalty by offering more participatory channels also opened up more revenue opportunities. As the *Leicester Mercury* web editor (L8) explained succinctly: “The more people can participate in, the more involved they can be, the more they will come back, the more advertisers you might get.”

As discussed in Chapter 1 newspaper companies have seen a slump in profit margins during the past decade and therefore it is understandable that a commercial organisation such as a regional newspaper would want to somehow maintain its profit margins. At both case study sites it was apparent that the companies were predominantly encouraging reader participation to remain profitable. By capitalising on free content from readers newspaper companies were able to redirect investment and make staffing cuts without cutting their content output. Senior editorial staff were preoccupied with utilising participation to drive traffic to their websites and using reader participation, in particular user generated content, as a cheap or free resource. This was a concern for a number of journalists at both case study sites who feared they might eventually be replaced by members of the public who would create poor quality content. A reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B16) thought reader content was “just a form of cheap labour or free labour, at the expense of journalists’ jobs. I think that’s the reason they want to encourage people to do that sort of thing, to save money and journalists.” This reliance on free resources was even more evident at the *Leicester Mercury* which had a partnership with a community reporter organisation as discussed at length in Chapter 12. During the observation period it became clear that free resources were being used and even relied upon to provide video content for the website as there were not enough journalists to undertake this work. Encouraging reader participation was therefore a means of getting content for free.

As mentioned above encouraging participation was also perceived as helping to build brand loyalty and drive traffic to the newspaper websites. During the observation period one of the web team members (B5) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* spoke about user generated content in terms of the number of page views it generated. Successful participation was measured in terms of the increase in website visits rather than the quality of comments, stories or photos or their ability to stimulate debate or empower citizens. However there was some evidence of economic and civic motivations co-existing as the *Leicester Mercury* rugby correspondent, Martin Crowson (L9) articulated:

Surely what we should be trying to do as journalists is to encourage discussion about people and about things that we write about and so for that reason participation is very good. And business wise it is attracting people to your website and if people are doing it regularly they will log online and see what people are debating the next day and you are getting more hits and therefore your advertising sales are going up as a result.

6.4 Discussion

The findings from this research would suggest that deterministic factors are prevalent and the accessibility, immediacy and cheapness of technology are driving more people to participate. A recurring comment from both readers and journalists was that it was “easy” for the public to send in a photo to a newspaper from the scene of a breaking news story and it was “easier” to fire off a comment on a story than to sit down, write a letter and post it to the newspaper. Graph 6.1 indicates that using the website is more convenient for readers and being able to interact immediately is also an incentive for some. As discussed in Chapter 5 there is also a cultural shift which means that audiences expect to be able to take part. This would support the view that the internet and in particular Web 2.0 has heightened the activeness of audiences, due to technological accessibility and cultural expectations in line with the arguments of a variety of scholars who hold such an optimistic view (Lewis, 2001; Rosen, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003).

Although the ease of participation may be one motivating factor there is also a sense that audiences are largely motivated by altruistic or democratic reasons rather than personal gain. As Howe argues audiences are “not primarily motivated by money” and instead are motivated by “the cause” as they perceive being involved reward in itself (2008, p.29). As Graphs 6.2 and 6.3 indicate readers are motivated by a desire to take part in debate, express their opinion, be informed and interact with others. These all form important parts of the democratic process and enable journalists to perform their public service role outlined by Deuze (2005) by informing citizens and providing a platform for outsider voices (Heinonen, 2011). Through participation audience members can be enlightened, be educated and can reach mutual understanding of the common good (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003). An important part of this process is enabling audience members to hear counterarguments and a variety of viewpoints (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003; Ross and Nightingale, 2003; Marcus, 1988) which can occur through a number of communication channels including comment threads, social media networks and via the different perspectives provided by user generated content.

However the motivating factor that readers participate to gain a sense of “being part of an online community” (Vujnovic, 2011; p.150) is less striking and is only the fifth most popular response. This may be due to the infancy of these communication channels which at the time of the research were only around two years old and had yet to develop a cohesive community unlike the newspapers which had been established for more than 100 years.

It is also apparent from the findings that as prior research suggests readers are also motivated to participate by private interests as well as public (Paulussen, 2007; Deuze, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003). As would be expected different audiences participate for different reasons and as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) reason, people engage in varying levels of participation depending on the topic – what they refer to as the Interlocking Public. This is supported by Gillmor (2006) who concludes that although the masses may not care about all the issues, individuals care about some of them. As the results above indicate, entertainment is a motivating factor for some together with the chance to vent frustration, which can also be a form of entertainment. But as Hermida (2011a) suggests “sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news” (p.7) whether this is due to democratic motivations to rally support around a cause or personal reasons such as interacting as a form of entertainment, or appreciation to gain social status. This research indicates that there are multifaceted motivations for reader participation but they are more in line with public interests than the sceptical journalists in the study would imagine.

Indeed many journalists dismiss reader participation, claiming their content is “poor quality” or their comments are “irrelevant” or merely “entertaining to read”. As research by Singer *et al* found, although some journalists stress the democratic benefit of including reader participation and user generated content others fear doing so “undermines the very basis of journalism” (Quandt, 2011, p.156) by endangering professional norms such as accuracy. It is therefore not surprising that the findings of this chapter indicate the journalists fail to understand the full range of participation motivations expressed by readers. Journalists recognised the desire to take part in democratic debate but put far too much emphasis on readers longing to gain status. Furthermore, journalists failed to recognise the social aspects of participation particularly the desire to share, interact and entertain. From the observation and interviews it was apparent that journalists spent little time thinking about how to harness participation or encourage political action. Journalists were not using technology to facilitate conversations between professionals, citizen journalists and users as Gillmor (2006) suggests they should, neither did they acknowledge that collective participation had value exceeding that provided by an individual participant as Howe (2009) and O’Reilly and Battelle (2009) maintain. Rather than acting a “curators, enablers, organizers, educators" (Jarvis, 2008) journalists in this study acted as miners, selectively excavating reader feedback and reader content to make their job easier. Indeed economic logic would suggest that journalists are fulfilling their traditional traits of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics (Deuze, 2005) by observing and informing, commentating, and providing a platform for outsider voices (Heinonen, 2011) but they have no commercial or societal obligation to go beyond these functions to facilitate political action.

Therefore despite evidence in this research that the ability to take part in democratic debate and to express opinions is a motivating factor for readers the extent to which this harnesses rigorous deliberation or further engenders political action remains limited. As editors and scholars argue, audiences are keen to engage in political conversation and harness the potential of Web 2.0 for democratic debate (Rusbridger, 2010; Gillmor, 2006; Bowman and Willis, 2003) yet as this research suggests journalists remain more reluctant. Journalists are often failing to engage in two way communication as explored in Chapters 7 and 10 and do not encourage participation beyond asking to readers to give feedback or send in content. As will be discussed in Chapter 9 the democratic and journalistic value of participation as outlined in Chapter 2 has not yet reached its full potential.

The reason for this reluctance and restriction could be attributed to the last section of findings which starkly reveal that there is a commercial imperative to increasing the number of participatory channels and reader participation is clearly being motivated by market forces rather than civic ones as both Banks and Humphreys (2008) and Paulussen *et al* (2007) contend. As discussed in Chapter 5 enabling greater participation can attract more audiences, who in turn will be more active. Furthermore a lack of resources means journalists have to work efficiently and harvest free content rather than harness its potential for civic engagement, mirroring the findings of Paulussen (2011) whereby priority is given to the production of stories rather than participation. Journalists at both case study sites were very aware of the need to drive traffic to their websites, build brand loyalty, beat the competition and keep costs down to make the company as profitable as possible, findings very similar to the international research of Singer *et al* (2011). By building a community of customers online through various communication channels, newspaper companies can create spaces where readers can engage in the product and thus brand loyalty can be built (Heinonen, 2011). This economic imperative is largely to be expected due to the commercial model on which local newspapers have evolved, as discussed in Chapter 1.

As Donsbach (2010) claims “economic journalism” has come to the forefront of journalistic identity and journalists are increasingly driven by a “necessity to reach the widest audience” (p.41) despite running the risk that journalism will lose its social function. Indeed Vujnovic (2011) argues that newspaper companies view publics as consumers of an information commodity and therefore the desire to build brand loyalty is “the real motive behind efforts to create a sense of community among website users” (p.145). But what is perhaps more interesting to note is the extent to which market motivations can co-exist alongside the unwritten social obligations of journalism. As Vujnovic notes, journalists “almost always discuss economic motivations in tandem with concerns about how to improve journalism, particularly in terms of its democratic social function,” (p.150). Furthermore Jenkins (2005) believes it is possible for the two to exist together, albeit often in conflict, a view outlined pre-Web 2.0 by Garnham (1986) and developed in Bourdieu’s (2005) notion of the journalistic field. This field is structured around the opposition between heteronomous economic capital and autonomous cultural capital in which journalists flow back and forth. Journalists and news organisations which operate within a commercial structure are constantly torn between the “contradictory demands of economic profitability, taking political positions and the imperatives proper to intellectual work” (Champagne, 2005, p.50) and British regional newspapers are not immune to these conflicts.

**Conclusion**

Readers are motivated to participate for a variety of reasons, many of them more altruistic or democratic than journalists would first assume. But readers cannot act alone and need more than peer-to-peer conversation (Goode, 2009). Furthermore Howe (2008) argues that the community of participators need “benevolent dictators” to guide them (p. 284) yet in the two case study sites of this research there is little evidence of such benevolent dictators. Therefore although there is the potential for local newspapers online to create deliberative forums, as Coleman and Blumler (2009) point out the right conditions have to exist first. Currently these conditions are not in place due to a greater emphasis on economic motivations from journalists and news organisations, despite the potential being there.

**Chapter 7: Nature of participation**

7.1 Introduction

It has been established in Chapter 5 that audience participation at the two case study sites is on the increase, reflecting a trend across the industry on a local, national and international level. But there is still great variation in the industry with each individual newspaper company choosing to open up participation in different ways. This chapter therefore seeks to explore the types of participation available to audiences at the two case study sites in order to address **RQ2a: What is the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?** Part of this process is a descriptive one explaining the range of participatory channels on offer at the locations in question. It is also relevant to indicate whether these channels of participation are one way (reader to content) or two way (reader to reader or reader to journalist) processes of communication, and whether any element of journalist moderation is involved. These findings relate to Chapters 10 and 11 which examine how the gatekeeping role of journalists is being impacted by Web 2.0. Research to date suggests that most journalists are striving to maintain editorial control online (Deuze, 2006) and user generated content is tailored, filtered and moderated to suit their own needs (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Furthermore the participation process often involves audiences taking part but very little interaction in return from journalists, thus continuing the traditional one way communication model (Chung, 2007; Broersma and Graham, 2011; Hermida *et al*, 2011).

This chapter will also investigate the most popular channels of participation to understand what type of participation is most prevalent. As set out in Chapter 4, this study proposes that audiences sit across a spectrum of participatory activity, ranging between passive, sharing and active involvement in the news process. As explored in Chapter 2 audiences move up and down this spectrum depending on the topic (Kovach and Rosential, 2007; McQuail, 1997) and audiences that were traditionally viewed as passive are active in some form in the online environment, simply through the process of selecting or interpreting media content. In this study passive audiences are defined as those who simply view content online which may include selecting content to view and navigating through a website. Sharing audiences are those who share existing news stories and hyperlinks via email and social media networks. Active audiences are those who produce content for mainstream news organisations or those who respond to news content online. It was necessary to distinguish between active and sharing audiences as different forms of participation due to growing evidence that news is becoming an increasingly social act online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010) with sharing news and information becoming a significant form of participation (Heinonen, 2011; Hermida *et al*, a 2011). Nether-the-less in this research, sharing involves a level of engagement beyond passivity, but one that is not as heightened as active participation.

The final part of this chapter observes what journalists perceive to be the most prevalent channels of participation and whether this correlates to the experiences of audiences.

7.2 Methods

The methodology for this research question took the same format as RQ1a and RQ1b described in Chapters 5 and 6. This involved an online reader questionnaire, observation within the news rooms of the two case study sites and interviews with journalists and readers.

In relation to RQ2a the questionnaire asked four questions about how often participants took part in passive, sharing or active engagements on the case study website and associated social media platforms. The last questions focused on the type of online content the participant shared or actively participated in. The full questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix 1a. The questionnaire results were made of 328 respondents from the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and 177 readers from the *Leicester Mercury*. All of the tables in this chapter display the total number of respondents for each answer, whilst the graphs are based on percentages from the total sample.

The semi-structured interviews with journalists were based on an interview guide and checklist (Appendix 2a) which included a question on the changing nature of interaction between newspapers and readers. As part of this question the researcher asked about the types of participation and interaction available and which were most prevalent. The checklist included topics such as user generated content, social media, email and their say which consisted of reader opinion or feedback given to the newspaper or website. During the interviews it quickly became apparent that comments on stories were one of the largest participation channels and therefore probing questions about this channel were asked of each interviewee.

The interviews with readers were based on a sample selected via the questionnaire as discussed in Chapter 4. These were conducted by telephone and the participants were asked to expand on the answers to each of the questionnaire questions. This enabled the researcher to have a greater qualitative understanding of the questionnaire results.

7.3 Results

Due to the nature of the research question addressed here, which explores the type of audience participation found on local newspaper websites, the findings of this chapter are largely drawn from the online questionnaire. However the first section of the chapter explores the participatory channels available and the final section examines the perceptions of journalists. These two sections were therefore investigated via journalist interviews and observation.

The results are presented in six sub sections exploring the different aspects of the research question outlined above. The sub headings look at the following: participatory channels, passive digital users, sharing digital users, active digital users, news above entertainment, photographic views and personal views.

The results refer to the participation model outlined in Chapter 2 which is reproduced below. As examined in Chapter 2 the stages of newsgathering, dissemination and responding are increasingly open to the public within Web 2.0 but the stage of production is where gatekeeping is most strongly in force. Therefore the production process is usually closed to readers and traditional gatekeeping remains upheld.

Table 2.2: Web 2.0 participation model

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Type* | Newsgathering | Production | Disseminating | Responding |
| *Description* | Collecting raw information, photos, video footage, audio and publishing online or sending to journalists | Producing news stories, video, audio, photos for professional publication | Distributing professional content to a wider audience | Giving feedback, analysing and interpreting professional content |
| *Examples* | UGC, tip-offs, leaks, ideas, blogging, data trawling | Selection, reporting, editing | Sharing via email and social media networks, tagging, bookmarking | Comments, email letters to editor, email journalists, liking / recommending posts, polls, rating content |

**Participatory channels**

Tables 7.1 and 7.2 indicate the range of participatory channels available at each of the case study sites and how open they are to public interaction. These tables refer to channels available between October 2010 and October 2011.

Table 7.1: *Leicester Mercury* online channels of participation

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Channel** | **Description** | **Dominant communication model** | **Moderated** | **Participation type** |
| Comments | Registered readers able to comment on most stories on the website | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Submit photos/ videos | Readers can email photos and videos to the news room or emailing a link to YouTube/Flickr | 1 way | Yes | Newsgathering |
| Blogs | Readers able to comment on the blogs of journalists hosted separately to the newspaper website | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Emails | Readers can email stories, tip offs, information and questions to the news desk or journalists | 1 way | Yes | Newsgathering |
| Twitter | Readers can upload content, interact with journalists and share content on Twitter, or reader feeds can be embedded in newspaper website | 2 way journalists | No | Newsgathering Production Dissemination Responding |
| Facebook | Readers can post messages on newspaper Facebook wall | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Q&A | Live discussion on the website open to readers to submit questions and comments | 2 way readers | Yes/No | Responding |

Table 7.2: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* online channels of participation

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Channel** | **Description** | **Dominant communication model** | **Moderated** | **Participation type** |
| Comments | Registered readers able to comment on most stories on the website | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Submit photos/ videos | Readers can submit stories, photos, videos through the website, via email or by emailing a link to YouTube/Flickr | 1 way | Yes | Newsgathering |
| Online polls | Readers can take part in polls on the website, Facebook, Flickr or Twitter | 1 way | No | Responding |
| Blogs | Readers able to comment on the blogs of journalists and bloggers hosted on the newspaper website | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Emails | Readers can email stories, tip offs, information and questions to the news desk or journalists | 1 way | Yes | Newsgathering |
| Twitter | Readers can upload content, interact with journalists and share content on Twitter | 2 way journalists | No | Newsgathering Dissemination Responding |
| Facebook | Readers can post messages on newspaper Facebook wall | 2 way readers | No | Responding |
| Q&A | Live discussion on the website open to readers to submit questions and comments | 2 way readers | Yes/No | Responding |
| Live blogging | Covering a news story or sports match live and interacting with readers | 2 way journalists | Yes | Responding |
| Flickr | Readers can post photos on newspaper Flickr groups which are linked to website and start discussions on Flickr, readers then vote for their favourite photos | 2 way readers | Yes/No | Newsgathering Production Responding |
| Tumblr: Echoes The Echo Chamber | Newspaper shares content from readers (comments, photos) and own website and invites submissions/questions | 2 way journalists | No | Dissemination Responding |
| Delicious | Journalists share links to press releases and documents via bookmarking website | 2 way journalists | No | Dissemination |
| Sharing | Stories on website can be shared via Facebook, Twitter or email. | 2 way readers | No | Dissemination |

The two newspaper organisations had a range of online participatory channels which enabled readers to submit content, give feedback, share content and interact with journalists. The dominant communication model was two way between readers. Most of the participatory channels enabled readers to talk to one another and although there was the ability for journalists to also interact with readers this rarely occurred. This was a recurring theme of the research and is developed in Chapter 8. The only exception was Twitter which as illustrated in Chapter 11, was a two way communication model between journalists and readers, although this was stronger on individual journalists’ accounts rather than on the official newspaper accounts.

All of the two-way communication channels were not moderated first, although in some cases there was post moderation to remove unsuitable or inappropriate content. Where one way communication prevailed all content was moderated. The tables above indicate that participation via a one way moderated channel existed at the first stage of participation in the newsgathering stage (refer to Table 1.2) this prevented readers from being involved in the production stage. The website bournemouthecho.co.uk invited readers to submit stories, photos and videos “for a chance to get published”, rather than to direct upload content to the website. However the final stage of responding was a more open process with no moderation and greater communication between parties. The only exception to this would be Twitter which was unmoderated at both the newsgathering and responding stage. Indeed Twitter appeared to be the only participatory channel which breached most gatekeeping rules. During the English Defence League march in Leicester the web editor embedded a Twitter widget on the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website with hashtag #leicester. This was not moderated and included strong language which would not normally be tolerated on the newspaper website in content by journalists or readers. However a view was taken by the web editor that it was acceptable as the content was identifiable as a Twitter feed and not *Leicester Mercury* content. Also it was not archived material but a constant rolling feed therefore it had no permanence on the website. In this instance readers were also producing content with no gatekeeping from the newspaper.

The research reveals that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* attempted to engage audiences and interact with them to a far greater extent than the *Leicester Mercury*. During the observation period it was apparent that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* web team were continually creating new ideas to get readers involved in their brand and the local community. The digital projects co-ordinator experimented with a range of social media platforms such as Tumblr, Delicious, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and Facebook although due to time constraints was not able to continue with them all. Two accounts were set up on Tumblr but these had been inactive several months. The Flickr groups had been a success however and there were a range of groups with a few hundred members each. These included a monthly group where readers took photos representing the month and these were voted on by the public. The best photos were published in the newspaper and on the website. This was continued all year round and resulted in thousands of photographs being posted to Flickr. Readers were permitted to submit three photos a day and each month the newspaper selected the best 18 photos and asked readers on Facebook and Twitter to vote for their favourite. The most voted seven to 10 photos were then published in the newspaper and on the website. Another round of voting then took place on Flickr to find the best photo for each month. This process allowed readers to be involved in the selection process of production although the original selection was made by the newspaper. Readers could also discuss the photos on Flickr, Facebook and Twitter as part of the responding process. This is an example of readers being involved in the production process albeit within boundaries set by the newspaper. However the majority of these photos were not news related and this interaction was based around building a recreational photography community related to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* as a trustworthy, community brand. It also served an economic function by enabling the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* to regularly produce photography books based on reader photographs. Readers were given a byline for their photographs rather than payment and proceeds from the sale of the books went directly to the newspaper company.

A further example of generating interaction at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was recorded during the first week of observation. One of the web team was creating the hashtag #echoshow for Twitter users to discuss local bands and give them live feedback from shows. The web team also spoke about utilising reader photos from major events such as the annual air show. These were planned months in advance so they could be promoted and designated areas could be created on the website. This was in opposition to the reactionary approach of the *Leicester Mercury* which tended to wait and see how many reader photos were submitted after an event before deciding whether to build a gallery on the website or dedicate a page in the newspaper to reader photos.

**Passive digital users**

It was immediately apparent from the results at both case study sites that the vast majority of web users visited the website or accessed its digital platforms on a daily basis and the main objective was to read the content, which in this study has been defined as passive participation. Graph 7.1 displays the results of the reader questionnaire as a percentage and indicates the frequency of online visits. This graph includes visits to the newspaper website, associated social media platforms and/or receiving the newspaper’s email newsletter or RSS feeds.

Graph 7.1: Frequency of visits

More than 85 per cent of readers at both case study sites visited the website or other digital platforms daily, with around 10 per cent visiting weekly. This indicates that the habit of reading a printed newspaper daily has transferred across to the online environment. Table 7.3 and 7.4 give a breakdown of the different digital platforms that readers were accessing. The figures shown are the total number of responses for each answer.

Table 7.3: *Leicester Mercury* online users frequency of passive engagements

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Engagement** | **Every day** | **Every week** | **Every month** | **Every 2 to 6 months** | **Never** |
| **Read LM tweets** | 13 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 122 |
| **Read stories on LM website** | 113 | 23 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| **Read LM email newsletters** | 6 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 127 |
| **Read LM**  **RSS feeds** | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 134 |

Table 7.4: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* online users frequency of passive engagements

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Engagement** | **Every day** | **Every week** | **Every month** | **Every 2 to 6 months** | **Never** |
| **Read BE tweets** | 25 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 231 |
| **Read stories on BE website** | 219 | 41 | 3 | 3 | 8 |
| **Read BE email newsletters** | 22 | 10 | 6 | 1 | 235 |
| **Read BE**  **RSS feeds** | 26 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 236 |
| **View BE Facebook post** | 13 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 247 |
| **View BE YouTube channel** | 2 | 4 | 7 | 15 | 246 |
| **View BE Flickr gallery** | 6 | 9 | 25 | 43 | 191 |

Reading stories on the website was the biggest passive online activity at both case study sites followed by reading tweets, reading the email newsletter and lastly reading RSS feeds. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had more passive channels due to a wider range of digital platforms including Flickr and YouTube. Text based formats were still the most popular online followed by photographs and then videos, despite Web 2.0 allowing for good quality multimedia content. This may be due to a number of factors including the dominance of text based content online at both case study sites, the historical context and identity of the brands as text based products and the variable quality, frequency and infancy of videos online. There is also evidence to suggest that online users mostly view news websites whilst they are at work where they have restricted access to video content (Thurman and Walters, 2012). The daily passive online activity of readers is illustrated further in Figures 7.1 and 7.2 below. It should be noted that Facebook/YouTube and Flickr were non-applicable to *Leicester Mercury* users as these activities were not available at the time the data was collected.

Figure 7.1: *Leicester Mercury* daily activity of users

Figure 7.2: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* daily activity of users

It is interesting to note in Tables 7.3 and 7.4 above that text based engagements tended to be daily but the viewing of photo and videos was a more occasional activity. This may be due to photos and videos being more entertainment based rather than breaking news and not being updated as regularly. Graph 7.2 explores in more detail how often readers view Flickr and YouTube content.

Graph 7.2: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* percentage of user participation rates on Flickr and YouTube

The responses were similar for both Flickr and YouTube, although viewing Flickr content was more popular than YouTube. Most readers viewed both sites every few months, and more frequent visits were less common.

**Sharing digital users**

Although most readers were passive users of the case study online platforms there was evidence of sharing activity particularly on the newspaper websites. Tables 7.5 and 7.6 show how often readers shared material on the newspaper websites by emailing stories to other people or posting stories to their social media feeds (Share website content). Readers also shared material via retweeting on Twitter (Retweet LM/BE tweet) or hyperlinking to the newspaper website from another website, blog or Facebook (Link to LM/BE story).

Table 7.5: *Leicester Mercury* users sharing frequency

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **Daily** | **Weekly** | **Monthly** | **Every 2 to 6 months** | **Never** |
| **Share website content** | 6 | 26 | 21 | 25 | 63 |
| **Retweet LM tweet** | 0 | 7 | 5 | 3 | 126 |
| **Link to LM story** | 1 | 9 | 9 | 15 | 107 |

Table 7.6: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* users sharing frequency

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **Daily** | **Weekly** | **Monthly** | **Every 2 to 6 months** | **Never** |
| **Share website content** | 13 | 39 | 42 | 72 | 108 |
| **Retweet LM tweet** | 3 | 8 | 14 | 4 | 245 |
| **Link to LM story** | 2 | 11 | 24 | 28 | 209 |

The combined results illustrated in Graphs 7.3 and 7.4 indicate that at both case study sites sharing content from the website was the most popular sharing activity, followed by linking to the website and thirdly retweeting on Twitter.

Graph 7.3: *Leicester Mercury* users sharing activity

Graph 7.4: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* users sharing activity

The results were very similar at both case study sites with more than 50 per cent of readers sometimes sharing website content as well as linking to the website and retweeting to a lesser extent. As Tables 7.5 and 7.6 indicate readers were likely to share content occasionally rather than daily. The results were spread fairly evenly between sharing weekly, monthly and every two to six months. However at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* sharing website content was more likely to happen less regularly than at the *Leicester Mercury* but this may have been due to more readers sharing content overall even though it was less frequent.

From the reader interviews it was possible to identify patterns in reader sharing activity and why it occurred occasionally rather than daily. All of the readers who shared content said they sent stories of particular interest to friends or family. Interest may be due to knowing someone in the story, the story having a quirky angle or a story covering a topical issue of importance to the reader and their social circle. LR3 said “I link to stories from Facebook about people I know and things that are amusing, usually humour/entertaining stories”, whilst BR3 said “I email stories to my parents outside Bournemouth and to a friend, stories that might be of interest to them”. For LR3 the whole experience of using the *Leicester Mercury* website was a social one as well as an informative one.

Some readers took a more political approach and shared stories with the intention of informing peers about issues they felt strongly about that might lead to further political action. LR4 said that due to living in America they were interested in sharing health stories in the UK press to their friends because “the USA is going the way of the NHS and it will be a disaster”. Furthermore BR2 admitted that they were a lobbyist for environmental issues and they shared stories to further their campaign:

I forward stories on environmental issues to friends or colleagues I think might be interested. I might post an Echo story on Facebook and I have access to a couple of blogs where I might post things. Sharing news is important to me, to encourage debate and to encourage people to write to the local paper for issues to be aired and debated (BR2).

It can therefore be seen that sharing news is an important social and political activity for readers.

**Active digital users**

The results above indicate that most readers were most frequently passive but occasionally sharing. The findings also suggest that readers were occasionally active although to a slightly lesser extent than sharing. Active audiences included those who took part in online question and answers sessions, emailed journalists, sent in user generated content such as stories, photos or video and those who commented on stories on the website or associated social media networks. Graph 7.6 and 7.7 illustrate that more than 40 per cent of readers who took part in the questionnaire were sometimes active.

Graph 7.5: *Leicester Mercury* active participation rates

Graph 7.6: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* active participation rates

Again the results were very similar at both case study sites with commenting on the website and taking part in Q&As being the most popular forms of active participation. Sending in photos was more popular at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and this may be due to their presence on Flickr and deliberate attempt to build a photographic community as discussed above. Overall active levels were slightly higher at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which could be due to a stronger web team, a drive to create interactivity and more channels of participation being available, this is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers were also asked about their active use of Facebook and Flickr as shown in Figure 7.4. During the timeframe of the questionnaire the *Leicester Mercury* did not have a Facebook page and to date it does not have a Flickr page. As with sharing activity the results found that active participation occurred more frequently at occasional intervals rather than on a daily basis. Active participation was likely to happen less frequently than sharing activity and was most popular every two to six months as shown in Figure 7.3 and 7.4 below.

Figure 7.3: *Leicester Mercury* occasional active participation

Figure 7.4: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* occasional active participation

Due to the range of participation channels available at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers activity is split between eight choices, although they may be engaged in more than one channel. This may give some explanation for why taking part in a Q&A and commenting on the website was less prominent than at the *Leicester Mercury.*

As with sharing activity, readers in the interviews explained that they became active users of the website and digital platforms on topics of particular personal interest to them. Of all the participants interviewed at both case study sites the majority had commented on the website at least once and most of them read comments. The interviewees tended to be split into those who commented occasionally on topics of interest or to correct mistakes and those who commented frequently as a matter of course as part of their social engagement with the website. As BR11 explained “the social side has drawn me in a lot more than the newspaper did”.

Occasional commenter LR1 said they sometimes commented on football stories, whilst BR2 stated “I comment on the website occasionally when it is an issue I’m interested in”, and BR6 said “I comment on news stories, depending on if a story grabs me”. Correctional commenter BR3 said “If someone is spouting off I put on comments to give more information, because of my job as a police officer”, and BR9 also felt compelled to comment to verify information: “I have commented in the past if something is incorrectly reported, sometimes I get on my high horse”.

On the other hand LR3 readily admitted that they were a “prolific commenter on news stories and letters” and BR4 said they “comment everyday but not weekends”. BR4 said in the past they read the newspaper everyday and then went online to email a letter or comment on a story. They enjoyed commenting so much that they stopped buying the newspaper and went straight to the website to leave comments on stories which were then sometimes published in the newspaper. Prior to using the website BR4 wrote letters to the newspaper three or four times a year. This indicates that some of the commenters on the website were the same people who would write regularly to the paper in the past as other interviewees also said they previously wrote to the letters page before the website allowed comments. This contradicts the perception of journalists at both case studies who understood commenters to be a different audience to the traditional green ink brigade. For example Keith Perch editor of the Leicester Mercury (L3) said: “I doubt it’s the same people because we still get a lot of letters from the same sorts of people we have always got letters from.” And Steve Smith, a senior reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B9) also indicated that the website and newspaper had different audiences.

The way I see it you have got an audience that would visit your website and probably doesn’t buy the paper and then you’ve got an audience that buys the paper and probably doesn’t look at the website or if they do probably don’t look at the website very often (B9).

**News above entertainment**

When asked which section of the newspaper website they would be most likely to actively participate in or share with others more than 50 per cent of readers at both case study sites said News. Readers were much less likely to be active or sharing users of Sport, Entertainment, Community or Other sections of the websites, as shown in Graph 7.7.

Graph 7.7: User participation genre

Active or sharing use of sport is likely to be higher at the *Leicester Mercury* due to the area having the Premier League rugby team the Leicester Tigers and the Championship team Leicester City Football Club. These teams have a higher profile than League 1 football team AFC Bournemouth and there is no professional rugby team in the town. Community interest may be more significant at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* due to the smaller and less mobile population as discussed in Chapter 1. These results indicate that readers as a group are mostly participating in the news but participation is also popular to a lesser extent in a diverse range of areas.

**Photographic views and personal views**

The combined results of the reader questionnaire and interviews strongly indicated that readers were most likely to actively participate by commenting on stories, taking part in Q&As and emailing journalists. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* ran regular live blogs covering sports matches and events like press conferences where readers could take part by asking questions and leaving comments via software Cover It Live and Scribble. Similarly live Q&As had also been used for news stories and debates with local politicians. One Bournemouth *Daily Echo* sports reporter (B14) said he had been “blown away” by the popularity of one particular live blog which reported on a breaking sports story regarding the manager of a local football club.

We had comments coming through, we couldn’t keep up to be honest there were so many... There was massive interaction and that was a big part of it. I think people quite like that, they like to be able to pick the brains of the people who write the things they read every day, because they are not stupid, they know there are lots of things up here that aren’t necessarily being written by us on the website, we can’t or, the blogs kind of give us a little bit of leeway, to hint at things. I found you can sort of plant a seed with supporters and get them talking and there was a lot of that with that blog in particular and the supporters definitely like the interaction of it even though it’s just us, we’re just normal people, I think they quite like that... Some of them knew each other but there were other people, there was people all over the world, Australia, Finland, all kinds of random places, all times of day and night and we were all communicating with each other, it was nice (B14).

The results for the *Leicester Mercury* were more surprisingly since the website rarely facilitated Q&As or live blogs making it difficult to attribute why this may have been popular with readers. However journalists did facilitate live reporting from football matches in a section called Kick by Kick (with no reader interactivity) and some reporters live blogged via Twitter which may have been interpreted by respondents as Q&As.

Research by Thurman and Walters (2012) on live blogs at the Guardian.co.uk found that they were more popular than stories or photographs on the same subject and they were meeting the needs of news consumers by providing bite sized information that could accessed in the workplace. This fitted with changing news consumption patterns from the home to the workplace and from print to the web. Thurman and Walters also suggested that live blogs may increase online news readers’ interest in public affairs content and their inclination to participate. Readers were more than twice as likely to participate in live blogs compared to other article types. These findings support the discussion in Chapter 5 which pointed to a correlation between increased participation and a shift from offline to online news consumption.

The design of the research methods in this study meant that it was possible to compare the actions of readers with the perceptions of journalists. The questionnaire was created via a deductive approach based on the literature review to help shape the questions and create valid quantitative results. By contrast the reader interviews were semi-structured and qualitative in nature therefore a combination of deductive and inductive approaches were used. The interview guide was deductive in nature based on the literature but the coding of the interviews was inductive finding patterns between the participants’ responses rather than giving them set answers to respond to as in the questionnaire. This made for an interesting comparison between the reader responses and journalist responses on the same subjects as the journalist interviews were also semi-structured and coded inductively. As outlined above, readers said they participated most in comments, Q&As and emailing journalists. The journalist perception of reader participation types was slightly different however as shown in Graph 7.8.

Journalists at both case study sites believed that the greatest level of reader active participation was sending in photographs but this was actually the fifth most popular choice in the reader questionnaire. Commenting on stories was the third most popular activity perceived by journalists but first with readers. Journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* identified sending in stories as the second most popular activity but this was identified as the least popular at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. This may have been due to the partnership between the *Leicester Mercury* and *Citizens’ Eye* which meant it saw regular story contributions from readers.

Graph 7.8: Journalists’ perception of most frequent participation types

The second most popular activity according to journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was sending in videos, which was the least popular amongst readers. Tips offs and emailing letters were relatively small activities on their own but when combined they would be second place at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and third at the *Leicester Mercury* and indeed this could be equated to the answer in the questionnaire that was emailing journalists. Photographs may have featured slightly higher amongst journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* as mentioned above due to their cultivation of a photographic community and multiple channels for incorporating reader pictures in their newspaper and website as well as ad hoc books. Digital technology has enabled readers to take photographs and easily email them to the news desk rather than having to rely on a newspaper photographer which has been a valuable resource for newspapers with fewer staff. As one of the website team (B6) explained:

You do get a lot of submitted pictures....We have quite a lot of reader galleries where we can use people's pictures online. We have got Echo Country which is scenic shots of Dorset and the New Forest and then we have got We're in the Echo which both appear in the paper as well (B6).

The reason journalists may have perceived that the sending in of photographs was the biggest reader activity may have been due to their own perception of what was most useful to them and therefore they placed greater significance on this area. Most of the journalists interviewed indicated that comments were a great forum for readers to voice their opinions and interact with one another but they were not a great source for stories, although they were useful as a feedback gauge, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

In comparison photographs of breaking news events were viewed as highly valuable sources and the introduction of advanced mobile technology has enabled journalists to receive good quality photographs immediately from the scene of an event from a member of the public which would not have been possible in the recent past. This means they can use breaking news pictures rather than photos from after an event. As Andy Martin head of multimedia content (B8) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* indicated:

If there is a car on fire or a fire in a house or a road traffic accident, if there is an incident going on and we're not there, eight times out of 10 we will get a photograph in from someone from their iPhone or their digital camera or wherever. So in terms of photos we get loads of content (B8).

This was supported by the deputy editor Ed Perkins (B13) who said there had been a definite rise in user generated content in the form of photographs: “I mean certainly in terms of photographically (sic) when there is a crash or a fire or something it’s a fabulous opportunity to get hold of instant pictures.”

7.4 Discussion

Although the reader questionnaires at both case study sites are a useful barometer of reader participation habits the results must be viewed with caution. The very act of taking part in a questionnaire on a voluntary basis requires the reader to participate in an activity on the newspaper website. Therefore the readers who took part in the questionnaire were likely to be more presupposed to participation than the readers who did not. However the range of responses and the high level of passive use of the website indicated in the answers mean it is still possible to glean significant data via this method.

The typography of participation was broad at both case study sites but wider at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in particular the dissemination channels. As illustrated in Chapter 5 the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had a better resourced web team and a staff member responsible for building audiences on various online platforms with a view to driving traffic to the bournemouthecho.co.uk website and building the brand. As discussed in Chapter 6 the drive to open participation channels was a largely economic one and by creating more channels where Bournemouth *Daily Echo* content can be shared the organisation is able to build its online audience.

Jenkins (2008) maintains that audiences are taking control of news in the mainstream media to varying degrees along the stages of production, selection and distribution. This study finds that these participation channels were most open at the beginning and end of the news process as also identified by Hermida (2011b) in an international study of newspaper websites. As with Hermida’s research, the channels of participation at the two case study sites in this study were primarily only open to the audience in the first stage of newsgathering and the final stages of dissemination and responding. The only production channel open to the audience were social media websites Twitter and Flickr which due to their open nature prevent journalists from selecting or editing content. Furthermore there was a mixture of one way and two-way communication between journalists and readers with one way communication dominant in the newsgathering stage, again with the exception of Twitter and Flickr. A two way communication between journalists and readers only occurred on external social media websites such as Twitter, Tumblr and Delicious and again this was mostly for dissemination. The final process of responding was almost entirely a two way communication between readers with no interaction from journalists. This is explored in further details in Chapters 8 and 11. The overall pattern that appears to be emerging is that traditional top down methods of communication remain in place in the production stage of the news process and channels are only opening up where individual journalists interact with readers via external social media networks. However channels for readers to engage with one another are increasing enabling them to participate in the dissemination and responding stages of the news process. This supports the findings of international research by Domingo *et al* (2008) which found that participation was mostly used as an opportunity for readers to debate on current issues rather than take part in news production. As Franklin (2008) states journalism now encourages readers to join in a more open and interactive discussion. However data from this study supports Örnebring’s (2008) findings that journalists may be willing to let audiences respond to and interact with already produced material but they are less willing to give them any real influence over the news process. The stages of dissemination and responding may not be moderated but newsgathering and production are. As Singer *et al* (2011) conclude journalists predominantly cast audience members as active recipients of the news rather than as active participants in the process of constructing it.

It has been suggested above that the nature of participation within the two case study sites is diverse but two-way (journalist and reader) un-moderated participation is restricted. However it is also important to have an understanding of the nature of participation in terms of its prevalence amongst readers. Data from the questionnaire indicated that readers were largely passive and when they were active it was more via the sharing of news rather than actively participating in the editorial process. As research from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010) indicates reader participation comes more through sharing than through contributing to the news.

The pattern that emerges is not one of passive saps (Ross and Nightingale, 2003) who are exploited by capitalist media but more in line with modern interpretations of audiences that view them on a spectrum from being controlled to being autonomous (McQuail, 1997). Individual acts of media response can be “more or less active” (McQuail, 1997, p.22) and as McLuhan (2001) suggests different media invite different degrees of participation, interpretation and activity on behalf of the audience. The internet as a multimedia platform therefore is arguably an aggregation of different types of media and thus enables readers to be both active and passive depending on what it is they are consuming and their level of interpretation and interaction. This fits with the model suggested earlier in the chapter that audiences move up and down a spectrum of activity. However as shown in Chapter 5 participation is increasing at the two case study sites and therefore it could be said that although readers may be largely passive an increasing number are engaging in sharing or active participation. As this chapter also illustrates readers are mostly involved in the dissemination stage of the news process which involves sharing rather than heightened active participation. This is more likely to occur in the newsgathering and responding stage. Interviews with readers indicated that they were more likely to engage in sharing or active participation when a story was of particular interest to them supporting the view that some readers are interested in participating in some things, some of the time. Gillmor (2006) reasons that although the masses may not care about all the issues, individuals care about some of them. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) develop this idea and maintain that everyone is interested in something and will engage in varying levels of participation depending on the topic.

**Conclusion**

The results from this study suggest that Kovach and Rosenstiel’s Theory of the Interlocking Public is at play within the two case study sites and readers will engage in varying levels of participation on an occasional basis depending on the issue at stake. The most frequent channel of active reader participation identified by the questionnaire at both case study websites was commenting on stories, which falls under the responding stage. Interestingly the perception of journalists was a different one, with most identifying user generated content in the format of photographs as the most significant form of activity. This may indicate that journalists put an emphasis on traditional modes of one way communication whereby the public are useful as active participants in the generation of source material in the newsgathering stage which can then be selected and edited in a closed environment by journalists. Yet readers see themselves in the active recipient role, responding to the news in an un-moderated environment where they can engage in two way communication with one another. These results indicate that journalists and readers have differing views on the role of the active reader with journalists preferring readers to enter at the first stage of news production and readers preferring to engage in the final stage.

Chapter 8 will now explore in further detail how readers are engaging in the final stage of the news process via commenting on stories on the case study websites.

**Chapter 8: Comment participation**

8.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to build upon the findings of Chapter 7 and focus on the biggest participatory field of comments on website stories. The reader questionnaire identified that more than 40 per cent of online users at both case study sites had commented on stories and this was 20 per cent more than the second most popular participatory channel. Commenting has become a popular activity for readers, as explored in Chapter 7, largely due to the accessibility, ease and speed of it when compared to the traditional method of writing a letter to the editor and then waiting to see whether it is selected or not. Further research also supports the claim that comments are the most popular form of participatory journalism both in the UK and internationally (Reich, 2011; Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Örnebring, 2008). Similarly local newspaper websites receive hundreds of comments each day and therefore there is a sizeable amount of rich data available for analysis. It was therefore deemed necessary to focus a chapter on the nature of these comments and the challenges they pose for journalists as the previous chapters looked at reader participation across a broader spectrum.

The literature in this field has been outlined in the previous chapter and remains relevant to the discussion in this chapter. To recap, research to date concludes that journalists are maintaining control of user generated content online (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Deuze, 2006) and although audiences interact with one another on newspaper websites there is very little direct interaction from journalists meaning a traditional communication model prevails (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Hermida *et al*, 2011; Chung, 2007). Furthermore journalists are only willing to let readers be involved in the first and last stages of the news process - newsgathering and responding (Hermida, 2011b). The findings of Chapter 7 support these claims by identifying that the channels of participation at the two case study sites were primarily only open to the audience in the first stage of newsgathering and the final stages of dissemination and responding. The results also indicated that the final process of responding was almost entirely a two way communication between readers only with no interaction from journalists.

This chapter therefore seeks to explore in detail what is happening in reader comments and how interactive this process of responding is. In doing so the findings will add further evidence to answer **RQ2a: What is the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?**

It is also important to understand how journalists are responding to the changing nature of participation and adapting their roles and practices to meet the challenges brought about by an influx of reader participation in the form of comments, in particular how to moderate and control this content. Via interviews with journalists and news room observation it has been possible to glean qualitative data on how comments in particular are impacting on the role of journalists as traditional gatekeepers to inform the following research question **RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?**

8.2 Methods

The first set of findings in this chapter has been drawn from a content analysis which was used to explore RQ2a in more depth, specifically in relation to comments. A unique coding system was designed and applied to comments on the two case study websites. The second set of findings has been drawn from interviews with journalists and observations in both news rooms to add further understanding to RQ3.

The content analysis, as described in detail in Chapter 4, included the capturing of 1,169 comments between the two websites thisisleicestershire.co.uk and bournemouthecho.co.uk. The top five most commented upon stories and their corresponding comments were captured each day over a 10 day period. These coding units were then coded into five categories. Each comment was only coded once, using a dominant category coding system. The five categories were Post (comment that has no relevance to the article), Content Interaction (comment that refers to the article), Poster Interaction (comment that refers to another user), Newspaper Interaction (comment including interaction from or with the website host/journalist) and Advanced Content Interaction (comment including additional information).

During the interview and observation period it became apparent to the researcher that the biggest talking point for journalists in relation to reader participation was the challenges posed by reader comments on website stories. The researcher therefore explored this further in interviews. Although the original interview guide (see Appendix 2a) included open questions on the changing nature of interaction and the value of reader participation additional questions were integrated which specifically asked about comments on stories, covering areas such as the value of comments and how they should be moderated. These helped to inform RQ2b (discussed in the next chapter) and RQ3 discussed here. Responses from the online reader interviews have also been incorporated into this chapter where they are able to add further insight.

8.3 Results

The first section of results refers to the comment content analysis and is divided into the sub sections: opinion and conversation, diversity and limitations. The second section is concerned with the attitudes and concerns of journalists in relation to comments and moderation and the results are based on interviews and news room observation. This is divided into five sub headings: level of anxiety, moderation policy, moderation desirability, challenges of non-moderation, a question of moderation.

The content analysis involved the coding of 430 comments on the *Leicester Mercury* website and 730 comments on the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. The sample was taken for the same timeframe at both websites therefore the amount of comments indicate that readers are more active in commenting on bournemouthecho.co.uk. This may be due to the slightly older audience as discussed in Chapter 5, which would contain more retired people with more leisure time, but it is likely to be further evidence that audiences at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* case study site are more active than their *Leicester Mercury* counterparts. It should be reiterated that the sample only included the top five most commented stories and therefore there were more actual comments within the timeframe than were captured.

**Opinion and conversation**

Overall the results at both case study sites were remarkably similar, even more so than the content analysis of social media discussed in Chapter 11. This would indicate that generalisations can be made about the habits of commenters.

Despite claims from some journalists in the interviews that reader comments tended to digress from the subject matter most comments in the sample were relevant to the story and only a small amount, around 10 per cent at both of the case study sites, were deemed to have no relevance. These included jokes which although related to the story were not an expression of opinion, interaction or providing additional information. Lighter, quirky stories tended to evoke a lot of comments with a high percentage of them being jokes. These were coded as a Post as they were not a direct comment on the story but a joke for the sake of entertainment. For example thisisleicestershire.co.uk published a story on October 7th 2010 with the headline ‘Leicestershire woman sues Asda over frog in her bottle of wine’. This received 51 comments of which 24 (almost 50%) were coded as Posts due to their irreverent nature. These included: “she’s hopping mad!”, “A bottle of beer would have made it hoppy”, “Maybe the wine was bottled in a leap year”, “Asda staff thought she was a right muppet”, “Did the frog Kermit suicide by hopping into the bottle?” and “She nearly had a frog in her throat!”.

Similarly on November 16th 2010 bournemouthecho.co.uk published a story with the headline ‘Outcry as reindeer steaks go on sale at Lidl supermarkets in Bournemouth and Poole’. This received 70 comments of which 21 (30%) were coded as Posts. These included: “I’m looking forward to a Donna donner”, “Haha Bliztin shnitzle!”, “A Lidl of what you know does you good” and “I’m looking forward to that Christmas favourite ‘Lidl donkey, Lidl donkey...”.

Graph 8.1: Percentages for each comment coding category

Humorous comments were the most frequent types within the Post category but there was also a range of other types of comments that were not directed related to the content. The sample at both case study sites included comments from users to correct their previous comments. This was due to the restricted functionality of the comment threads which did not allow users to edit their own comments. For example one comment categorised as a Post at the *Leicester Mercury* was:

*CGLee*: Sorry – my last should have read “service personnel”

Users also occasionally used the comments to correct or comment upon one another’s grammar and spelling. As one *Leicester Mercury* reader posted:

*Puzzled*: The Nimby’s...what? You’ve missed a word out John.

Although these comments often included interaction amongst readers they did not directly relate to the content of the story and were therefore classed as Post rather than Poster Interaction. Another example of this was when readers discussed the comment thread etiquette, as one Bournemouth *Daily Echo* user commented:

*Bob49*: polite/friendly note to Wiggins, it is not always necessary to hit the quote button, it can tend to clog the thread.

However some of the comments classified as Post were not as benign as the above examples. Some readers did use the comment thread to abuse one another or make snide remarks directed at other users. However this was not as frequent as journalists suggested, as discussed later in this chapter. It was noticeable however that there were more abusive comments on the sample threads of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and they were also more extreme than those on the *Leicester Mercury*.

An example from the Leicester Mercury sample:

*MrsLeicester*: @MrLeicester your response reflect a man of high calibre!!! Don’t give up your day job.

Compared with an example at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*:

*BackOfTheNet*: Sorry dickhe@d, no I didn’t read your earlier comment, so I will apologise for the comment about injured players. I stand by my comment about your NOT being a supporter.

As Graph 8.1 indicates Content Interaction was the largest category at both case study sites, at around 50 per cent, followed by Poster Interaction at 34 per cent. Newspaper Interaction was virtually non-existent at one per cent and Advanced Content Interaction was also a minor category at around three per cent. These results indicate that readers firstly use comments as an expression of opinion and secondly as a means of interacting with other readers, supporting the findings of Chapter 6.

Most of the comment threads on each of the stories had a mixture of Content Interaction and Poster Interaction comments although lighter, quirkier stories tended to provoke a higher percentage of humorous comments, classified as a Post, as discussed above. However it was evident at both case study sites that Content Interaction and Poster Interaction went hand in hand. The more Content Interaction comments, the more likely there was to be Poster Interaction. Indeed on stories that attracted a high number of comments there was also Advanced Content Interaction and evidence of rigorous democratic debate, beyond simple expression of opinion or social interaction.

A topic that provoked such response at both case study sites was the issue of cycling on pavements. A story with the headline ‘Leicester cyclists warned to stay off the pavement or face £30 fine’ published on thisisleicestershire.co.uk on October 12th 2010 received 28 comments. Meanwhile a story with the headline ‘Mum’s anger as cyclist blames toddler for accident’ that featured a three-year-old boy who was knocked over by a cyclist riding on the pavement, was published on bournemouthecho.co.uk on Wednesday November 17th 2010. This story elicited 71 comments.

The *Leicester Mercury* website story contained 64 per cent Content Interaction, 25 per cent Poster Interaction and 11 per cent Advanced Content Interaction. Although the story had lower than average Poster Interaction it had higher than average Advanced Content Interaction illustrating users were bringing forward new information and adding further evidence to the debate. The Content Interaction included a mixture of brief remarks:

*M Sinker*: When the police turn a blind eye to law-breaking, they commit a dereliction of duty and encourage vigilantism.

And much longer and more complex opinions:

*Mike Leicester*: The roads are NOT too dangerous for cyclists. If they were, how would all those cyclists (like myself) who cycle around Leicester every day get about? In any case, many cyclists ride on the pavement out of sheer selfish laziness, often listening to headphones, rarely using lights and frequent riding one-handed while texting on their phones. If they did that on the road they would be in danger so they ride on the pavement to transfer that danger to other people. On the other hand, some pavement cyclists aren't ignorant yobs but actually very intelligent people, sometimes quite active in cycling promotion. I've had university professors try to justify this behaviour to me but the simple fact is this: reducing the perceived danger to cyclists does not and cannot ever justify increasing the actual danger to pedestrians. Every year a considerable number of pedestrians are injured (and occasionally killed) by cyclists. Old people and small children are particularly vulnerable. One of the reasons why antisocial cyclists get away with this is because pedestrians meekly get out of their way (though you have to watch out - God forbid any of these idiots should actually use a bell). It's time that those of us fit enough to do so stood up and refused to move out of the way. Make the cyclists swerve. If a few of them started falling off their bikes they'd soon start riding on the road. Here's a simple message: if you don't want to cycle on the road, don't cycle at all.

The Poster Interaction involved seven comments but was between 10 different users, as posters kept cross referring to each other and some interacted with more than one person in a comment, for example:

*Robbo the Yobbo*: hope that this action is just a pilot, and will be extended to the rest of the city in due course. @Graham: I sympathise - I too have had several near misses. Many of these cyclists are clearly drunk or drugged up. @Watts @Shaw: if the roads are too dangerous for you, get off and push!

The comments also included Advanced Content Interaction which linked to other websites and/or referred to legislation, for example:

*Dafydd*: The rules aren't straight forward. Queen's Road (like most main routes into the city) is relatively safe to cycle, but you need to be confident and assertive to ride safely. There's a train of thought that suggests cyclists adopt a style of riding called Vehicular Cycling, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vehicular_cycling> - this involves dominating the road lane in much the same way as any other vehicle would, thus forcing cars to slow down to their pace. This is by far safer for the cyclists point of view but would no doubt rile commuters at 8am. My 12 year old daughters cycle to school. My advice is that they should stick to the pavement, but go on the road where it's relatively safe, and it's that 'relative safety' that causes the problem.

*Robbo the Yobbo*: @Dafydd: the law is perfectly clear. Cycling on footways (a pavement at the side of a carriageway) is prohibited by Section 72 of the Highway Act 1835, amended by Section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1888. This is punishable by a fixed penalty notice of £30 under Section 51 and Schedule 3 of the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988.

In this example it was also clear that the users were also directly interacting with one another as well.

Unlike the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* story discussed below, the *Leicester Mercury* did not get involved in the comment thread of the cycling story. In the entire sample of 430 comments there were only five comments coded as Newspaper Interaction. The newspaper journalists rarely commented and unsurprisingly readers failed to direct comments towards the newspaper or journalists. The only time Newspaper Interaction appeared was when the web editor was wanted to inform readers of a correction, for example:

*ED*: The link given is not correct, for rules and details leave off the .uk and use www.cpre.org

By comparison there was more Newspaper Interaction in the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* cycling story but in the overall sample this category only made up one per cent of all comments, the same as the *Leicester Mercury*. On the day the cycling story was posted on bournemouthecho.co.uk it appears the digital project co-ordinator Sam Shepherd was keeping a close eye on the comment thread and intervening to respond to criticisms towards the newspaper. During the observation period Sam Shepherd indicated that stories about cycling often evoked passionate and sometimes extreme comments on the website and therefore she tried to maintain a measured and accurate debate amongst users by sometimes stepping in.

*Sam Shepherd*: @sprint - we take your point, but if the incidents you refer to aren't reported to us, by you or the police, then we don't know about them to write about them... It's really not fair to call us anti-cycling (we started our cycling blog precisely to address this issue) and we do report on incidents of idiot driving when we hear about them - the number of stories we've done about the No Excuses campaign should be evidence of that - and a brief search throught the last two weeks' stories would give you two examples of pedestrians being driven at by drivers...

Overall the comments on this story were maintained as a lively debate amongst the readers with 43 per cent Content Interaction and 42 per cent Poster Interaction. The interaction was therefore much higher than the similar story at the *Leicester Mercury* website. This may have been due to there being three times as many comments on the bournemouthecho.co.uk story than on the thisisleicestershire.co.uk story meaning there was more opportunity for readers to engage with one another and for the debate to develop. This reflected the general trend of bournemouthecho.co.uk threads which tended to be more than four times longer than thisisleicestershire.co.uk threads. Again the Content Interaction in this comment thread was both simple and complex, as these two examples illustrate:

*Ekimnoslen*: Cycling on the pavement is illegal. The fact that our so called guardians of the law do nothing about it is deplorable. The cyclist should be prosecuted.

*JS BAC:* The child may well have walked across the path of the cyclist, but that's what children do and what we all did as children so it's folly to say it's unpredictable. It would have been light at that time of day so no excuse not to have seen Connor and taken the common sense approach of what might happen and to cycle accordingly. There's a driver awareness course, why not a similar course for other road users. This may be controversial and won't be agreed by everyone, but I don't actually have a problem with cyclists riding on pavements. That's on the caveat they do so slowly and always give way to pedestrian traffic like 99% of them do on the pedestrianised route up to horseshoe common every morning before 9am when it's deserted - it's the reckless and irresponsible manner like in this story that I have a problem with and I hope the offender is made to take responsibility for his actions. Hopefully this guy doesn't have a driving license and that hitting someone 'so hard' that a grommet fell out is the worst damage he's capable of doing.  
 For those asking why the Echo is publicising, perhaps the rarity of such an incident is what makes it news. I've been cycling 2 miles to work for three months and been hit by motor vehicles twice, there'd be no space if every incident was reported like this one has been.

The Advanced Content Interaction was also higher than the average on the cycling story, at 11 per cent (average one per cent) which was similar to the *Leicester Mercury* website. This would indicate that the more complex and interactive a thread the more likely it is to contain additional information not available in the story.

**Diversity and limitations**

A common misconception portrayed by journalists at both case study sites, particularly the *Leicester Mercury*, during the interviews was that the same people commented on stories all of the time. One reporter (L1) said: “It is a group of about 12 or 15 people who are always the same people commenting on the stories whatever it is, like armchair experts.” Similarly another trainee reporter (L4) said “the commenters on the website are like 15 people, they might comment thousands of times, but when you look it is the same people” and a third reporter (L18) re-emphasised the point again: “A lot of the time you get the same names cropping up”. Yet evidence from the content analysis does not support this perception. At the *Leicester Mercury* the 10 day sample included 430 comments from 159 users. The average amount of comments per person was therefore three comments over 10 days. At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the picture was the same with 730 comments from 247 users, resulting in an average of three comments each over 10 days. In broad terms this would indicate that it is not the same “15 people” commenting over and over again and in fact different people comment on different stories, depending on their interests. This gives further support to the Interlocking Public theory discussed in Chapters 2 and 6.

When looking more closely at the usernames in the sample it can be seen that the *Leicester Mercury* did have more serial posters who commented on multiple stories, than the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, which might explain the journalists’ perceptions. However rather than 15 frequent posters, only two prominent usernames were identified in the sample. Out of the 40 stories in the *Leicester Mercury* sample usernames *Kulgan* and *Martin* had commented on a third of them and were often the first to comment on each new story. They often commented more than once on the same story and also often interacted with others. This would indicate that they took part in commenting as a matter of course for entertainment purposes rather than due to being particularly interested in one story as the Interlocking Public theory would suggest. Indeed in the reader interviews LR3 revealed that he was the username *Kulgan* and he described himself as a “prolific commenter” who got involved in debates with other readers and quite often they commented on each other’s posts. However the behaviour of *Kulgan* and *Martin* from the sample did appear to be the exception rather than the rule, contradicting the view of some journalists.

Although the overall coding results were incredibly similar at the two case study sites there were differences between the comments, which further analysis revealed. The comment threads on bournemouthecho.co.uk were considerably longer both in terms of number of comments overall and length of individual comments. Over the 10 day sample timeframe the 730 comments were placed on just 15 stories, nine news and six sports. The average number of comments per story was 49. The number of comments on a story meant there was a mixture of people getting involved, a range of opinions being expressed, a good level of interaction and the move towards real democratic debate. Indeed the sample only included the top five most commented stories and there were dozens of other stories that also received a high number of comments with the timeframe so the content analysis only revealed a proportion of the stories actually commented on over the 10 days.

By comparison on the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website during the sample timeframe there were 430 comments on 40 stories, an average of just 11 comments per story. This showed that the comments were spread amongst a greater number of stories giving less opportunity for real debate or a diversity of opinions on one particular subject. There were also far less people taking part, with a total of 159 usernames compared to 247 usernames at bournemouthecho.co.uk. Another point of difference was that the top 5 most commented stories on thisisleicestershire.co.uk were divided between 23 news stories, 15 letters and two sports stories. The reason why comments on sports stories may have been significantly lower was probably that the active sports forums which existed elsewhere on the internet and pre-dated the thisisleicestershire comment threads. As the rugby correspondent (L9) Martin Crowson explained:

There is a really good fans forum on the Tiger’s official website which seems to attract all of that traffic, so people pay lip service to ours really and for whatever reason we have not done a great job on that for the last three or four years in some respects. The Tiger’s one is really established so it would be very hard to break in, if a 1,000 people go on that to get 500 of those onto your own website, I don’t know how you would do it.

Whereas at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* one of the sports reporters (B12) boosted that they were stealing commenters away from the competition:

I monitor all of the supporter’s websites, there is one supporter website which is particularly well used and without doing any figure work I am convinced we have taken away a lot of the traffic from that website because there seems to be a lot more on ours and a lot less on theirs and we have a lot more posts than some of theirs. We are getting up to 100 now and then, and theirs are 10 or 15, so we are taking away from them.

Furthermore commenting on Letters to the Editor placed on the website was prominent at thisisleicestershire.co.uk but did not feature in the top 5 most commented stories on bournemouthecho.co.uk at all. This is likely to be due to the fact that the content is much easier to find on the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website but is buried on the bournemouthecho.co.uk website. During the reader interviews, several Bournemouth *Daily Echo* website users commented that they did not think the letters were on the website, when in actual fact they were. This indicates that given the opportunity or ease of access readers like engaging with other reader’s content and views, a result also supported by the findings of Chapter 6.

**Level of anxiety**

This chapter now turns to the challenges newspaper organisations and journalists face when they open up their websites to reader comments. Throughout the journalist interview and news room observation periods at the two case study sites it was clear that reader comments was a rapidly evolving field which raised concerns with regards to gatekeeping. By allowing readers to comment directly underneath stories rather than through the traditional methods of writing a letter to the newspaper which was then checked and selected by the Letters’ Editor, journalists could receive instant feedback with the caveat that they could not filter what readers said. The researcher noted that this was a bigger concern and a more regular discussion topic at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* compared to the *Leicester Mercury*. How to moderate comments was discussed in news conferences, talked about in the news room and was a repeated theme in the interviews. The reason for this was thought to be threefold. Firstly the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was at the centre of pending civil legal action between a member of the public and a commenter who had allegedly defamed them through a post on bournemouthecho.co.uk. Although the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was not implicated in the legal action it was still a cause for concern. Secondly as discussed above bournemouthecho.co.uk had a much more active and larger reader comment base than thisisleicestershire.co.uk meaning there were more comments to monitor and potentially more comments to cause concern. Active registered users on bournemouthecho.co.uk numbered 9,400 however the figures were not available to the researcher for thisisleicestershire.co.uk. The third reason may have been that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had direct control over the comments and the ability to remove comments when abuse was reported therefore they were more closely concerned with their content. By contrast the website of the *Leicester Mercury* was largely controlled by the central web team based in Derby. They were responsible for removing comments and responding to complaints of abuse rather than the thisisleicestershire.co.uk web editor based in Leicester.

**Moderation policy**

In order to comment on either of the newspaper websites users had to register their details first including a username and valid email address. They also had to agree to abide by the house rules otherwise they risked being banned from commenting. The username could be anything they chose and did not have to reveal their identity. Most users chose ambiguous or anonymous usernames like *MrLeiceste*r or *Dorset Mitch*. The house rules were published on the websites and were relatively lengthy but included details on language, relevance, libel, confidentiality, advertising, impersonation, copyright and liability. The house rules at both case study sites not only included no libel but also no offensive content. The newspapers therefore took a legal and moral stance on what material was permitted, taking the view that “if people are being abused by comments then you have got a moral position to take” (L8). Furthermore both websites made it clear that they were not liable for any of the content posted by users.

The moderation of comments was operated in the same way at both case study websites and appeared to replicate the policy of the regional newspaper industry as a whole. It also reflected the emerging legal consensus identified in the international research of Singer (2011) that news organisations which post-moderate – that is, enable comments to be published without prior review – are “not legally responsible for the content of those contributions the moment they appear” (p.124). However the news organisation has a legal responsibility to respond to post-publication concerns raised by users and failure to do so within a reasonable amount of time could result in legal liability. The two case study websites in this study operated the same system which was effectively a reactive one rather than a moderated one. The official policy was that the newspaper companies did not moderate comments, however they would respond to complaints from users about comments. On each website there was an option for readers to press a button on any comment saying ‘Report abuse’ or ‘Report this post’. Once a comment had been reported a member of the editorial team would review the offending comment and decide whether or not to remove it. In this respect the solution to problematic comments was “collaborative moderation” (Reich, 2011, p.109), handing responsibility and involvement to both readers and journalists.

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the decision to remove a post or not was taken by the web team or the news desk or out of hours by the duty reporter. At the *Leicester Mercury* the decision was taken by the web team in Derby taking the decision out of the hands of Leicester editorial staff, although they could communicate their wishes to the Derby team. This system of non-moderation (sometimes referred to as post moderation or reactive moderation) varies from other forms which include moderating each comment before allowing it to be posted online or having a system where a comment is automatically removed when a user reports abuse rather than a journalist deciding whether it should be removed or not.

The non-moderation system was used by both of case study websites due to the legal advice they had both received. Sam Shepherd, digital projects co-ordinator (B1) explained:

The legal advice is we are not moderated and so we shouldn’t get involved. But if somebody makes a complaint then we can go on and respond. If a comment is drawn to our attention we can go on and respond, so the trick if you like, is if I’m posting a comment on a story now that you need to include the phrase, this is what the lawyer says anyway, you need to include the phrase, ‘in response to a complaint or in response to a query’, to make it clear that you haven’t been reading the comments. Because what they are worried about is that the readers will see a comment by us and assume that we are reading everything that is posted everywhere and we’re not.

However when a complaint was made by a user it was ultimately the newspaper’s decision whether to remove the comment from the website or not and to rule what was decent or legal. Sometimes the person who had complained would be sent an email to explain why the comment they reported had not been removed. As one web team member (B5) explained:

We are legally obliged to act upon those comments. But we can make a judgement of course and we can make a judgement that there is nothing wrong with the comment and we do. But we are legally obliged to act upon it and you have got to be pretty sure if someone complains about something and there is something remotely legally dodgy about it, you would be wise to remove it.

Another web team member at the Bournemouth Daily Echo (B6) said dealing with comment complaints was sometimes like “being in a playground” with users winding each other up and trying to get each other’s comments removed.

The two case study sites had a second step of intervention if a user consistently broke the house rules. Users could be sent a warning via email and could ultimately be banned from making comments if the newspaper deemed this necessary. However this did not stop users from creating a new username under a different email address. The decision to warn or ban users was another judgement call and was made by the relevant web teams. There were no set rules or procedures to follow in order to decide whether to ban a user or not and it could be an arbitrary process as a member of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* web team (B6) explained:

It varies from case to case, swearing or people making statements that are inaccurate, defamatory statements, anything in that area you would consider banning the person and you would give them a warning depending on the severity of what they have said, but anything that is like spates online, depending on who the perpetrator is and how many people they are upsetting, sometimes it can just be better to ban them.

The web team could also decide to turn off all comments underneath a story or not allow comments on a story in the first place. One of the frustrations of the non-moderation system highlighted by the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* digital projects co-ordinator (B1) was the lack of a measured approach towards comments. Without active moderation it was difficult to intervene at an early stage before comments became too extreme and instead what tended to happen was a whole comment thread was switched off following a series of complaints from users. This was another example of organisational structures preventing journalists from engaging with readers effectively.

Almost all newspaper websites are post moderated and so that means the comments can get completely out of control when they don’t need to. When all it would take is one comment from one of us to say actually you have said this but this is what actually happened or to say can you please not make slanderous remarks, it doesn’t take much for people to back off a bit, whereas if you leave them to their own devices they tend to egg each other on and be more and more abusive and so on...Nick’s (former web editor) policy was if it’s getting out of control turn it off but I know that the readers hate it when we do that because they don’t know why we can’t just take down the offensive ones and leave the sensible ones (B1).

**Moderation desirability**

At both case study sites the majority of journalists and senior editorial staff agreed that the best system would be pre-moderation of comments, similar to the selection of letters for the printed newspaper. However pre-moderation would mean employing at least one additional full time member of staff to take on this role and the current financial situation meant this was not feasible. The editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B7) said if they pre-moderated comments staff “wouldn’t have time to do lots of other things” and one of the web team members (B5) suggested that you would need a team of people to monitor comments and “in this current economic climate it is completely unrealistic... we are already managing on fewer staff than in any time in history, even though we are actually busier than any time in history.”

The sentiment was echoed at the *Leicester Mercury* where the football correspondent (L16) explained that the website would need monitoring 24 hours a day and although a full time moderator would be a “great asset” there was not the manpower to resource the role because newspapers were “cutting back spending money and hiring staff”.

**Challenges of non-moderation**

Although non-moderation at both case study websites was viewed as the best policy in terms of managing resources and legal liability, it did create a series of other problems. Through the interviews and observation the researcher identified three key challenges that the non-moderation system generated. These were the posting of abusive comments, the posting of defamatory comments and brand damage caused by comments. Similar concerns were raised by Reich (2011) in an international study, which saw journalists identify defamation, incitement, abuse, racism and hate speech as problematic aspects of post-moderated comment threads. In turn this poor quality content was seen as having a negative commercial effect that damaged the organisation’s reputation. Further problems identified by journalists at the two case study sites in this PhD research were the inaccuracy of comments, the unrepresentative nature of comments and the lack of two-way interaction between readers and journalists on the comment threads.

Abusive comments were the number one concern of journalists interviewed at both case study sites. Despite the house rules stating that users should not post offensive or threatening comments some users did not stick to these rules. Journalists were concerned that readers were offensive and abusive to one another but they were unable to remove these comments unless someone complained as this would be moderation and therefore legally unsafe. One Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reporter (B2) commented that “you get an awful lot of abuse and really puerile point scoring”, whilst a football correspondent (L16) at the *Leicester Mercury* referred to “keyboard assassins” who tried to “stir up a bit of trouble”. Furthermore the politics correspondent, David MacLean, (L10) at the *Leicester Mercury* felt that comments on their stories turned into “political tribal slanging matches” and 80 per cent of comments were not constructive.

Another concern was that users were sometimes abusive to the subjects of stories which could damage relationship with contacts and prevent them from speaking to journalists in the future. One reporter at the Bournemouth Daily Echo (B10) was particularly angry about how their contacts had been attacked in a comment thread:

It can cause problems because people come to you about an issue in good faith to do a story then people jump to conclusions and start abusing them on the website, this has happened to me a few times. People say they wish they hadn’t spoken to the paper or they won’t speak to them again because of the abuse they get on the website.

The third area of abusive comments was users attacking journalists via the comment threads. A sports reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B12) said:

I am flabbergasted that sometimes they are allowed to post derogatory comments about us, so we are almost giving people a platform to attack us which seems curious to say the least.

However all the journalists that raised this as a concern accepted that this was part of the job and it was better to have “people talking about you than not talking about you” (B12) and that “if you live by the sword, you are paid to put your thoughts into print then you have to accept if people have a go back however awkward that might be, you take that on the chin” (L7).

Curiously, although abusive comments were the number one concern of journalists the content analysis discussed above revealed that they were relatively small in number. This may indicate that the extreme but rare examples are given too much prominence in the minds of journalists or the report abuse system works effectively and abusive comments had been removed from the sample of captured comments.

Even though both newspaper websites made it clear that they were not liable for any of the content posted on their website by users and they did not moderate the content there was still a large concern amongst journalists that comments could be libellous and defamatory. There was an anxiety that the newspaper company could be potentially sued for defamatory comments and the law was unclear as no precedent had yet been set. As the web editor of the *Leicester Mercury,* Angela Bewick (L8) expressed: “We are part of a big organisation so you are vulnerable to in the end someone coming round to saying we are suing you for that.” Prior to the research period the *Leicester Mercury* had taken the decision to block comments on any stories about the disappearance of Madeleine McCann due to the stories attracting defamatory comments. During his interview the deputy editor (L13) used this as an example of the potential danger of having non-moderated comments.

We put a ban or a block on comments on all stories about Madeleine McCann. And at the time we were criticized by other elements of the media for doing that because that was seen as restraint on freedom of expression and I can understand that argument but I think there is a line, which is pretty clearly defined, it is defined in law, and in our view those comments were defamatory, just simply defamatory. And interestingly in the period which followed that the McCanns sued the organizations which carried defamatory comments, it was noticeable that other media organizations did put a block on messages about the McCanns.

The impact of abusive comments and potential defamatory remarks leads to the third area of concern, that of damage to the newspaper and its website as a brand. This was a particular worry for the newspaper editors but was also mentioned by some reporters. As discussed in Chapter 6 and later in Chapter 11, maintaining brand loyalty is a crucial component of online participation for newspaper companies and journalists, therefore anything that may damage the brand could be detrimental to loyalty and building new audiences. Editors at both case study sites worried that non-moderation was damaging their brand.

I think that if you’re a publisher, which we are, then you have to worry about brand and stuff like that, and I’m not sure that some of that (comments) isn’t damaging to our brand. So I’m not sure that that particular form of interaction (comments) is great for us…And the real problem we have as publishers, we can’t afford to moderate it properly, so we go the other way and don’t moderate it at all. And then I think it starts to undermine your brand (L3, Keith Perch, editor *Leicester Mercury*).

Yes I think the difficulty for me is that as an editor you have control of what goes in the paper but as an editor you don’t have control over people’s attitudes to online stories and to other people online so that is quite difficult because that to me, it means that your brand can come under, it can have a detrimental effect on your brand, if people are saying the *Daily Echo* website is full of hateful, bilious horrible people, just basically spewing bile over other people, than that impacts on us, it reflects badly on us... We lose control of how we present ourselves as a brand. Because people go ‘oh god that’s terrible he’s saying that’, and that is under our brand, that is my biggest problem (B7, Neal Butterworth, editor Bournemouth *Daily Echo*).

Abusive comments, defamation and brand damage were the three key problematic factors related to non-moderation but journalists also raised other secondary concerns. One issue was the accuracy of claims made in comments and the public “thinking they are becoming more informed when actually they are becoming less informed” (B1). A reporter at the *Leicester Mercury* (L1) held similar concerns:

There is a whole problem with the internet that you can pretty much put whatever you want on it and there is no-one to moderate it and I don’t know if there is a code, we have the PCC (Press Complaints Commission Code of Conduct), and they tell us what we can and what we should and shouldn’t put in the newspaper, that doesn’t exist for the internet so anyone can put what they like. So you have to make a judgement on whether you can trust the information in front of you.

There was also a question over the representativeness of comments and whether it was appropriate to use comments in a follow-up story if the newspaper was implying they represented readers as a whole. The digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B1) said there was a danger sometimes of “pandering to the agenda of a vocal few” and the head of multimedia and content (B8) claimed that they sometimes “gave too much credence to online opinion thinking that it represents a fair snapshot of people across the area and a valid opinion rather than representing the opinion of a handful of our online audience.”

One of the major shortfalls of the non-moderation system was that due to legal reasons discussed above journalists were not able to join the conversation and interact with readers via the comment threads. And even if they were legally safe to respond senior editorial staff indicated that their staff did not have time to interact with readers online. One senior member of staff (B15) at the *Bournemouth Echo* explained:

In an ideal world, yes it is desirable because you are engaging totally with you audience and you can say why did you do this and you can say we did it for this reason and there is also defending the paper and the integrity of the paper and everything else, so that would be ideal but we don’t live in an ideal world and that would require more staff, more people and more time to deal with that and ultimately we have to decide how best to use the journalists and that is obviously to write stories.

This lack of two way interaction between readers and journalists, as outlined in Chapter 7, was identified by the editor of the *Leicester Mercury* (L3) who admitted that the comment threads did not work well “because the comments are one way, there is no interaction, we don’t treat them as a conversation, we just get people to say what they want on there.” This lack of two way communication between readers and reporters was a criticism raised by some readers in the interviews. A Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR6) said: “I would like to suggest that it might be interesting to have an editorial commentator on the comments, not editing comments but some journalistic feedback on what is being said”, whilst a *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR3) concurred: “reporters shouldn’t comment on every comment but when a question is raised about a story they should respond, I have never seen a reporter comment on a story in five years.”

**A question of moderation**

Although both newspaper organisations followed the same non-moderation policy with regards to comments on their websites it was evident from the interviews that there still remained inconsistency in the approach and attitudes towards moderation. This was again due to organisational restrictions and lack of communication.

It was unclear whether journalists were permitted to read the comments at all or whether they simply were not allowed to respond to them, or take them down without a complaint being made first. The legal advice appeared to be that moderation meant liability and therefore journalists should not read at any of the comments as this could be deemed as moderation. However in practice journalists read the comments and indeed used them in follow up stories in the newspaper or printed a selection of them in the newspaper Letters Page. The digital projects co-ordinator (B1) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* admitted that she kept a close eye on the comments and would respond to people to correct their comment, answer a question or give further explanation. However it was unclear whether this was legally appropriate or not.

I shouldn’t, but I do read most of the comments because I think what is the point in having them if you don’t, it doesn’t make any sense at all. But I don’t think everybody would agree with that (B1).

There was also much confusion about how to respond to complaints about comments and how to decide whether to a remove a comment or not, or indeed whether a whole comment thread should be shut down. Sam Shepherd, digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B1) expressed her concern over this issue:

You would find there is a lot of disagreement here among people about what should be left up and what should be taken down as there are some people who are of the opinion that once it has been reported we should remove it. Because if we leave it on we are leaving ourselves open to that person then taking us to court and because we made the decision to keep it up then that could then potentially land us in trouble. And partly that is because there is not really any precedent nobody really knows what would happen under those circumstances and because we fall between these stools of moderated and not moderated. But there is definitely a tendency for ‘well there’s been a complaint we will turn them all off’ as it is just easier to do that and we are likely to get in trouble.

Similarly at the *Leicester Mercury* there was no clear policy on what should be deemed freedom of speech and what should be deemed offensive material and therefore removed, as the web editor (L8) explained:

It’s a fine line between giving people free speech. Often it is the case that comments have to get turned off if there is any sort of abuse and there will always be people who say what about free speech, but well there are times when we have to balance that against people just abusing the system, insulting people, being rude, being offensive, or just not following the spirit of what the site is supposed to be about. So yes it is a problem, and although we set up the reactive moderation there is a point where we have had to turn the comments off.

Yet some journalists felt that the newspaper website should not be too quick to remove comments, ban users or close down comment threads as the head of multimedia and content (B8) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reasoned:

I get as frustrated as anybody that you get people on there who look childish, stupid or offensive but I think, unless they are personally very, very offensive to an individual or they are racist or homophobic, yeah fine ban them. That's an abuse of free speech, but otherwise the policing I almost feel that people should, that argument should be had online between the people having the argument as opposed to us banning people left, right and centre and stopping them commenting.

And although neither website moderated comments there was still the notion that the comment thread was “not a free for all” (L13) and there was still “a certain amount of arbitration” (L13). Senior editorial staff found it difficult to hand over control to their readers and still wanted to act as gatekeepers with regards to comments. This was particularly apparent on specific stories where no comments were allowed at all. Both newspaper websites justifiably closed comments on court stories due to legal issues such as contempt of court or identification, however there were other stories where the decision was made not to allow comments simply due to the potential risk of abusive comments. As the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* editor (B7) explained:

There are some we choose not to put comments on quite rightly simply because we know what’s going to happen, we predict it, we know the people and if you’ve got a council leader who in previous months, or a couple of years ago was exposed for looking at porn on the internet on a council laptop whenever he comes up you are going to get the same kind of people basically using that against him.

At the *Leicester Mercury* a similar approach was taken on stories relating to the English Defence League due to racially offensive comments on previous stories.

The result of these inconsistencies was a rather confused policy on whether comments were moderated or not and a heavy handed approach to blocking comments. This confusion was reflected in the interviews with readers who were not always aware if, or how, the comments were moderated. One Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR6) said: “One thing that doesn’t come across too clearly is how much editorialisation has been done”. Whereas other readers showed frustration at the blanket approach to switching off comments on certain stories: “Some stories don’t allow comments. Suddenly the comments are turned off. It should be switched on for all stories. It is like holding back the reigns. Either go with it or don’t (BR5).” This was also the view of a *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR2): “I do not believe in censorship, if you are going to have a comments section you should allow comments on all stories, there should be no censorship whatsoever. You shouldn’t stop comments unless they are unlawful.”

8.4 Discussion

The findings of this chapter re-iterate once again that organisational structures are restricting reader participation and limiting interaction to reader to reader communication rather than back and forth between journalists and readers. The one area of consistency between the content analysis, interviews with journalists and interviews with readers was that there was very little newspaper or journalist interaction on the comment threads, and almost all interaction was between readers, as previously outlined in Chapter 7. The traditional communication model indicated by Broersma and Graham, (2011), Hermida *et al* (2011) and Chung (2007) continues to prevail within local newspaper website comment threads due to a number of organisational constraints such as legal restrictions, lack of resources and lack of direction from senior editorial figures.

However the nature of participation on comment threads is an interactive one, albeit between readers, rather than being between readers and journalists. The content analysis revealed that there is a fairly high level of interaction - a third of all comments - and this rises to 50 per cent on some subject matters. Readers firstly use the comments to express opinion and secondly to interact with others, reflecting the broader themes outlined in Chapter 6 that readers are motivated by a desire to take part in debate, express their opinion, be informed and interact with others. Trice (2010) found similar results in his examination of American news websites concluding that some level of dialogue was occurring and that comment spaces were “clearly active and interactive” (p.15). The extent to which this participation and interaction leads to true deliberation is difficult to judge but there is evidence in this PhD study to suggest that the longer a comment thread the more likely it is to contain vibrant democratic debate with counter arguments, interaction between multiple users and the presentation of additional information as well as opinion. Indeed as explored in Chapter 9, some readers acknowledged that their views did change when they participated in comment threads and were exposed to alternative arguments. As Marcus (1988) suggests taking in new information and considering and evaluating it, and then possibly changing your mind is exactly what is required in order for a democratic society to function. Participation such as comment threads which take the form of deliberation, enable citizens to find out if political decisions are correct by hearing freely voiced counter arguments (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003).

In this respect comment threads in this PhD study fulfil an important function for democracy by providing a public forum in which a variety of views and opinions can potentially have an influence on the decision of politicians or at the very least have an influence on the voting decisions of other citizens, as Ross and Nightingale (2003) argue happens in participatory television debates. These comment threads could therefore be perceived as a place where citizens come together to discuss, share, argue and deliberate politics in a Web 2.0 public sphere. However the extent to which the users reach a mutual understanding based on the common good or a decision which the majority can accept is still difficult to gauge.

Similar research by Trice (2010) noted that comment threads contained a substantial word count, multiple ideas, active discussion, and attempts at citing sources, but they did not appear to “reach the level of deliberation” (p.15). However research by Reich (2011) suggests that journalists in the USA and UK believe that comments do contribute to public discourse and they are likely to portray comments as “accomplishing deliberative aims, particularly engaging the audience in discussion of public issues” (p.102). Therefore it could be argued that the combination of these results suggest that the democratic debate envisioned by Rusbridger (2010), Gillmor (2006) and Bowman and Willis (2003) is in view but the organisational restrictions put upon journalists limit the harnessing of this content. Deliberation is occurring in comment threads but as Goode (2009) expresses peer to peer horizontal conversation is not enough.

A large part of this problem appears to be the confusion surrounding the moderation or non-moderation of comments and the potential legal implications. At both case study sites there were no clear guidelines for editorial staff on the removal of comments that received complaints, the closure of comment threads or on the banning of users. Instead an ad hoc, subjective approach was taken which often varied between different members of staff. As Reich (2011) found the strategy for gatekeeping comments has shifted from exclusion as a default to inclusion as a default and comments are only removed if they violate the rules rather than because they are not worthy of publishing. However the larger national and international news organisations of Reich’s (2011) study did have strategies to manage comments set at an organisational level, something which was either lacking, or not transparent, at the two local newspapers in this study. A similar approach was taken in regards to the use of social media networks as discussed in Chapter 11. If the web team or editor did have a clear policy on the handling of comments this was not communicated to staff or indeed to readers. This seems to reflect Robinson’s (2010) conclusion that there is a “grand confusion in the industry about who has ultimate textual privilege and the role that audiences should play in online news sites” (p.126).

But organisational restrictions are not the only factors at play. Differences between the content analysis and interviews reveal that journalists’ perceptions of comments are an over-exaggeration of the reality. The sceptical view of journalists is that the majority of comments are stupid, irrelevant, abusive or nothing more than entertainment. For example the features editor (L6) of the *Leicester Mercury* expressed vitriolically:

It’s full of racism, nasty comments, snide swearing remarks to each other, the worst sort of those thoughts, blurting rather than any sort of journalism and of course there are members of the public who are perfectly responsible, perfectly capable of stringing a few sentences together and would write a nice piece about the article but they are not the ones who tend to be on the website. Instead there are the ones ‘fucking hell I’ve got something to say and fucking show him’ and they respond to the previous comments. There is a lot of spite, defamation, misinformation, ill-informed comment in any newspaper in comments from the readers in any single newspaper. People think journalists are bad, they should bloody see the public.

Yet the content analysis indicates that these types of comments are the exception rather than the rule. This indicates that journalists’ attitudes toward readers remain aloof and prejudiced. Other research supports this claim with Chung (2007) observing that journalism purists state that “raw comments are not the business we are in” (p.57), and Reich (2011) suggesting that journalists view comments as “low quality” with “intolerable” standards of expression (p.103).

However the content analysis results discussed above may also suggest that the sample did not contain particularly controversial stories or topics that provoked an extreme reaction from readers. It may also indicate that the comment complaint system is working and abusive comments are being removed swiftly. Nonetheless the sample did contain more than 1,000 comments of which less than 10 per cent could be deemed irrelevant or abusive. Yet the posting of abusive comments was the number one concern of journalists and was raised by two thirds (64 per cent) of the interviewees at both case study sites.

The other misconception of journalists disproved by the content analysis was that the same small group of people commented on stories repeatedly. The results indicated that again this was the exception rather than the rule. The range of usernames commenting on stories was diverse and largely indicated that different people commented on different stories, at different levels of complexity, depending on the subject matter. This gives further support to the Interlocking Public theory put forward by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) previously discussed in the findings of Chapters 5, 6 and 7. From the results of this chapter it appears that journalists perpetuate the myth that “people are simply ignorant, or that other people are interested in everything” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, p.24) but in reality people have diverse interests and expertise and “the involved expert on one issue is the ignorant and unconcerned member of the public on the other” (p.25). Indeed Kovach and Rosenstial argue that a mix of publics, with varying levels of concern and knowledge, is wiser than one active interest group. This is a view strongly endorsed by Howe (2008) who argues that a large and diverse labour pool will constantly come up with better solutions than the most talented, specialised workforce, and O’Reilly and Battelle (2009) who state that a large group of people can create a collective work whose value far exceeds that provided by any of the individual participants.

The type of stories that readers comment on most frequently give some indication of the level of sophistication of these posts and interactions. As discussed in the next chapter the majority of most commented stories were news stories rather than sport or entertainment. The topic of these most commented on news stories were largely hard news stories containing content about local government, crime and health although when a quirky or humorous story was posted this did attract a large number of comments. These results chime with Thurman and Walters’ (2012) recent study of live blogs on the *Guardian* website which concluded that the format might increase readers’ interest in public affairs content and their inclination to participate. In this PhD study where readers participate in their greatest number is on comment threads and this too tends to show an increase in public affairs. Yet it must be acknowledged that entertaining stories also invoke high levels of comments, although there are less interactive or advanced in content. This matches the observations of Shoemaker *et al* (2008a) that news items about unusual events and public welfare play a much bigger role when readers decide to send news items than when journalists select events for news items. The public it seems like to be informed and entertained and both are motivating factors for participation.

**Conclusion**

Journalists strongly held the view that the system of non-moderation of comments was damaging for the newspaper company brand, as also found by Reich (2011) and Hermida and Thurman (2008). This is recurring theme throughout this research and was previously discussed in Chapter 6 and is explored further in Chapters 9 and 11. Again the extent to which this is the case in reality may be less substantial than journalists and editors believe, due to the ‘damaging’ comments being limited to a small percentage. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter which turns to the value of audience participation.

Despite the reservations made about comments and the challenges they bring editorial staff, not a single journalist thought the ability to comment should be removed. They all argued that the comments were an important democratic right and the reward of an increase in online users outweighed the risks. As Reich (2011) reasoned journalists viewed reader comments as a “necessary evil” with both positive and negative impacts (p.103). Indeed at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* where comments raised the most concern, it was also evident that the comment function had increased their active audience figures the most. In line with the results of Chapter 5, the content analysis further revealed that audiences were more active at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* than at the *Leicester Mercury*.

**Chapter 9: Value of participation**

9.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters outlined why audiences participate and why journalists are encouraged by a combination of economic pragmatism and sometimes professional altruism to enable participation (Chapter 6); the nature of this participation (Chapter 7); and an in-depth look at the nature of this participation with regards to comments on stories (Chapter 8). The pattern emerging from the data is that readers are mostly motivated by public incentives of being informed, being able to take part in debate and being able to interact with others but news organisations are motivated by economic factors which is a pressure keenly felt by journalists. There is potential for harnessing democratic debate to a greater extent but this is currently restricted by organisational factors and journalists’ sceptical attitudes towards participation which in turn is creating an environment where there is a lack of two-way interaction between readers and journalists.

Having identified the types of participation and the motivations of audiences and journalists this chapter now looks toward the question of the value of audience participation for both readers and journalists. The research recognises that value can have both economic worth (Miller, 2008; Blaug *et al*, 2006; Mulgan *et al*, 2006) and non-monetary subjective worth (Miller, 2008) whilst public value can be the morals, principles or ideas that serve as guides to action (Mason, 2002).

Therefore as discussed in Chapter 2 this study aims to measure value from the perspective of audience members and journalists, whilst also taking into consideration the value of participation to news companies. As discussed in the literature review, journalists are caught between social and economic obligations meaning the value of participation to journalists is potentially one that holds both public and economic value.

In order to measure the value of participation to audience members this study has developed three gauges from public sphere theory, which are set out and justified in detail in Chapter 2, section 2.5.

To recap, for Web 2.0 audience participation in local British newspapers to be valuable to readers it must:

1. enable *anyone* with internet access to participate
2. allow a *variety* of communication channels to offer alternative arenas to dominate and subordinate groups
3. contain *moral, ethical, political or community* communication irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest

As argued in Chapter 2 accessibility and inclusivity must exist in order for the public sphere to operate effectively as a space for rational critical deliberation (Habermas, 1989). Without inclusivity the public sphere cannot represent public opinion. But in order for this to occur the contemporary argument is that multiple public spheres (Gitlin, 1998), counter-publics (Dahlgren, 2001; Fraser, 1999) and deliberative online forums (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) must exist via a variety of communication channels to offer alternative arenas to both dominant and subordinate groups.

As illustrated in Chapter 6 readers are motivated to participate largely due to a desire to deliberate about the public good rather than in the pursuit of private interests. However the socialisation of news consumption and participation means that they can be motivated by personal and private reasons simultaneously. As Hermida *et al* (2011) reason “sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news” (p.7). There is a desire amongst readers to interact and share information for the common good as well as for entertainment or social engagement. As argued by Fraser (1999) and Johansson (2007) the boundary between public and private interests is difficult to define. By reporting seemingly private matters, Johansson (2007) argues that news organisations are able to open up political discussion, therefore creating a more inclusive media public sphere. Furthermore moral and ethical issues can serve to inform indirect political discourse (Johansson, 2007). Therefore for the purpose of this study in order for participation to be valuable to audiences it may contain moral, ethical, political or communitycommunication, irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest.

Furthermore if the three gauges set out above are met then participation can be a valuable form of deliberation. As Eriksen and Weigard (2003) reason, through participation democracy can enlighten and educate its citizens and enable them to reach mutual understanding of the common good. This participation often takes the form of deliberation which enables citizens to find out if political decisions are correct by hearing counter arguments which are freely voiced. The news media fulfil an important function for democracy by providing a public forum in which these views and opinions can potentially have an influence on the decision of politicians or at the very least have an influence on the voting decisions of other citizens (Ross and Nightingale, 2003). This public forum or public sphere is where private citizens come together to form a public and deliberate politics through rational critical debate in order to reach a common judgement and influence political decision-making (Habermas, 1989). The mass media play a vital role in the public sphere as journalists “help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt” (Dahlgren, 1991, p.1). Furthermore within the context of Web 2.0 Wessler and Schultz (2007) maintain that the mass media have become the most important forum for truly public deliberation. As Jackson (1971) indicated four decades ago the local press have a series of important functions one of which is to provide a platform for debate, a function which is still relevant in the post Web 2.0 era. Therefore the findings of this chapter seek to understand whether audience participation meets the three gauges set out above and whether it can be classified as deliberation.

The notion of value must be explored within an economic context however, as this underpins the business model of UK regional newspapers and their websites. Chapter 6 strongly indicates that journalists and newspaper organisations are being motivated to enable participation for economic reasons and indeed Chapter 8 suggests that true democratic deliberation is being held back in part due to commercial concerns about damage to the brand of a news organisation. Habermas (1992) argued that the public sphere was in decline in the 19th century due to the commercialisation of newspapers yet contemporary scholars (Hermida, 2011a; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2001; Poster, 1995) argue that the media of the 21st century represent the public sphere ideal more accurately due to the diversity of voices contributing and the ability for the public to participate via the internet. Yet there still remains constant friction between the political realm of readers as citizens and the economic realm of readers as consumers outlined by Garnham (1986) more than two decades ago. The question is whether the two can co-exist or whether the internet runs the risk of equating democracy with populism (Goode, 2009).

This chapter therefore seeks to explore **RQ2b: What is the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers?** in relation to contemporary conceptualisations of the public sphere and deliberative democracy set within the context of the commercial media market.

9.2 Methods

This chapter aims to draw on the perspectives of both readers and journalists and therefore a variety of methods were deployed to gather data. The first section of results entitled access, inclusivity and topic, draws from the findings of the comment content analysis discussed in Chapter 8 together with findings from Chapters 5 and 7. The second section entitled learning and debating, deals with results from the questionnaire of online users from both case study websites. There were three questions specifically relating to the value of participation including an open question to extract qualitative responses. The full list of questions can be viewed in Appendix 1a. The responses to the questionnaire were analysed in conjunction with reader interviews as outlined in Chapter 4. Readers were asked about the value of participation and then more specifically about the value of comments on stories. The responses were mostly based on predetermined answers devised from the literature but the open questions in the questionnaire and questions in the interview allowed for a broader range of responses which were coded qualitatively.

The third section, economic value, draws from interviews with journalists. The interview guide included a section on the value of participation including questions such as, ‘Is readers participation valuable? Why? How? For whom?’ The interview checklist also included subjects such as: empowering citizens, resources, debate, scrutiny, personal interest, and social. Both can be seen in full in Appendix 2a. The results were analysed and coded organically with the use of priori codes rather than predetermined categories.

9.3 Results

The results in this chapter specifically refer to the question of value and draw on all of the methods outlined in Chapter 4 including observation, interviews, questionnaire and content analysis. This chapter draws together the findings of Chapter 5, 6, 7, and 8 as well as new data analysed specifically from the reader and journalist interviews together with sections of the online reader questionnaire.

The findings are divided into three key areas to explore all the aspects surrounding value and notions of the public sphere as outlined in Chapter 2. The first section, access inclusivity and topic, explores whether the three gauges of value described above have been met in the two case study sites. The second section, learning and debating, focuses on whether audience participation can be defined as democratic deliberation. The final section, economic value, explores the commercial context and whether audience participation has a journalistic value as well as an economic one.

**Access, inclusivity and topic**

In order for audience participation to have value the first criterion that must be met in this study is that the case study websites must enable *anyone* with internet access to participate. Via observation and journalist interviews at both the *Leicester Mercury* and Bournemouth *Daily Echo* it quickly became apparent that access was not universal. Although anyone with internet access could send in user generated content, or participate via social media websites, there were restrictions on who could participate in commenting on stories. Anyone could initially register an account to comment as long as they had an email address but the newspaper had the power to ban users. Figures disclosed by the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* showed that there were 9,400 active users registered and 11,300 active, non-active or banned users registered. This would indicate that there were up to 1,900 banned users, although this figure is mostly likely to be made up of non-active users. The *Leicester Mercury* was not able to disclose comparable figures. As discussed in Chapter 8 the banning of commenters was a somewhat arbitrary process at both case study sites. Banning users together with turning off some comment threads, preventing readers from commenting on certain stories altogether and a lack of a measured approach to moderation meant that access to participation was being curtailed at the whim of journalists. Organisational constraints and legal anxieties meant that with regards to comment threads the gauge that newspaper websites should enable *anyone* with internet access to participate was not being met. Live blogging was another area where journalists restricted readers from participating as they had control of which posts to publish as this was a fully moderated system.

Furthermore with user generated content the journalists still acted as gatekeepers, as discussed further in Chapter 10, selecting which reader content to publish and which to spike. Therefore not everyone with an internet access was able to participate. The only place where access was completely open was on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, although journalists still had the ability to remove reader posts, although due to a lack of interaction from journalists this rarely or never happened. There was less anxiety about these websites due to the content not being the legal responsibility of the newspaper or its website. As explored further in Chapter 7 social media platforms such as Twitter were the only participatory channel used by the two case study websites for two way communication between readers and journalists, without moderation, that potentially enabled readers to participate in newsgathering, production, dissemination and responding.

The second value gauge that the two case study websites were measured by was whether they provided a *variety* of communication channels to offer alternative arenas to dominant and subordinate groups. As Table 7.1 and 7.2 in Chapter 7 illustrate both case study sites provided a range of participatory channels with seven at the *Leicester Mercury* and 13 at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. As has been shown throughout this study the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had higher participation rates and encouraged participation to a greater extent, therefore it met this second gauge more fully than the *Leicester Mercury* - at least on its website. However as Chapter 12 explores the *Leicester Mercury* has more participatory channels in the traditional printed product due to its partnership with community reporter organisation *Citizens’ Eye*. The range of Web 2.0 participatory channels at both case study sites meant that readers who might be subordinated by other users on comment threads for example, could participate via social media networks or live blogs instead and were also able to send in user generated content via a variety of means such as email, social media platforms or mobile phones. Indeed some readers in the interviews indicated that they preferred to comment on the newspaper’s associated Facebook page rather than on the website comment threads because it was “safer” (BR1) whereas the comment threads were “a small pool of people dominating the space which excludes a lot of people” (BR1). With the range of participatory channels on offer it was possible for audience participation to meet the requirements of a valuable public sphere and be inclusive to all. These various participatory channels allude to Fraser’s (1999) multiple public spheres which create a “parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities interests and needs,” (Fraser, 1999, p.123).

However, although the potential for inclusivity was in evidence, this did not mean that these participatory channels attracted an inclusive audience. Results from Chapter 5 show that at both case study sites the diversity of the public sphere was limited and therefore not inclusive. Those that participated tend to be male and more highly educated than the national average. However age and salary appeared to be less of an exclusivity factor with questionnaire respondents at both case study sites representing the average population in their local area. It should also be noted that the diversity of the participatory audience was broader than suggested by journalists, as demonstrated in Chapter 8. However the results of Chapter 5 and 7 do show that it was still the minority of the audience that was participating albeit in growing numbers. Therefore it would be reasonable to suggest that this participating public is not yet representative of public opinion.

The third gauge of value in this study is that audience participation must contain *moral, ethical, political or community* communication irrespective of whether it is a matter of public or private interest. The results of the comment content analysis discussed in Chapter 8 supported this gauge although it did not take into consideration other forms of communication such as posts on social media platforms, live blogging or submitting user generated content. However given that commenting on stories was the most popular form of audience participation it gave a good indication of this third gauge. At both case study sites it was found that on average 90 per cent of comments were relevant to the story or another comment and did not contain a personal attack on another user. This might suggest that these comments were therefore responding to the article and contained some form of moral, ethical, political or community communication usually in the form of an expression of an opinion or debate with another user. More significantly the majority of the most commented upon stories were news stories rather than sport or entertainment. Furthermore the news stories were mostly hard news stories containing content about local government, crime and health. For example the headlines of most commented stories included: ‘[Street lights off after midnight in bid to save money](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/news/8673639.Street_lights_off_after_midnight_in_bid_to_save_money/?ref=mc)’, ‘[Question mark over revamp of surf reef](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/news/8675783.Question_mark_over_revamp_of_surf_reef/?ref=mc)’, ' “There were no cots free for our premature twins” ', ‘Leicester councillor 'is sorry' over scathing attack on former PM Brown’ and ‘Man barred from every pub and club in Leicester city centre’. This would re-enforce the argument that comments on these types of stories were political or community oriented in nature as most of these stories were centred on local issues and public affairs. A story about a local student protest over the rise in university tuition fees received 49 comments on the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* website, most of which discussed and debated the political context. One commenter wrote:

Good to see a bit of militancy. Show Clegg and his lot their promises haven't been forgotten. At least the Tories were honest whatever people think of them. The lib dems sold their souls for a sniff of power.

Another argued:

Where are our Nurses and Teachers and others in low paid vocational jobs going to come from in the future. Who is going to go into these jobs which will be demanding a £40,000+ entry fee in the future. Add the higher fees to the removal of maintenance allowance to poor families to allow their children to stay on at school and a picture is emerging,. Cut higher education for those from low and ordinary income families, bring in skilled immigrants to do the skilled jobs that they otherwise would have done. The new immigration "cap" is a sham, it excludes inter Company transfers. As for the Lib Dems they face annihilation when they next face the electorate. As Mr Cable says a promise is not a promise when you aren't elected - but he was! He really meant a promise is not a promise when you are a politician!

Indeed many of the comments were also made up of moral or ethical discussion particularly on stories based around issues of beliefs, conduct, or complaints. A health story on the *Leicester Mercury* website about parents complaining that their premature twins were moved to a hospital 50 miles away, promoted a variety of comments and a debate over whether the parents had a legitimate complaint. This contained moral and ethical arguments about the parents and the National Health Service. One commenter wrote:

This young couple should be grateful that their babies are being well cared for! It is simply not possible to plan for how many babies will be born prematurely each day and to have a large number of cots standing empty 'just in case' is not realistic. When my sister suffered a massive brain haemorrage some years ago, she was taken to Queens Medical Centre in Nottingham. When we made the daily journey to and from Nottingham, we did not complain; we were just eternally grateful that she was being helped by a dedicated team of professionals. Thanks to them she made a full recovery. That was all that mattered. This rationale should be applied here too.

At the *Leicester Mercury* 58 per cent of comments in the content analysis sample were on news stories and 37 per cent on Letters to the Editor, which again were responses to news stories. That meant only five per cent of comments were on sports stories. At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the entertainment factor was higher with 40 per cent of comments on sports stories and 60 per cent on news stories. However comments on sports stories could be classified as containing community content as all of the sports stories involved local sports clubs. However stories of a humorous nature, categorised as news stories, did receive a lot of comments when they were published on the websites, but these types of stories were not published often and made up less than 10 per cent of each of the comment thread samples. A similar pattern could be seen with user generated content, as discussed in Chapter 7, in that readers generally sent in photographs from breaking news stories but when an unusual or quirky event happened on a rare occasion, such as heavy snowfall, readers participated in high numbers. Again this supports the findings of Chapter 7, Table 7.7, which indicates that readers generally prefer to participate in news stories over any other kind of content.

**Learning and debating**

The results in this section consider whether audience participation is valuable in light of Dahlgren’s (1991) description of the extent to which mass media facilitate the public sphere by helping “citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt”, (p.1). It should be noted that most readers in the questionnaire and interviews equated participation primarily with commenting on stories rather than broader participatory channels such as submitting user generated content or participating in social media platforms.

Graph 9.1 illustrates results from the reader questionnaire and indicates that readers marginally thought that their participation added value to the newspaper website, although it was not a strong consensus.

Graph 9.1: Do readers think their participation adds value to the newspaper online (shown as percentage)

Overall the results were largely ambivalent with 53 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* readers and 54 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers answering Yes, Maybe or Don’t Know, and all other respondents answering No, to the question: Do you think your participation adds value to the newspaper online? This indicates that audiences are still not sure of the value of participation and opinions are very mixed. This may be due to the infancy of comments on stories on local newspaper websites and the limited feedback or interaction readers receive from journalists making it unclear what the significance of these contributions are.

The questionnaire included an open question asking readers how participation added value. Many readers left responses including details about why participation did not add value. The reasons why participation was viewed as valuable centred on the enabling of people to take part in democratic discussion. *Leicester Mercury* respondents commented “it helps with public issues” and “it’s a useful media to source local grassroots opinion” whilst a Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader said “yes it makes people think and contributes to the debates”.

Another factor was the ability for participation to open up the conversation to differing perspectives. One Leicester Mercury reader said “it’s the only way locally that you can have your say especially if your views are opposed to others”. This was even more prominent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, where several readers articulated the importance of enabling a variety of opinions to be expressed and debated, as these three separate responses exemplify:

Yes it adds value because it allows for a more objective viewpoint from other sources and not just a journalist’s view point. It also helps with preventing any possibility of a journalist being biased towards a topic and tilting the story in favour of it. I have seen this many times in stories and news reports.

It can add a different perspective, provide additional information, balance out extreme views, correct inaccurate data.

I think it is important to the journalists, local community and official figures involved or featured in stories to receive ‘live’ feedback via these pages. Mainly in order to offer another perspective from the public view on stories or blogs. Occasionally the newspaper would be quite empty, boring repetitive and bland without this public interaction.

Other respondents at both case study sites felt the value of participation was variable, commenting that it was “very mediocre” or “sometimes, ignoring the whingers, interesting discussions can be sustained, but not that often” and “certainly some of the comments added are either ‘chattering classes’ rants or downright rubbish – but there are often some good and helpful points”. And a third section of readers were clear that participation had no value stating that “contributions are ill informed and a waste of energy” and “most readers postings appear mad, ill informed”. This re-iterates the concern of some journalists explored in Chapter 8 that readers think “they are becoming more informed when actually they are becoming less informed” (B1).

The questionnaire asked readers specifically about comments on stories and whether they viewed them as abusive, irrelevant, entertaining, informative or thought provoking. As Graph 9.2 indicates opinions were largely positive with almost 60 per cent of readers at both case study sites describing comments as informative or thought provoking. Conversely only a fifth of readers said comments were abusive or irrelevant. Once again the results were very similar at both case study sites making it possible to make broader generalisations.

Graph 9.2: How readers describe comments on stories (shown as percentage)

In reader interviews, participants were also asked specifically about the value of comments. Overall 90 per cent of readers at both case study sites had a positive view of comments. However it was still a mixed picture with 60 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* readers stating that comments could also be abusive or irrelevant as well as valuable. By contrast this was just 36 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. This supports the findings of the content analysis analysed in Chapter 8 which showed that irrelevant and abusive posts were slightly more frequent at the *Leicester Mercury*. More significantly the comment threads at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were longer and more complex signifying a higher likeliness of real democratic deliberation. Therefore readers at the *Leicester Mercury* may be justified in believing that comments are both positive and negative in value.

The positive value of comments identified by readers in the interviews was the apparent inclusivity and lack of gatekeeping, which enabled everyone to have their opinion published. One *Leicester Mercury* (LR2) reader commented: “It’s very important that people have a chance to have their say. If you wrote a letter to a newspaper [in the past] it was being sorted by the editor, there is no such selection online, so you get a wider range of views on comment sections on website.” Meanwhile a Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reader (BR5) recognised the advantages of online participation over offline participation, and said: “It is good for the community. It gives people voice power. With a newspaper you would absolutely not be able to do that.” A range of difference perspectives also enabled readers to be exposed to different views and potentially have their opinions changed, which is an important part of the democratic process (Marcus, 1988). As *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR3) demonstrated: “My opinion can change if new information I was not aware of is told to me. I will go away and do a little research and if it is valid information I would change my opinion.”

The qualitative results above show that readers believed there was value in participation because it enabled them to express an opinion and have access to a wider range of perspectives, whilst the quantitative data displayed in Graph 9.2 indicates that comments were viewed as mostly informative and thought provoking. Further quantitative data presented in Chapter 8 indicates that comment participation had a fairly high level of interaction - a third of all comments - and this rose to 50 per cent on some subject matters. The combination of these results indicates that participation, in particular comment threads, helps people “learn about the world” by being informed and exposed to differing perspective, and enables them to “debate their responses to it” via interaction (Dahlgren, 1991, p.1). However it does not necessarily follow that such debate will also help people to “reach decisions about what courses of action to adopt” (Dahlgren, 1991, p.1). Results from Chapter 6 indicate that only five per cent of readers said participation empowered them to take part in further political action. Therefore the extent to which audience participation within Web 2.0 represents a fully operational public sphere is still questionable. Furthermore a significant number of readers and journalists still believe that participation is irrelevant, abusive or ill informed which does not reflect the discursive space of rational judgement and enlightened critique that Eagleton (2005) describes as the public sphere.

**Economic value**

The value of audience participation to journalists was one of the topics addressed in the semi-structured interviews of 37 journalists at the two case study sites. The interviews elicited a range of 11 responses displayed in Graph 9.3 which can be broadly divided into negative value (damage to brand), public value (accountability, public gauge, follow-up) and economic value (source, resource, promotes brand, brand loyalty, new audiences, new advertisers). Not applicable refers to journalists who gave no clear response. Every response given by each interviewee was coded.

Graph 9.3: Value of audience participation for journalists

What is most salient about the results shown in Graph 9.3 is the emphasis on economic value which made up for 60 per cent of responses from journalists at both the *Leicester Mercury* and the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. There was a feeling amongst some interviewees that participation was valuable for promoting the newspaper and creating loyal audiences rather than having any journalistic value. One reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B15) commented: “It does more for the brand as a whole than any particular kind of use from a journalistic kind of view, I think it gives the paper great kudos that they interact with their readership in the way that we do and I think the readers really do respond to that.” This was echoed by the editor Neal Butterworth (B7), who said:

There are lots and lots of people out there who feel they are part of this great big melting pot of news and views and information and if their local newspaper is savvy enough to give them the opportunity to be part of it and to understand the importance of their part of it then great they’ll keep with you and they’ll effectively support your newspaper, your website, your brand.

The value of audience participation as a means of attracting new audiences and promoting the brand was substantially higher at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (44% and 44% compared to 21% and 26% at the *Leicester Mercury*). The explanation for this was evident from the interviews and observation which both indicated that the three-strong web team at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* spent much of their time and effort using participation to engage new audiences on social media networks and drive traffic to bournemouthecho.co.uk as examined in Chapter 6.

The biggest single response from interviewees was that audience participation was valuable as a source of stories. This was identified by 100 per cent of the *Leicester Mercury* journalists and 77 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* interviewees who responded to the question of value. The value of audience participation as a source and a resource was notably higher at the *Leicester Mercury* and this likely to be due to the partnership the newspaper has with *Citizens’ Eye* as discussed in further detail in Chapter 12.

Although the most popular values appeared to be economic ones which either supported the work of journalists, attracted new audiences/advertisers or developed the brand, a third of responses at both case study sites identified public factors for why participation was valuable. These included using participation as a means of gauging public opinion, feeding that public opinion into follow-up stories and holding journalists accountable to the public. The results suggest that being a mouthpiece for public opinion is a vital way in which the media facilitates the public sphere and technology has made this process easier. As international research by Heinonen (2011) indicates journalists view participatory audience members as valuable not only as sources but also as reflectors, commentators and pulse-takers. The deputy editor (B13) of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* explained how technology had opened the gates to public feedback:

Previously if you had covered a story you wouldn’t really have much of an idea about what the impact was outside or what people thought of it, now you get such instant feedback that it’s a fantastic ability to be able to research how your own material is effecting the community that you work in and whether you are getting it right or wrong.

Furthermore David MacLean, political correspondent at the *Leicester Mercury* (L10) argued that the smaller scale nature of reader participation on local newspaper websites meant that more people had a chance of being heard:

I think when you get any bigger than this, look at the Daily Mail website, where there’s 400 comments on a story, people’s voices get lost, but here where you get 20, 25 comments on a story, I think everyone’s voice does get heard... I think it is the job of newspaper to provide a platform for as many people’s views as possible.

Being the watchdog of the watchdogs was also an important role of audience participation, as articulated by Andy Martin, head of multimedia and content (B8) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*.

Yes I think it probably does (make journalists more accountable) because as much as we might think we know it all and what we write is the truth or the facts, often we don't get it right, or sometimes we don't ask the right questions, and the ability of people to come in who might be more closely involved, they might be a council worker who say actually you have missed the point here or whoever it might be, it's basically an extra set of eyes and ears on a particular story.

These results also indicate that journalists see most value in the newsgathering (source) and responding stages (public gauge) as these are the biggest sections of Graph 9.3. These results resonate with the findings of Chapters 7.

9.4 Discussion

A common theme throughout this thesis is the potential for journalists to utilise audience participation for democratic and civic purposes. However as the results from this chapter re-iterate this process is at best incomplete which may be the inevitable struggle between commerce and civic obligations identified by Jenkins (2008), and the economic and cultural conflicts outlined by Bourdieu (2005) as discussed in Chapters 2, 6, and 12. Organisational restrictions and economic emphasis are constricting the public value of participation and preventing it from fulfilling its potential. Indeed journalists’ strive for complete autonomy to gain cultural capital and oppose constraint by the structural processes that are necessary to gain economic capital, which ultimately makes the dissolving of professional boundaries nigh on impossible.

The three gauges designed to measure the value of audience participation have been tested in this chapter, providing mixed results. The first gauge of access is not fully met in the two case study sites due to a lack of a clear policy on how to handle user generated content and the desire of journalists to remain as gatekeepers of information. This is particularly the case with content in the form of text, photos, video and audio, excluding comments on website stories. As discussed in Chapter 8, comment threads are a more complex form of participation where readers can in most instances bypass gatekeepers however users can be banned or their comments can be blocked at the whim of a journalist. Therefore some “existing norms and practices” have expanded into digital media (Hermida, 2011b, p.30) with journalists holding ultimate privilege over who can comment, and comment threads being viewed as distinct reader content with little or no journalist intervention, therefore distinguished from the content of professional journalists. However the very fact that hundreds of readers are almost instantly able to post comments rather than go through the selection process of the Letters Page illustrates that the authorial structures and established flows of information, typical of gatekeeping journalism (Hermida *et al*, 2011) are being disrupted on comment threads, if not with user generated content. This partial sharing of the gates, as discussed in Chapter 8, is further support for what Robinson describes as “a grand confusion in the industry about who has ultimate textual privilege and the role that audiences should play in online news sites” (2010, p.126). The value gauge of access, as outlined in section 9.1, is therefore only currently partial met although this is in a state of flux.

The second gauge of inclusivity is partially met with a range of channels being provided, yet there is still exclusivity around the gender and education of audience members. Even with a range of public forums online the public sphere is dominated by educated males, replicating the 18th century bourgeoisie coffee house identified by Habermas (1989) and supporting Sparks (2003) argument that newspaper websites strengthen the social divide by narrowing access to public life to the “educated elite” (p.125). However these alternative public spheres are opening up spaces for a variety of age ranges and are attracting a combination of digital natives and digital migrants, therefore as discussed in Chapter 5, they are not simply the closed domain of elite audiences. As argued above, the gates are now partially open, meaning that media gatekeepers can no longer turn participation channels into entirely exclusive spaces. As Reich (2011) reasons comment threads in particular are inclusive spaces and it is no longer the case that only citizens whom the gatekeepers decide are worth hearing are allowed a public voice. The former spaces were governed by journalistic logic while user comments are “governed by broader social standards” (Reich, 2011, p.97) enabling wider inclusivity. Indeed this was one of the values identified by audience members who felt that comment threads enabled a greater variety of voices and opinions to be heard, that may have been restricted in the past. These public spheres online are therefore not yet representative of public opinion but are perhaps more diverse than their offline counterparts, and certainly more representative than journalists would have us believe.

The third value gauge which argues that audience participation must contain moral, ethical, political or community communication, appears to be mostly met particularly in relation to comment threads. Although the comments sometimes contained irrelevant or entertainment-based information and occasionally frivolous content was sent into the newspaper from readers, the vast majority of participation was based on local news worthy issues centred on public affairs as discussed in the previous chapter. Although there is evidence of a social element to interaction and participation the main incentive for audiences is to be better informed, hear a diversity of perspectives and debate public issues. However the extent to which this participation fulfils the role of deliberative democracy is again only partial, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 8.

There is evidence to show that the case study sites provide a variety of alternative public spheres/online forums which help citizens learn about the world and debate their responses to it. However the results do not tell us whether this enables citizens to reach mutual understanding of the common good. This may be happening by default but there is no empirical evidence to support this final stage of deliberation. Indeed further research is needed in order to unpick whether audience participation is fully deliberative. Evidence from the comment content analysis at the two case study sites suggests that there is greater deliberation at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. This may be due to users being more highly educated as shown in Chapter 5 and there being a higher percentage of retired audience members who have more time to participate and formulate considered responses, however without further inquiry an explanation would be difficult to pinpoint. As discussed in Chapter 8 the extent to which users reach a mutual understanding based on the common good via participation is difficult to measure however there is evidence to suggest that participation does expose audience members to multiple actors, (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010) and counter arguments (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003) which could have an influence on their voting decisions. Therefore participation via the news media does fulfil an important democratic function (Ross and Nightingale, 2003) providing a platform for voices (Heinonen, 2011).

What is clear from the results is the emphasis placed on the economic value of audience participation by journalists. It is perhaps not surprising that this is such a dominant factor given that the industry is currently under huge financial pressure and this is a daily concern for editorial staff. These results chime with the international findings on comment threads by Reich (2011) which found that journalists most commonly cited the biggest benefit of comments as being their commercial value. Comments helped to “increase traffic to the website and strengthen loyalty to the brand” (Reich, 2011, p.104). Meanwhile research at British national and local newspapers indicates that far from democratizing journalism, the internet is actually creating more competition and a need for speed rather than in-depth reporting, which in turn is pulling journalists towards the economic and heteronomous pole of Bourdieu’s journalistic field (Phillips, 2010). Uniformity has also increased with the growth of the internet as journalists are able to instantly see what their rivals are publishing online and therefore copy or rewrite it for their own news organisation. However Phillips’ (2010) research does acknowledge that local journalists are more likely to source stories from the public than their national counterparts and the internet does give all journalists greater access to dissenting voices and smaller organisations that would have been overlooked pre-internet. Yet on balance the research concludes that although the internet creates opportunities for finding alternative sources, improving reliability and increasing independence to improve the democratic and cultural relevance of newspapers, the internet “is actually narrowing the perspective of many reporters,” (p.99).

As discussed in Chapter 6, economic journalism has come to the forefront of journalistic identity (Donsbach, 2010; Bourdieu, 2005). Audience participation is viewed as being a valuable commercial asset (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Paulussen *et al*, 2007) because it drives traffic to newspaper websites (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Phillips, 2011) and builds brand loyalty (Heinonen, 2011; Vujnovic, 2011). However it should be recognised that although economic values dominate they do exist alongside civic values. Journalists recognise the value of being able to gauge public opinion and be questioned by the public (Heinonen, 2011) to enable them to improve their journalism. As Vujnovic notes, journalists “almost always discuss economic motivations in tandem with concerns about how to improve journalism, particularly in terms of its democratic social function,” (p.150). This reflects the arguments discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, laid out by Garnham (1986) and more recently by Jenkins (2005) that the economic drive of news corporations can co-exist alongside a public desire for civic participation. It also resonates with the journalistic field of Bourdieu (2005) which argues that journalists have to find a balance between the economic capital of selling newspapers and having less autonomy, with building a reputation and maintaining strong autonomy. It could be argued that within niche markets such as local newspapers, which are not aiming for a mass market, this balancing act is strongly felt. There is a commercial imperative to sell newspapers and advertising and to attract as many website hits as possible but this is not to be at the expense of damaging the reputation of the brand amongst the local community, therefore some autonomy must be upheld. For Bourdieu the freedom of action of journalists depends on where a journalist is located within a particular field (Phillips *et al*, 2010). Local journalists arguably sit within the middle of this journalistic field, constantly feeling the economic and cultural forces pulling them from pole to pole. Indeed it could be said that local newspaper journalists, who are often allocated specialisms or patches, are more autonomous than their national counterparts, as they are able to carve out their own contacts and expertise rather than be ‘spoon-fed’ by the news desk. Furthermore they are faced with less competition than national newspapers as few local newspapers have direct rivals anymore, including the two in this study, as the competition has been bought up or forced out of the market by the big publishing companies.

Consequently the economic realm of readers as consumers and the political realm of readers as citizens are in constant healthy competition with one another. However within the two case study sites of this study the balance of power currently lies firmly within the economic realm. However it must also be recognised that although participation is largely seen as holding great economic value it can also have a damaging, negative economic and cultural impact on a company brand, however the overall balance is in favour of positive economic value with participation understood to be a “necessary evil” (Reich, 2011, p.103).

**Conclusion**

As previously outlined in Chapter 6 there is the potential for local newspapers online to empower citizens and create deliberative forums which enable multiple actors, diversity and a democratic public sphere to exist (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010). But as Papacharissi maintains (2002) access and the ability to participate online does not guarantee an actual increase in audience participation and although technologies carry the promise of bringing people together it does not ensure people from different backgrounds gain a greater understanding of one another as outlined by Dahlgren (2001). In order for this to happen Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue that the right conditions have to exist first. In this PhD study the two case study sites are currently constrained by economic anxieties which mean a lack of communication and inefficient organisational structures are restricting the value of audience participation. Many of the editorial staff at both companies recognise the public value of utilising Web 2.0 but acknowledge it is not currently reaching its potential. However the perception is that it is the audience that is failing to harness the potential of the online public sphere rather than journalists or news organisations themselves. The deputy editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B13) expressed how he felt disappointed by the public:

I think it has potential, it is a wonderful thing , the whole concept of citizen journalism is a fantastic opportunity for people to have their say and it is wonderful that so many people are using that avenue to have their voice heard but it is disappointing that they are not using it as well as one might have hoped.

The attitude reflects another fundamental restriction to the promise of bringing people together and encouraging grassroots democracy (Papacharissi, 2002). As Goode (2009) coherently argues the democratic public sphere needs more than peer-to-peer conversation, which is predominantly what exists at the two case study sites. Instead the right conditions for an inclusive deliberative public sphere need to include vertical interaction with journalists joining the conversation. Until two-way communication between journalists and readers occurs the value of Web 2.0 audience participation will always be limited.

**Chapter 10: Impact on gatekeeping role**

10.1 Introduction

As illustrated in Chapter 7 and 8 the traditional top down model of communication remains in place in the production stage of the news process. However audiences are increasingly able to participate in the newsgathering, dissemination and responding stages of the news process which bookend the production process. Furthermore Chapter 9 recognises that participation via Web 2.0 has a journalistic value in that it enables journalists to gauge public feedback to a greater extent, develop stories based on public opinion and be held more accountable by the public. This context informs this chapter which seeks to find out what the modern role of local journalists is and whether their traditionally authoritarian position as the gatekeepers of information still exists within the age of the internet. The various sub-sections discussed below aim to address the singular research question **RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?**

As discussed in Chapter 2 key scholars argue that the journalist-as-gatekeeper role has not diminished but it is simply being redefined. Journalists are now the verifiers of mass information as other individuals and organisations have also taken on the role of information gatherers and distributers in the online environment. Hartley (2000) sees journalists as editors of information who are increasingly responding to the whim of the sensation seeking public rather than setting the agenda. Singer (2001; 1997) and Hermida (2009) describe journalists as sense makers, who filter the glut of information online, whilst Charman (2007) refers to journalists as human algorithms sifting through volumes of data, communicating what they believe to be important to the public. Meanwhile Gillmor (2006) argues that it is the modern journalist’s role to shape larger conversations and provide context alongside the traditional role of newsgathering. Indeed, in her more contemporaneous research, Bruno (2011) sees verification as the only added value of professional journalists in the future. In order to clarify which perspective has the most pertinence to contemporary journalism at a local level this chapter seeks to explore whether journalists at the two case study sites believe their professional role is changing, and if so what this modern role is.

First of all, it must be acknowledged that some journalists are reluctant to adapt and accept that their role is changing. As previous research suggests journalists’ attitudes tend to fall into opposing camps, those ready to embrace change and those clinging onto their traditional role (Robinson, 2010; Chung, 2007). Robinson describes these camps as the convergers – those who are younger and hired more recently - and the traditionalists – those who are over 40 and have been at the newspaper for a number of years. Furthermore Singer *et al*’s 2011 international research reveals that although some journalists stress the democratic benefit of including reader participation and user generated content others fear doing so undermines the very basis of journalism (Quandt, 2011). The research also found that polarised views existed, with the spectrum of viewpoints divided into the three camps. These were the conventional journalist (traditional gatekeeping role), dialogical journalist (collaboration between users and journalists) and the ambivalent journalist which was the biggest camp and included those who saw merits in both the conventional and dialogical approach (Heinonen, 2011). This PhD research therefore seeks to explore to what extent local journalists are willing to change and accept that their gatekeeping role has evolved.

Via news room observation it was also possible to see the ways in which Web 2.0 was impacting on the traditional role of journalists as gatekeepers. In recent years several scholars have argued that a second layer of audience gatekeeping is occurring in the reaction to the news (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) and the growing role of web analytics, also known as the clickstream, is central to this (Anderson, 2011; Dickinson, 2011, Örnebring 2011). Shoemaker and Vos make a convincing case for audiences as “secondary gatekeepers” who become active once the mass media process stops (2009, p.7). Audiences share stories on traditional news media websites by emailing them to friends, or posting them to their open social network profiles and in doing so tell journalists which stories are popular. Furthermore research by Shoemaker *et al* (2008a) indicates that readers use different criteria for gatekeeping decisions than journalists do for news selection. News items about unusual events and public welfare play a much bigger role when readers decide to send news items than when journalists select events for news items. The increase in the use of web metrics or analytics to measure most-read stories, most-commented stories and most-shared stories is beginning to shape journalistic decision. This is supported by research into the *Leicester Mercur*y newspaper website (Dickinson, 2011) and a study of news rooms in Philadelphia (Anderson, 2011). Both studies conclude that audiences are not impacting on the gatekeeping process via user generated comment but are influencing news selection via web metrics. According to Örnebring (2010) this influence can lead to a change in news values to soft over hard news, quirky over substantial, visual over non-visual and an overall preference for sensationalism.

But despite evidence to suggest that gatekeeping is changing some journalists are still reluctant to accept this change as previously suggested. Part of the reason why local British newspaper journalists remain reluctant to accept changes in their gatekeeping role is due to worries about the accuracy, credibility and quality of user generated content (Singer, 2009). Similar concerns have also been identified by Chung (2007) and Robinson (2010) in their news room studies. As McQuail suggests the professional ideology of journalism contains “unwritten obligations” (2005, p.162), something which Deuze (2005) more explicitly outlines as the five traits of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. It is therefore important to understand how journalists at the two case study sites respond to citizen journalists and how they distinguish themselves from them to have an understanding of their modern role and professional identity.

10.2 Methods

This chapter focuses on journalists and the way in which they perceive that the introduction of Web 2.0 has impacted on their role as traditional gatekeepers. The bulk of the data was gathered via interviews and news room observation at both case study sites, as detailed in Chapter 4.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 members of editorial staff at the *Leicester Mercury* and 18 at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. These ranged from trainee reporters to the newspaper editor and included department heads in news, sport, features and web. An interview guide developed from the literature, as shown in Appendix 2a, was used which included two key questions about the gatekeeping role of journalists. These were: how has journalists’ control over the news changed with the widespread use of the internet? What is the role of a journalist when anyone can publish online? A further question was added during the interviews asking: what distinguishes professional journalists from citizen journalists? The interview checklist also included the topic headings: threat, control, undermining and what sets journalists apart. Interviewees were also asked probing questions for clarification, elaboration and to establish significance and were also asked to give examples.

The responses from the interviews were coded organically using priori codes, as shown in Appendix 2d. Some of the answers were coded using a hierarchal system where only the dominant response was recorded and for other answers all responses given were recorded to portray the complex and sometimes contradictory role of the journalist. The results section below indicates which responses were coded as hierarchal and which were not.

The observation was carried out during three weeks at the *Leicester Mercury* in October 2010 and two weeks at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* – one weekduring November 2010 and one week during January 2011. The researcher shadowed different members of editorial staff and attended news conferences and editorial planning meetings. Observations were recorded in an observation guide, as shown in Appendix 3, and guided by observation themes.

10.3 Results

The findings in this chapter refer specifically to RQ3 from the perspective of journalists as drawn from interviews and observation. However the results discussed here also relate to the findings of Chapter 8, 11 and 12 which all look at specific areas of the research in more depth in particular reader comments, the use of social media by journalists and a pilot citizen journalism project.

The findings in this chapter are divided in three sub-sections reflecting the key themes outlined in the introduction above. These include whether the traditional role of journalists as informational gatekeepers is changing, if so what is it changing to and are journalists willing to accept these changes. The final section discusses if, and how, professional journalists distinguish themselves from citizen journalists. These sub-sections are titled: the evolution of journalists, adaptation and acceptance, and professional standards.

**The evolution of journalists**

In each of the interviews participants were asked whether the role of the journalist was changing in the Web 2.0 environment and if so what it was changing to and what their role incorporated. The responses were coded into two sections, the first looking at the attitudes towards the current status of journalism. As illustrated in Graph 10.1 the responses fell into three key attitudes which ranged across a spectrum from a traditional view to one where journalists felt their role was under threat. The dominant response only was coded for each participant in order to give a clear indication of attitudes, which were then explored in further detail through the use of probing questions. The responses were coded as follows: the role of the journalist is Unchanged, Adapting or Under Threat. The graph displays the results as a percentage of all editorial staff interviewed. Interestingly no participants felt that the role of the journalist was redundant, even when asked this as a direct probing question.

The largest proportion of journalists felt the role of the journalist was adapting, as it had done throughout history.

Graph 10.1: Attitudes towards current role of journalists

The results were very similar at both case study sites, with 53 per cent at the *Leicester Mercury* and 54 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, expressing that their job and journalism was changing to the meet the demands and expectations of digital consumers. Even the editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B7), who described himself as “a traditionalist who likes to think he is forward thinking” acknowledged that the relationship with the audience had changed and the profession was evolving, albeit in a haphazard fashion.

I still think we’re kind of growing. Life-cycle-wise we are wide eyed teenagers a little bit, we’ve not become totally au fait with how to do it, what the best thing to do is. And that’s not just here but within the industry. There is no perfect solution to running a print media and running simultaneously a 24-7 digital media offering as well, so we are learning all the time...I think it’s that whole cliché of how it used to be us and them and now it’s just a massive us. It used to be that we could decide what people read about and when they read about it and there was much more of a we’ll tell you what the story is and we’ll do that because we have chosen to write about this part of it and chosen to include these quotes (Neal Butterworth, B7).

The idea that newspapers could no longer dictate the news agenda and act as authoritarian gatekeepers of information was echoed by some journalists at the *Leicester Mercury*. One reporter (L17) commented:

As I keep saying you have to be relevant to their lives and the issues important to them, rather than trying to dictate to them what is perceived to be the issue of the day or what is important. Maybe it needs to be turned on its head slightly... you need to talk to them and certainly they should have a part in setting the agenda.

However despite 50 per cent of staff accepting that journalism was adapting, a significant number from various age groups remained obstinate, expressing that their role had not changed and it was simply the tools and technology that was different. A reporter at the *Leicester Mercury* (L1), in their mid-thirties, commented: “Whether it came through carrier pigeon or whether it comes by a message saying check this out, the internet is just a different way of doing that.” Furthermore a reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in their fifties (B2) retorted: “The basic job hasn’t changed much at all except it’s more intense. The actual business of going out and talking to people and getting a story out of them is the same.” This is despite research to the contrary (Davies, 2009; O’Neil and O’Connor, 2008) that journalism is increasingly dominated by a reliance on public relations and deskbound journalists churning out copy from press releases.

A third of interviewees at the *Leicester Mercury* (31%) held the view that their job was unchanged, compared to just over a quarter (23%) at the *Bournemouth Daily* Echo. Again this reinforces the findings of previous chapters which indicate that the *Leicester Mercury* is slightly more traditional in its approach and this in turn is reflected in the attitudes of its editorial staff. Because more journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* felt journalism had not changed, only a relatively small number (16%) said their role was under threat. Overall 84 per cent indicated that the role of the journalist was secure either because it was adapting or had not changed. However as might be expected a higher percentage of journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (23%) felt their role may be under threat from external sources. This may be due to staff at this case study site having a greater awareness of audience participation, due to there being more participatory channels on its website and associated social media platforms and therefore its journalists felt the effects of this more. This is despite the fact that during the research project the *Leicester Mercury* was running a collaborative project with a citizen journalism organisation. However as explained in detail in Chapter 12 this collaborative project was largely between senior managers and *Citizens’ Eye* and did not involve wider editorial staff. It should be noted that the threat of redundancy was fairly equal between the two case study sites as both had seen staff cuts in recent years and staff expected to experience more in the future.

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* journalists identified a number of different threats to their role including citizen journalists, bloggers, sports stars or sports fans. One editorial staff member (B18) was particularly anxious about their job and was concerned that they might be replaced by members of the public willing to provide content for free.

In the past three years there have been redundancies. Every Christmas has been truly terrifying. You don't know what they are going to cut and why. They are trying to keep shareholders happy. It is really, really scary (B18).

Meanwhile one sub-editor (B4) shared similar concerns about reporters being replaced by citizen journalists.

Whether we go down the route of not being journalists, I can see it happening and being filled with unpaid people writing stories. We will be run out of jobs. The quality would be much poorer I would imagine. They might be able to write well but a journalist is a journalist (B4).

The sports journalists at Bournemouth *Daily Echo* raised concerns about former sports stars replacing journalists as match commentators and competition from fans on reporting news stories.

At the ground the other week when the managerial situation was blowing there was supporters down there with iPhones and BlackBerrys, iPads and everything else and they were all posting on internet forums and their own blogs and all that, so we are down there competing with them on our blog and own website, trying to get it out first... So there was 50 supporters down there with equipment and it’s competing with them as well as the other media - social journalism, doesn’t make it easy for us anymore, everyone’s a journalist now (B14).

The issue was also a concern to department heads, with problematic instances already occurring. The head of content and multimedia (B8) Andy Martin gave a recent example of a councillor scooping the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*.

We had an issue the other day about a local councillor who has her own local blog/local news website in Boscombe. And she gets access to all press releases put out by the council. We made an enquiry about FibreCity which has been digging up the roads and work has stopped for the last four months because they haven't got any money and there is an issue with the payment of contractors. We rang the council and said we wanted a statement on what you are doing about FibreCity. The council then put out a statement but they put it out to all the councillors as well in the form of a press release and to us. And one of those councillors put it on her website (B8).

Although Graph 10.1 shows three distinct attitudes towards the broad role of the 21st century journalist for those who believe the role is changing it is less clear what it is changing to. As Neal Butterworth, editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, expresses above, journalists are still “learning all the time” and working out what to do in the digital age. Although the literature discussed in Chapter 2 sets out how some scholars see the role of journalism changing in this study those interpretations were only partially represented at the two case study sites. Graph 10.2 indicates the responses given by interviewees about the role of the journalist within the content of Web 2.0. The results are displayed as a percentage of all the answers given and every response given by each interviewee was coded, rather than a dominant coding system being used.

For the more traditional *Leicester Mercury* journalists the biggest role was that of verification (44%) and “sorting the wheat from the chaff” (L16) in an environment where anyone can publish online and where there is information overload.

Graph 10.2: Role of journalists within the context of Web 2.0

The second largest response (28%) was a mixture of different views which did not fall into one single category, therefore they were categorised as Other. These responses included the role of a journalist as a watchdog, analyser, filterer and quality controller. These could be interpreted as the traditional roles of a journalist being adapted to an online environment. A quarter (22%) of the responses from *Leicester Mercury* journalists included that the role of the journalist was to amplify information and spread it to a wider audience, having already built up a reputation for reliability over time.

The perception of the amplification role of journalists was much higher at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* making up 50 per cent of responses. This might have been due to the multiple social media platforms that the company utilised and its drive to build new audiences on new platforms via the appointment of a digital projects co-ordinator. Verification was also a fairly frequent response (30%) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* along with Other (20%) which at this case study site was made up of the view that the modern role of a journalist was to be a digital storyteller.

Prior to the internet the role of the journalist was to let information through the gates and be a voice of authority. In their modern guise journalists recognise that they no longer hold the keys to the gate however they believe that their role as verifiers of information who can spread quality, analytical content to a wide audience has actually been heightened. And indeed this is what the audience is still expecting from them.

**Adaption and acceptance**

As outlined in the introduction there is some reluctance amongst journalists to adapt to the changes brought about by Web 2.0. However the dominant responses given by journalists in interviews at the two case study websites indicate that the majority are willing to adapt (Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 80%, *Leicester Mercury* 67%) and it is the minority who are reluctant to change (Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 20%, *Leicester Mercury* 33%). Figures 10.1 and 10.2 display the percentage of journalists who fall into each viewpoint at each case study site.

Figure 10.1: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* willingness or reluctance to change

Figure 10.2: *Leicester Mercury* willingess or reluctance to change

Age did not appear to be a distinguising factor as Robinson’s 2010 research suggested, with journalists in their fifties eager to use new technology and open up audience participation and journalists in their twenties being reluctant to move beyond traditional norms and practices. Indeed many journalists recognised that although they had been reluctant to change in the beginning they were now changing their attitudes.

One reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in their early 30s (B14) admitted they had “come round full circle” and now liked interaction and were accepting of audience participation, viewing it as a “worthwhile thing.” Furthermore a reporter in their thirties at the *Leicester Mercury* (L16) said they recognised that they were “not solely a print journalist”. At both case study sites there was a sense that journalists were embracing and even relishing the changes to their roles. Richard Bettsworth, aged 45, deputy editor of the *Leicester Mercury* (L13) said it was important to embrace changes brought about by the internet.

I think there has been very much a culture historically in newspapers of we are the journalists...What I don’t think is possible is to stick to the traditional newspaper model, it has changed already, (the model of) we are the guardians of all news. I don’t think that is possible, I don’t think that is a good thing. I think you have to embrace the things that develop and you have to provide the needs to allow people to have a say and participate and that is in general a good thing, I think it is a positive thing. I see the newspaper’s role in facilitating it as providing space whether that is on the internet, whether that’s in the newspaper (L13).

A reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B12) in their forties said they had absolutely “revelled since the website came along” and enjoyed greater interaction with readers and instant feedback on stories. But despite the overall optimism there were still some staff members reluctant to change, particularly at the more traditional *Leicester Mercury.* At this case study site a third of editorial staff showed a reluctance to change, ranging from those in their twenties up to journalists in their fifties. One young reporter (L11) in their mid twenties was adamant that their job was writing for the newspaper and not creating content for the website, whilst an older member of staff (L6) made it clear that they were unhappy with recent changes brought about by online technology.

A newspaper is not a forum for anyone to write something down, it’s not a website, it’s a matter of record, a good one is well put together, well made, well thought through, legally correct, full of useful information, of course we make mistakes, of course we leave things out we shouldn’t do but it isn’t just a haphazard collection of thoughts from members of the public put into some sort of order... I don’t think journalists are in such a hurry to rush to the public.

However this reluctance to change amongst some staff was a source of frustration for other journalists as the rugby correspondent (L9) explained:

I get the piss taken out of me for being on Twitter by a lot of my colleagues. ‘What are you doing wasting time on that thing again? What you tweeting about now?’ And that’s just one department, so there’s a reluctance there because people don’t understand it and it’s not like it was in the old days and things have changed for the worse.

This issue was also evident at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, particularly amongst more senior members of staff. The editor (B7) said the biggest obstacle to change was “changing people’s mindsets” and making staff realise “just how important the digital offering is to the future of our business”. In particular it was an obstacle for the digital projects co-ordinator (B1) who was trying to promote audience participation and journalist interaction.

So there are some people who are always going to think that the internet is a pain in the neck and there are some people who are always going to think that because someone has contacted them on Facebook and said ‘can you do a story about this’ that they don’t have to respond (B1).

Even though, overall there was a sense that journalism was adapting and journalists were willing to make this transition, there was still a strong attitude at both sites that journalists needed to maintain a certain level of editorial control. At both case study sites 100 per cent of interviewees agreed that user generated content such as information, stories, photographs and videos should be moderated. It should be noted that comments were seen as a separate entity to user generated content being viewed by journalists as opinion rather than fact and the issues over moderation were complex, as discussed previously in Chapter 8. Some journalists held the rigid view that “if it is not moderated it’s not a newspaper” (B10) and readers should not be “dictating what you put in your paper” (B15). Another argued that the journalist always remained the authority on a subject.

We are finding this information out for their benefit on their behalf so we are wiser about issues than they are. So they are right to say to us you should be asking this question and we have the right to say I don’t think that question is relevant. And they might not like that but it comes down to us at the end of the day, and down to the editor’s choice (L1).

Despite a reluctance from some journalists to enable the public to set the agenda it was apparent during the observation period that on the case study websites this was happening to a certain extent. The news desk and web teams were aware of what stories were popular due to the number of views they received or the number of comments they attracted. Stories that scored highly in one or both of these areas were likely to be developed into follow up stories. A frequent remark from interviewees was that comments on stories were good feedback for indicating which stories were popular and for measuring public opinion on a subject, which in turn was a stong basis for more stories. As discussed in Chapter 9 one of the values of audience participation to journalists was the possibility of receiving instant feedback and creating follow-up content which had an in-built audience.

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the digital projects co-ordinator, Sam Shepherd, responded directly to web analytics and would move stories around on the homepage accordingly. She would also constantly check the web statistics and was aware that internet readers were interested in different stories to newspaper readers, preferring hard news stories over human interest news. Popular online stories included those on the topic of cyclists, speed camera and council spending. Sam Shepherd (B1) admitted that she also changed headlines in response to web analytics.

Sometimes the story will go up and it will have a certain headline on it and I’ll notice that later in the day the subs have put a headline on it that doesn’t really work and I change it to something else. And the difference between the number of people who look at it with the original headline and the people who look at it with the changed headline can be massive. So sometimes it’s good for we know this is the angle that people are interested in, this is the angle on the headline they clicked on, whereas they’re not interested in this angle because they didn’t click on that, so it can be a good way of gauging interest (B1).

This pratice indicates that the public is influencing gatekeeping online and as Shoemaker and Vos (2009) propose audiences are acting as secondary gatekeepers, telling journalists via web analytics what stories are popular and in turn shaping journalistic decisions.

**Professional standards**

During the semi-structured interview process it became apparent that a high proportion of journalists saw their role as being different from that of the work of citizen journalists. The researchers therefore asked each interviewee what distinguished them from a citizen journalist. Eight factors were identified by the interviewees and each factor was coded individually. Graph 10.3 shows the popularity of each factor as a percentage.

Graph 10.3: Distinguishing factors between professional journalists and citizen journalists

At both case study sites the most frequent distinguishing factor identified was that of training. This made up for a fifth of the responses at the *Leicester Mercury* (19%) and a third of responses at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (28%). Although journalism is not a profession requiring legal qualifications, as discussed in Chapter 2, journalists working in the regional press are expected to have passed the preliminary National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) exams. Editors in the regional press tend to only hire journalists who have passed these exams or occasionally they will hire trainees who will then have to sit the exams as part of their employment. It is a recognisable industry standard and usually a requirement when applying for a job at a local newspaper. Therefore it is understandable that journalists working at the two case study sites would cite their NCTJ qualifications as a factor which would distinguish them from a member of the public who chooses to report news. Journalists working at the two case study sites will have also received some internal training and refresher training from their news organisation. One senior reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (B9) explained:

You have to go through a lot of training to become a journalist, you have to know a lot of law and ethics, it’s not just about being able to point a camera at something or write something down.

However should the same question have been asked of journalists working in the national press or within broadcast journalism the number one factor may have been different due to a different set of entry requirements and the lesser importance of NCTJ qualifications particularly to journalists employed more than 20 years ago when journalism training in further and higher education was less prevalent.

Other factors deemed significant to journalists at both case study sites included a robust understanding of media law. Indeed if Media Law as a factor was included within the Training category this would make a total of 31 per cent of responses at the *Leicester Mercury* and 44 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. A further factor was the ability for journalists to report objectively. A comment made by journalists at both case study sites was that citizen journalists may have an “axe to grind” and therefore could not remain impartial.

The ability to produce quality content was also a prominent factor, particularly at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. One reporter (B18) said “there is a perception that citizen journalist pictures are just as good but they are not”, whilst a feature writer (B11) commented “everyone has a story to tell but I wouldn’t necessarily say that the lady next door will tell it in the best way”. Criticisms were made about the way in which reader content was written and it was countered that it was a journalist’s job to turn such information into a structured news story.

Most of the time when it comes to the reporting of news events if they (the public) try and do the same (as journalists) they lack ages, they lack addresses. You will be confused about exactly what’s happened, there won’t be the context in it that we would be expected to provide in a news story, which is fair enough, I don’t expect people to write news reports for us (B10).

These opinions were reflected at the *Leicester Mercury* with journalists criticising citizen journalism as being of inferior quality whether it be text or photographic content. One senior reporter (L12) said: “The one thing I am not so keen on is if people think now they have got digital cameras anybody can take a picture, and they so can’t”, whilst a department head (L6) insisted that the average reader “cannot write a piece for the paper, nor should they try.” A comparison made by a number of journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* was that of the difference between a doctor and a journalist. The journalists argued that you would not want a citizen doctor to operate on you so why would you want a citizen journalist to report the news. The case was also made by some *Leicester Mercury* journalists that citizen journalists actually undermined democracy as they did not have the skills to hold public bodies to account. One department head (L6) lamented:

We might get to the point where the local newspaper closes down and the only people covering the local council might be a pair of twittery nutters...there will be no journalists and the council can get away with doing what they want without public scrutiny...democracy will be less effective.

The fact that journalists themselves can be held accountable was also seen as a vital part of their role particularly at the *Leicester Mercury*. One reporter (L11) commented:

If I make a mistake 60,000 people will read about it and we will probably have a letter published about it in the paper and I might get a letter from a lawyer - I’m accountable. But I also think it’s about, that my job is to make sure other people are accountable and citizen journalists follow what stories they want and although they might be accountable to the people who read their blog they are not accountable in the same way.

The journalists at both case study sites held the view that this accountability also enabled them to have access to people and events, closed to the public due to the credibility that came with working for a traditional news organisations. Sports reporters had access to club players, managers and chairmen and general reporters had access to chief executives, spokespeople and public officials. On *Leicester Mercury* reporter (L17) explained:

The *Leicester Mercury* does carry a bit of weight with it with regard to trying to follow an issue whether it be through an MP, or a matter with the police or the health authority or the local education authority. And I think also it works, this may only be my perception, I think these organizations I think they are more likely to respond to dialogue with the *Leicester Mercury* then say somebody who is doing a blog or something like that. As an accredited newspaper and accredited journalists, I think it is incumbent on them to reply but I don’t think it would be as much with a blogger or somebody trying to do their own thing, I think they could be fobbed off.

These distinguishing factors may provide some explanation why 80 per cent of journalists at both case study sites did not feel their role was under threat. There was a sense that professional journalists and citizen journalists played different roles. A Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reporter (B2) said: “I don’t think things like citizen journalism, blogs, whatever you like to call them, I don’t think they are true competition as they are not in the same game at all.” Meanwhile the picture editor at the *Leicester Mercury* (L2) described the two types of journalists as catering for different markets:

There is always going to be more than one market for more than one product and we’re the John Lewis. And I would always expect my photographers to be producing the John Lewis picture and not the Poundland picture. If it’s a Poundland picture it gets rejected and it doesn’t go in.

However there was one lone voice from a single reporter at each of the case study sites. A *Leicester Mercury* reporter (L10) disputed that there was any difference between a professional journalist and a citizen journalist other than one was paid and one was a volunteer:

In terms of skills if they have picked up shorthand and have a copy of McNaes (media law book) and they can write alright there is no kind of difference between the two...I think we are very similar.

Meanwhile a Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reporter (B3) appeared to be unable to decide whether there was a difference between herself and a citizen journalist:

I don’t know really. Do they get paid? They might be qualified so I guess there is no difference. And is there a difference even if they aren’t qualified? I don’t know.

The results would indicate that the vast majority of journalists at the two case study sites perceive themselves as having a distinct set of practices which distinguish them from others, including those referred to as citizen journalists.

10.4 Discussion

As the literature indicates the role of the journalist is changing and this is reflected in data collected via interviews and observation in this research. Web 2.0 is impacting on journalists by forcing them to adapt in order to survive, compete economically, and to reconsider how to best maintain a relevant, reliable service for the public. Singer (2001, 1997) refers to contemporary journalists as information sensemakers and Charman (2007) talks of information curators, whilst Bruno (2011) points towards the role of verification. All of these interpretations acknowledge that journalists are no longer solely the gatekeepers of information but have a role in sifting through an increasing amount of information which is often already in the public domain, reshaping it into accurate, objective accounts and publishing or broadcasting it to a wider audience. This PhD study indicates that within local UK newspapers the two key functions of a modern journalist are to act as verifiers and amplifiers of information. In doing this, journalists are able to fulfil their traditional roles of acting as watchdogs, quality controllers, analysers and storytellers, while using the tools of modern technology. There is less evidence to suggest that the role of the journalist within Web 2.0 is to shape larger conversations as suggested by Gillmor (2006) and this may be due to journalists concentrating instead on striving to maintain some editorial control and act as gatekeepers of accurate, quality information.

The research also suggests that journalists do have differing opinions and tend to fall into three camps which are positive, neutral and negative. As Heinonen (2011), Robinson (2010) and Chung (2007) suggest there are those journalists who are willing to embrace change and those clinging onto their traditional role. Heinonen also suggests a third group which sits somewhere between the two and make up the largest proportion of journalists. However within this PhD research the largest camp is the embracers who accept that their role is adapting (positive camp); followed by the traditionalists (neutral camp). The third party is made up of those who feel their role is under threat and may become redundant in the future (negative camp). Although this makes up less than a fifth of journalists it is a significant finding since it is not in evidence in other empirical research. This may be due to the fact that local journalism in the UK is facing more severe financial problems and job losses, as discussed in Chapter 1, than its national and international counterparts on which much other research is based. Another noteworthy finding is that contrary to Robinson’s (2010) research of American newspapers which found age to be a factor, this research found that age did not correlate to attitude. Traditionalists were found amongst all age groups, as were adapters, whether they had worked in the industry for a year or 30 years. The data also suggests that the level of reluctance to change was minimal and at least two thirds of staff were willing to adapt and indeed many were excited by the potential to open up audience participation.

The results indicate that the majority of journalists at the two case study sites portrayed themselves as embracing changes to their role and that they welcomed audience participation. However these attitudes somewhat contradicted the actual actions of journalists as observed in Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9. The majority of interaction on the two newspaper websites was between readers and readers, or readers to the news organisation or journalists, with no response in return. This was particularly true of interactions on comment threads as discussed in Chapter 8 but also on Facebook as addressed in the next chapter. In Chapter 7 the results demonstrated that journalists primarily viewed readers as traditional sources and this is supported by the case study within Chapter 12. Yet audiences viewed their biggest role as responders to the news, rather than as sources, and indeed commenting on stories was the largest form of participation as outlined in Chapter 8. But journalists could be dismissive of the quality and value of reader comments as anything other than a resource to be exploited in order to gain an economic advantage such as maintaining brand loyalty or remaining competitive. Therefore although journalists in theory were accepting of the changing nature of their gatekeeping role, in practice they tended to hold onto traditional claims of authority. This position was based on the belief that the role of the journalist contained professional traits and procedures which were not adhered to by the public acting as citizen journalists. However rather than these factors implying they were unable to accept changes to their gatekeeping role as suggested by Robinson (2010), Singer (2009) and Chung (2007), it appeared that they heightened their modern, adapted role as verifiers and amplifiers of information within the Web 2.0 environment. The journalists in this research distinguished themselves from citizen journalists by holding claim to a range of skills and standards that in their view identified them as professionals. The eight professional traits were: training, media law, quality, objectivity, trust, accountability, accuracy and access. In particular accountability, accuracy and objectivity mirror the traits of scrutiny (McQuail, 2005), truth seeking (Donsbach, 2010) and objectivity (Deuze, 2005), outlined in Chapter 2, section 2.6. Furthermore access, quality, media law and training correspond with Örnebring’s (2010b) notion of journalism as a profession with a special body of knowledge, skills and expertise. Meanwhile trust could be understood to fall under Örnebring’s (2010b) category of autonomy which requires minimal external influence as well as Bourdieu’s (2005) concept of cultural capital gained via a reputation built on unbiased reporting and independence. However the most important factor identified by journalists was training which is unique to the culture of local British newspapers because it relies heavily on NCTJ qualifications as an entry requirement and these qualifications are now incorporated into many undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. This supports the view of Örnebring (2010b) that journalism requires a specialist body of knowledge gained through education and this is increasingly being provided by higher education institutions.

Although in summary it could be said that the impact on the role of journalists as gatekeepers is one of redefinition rather than revolution, more striking changes are happening in the presentation of news on newspaper websites. As some scholars make the case (Anderson, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Örnebring, 2010a; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) the growth of web analytics is influencing news selection online. There was evidence of secondary gatekeeping, as outlined by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), at both of the case study sites particularly the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which was more website orientated than the *Leicester Mercury*. This is likely to increase further in the future particularly in light of the strong economic factors driving online development in newspaper companies, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Stories are being selected and placed higher or lower on the agenda according to audience response to those stories, whether it be through passively viewing them, or actively sharing or participating in them. Audience participation could therefore be said to be partially setting the agenda online and disrupting the gatekeepers’ selection process. However this does not necessarily lead to an increase in sensationalised or soft news as Örnebring (2010) suggests, as the findings are more in line with those of Shoemaker *et al* (2008a) who found that audiences tend to select stories of an unusual nature or those focused on public welfare. The observation in this study together with the findings of Chapters 8 and 9 tend to support this claim with quirky stories receiving greater audience participation along with stories to do with local welfare issues such as health, crime, transport and local government.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has identified that the role of the journalist as gatekeeper is being subtly redefined due to the impact of Web 2.0 but the traditional skills of a journalist still remain relevant and perhaps even more important than ever before. Although journalists are no longer gatekeepers of information or even news selection they remain the largest and loudest gatekeepers of credible and verifiable news. The next two chapters explore in depth two examples of how the role of the journalist as gatekeeper is being challenged further and how it is opening up to an even greater degree of audience participation. Chapter 11 explores how social media platforms are creating a two way communication platform between journalists and readers whilst Chapter 12 looks at the role citizen journalists can directly play within a traditional news organisation.

**Chapter 11: The interactive spectrum**

11.1 Introduction

New media technology, in particular Web 2.0, has the potential to turn journalism from a lecture to a conversation (Paulussen, 2007) fostering a two way reciprocal interaction between journalists and audiences. However as discussed in Chapter 2 and 10, journalists are still reluctant to relinquish their gatekeeping role within the online environment (Franklin, 2008; Singer 2009, Hermida, 2011b). There is also evidence to suggest that the widespread increase of the use of social media networks amongst journalists in the past five years has continued to maintain the status quo rather than create greater interaction between journalists and readers as proclaimed by digital enthusiasts (Rusbridger, 2010; O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009; Gillmor, 2006). Instead news organisations are largely sustaining a traditional communication model (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Hermida 2011a) by creating automatic feeds or linkbots from their websites to social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter and therefore journalists are rarely responding to readers.

As indicated in Chapter 5 true two-way interaction between journalists and readers is occurring at an individual level rather than an organisational one, as some reporters decide to engage directly with readers rather than viewing them as a homogenous mass. Research by Dickinson (2011) also indicates that journalists at local newspapers are utilising social media to build relationships with readers and stay closely connected to their audience. However as outlined in Chapter 4 there has been limited empirical research to date analysing the content of individual journalists’ social media use, with studies tending to focus on trending topics (Kwak *et al*, 2010) user influence (Cha *et al*, 2010), and broader uses of Twitter by the online population as a whole (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Java *et al*, 2007).

This research therefore aims to understand how journalists as individuals are using social media networks in comparison with their associated news organisation. It seeks to explore whether the profile of an individual journalist is likely to be more interactive, personal and informal than the profile of a newspaper organisation. In doing so it aims to draw comparison with the concept of the spectrum of passive, sharing and active audiences addressed in Chapter 7 and consider whether journalists are traditional, sharing or interactive in their approach and how this impacts upon historical notions of gatekeeping. In doing so it aims to add empirical evidence to the findings discussed in Chapter 10 and respond in more explicit detail to answer **RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers?**

11.2 Methods

This chapter aims to support Chapter 10 by focusing specifically on social media networks which as previously discussed are arguably the current biggest challenge to the role of gatekeeping within the context of Web 2.0. The findings have been drawn from interviews with journalists and a content analysis of Facebook and Twitter at the two case study sites.

The interviews, as outlined in previous chapters, focussed on a range of topics and were semi-structured in nature. Journalists were able to discuss their use of and attitudes towards social media networks through a range of open questions on the changing nature of interaction and the gatekeeping role of journalists. Social media also appeared on the interview checklist as a topic to cover. The interviews discussed in this chapter include all of the journalists relevant to the content analysis but also include other journalists particularly those in management positions who had an influence on access to, or use of, social media networks.

The content analysis was a complex process due to the lack of established methods in this field of research, as discussed in Chapter 4. For the Twitter content analysis two samples were captured but due to technical difficulties explained in Chapter 4 the first sample was two weeks and the second sample was one month. Having two samples enabled the researcher to compare how the journalists’ use of Twitter had developed over the interim period. Data was captured from the most prolific Twitter users at the two case study sites. More journalists used Twitter at the *Leicester Mercury* therefore data was collected from four users at that case study site compared to two users at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo.*  At each case study site one of the Twitter accounts captured was the official newspaper profile (@thisisleic and @Bournemouthecho) and the other profiles were individual journalists (See Table 4.1, Chapter 4). In total 2,588 individual tweets were coded.

The researcher attempted to collect data from Facebook to mirror the Twitter methodology but this was not entirely possible due to a number of factors outlined in Chapter 4 and below. The findings in this chapter therefore compare a one month sample from each case study site. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* sample was taken in March 2011 and the *Leicester Mercury* sample was taken in June 2011 once the case study site had launched its Facebook account. The Bournemouth *Daily Echo* had two Facebook presences – one a profile and one a page. The more personal profile Bournemouth Echo Sam, managed by the digital projects co-ordinator Sam Shepherd, was the only Facebook account to be captured. This particular account appeared to represent a cross between an individual journalist profile and a newspaper organisation profile and was therefore potentially a useful exemplar of how organisations can fashion an individual approach.

11.3 Results

The results in this chapter draw from interviews and content analysis as outlined above. The Twitter content analysis is the focus of the findings due to the breadth of data gained from this method. The Facebook content analysis was smaller in size due to there being only two accounts to analyse compared to six on Twitter. The results are therefore divided into six sub-sections focusing on Twitter use, frequency, interactivity patterns, changes in interactivity, interaction with colleagues and personal preferences with the seventh sub-section forming a comparison with the Facebook content analysis. There are several graphs in this chapter and it should be noted that where there is a blank space in a graph it indicates that the result was zero.

**Twitter users**

The richest content analysis was captured via the two samples of Twitter which was used more frequently and by more individuals than Facebook. Twitter was viewed as an interactive work tool but most interviewees felt that Facebook was for personal use only, or to find stories via a traditional model of communication. Table 11.1 indicates the total number of tweets by each username in rank of the most prolific first. The organisational usernames were @Bournemouthecho, administrated by one of two people on the web team, and @thisisleics administered by a single web editor. These were the official accounts representing each newspaper as a whole. By the time the sample was taken at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the web team had been reduced from three to two staff due to structural changes and cuts, however when interviewed all three were referring to their role on the web team and therefore B1, B5 and B6 are listed in the appendices as part of the web team.

Table 11.1 indicates that the *Leicester Mercury* had a stronger individual journalist presence on Twitter and a weaker organisational one, with the editor and official newspaper tweets putting out the least amount of tweets compared to individual reporters. However this was the reverse at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* with its web team posting a high number of tweets.

Table 11.1: Total number of tweets from two samples

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Rank** | **Username** | **Administrator** | **Newspaper** | **Total tweets** |
| 1 | Bournemouthecho | Web team | Bournemouth Daily Echo | 1196 |
| 2 | martin\_crowson | Rugby correspondent | Leicester Mercury | 461 |
| 3 | David\_MacLean | Politics correspondent | Leicester Mercury | 312 |
| 4 | SteveBaileyEcho | Senior reporter | Bournemouth Daily Echo | 257 |
| 5 | thisisleics | Web editor | Leicester Mercury | 208 |
| 6 | tipexxed | Editor | Leicester Mercury | 136 |

There was only one regular reporter tweeting at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and their output was almost a fifth of the official newspaper account. During the interviews it became apparent that the organisational structures at both case study sites were in opposition in relation to the use of social media networks. At the *Leicester Mercury* the editor, Keith Perch (L3), took a very relaxed approach and did not discourage tweeting, leaving it up to individuals to take the initiative, and leading by example:

I encourage it to the extent that they know I do it and I would say to them if they were ever talking to me about it, sometimes at reporters’ meetings and things like that, I would say that I think it is a good thing, but I deliberately don’t tell them they must do it because I don’t think you can with social media. It’s one of those things where if you are forced to do it, it just won’t work (L3).

Conversely at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* a more confusing message was presented to journalists. The structures in place meant there was a centralised approach to social media networks based around the web team who were responsible for responding to readers and sourcing information from Twitter and Facebook. Indeed one of the web team expressed concern over journalists using Twitter at all (B5):

There is no harm in people having their own Twitter pages as well. But I think you have to be slightly careful there that you are speaking as a private individual and not as a member of staff, you need not to compromise yourself there because journalists aren't really supposed to have opinions are they, so in some ways it is probably better to operate via our own (@Bournemouthecho) Twitter feed I think. I think if you have your own Twitter page you should keep that completely separate and you would be best not to use your own name or something like that (B5).

Yet this contradicted the message coming from the news desk where the head of content and multimedia, Andy Martin, said: “I try to encourage the other reporters to tweet and to engage people (B8)”. As a result there was confusion amongst reporters over what they were permitted to tweet. One reporter (B10) said: “I’m sure we have got rules and regulations on what we can and can’t say (B10)”. However the digital projects (B1) co-ordinator confirmed that this was not the case, and said: “There isn’t an official policy in that you can or you can’t do it and they (senior staff) don’t worry about it because nobody does (use Twitter), so I think if people did there might be a need for some sort of guidelines (B1)”. Newsquest did introduce a Social Media Best Practice for Journalists guideline in 2011 but interviewees at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were unaware of this policy at the time of the research. The guidelines were renewed in 2012 but the company declined to give the researcher access to the document, therefore its content and impact on reporters could not be assessed.

However at the time of the research the lack of clarity on social media website use was compounded by the fact that most reporters at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* did not have access to Facebook, and this too was centralised to the web desk, meaning that individual interaction via social media networks was limited. The editor justified the censorship and centralisation approach as a means of enabling staff to prioritise on their traditional roles of newsgathering, although it actually supported the view of some reporters that they were “not trusted” to use social media networks for work purposes only. Editor Neal Butterworth (B7) said:

My concern is that I have got people here who would, might take advantage of that situation. I don’t want to have people sitting there tweeting and on Facebook for too long and that’s a traditionalist, probably old fashioned way of looking at it as an editor but I think the way we do it at the moment is controlled and I’m not a control freak but it’s controlled and it means everyone is focusing on the thing that they need to do (B7).

This mirrors the findings of Chapter 5 which argued that organisational structures such as lack of communication and censorship of social media networks restricted the development of audience participation and interaction. At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* these two organisational restrictions were furthered by another factor – time. The editor, Neal Butterworth (B7) took the view that journalists had little time to spend building relationships on social media platforms and they should leave this to the web team. Rather than leading by example like Keith Perch at the *Leicester Mercury* he preferred to avoid social media networks altogether:

It (social media) is a fantastic tool, how the hell anyone has any time to do it I have absolutely no idea and it’s something that I personally have just avoided. I don’t have a Facebook account, I’m not on Twitter. I don’t have the time to do that because of this bloody job (B7).

This concern about prioritising journalists’ time was echoed by the head of content and multimedia, Andy Martin (B8):

I have got no issue about journalists joining in if they have got the time to interact with readers. If readers say could you tell me a bit more about that, then fine, I haven't got a problem with that.... The only issue I have is a time one, because I'm trying to fill a newspaper and they're engaging in online activity with x number of readers (B8).

The researcher noted that a lack of time and structure was the main contributing factor to the failure of a news desk Twitter account which was launched in late 2010 but was virtually inactive within a month. As the digital projects co-ordinator (B1) lamented: “They did set up a news desk Echo Twitter which was going to be used by more than one person but in effect is not used by anybody, which is a shame.” The echonewsdesk Twitter account was briefly revived in June 2011 when the newspaper used it for live updates during a high profile court case but the account became inactive again after this. The account had 510 followers but was not following any other accounts and there was virtually no interaction or sharing activity. Therefore it was being used as a traditional one way feed of information in the form of a live micro blog.

Consequently unlike the *Leicester Mercury* there was no culture to encourage journalists to use Twitter and the researcher only identified one journalist at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* with a consistently active Twitter account.

**Tweeting frequency**

Although the two sample periods were different in length it could be assumed that the tweets in the second, longer sample of four weeks would be around twice the amount of the original two week sample. Many of the journalists at both case study sites expressed initially that they were only starting to use Twitter regularly and therefore it would be reasonable to predict that by the time of the second sample they would be tweeting more often. However the picture was much more mixed as Table 11.2 suggests.

The reason for the decline in the @Bournemouthecho account was likely to be due to the digital projects co-ordinator being on maternity leave during the second sample period. She was the main driver of online interaction and once she left, the Twitter feeds and Facebook posts declined significantly. This would have been compounded by the fact that she was not replaced during her maternity leave so the website team was halved in size and therefore its output also decreased. The @thisisleics tweets may have been higher in the first sample period due to the large breaking news story of the English Defence League protest in Leicester during the timeframe which resulted in regular live updates to the website and subsequently to Twitter which was atypical for the *Leicester Mercury*.

Table 11.2: Tweeting frequency between two samples

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Username** | **Sample 1** | **Predicted sample 2** | **Actual sample 2** | **Change** | **%** |
| Bournemouthecho | 508 | 1016 | 689 | Decrease | -59% |
| martin\_crowson | 173 | 346 | 288 | Decrease | -17% |
| David\_MacLean | 50 | 100 | 263 | Increase | 163% |
| SteveBaileyEcho | 38 | 76 | 219 | Increase | 188% |
| Thisisleics | 114 | 228 | 94 | Decrease | -67% |
| Tipexxed | 13 | 26 | 123 | Increase | 373% |

In the case of @SteveBailyEcho it was likely that his input increased due to sample 1 being within a few weeks of the reporter adopting Twitter whereas sample 2 was five months later when he had developed a larger network of followers and a regular tweeting habit. In the case of the *Leicester Mercury* editor’s username @tippexed the large increase may have been due to his tweets and responses to readers about a problem with the newspaper. As discussed below, @tippexed scored highly in interactivity due to the editor responding to reader queries and concerns. During the second sample period a problem had occurred in the printing press meaning pages of another local newspaper were printed by accident inside the *Leicester Mercury*. This caused many complaints and questions to the editor on Twitter which he responded to, accounting for 10 per cent of all of the tweets in the four week period. Also by the second sample period @tippexxed had also started to use a Twitter widget enabling him to tweet a list of people to follow in Leicester, which were updated every few days accounting for a further 21 per cent of his total tweets.

It is difficult to identify why other usernames increased or decreased as it may have been due to a number of factors such as a busy period at work leaving little time for tweeting or conversely a slow news period giving journalists little to tweet about. The researcher did confirm that none of the username administrators were on leave during the sample periods, bar the aforementioned maternity leave. Overall the results show an increase in individuals tweeting and a decrease in organisational tweets.

**Spectrum of Twitter interactivity**

What is of particular interest is the different ways in which individuals and news organisations used Twitter. As discussed below it was apparent that individual journalists used Twitter for different purposes than their organisational counterparts, however there was also great variation between journalists. This suggests that Twitter is a flexible tool which can be adapted to suit a journalists’ specific job role (such as politics or sport) and individual preferences in relation to interaction. Graph 11.1 illustrates the interactivity spectrum and how different users used Twitter for different purposes, some more interactive than others.

The most significant findings from the interactivity spectrum were that the official newspaper accounts @Bournemouthecho and @thisisleics had considerably higher rates of traditional tweets and no personal tweets. The lack of personal tweets was understandable as the account was representing an organisation as a whole rather than an individual. However the high percentage of traditional tweets (@Bournemouthecho 68%, @thisisleics 45%) implied that these accounts were largely being administered via a top down gatekeeping approach with linkbots simply putting out automatic headlines linking back to the website, as outlined in Chapter 2. The informal category which allowed for a more personal approach but was still related to work was most popular amongst individual reporters. This category included links to a website story with a personal message, live updates, comments and personal messages directed at readers.

The level of sharing and interactivity appeared to differ from individual to individual with no clear pattern emerging. Whilst the rugby correspondent was the most interactive, the politics correspondent shared tweets the most. It is worth noting however that the individual (@martin­­\_crowson) with the highest percentage of personal tweets (16%) was also the second most interactive (39%) and this may have been due to their role as a sports journalist which meant they had a closer and more familiar relationship with the fans/readers.

Graph 11.1: Spectrum of interactivity

There was also a similar correlation for the *Leicester Mercury* editor who had the second highest percentage of personal tweets (13%) and highest percentage of interactivity (51%) together with the second highest percentage of sharing tweets (29%). This particular account appeared to be the most bottom-up in its approach with no traditional tweets and a mixture of personal, sharing and interactive tweets. The content of the tweets rarely referred directly to news stories on the website or in the newspaper and perhaps this was because there was already the more formal Twitter account @thisisleics to serve this purpose. It appeared that the editor used his tweets to be transparent and accountable to the readers, to respond to feedback and to give a personal touch, in an attempt to build community relationships. Some of his tweets included:

@davetoyn yes apologies there was a cock-up on the press. The page belongs to the Scunthorpe Telegraph!

 @Sundip what was sycophantic about the article? You don’t think we should report on an independent who wants to hold public office?

Yeah, all right, I’ve got a day off and I’m gardening.

Nosey cows! <http://t.co/OBGXJID>

The editor (L3) also argued that having a more personal presence online made him more accessible to readers, and again helped to build relationships: “Particularly for me, in my role, there are a lot of people who wouldn’t dream of coming to try and see the editor but will happily talk to me online (L3)”.

**Changes in Twitter interactivity**

The two Twitter samples allow for some comparison over how interactivity had changed over time for individuals and organisations. Firstly Graph 11. 2 looks at the changing tweeting patterns of the company Twitter accounts. In both of the official company tweets it can be seen that traditional tweets had increased from the earlier sample to the later sample. At the *Leicester Mercury* the informal tweets had also dropped being replaced by more formal traditional tweets. However there had been an increase in sharing tweets. Furthermore at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the interactivity had decreased over the two periods and sharing and informal tweets had remained relatively stable.

Graph 11.2: Company tweeting patterns between two samples

It would be reasonable to suggest that the decrease in interactivity and increase in traditional tweets at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was due to the same reason for the decrease in total tweets in the second sample as discussed above. The digital projects co-ordinator, part of the two person web team, was on maternity leave by the time of the second sample and she was the driver of interactivity at the case study site. This was a concern raised by the digital projects co-ordinator, Sam Shepherd (B1), to the researcher before going on leave.

What worries me about taking nine months off is that Twitter is quite a labour intensive, and if you don’t respond to people then that annoys them and if you regularly don’t respond to people then they’ll just stop asking you things and seeing we have got to the stage where it is quite a big source of information and stories I worry that that will all just disappear if they don’t get it right (B1).

However despite the web team members claiming that a “large part of the job (B1)” was responding to readers and “being interactive (B6)”, the data in Graph 11.1 shows that only about a third of their tweets were non-traditional, and this decreased over time as shown in Graph 11.2. From interviews it was apparent that the web team were predominantly using social media networks to promote the company brand, source stories and drive traffic to the website, rather than to be interactive or engage with readers. Indeed the digital projects co-ordinator kept a close eye on the number of referrals to bournemouthecho.co.uk from Facebook, stating that is was sometimes the second highest referrer after Google. Statistics cited by the web team showed that in September 2010 12,000 users were referred to the newspaper website from Facebook, compared to 2,000 in the same month the year before.

Meanwhile the changes in the @thisisleics tweeting patterns may have been due to researcher influence. During the first sample period it was also noted that the web editor responsible for administrating the @thisisleics tweets was influenced by conversations with the researcher and began to experiment with Twitter techniques such as requests to followers and more informal announcements. However this appeared to have stopped by the second sample period and reverted back to a more traditional model. This may have been also been due to a lack of organisational policy on the appropriate tweeting method from the company and a lack of leadership from the editor who preferred a laissez faire approach. It was noted in the observation period that when encouraged, the web editor tended to try new techniques but with a lack of direction she reverted back to the established gatekeeping model.

A more complex picture emerges when looking at the change in tweeting patterns by journalists and this in part may be due to how long they had been using Twitter.

Graph 11.3: Individual tweeting patterns (new users) between two samples

It is particularly interesting to note the similarities in tweeting behaviour between @martin\_crowson and @StephenBaileyEcho between the two sample periods as they were both relatively new to Twitter during sample 1 as shown in Graph 11.3. Their tweeting increase or decrease was the same in all five categories. They had each decreased their informal tweets and traditional tweets and both increased their personal, sharing and interactive tweets. This would indicate that the more familiar a journalist becomes with Twitter the more likely they are to move away from a one way model to a more interactive, personal approach.

By comparison the tweeting patterns of more seasoned users @David\_MacLean and @tipexxed were completely opposite in every category over the two samples as illustrated in Graph 11.4.

The account of the editor, @tipexxed, was more in line with Graph 11.3, since it indicated that a decrease in informal tweets was mirrored by an increase in personal and sharing tweets. However for @tipexxed the interactivity level was down perhaps because of more significant increases in personal (from 0% to 15%) and sharing (15% to 30%) than @martin­­\_crowson and @StephenBaileyEcho.

Graph 11.4: Individual tweeting patterns (existing users) between two samples

The account @David\_MacLean actually showed a shift back to a more traditional approach with more traditional and informal tweets and less sharing and personal tweets, although interactivity did increase. And indeed the tweets overall were still more personal and sharing than organisational accounts as shown in Graphs 1.11 and 11.2. However when looking in detail at the informal tweets it is apparent that the majority of these were comments on current affairs rather than links to the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website with a personal message or live updates and therefore were perhaps more personal in nature. The user appeared to be making more personalised comments related to his work as politics correspondent than comments about his private life outside work, whereas the other three individuals had increased their personal tweets separate from work but used informal tweets more for live updates and links to their associated website with an informal message. The different uses are discussed in more detail below.

The patterns emerging between the two individual and organisational samples appear to show that journalists are becoming more open, personal and interactive over time whilst conversely organisations are becoming more one way following the traditional model, unless they have influence from a particular individual. It may be that as the use of social media networks progresses these two clear camps will move further apart performing entirely different functions.

**Talking amongst colleagues**

Although journalists had higher levels of sharing and interactivity on Twitter than the official organisation accounts (@thisisleics and @Bournemouthecho) some of these tweets were to/about colleagues within the same newspaper. Therefore the content analysis considered how many of the sharing and interactive tweets were sharing colleagues’ content or sharing external users content or interacting with colleagues or interacting with external users.

Table 11.3: Division between colleague and external sharing and interaction

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Username** | **Sharing colleagues** | **Sharing external** | **Interactive colleagues** | **Interactive external** |
| Bournemouthecho | 24% | 76% | 0% | 100% |
| martin\_crowson | 9% | 91% | 7% | 93% |
| David\_MacLean | 11% | 89% | 0% | 100% |
| StephenBaileyEcho | 23% | 76% | 2% | 98% |
| Thisisleics | 24% | 76% | 0% | 100% |
| Tipexxed | 5% | 95% | 3% | 97% |

The table above displays the overall percentage as there was little differentiation between the two sample periods. The official organisation accounts tended to share tweets from journalists more often than journalists retweeted their colleagues messages, with the exception on @StephenBaileyEcho but overall at least three quarters of sharing was external tweets, which indicates that on Twitter newspaper organisations and individuals are sharing information from a wider network. However it could be argued that they were still acting as gatekeepers as they selected which public information to share and thus amplify. Internal interaction was even smaller indicating that journalists and organisations were using Twitter to interact with readers rather than with their colleagues.

**Personal preferences**

From analysing the captured tweets in more detail and comparing them with interview responses it is possible to map how individual journalists use Twitter. It has been shown in Graph 11.1 that the official Twitter accounts of newspaper organisations tend to post traditional automatic tweets, informal links to their website or share information rather than interact with readers. But individual journalists appeared to use Twitter in a variety of ways, which warrants a closer look at the four accounts analysed in this chapter.

Table 11.4: Individual journalist Twitter use

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Username** | **Dominant coding categories** | **Description** | **Examples** |
| martin\_crowson | Equal balance between Informal and Interactive, followed by Personal | Live blogging during rugby matches and press conferences, chatting to rugby fans, talking about family life and catching up with friends | Live blogging: New Bath signing Dave Attwood being helped from the pitch by physios with what looks like ankle injury  Fan interaction: @SportingbetMark It was pretty tough – as was their scrum  Family life: Father’s day began at 2am with excited 4-yr-old trotting in and whispering: “How long until I can give your present Daddy?” |
| David\_MacLean | Equal balance between Informal and Sharing, with lesser amount of Personal and Interactive | Commenting on and linking to national current affairs stories, commenting on own newspaper/blog coverage, Retweeting posts by journalists, news sources and political commentators, responding to reader comments, witty observations unrelated to work or current affairs | Commenting national: Daily Mail – “More and more families are having to withdraw their children from private education”http://t.co/L6ekgG7 - Heartbreaking  Commenting on own coverage: I’ll deal with the inept spinning behind the @leicester\_news Twitter account on my blog tomorrow.  Retweeting: RT@GuidoFawkes I called them to ask for Hari to be stripped of his award.  Responding: @mikemcsharry I’m trying to upload some PDFs to share with you all.  Observations: Ordered a Gin Bramble in Cafe Bruxelles and I’ve been served something quite disgusting by mistake. It could strip paint. |
| StephenBaileyEcho | Mostly Informal, followed by Interactive | Commenting on local current affairs, updates/colour on own reporting activity, news/media related recommendations, responding to reader questions/comments | Updates: Just interviewed the friendliest block of pensioners ever, after a very serious flat fire on the east cliff  Recommendations: The Guardian magazine had a brilliant and horrible selection of photographers best works from conflict zones today <http://t.co/uiJ6gbP>  Responding: @GarrisonGirls Previous articles on our website, this one 95 per cent done, and should be up soon |
| Tipexxed | Mostly Interactive followed by Sharing and then Personal | Conversing with readers, answering reader queries, sharing Leicester lists of people to follow on Twitter, scenic photographs and posts about leisure time and family | Reader conversation: @vriyait that’s my view too, but difficult to see how he can get a fair trial what’s already been said  Sharing lists: My Leicester lists is out! <http://bit.ly/lhxRbq> Top stories today via @leicesterpeople @housesleicester @thejamesdixon @leicesterliz  tipexxed poppies.jpgLeisure time: A beautiful morning for a walk |

It is significant to note that *Leicester Mercury* rugby correspondent Martin Crowson (L9) made a conscious decision to transfer from work related tweets only into personal tweets. In his interview he discussed how he had reached a “crossroad” and was considering carefully what step to take next:

It’s very interesting now as I have kept it very work related tweets whilst I have been doing it but you get to a stage where you start questioning whether you should do a few more things, tweet a few more things that aren’t specifically work related.........I’m at that crossroad now, where do I go with it, for that coverage because to some extent people can get certain information off the club and certain information off me and I can offer a different service, so to push that and to try and attract some more followers do I need to take that a step further and I start questioning myself, who is interested in what I’m up to? (L9)

For Martin Crowson being personal on Twitter was a way to distinguish himself from other online competition and build his own fan base and personal brand. He confirmed four months later that he had incorporated personal messages and it was definitely the right decision for him. As discussed above Martin Crowson had a high proportion of interactive and personal tweets, due to his position as a sports journalist. As he explained in his interview he spent some of his time on Twitter chatting with fans and answering questions:

If I say I have just come back from a press conference they say ‘is he fit for the weekend? Was he in good spirits? What did the head coach say today? I would like to see his reaction to X, Y, Z, let us know what he says. What do you think the score will be? Can we come back from this game?’ That sort of thing. There is good interaction (L9).

Similarly for *Leicester Mercury* politics correspondent, David MacLean (L12) being personal was an important part of Twitter particularly in making the most of it as a journalistic tool.

I think the personal stuff is quite important because contacts that are coming to you about, people that you would only deal with in a work environment, cabinet members at the council, they only deal with you as a journalist and I think it kind of makes you more human. What are you doing for your holidays, are you playing with your cat. It’s helped me build up a bit more of a closer relationship with people I would just usually deal with for stories.

As shown in Table 11.4 above all of the four journalists used Twitter to respond to reader questions and comments and/or have conversations with readers. The other reasons can be summarised as sharing information, commentary, live reporting and diary tweets.

**Facebook comparison**

As discussed in Chapter 4 the *Leicester Mercury* did not have a Facebook page when the first Facebook sample was taken at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. Originally the researcher planned to take two samples from the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* case study site to mirror the Twitter content analysis and include none from the *Leicester Mercury*. However after the original two sample periods the *Leicester Mercury* launched a Facebook page and therefore the researcher felt it was appropriate to take a sample from this to compare to the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*.

When analysing the findings the researcher felt it would be more helpful to analyse like with like between the two case studies and therefore decided to discount sample 1 from the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* and only compare the one month sample at both case study companies. Graph 11.5 is an illustration of the engagement on each of the case study site’s Facebook walls and it records how much activity there was between the company and the reader and vice versa. Each category is described in full in Chapter 5.

Graph 11.5: Facebook interaction at two case study sites

At both case study sites the largest amount of engagement was readers interacting with the content of the Facebook wall (Bournemouth Echo Sam 49%, thisisleicestershire 40%). This included posting a message on the wall or commenting on a story. Many of the comments on stories turned into conversations between readers about the original wall posting from the case study newspaper. The results also show that there was very little reciprocal engagement from the newspaper company. The Newspaper Interactive and Newspaper Sharing results were almost negligible amounting to a total of five per cent for Bournemouth Echo Sam and two per cent for thisisleicestershire. It could be argued that the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* Facebook account had a marginally higher Newspaper Interactive rate due to the efforts of the digital projects co-ordinator, Sam Shepherd (B1) who said: “Facebook is getting there (in terms of interaction) because people are starting to know they can Facebook chat me and I’ll answer a question and if I’m online I’ll find the answer for them.” However despite Sam Shepherd setting up a seemingly more personal profile page with the username Bournemouth Echo Sam, in contrast to the formal Bournemouth *Daily Echo* Facebook page, it appears that the profile page was still largely traditional in nature. The motivation for setting up the page seems again to have been to attract more readers to the brand rather than to increase interactivity as Sam Shepherd suggests: “People are more likely to be friends with an individual on Facebook rather than an organisation which might look uncool (B1)”. Therefore this profile was not a useful exemplar of how a newspaper organisation can take a more personal approach as was first thought.

The second biggest categories were Traditional (Bournemouth Echo Sam 26%, thisisleicestershire 23%) and Reader Response (Bournemouth Echo Sam 18%, thisisleicestershire 34%). The Reader Response category included when someone ‘liked’ a post or comment. It appeared once more that Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers were more interactive than their *Leicester Mercury* counterparts, as they were more likely to comment on a post than to just simply ‘like’ a post. The opposite was true of *Leicester Mercury* readers who ‘liked’ posts in a higher proportion than commenting on them. This may have been due to the *Leicester Mercury* Facebook page being in its infancy and not having built up an interactive audience to date. It should also be noted that spam was taken into consideration when categorising the Reader Interactive engagements as postings on the wall could be promotional material. However it was found that this made up for only 11 per cent of Reader Interactive engagements at both case study sites.

It was not possible to compare how readers interacted with the case study newspaper companies on Twitter and Facebook due to their open and closed designs as explained in Chapter 4. However it was possible to compare how the newspaper companies were using the different types of social media networks to engage with their audiences. On both platforms there was limited two way interaction between journalists and readers and a traditional model prevailed, particularly on Facebook. This may have been because Twitter is a more open system which encourages interactivity whereas Facebook is a closed environment which stifles connectivity. For the two case study sites Facebook was seen as an extension of the newspaper website comment threads and a space for readers to engage with one another, rather than with the newspaper. The digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth Daily Echo, Sam Shepherd (B1), explained:

What is starting to happen is people that don’t actually know each other have long conversations with each other in the comments under our stories which I think is brilliant. They are not Facebook friends but they will have a conversation and it is much more genial and less aggressive than the comments on the website and partly that will be because they are not anonymous and everyone can see who they are and so they are nicer to each other (B1).

11.4 Discussion

The use of social media networks in local newspaper newsrooms does appear to be altering the traditional gatekeeping model in respect of the journalist-reader relationship. The spectrum of interactivity is shifting from a traditional approach towards a more interactive one yet the transition is still in progress. Journalists are making individual decisions to share information that would not be published in the print newspaper or on the website, and they are engaging in open conversations with their readers. However the extent to which this happens is still largely dependent on individuals rather than being incorporated into organisational norms and routines. This is in part due to organisational structures rather than journalist reluctance to embrace social media networks. This is supported by the findings of Chapter 5 and the work of Paulussen and Ugille (2008) which found that it may be difficult to create a newsroom culture of collaboration when the organisational structure does little to promote collaboration between print and online editors, IT departments and editorial and journalists and audiences. In this PhD research study the censorship of social media networks, the lack of communication between staff together with the lack of organisational leadership had created an environment where a small but growing number of journalists had decided to take the initiative themselves whilst others remain apathetic. Therefore as Heinonen (2011) suggests, integration between journalists and audiences is still limited in scope amongst mainstream news organisations. However where journalists are enabled to use social media networks there is clear indication of two way interaction and the building of relationships with readers.

The findings also illustrate that there is a clear distinction between the approach of an organisation and the approach of an individual journalist when using social media networks. Broersma and Graham (2011) identified that many news organisations use linkbots that automatically tweet headlines to generate traffic to their websites. As such they form “one-way communication” (p.2). In this PhD research there is evidence to suggest that the two case study organisations did predominantly rely on a traditional one way approach on Twitter and more strikingly on Facebook, although less traditional approaches were also being implemented. This may have been due to the smaller size of the organisations, which had thousands of readers rather than millions, meaning they had the resources to respond to readers. As explored in Chapter 2 local newspapers have more of a vested interest in connecting with their local community (Franklin and Murphy, 1998; Harrison, 1998) and therefore may be more likely to interact with their audiences than their national counterparts. That being said the findings indicate that it was individual journalists rather than their news organisation that are taking the lead in increasing interactivity with readers. As Paulussen (2011) also found individual enthusiasm and commitment are important factors for the incorporation of participatory journalism and a step by step process usually starts with a few employees before gradually spreading.

The traditional linkbot approach was negligible amongst reporters in this PhD research and instead they were increasingly engaging in a two way conversation via social media networks, an approach which Hermida (2011a) advocates, as readers increasingly gather and mediate news through their social networks online. The research discussed in this chapter suggests that two distinct channels of communication may develop in the future with a traditional function for news organisations and a social function for journalists.

As discussed above, the way in which journalists interact with readers on social media networks suggests their traditional role as gatekeepers is changing. However, although journalists use social media networks to share content, create more personal relationships and converse with their readers it could be said that these engagements serve largely traditional functions. As Hermida (2011b) suggests journalists in the main are not using social media networks to harness collective intelligence to verify information as they still prefer to rely on elite, traditional sources. Interviews with journalists at both case study sites indicated that social media networks constituted a flexible tool that could be adapted to an individual’s preferences and needs. However three main functions were indentified: increasing accountability, news gathering and building brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is one of the most significant functions and has been previously identified by Broersma and Graham (2011), Dickinson (2011) and Phillips (2011).

**Accountability**: Via social media networks journalists are becoming transparent about the way in which they operate and make decisions whilst in return the public keep watch on the watchdogs by giving continual feedback.

**Newsgathering**: Finding stories, capturing user generated content and building relationships with sources all form part of the newsgathering function of social media networks.

**Brand loyalty**: By conversing with readers and developing a more personal, informal approach on social media networks journalists are able to attract new readers and sustain a relationship with them.

These three functions enable audiences to be involved in three of the four stages of the news process: newsgathering, dissemination and responding but once again the second stage of production is beyond reach. There are some exceptions to this such as data collaboration but in the main audiences are expected to react to the news and be sources of information as Singer *et al* (2011) also found.

Although other research suggests that organisations use social media networks to promote their brand and drive traffic to their website (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Phillips, 2011) this study found that this was largely the approach of news organisations rather than individual journalists. The news organisations used more traditional methods of automated headlines with a link to the website whereas journalists took a more informal approach and often did not include links in their story or promote upcoming editions of the paper. By talking about what they were working on or using Twitter for live blogging they felt they were indirectly promoting the newspaper brand without explicitly directing people to the newspaper or website. This is supported by the findings of Dickinson (2011) who conducted interviews at the *Leicester Mercury* during the same period as this study. Dickinson found that journalists were aware of building a personal brand via Twitter as well as newsgathering and soliciting feedback via social media networks to stay closely connected to their audience.

In building a personal brand on social media networks journalists are moving away from the more traditional approach of presenting a neutral face of the news organisation they work for. It is clear from the results of this research that a growing number of journalists are crossing the line between professional and personal and indeed see this as beneficial to their work as a journalist rather than damaging. Although at both case study sites there were some condemning voices in the newsroom, journalists who had embraced social media networks were mostly speaking to readers in an informal tone and adding insights from their personal life. They were also engaging in two way interaction with readers rather than a one way communication model. This adds to the evidence that the traditional methods of communication are changing on social media networks and the news process is becoming socialised.

A significant finding from the content analysis and interviews was that individual journalists utilise Twitter for different means, depending on their personal preference but also their job role. Dickinson (2011) found that politics and business correspondents primarily talked about Twitter as a means to cultivate news sources whereas for sports correspondents it was a means to connect with readers. For Steensen (2011) sports journalists are more closely connected to entertainment and market-driven news than the professional ideals of hard news. His findings argue that in an online environment it may be appropriate for sports journalists to promote a new ideal to the professional ideology of social cohesion which is directed towards pleasing the participating part of the audience. It could therefore be surmised that it is more appropriate for a sports journalist to use social media networks as tools to communicate with readers and sports fans, than it would be for a hard news journalist such as a politics reporter. Indeed it may be more appropriate for a politics reporter to use social media networks as newsgathering and data collaboration tools than to engage in banter with readers. In this case of the *Leicester Mercury* the content analysis supported these demarcations with the rugby correspondent having a far higher level of interactivity than the politics correspondent.

**Conclusion**

The findings suggest that social media networks are having a variable impact on the role of journalists as traditional gatekeepers. Instead of being a platform where the two actors converge to share, comment on and verify information, as outlined in Chapter 2, social media networks are platforms where audiences and journalists converge to share information, comment on information and occasionally collaborate. Traditional methods remain dominant but a change is happening at an individual level. Journalists are communicating more frequently with readers, taking their feedback on board and becoming more accountable. This communication is public and informal in approach, framing journalists as ordinary, fallible individuals rather than authoritarian gatekeepers.

**Chapter 12: The Citizens’ Eye project**

12.1 Introduction

The evolution of the internet and its current guise as Web 2.0 has for many given rise to a new breed of cyber village correspondent known as the citizen journalist. Equipped with little more than a mobile phone and an inquisitive nature this former audience (Gillmor, 2006; Rosen, 2006) is providing valuable content for the news media (Allan, 2007; Newman, 2009). As illustrated in Chapter 5, audiences have a growing expectation (Bowman and Willis, 2003) to be involved in the news-making process and an increasing number are actively chasing discovery. This influx of fast user generated content is a potential resource lifeline for local British newspapers which have seen a continued decline in revenue and dramatic editorial job losses during the past decade, as outlined in Chapter 1. As explored in Chapters 6 and 9 the utilization of material provided free by the public has become a vital process in the production of local news for both civic and economic designs.

As discussed at length in Chapter 2 newspapers are increasingly “harnessing collective intelligence” (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009, p.1) leading to the suggestion that news is becoming collaborative (Allan, 2007; Rusbridger, 2010). And for scholars and journalists alike this approach does not necessary undermine professional journalism, but instead strengthens it. As Reich (2008) maintains ordinary citizens can serve as a vital complement to mainstream journalism but not as its substitute. This leads to an arena in which a professional top down media organization “partners with or deliberately taps into the emerging participatory media culture online (bottom up) in order to produce some kind of co-creative, commons-based news platform” (Deuze, 2008, p.7).

This chapter aims to explore the development of collaborative journalism within a specific project located at one of the case study sites. The *Leicester Mercury* is the biggest selling daily newspaper of the Northcliffe Media publishing group but in 2011 faced year on year losses of 7.2 per cent (ABC figures, 2011). During the same year a pilot project was being trialled at the newspaper to incorporate the content of Leicester citizen journalism agency *Citizens’ Eye* into the *Leicester Mercury* and its website thisisleicestershire.co.uk. This chapter will explore the nature and impact of this partnership with several research questions in mind. The first set of findings are largely descriptive and aim to explore the nature of the partnership in line with the research question examined in Chapter 7 whilst focusing on the specifics of this unique project. Therefore RQ2a: What is the nature of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers? is interpreted in this chapter as follows:

**RQ2a: What is the nature of the Citizens’ Eye collaborative project at the Leicester Mercury?**

Examining what motivates *Leicester Mercury* editorial managers to collaborate with non-professional content providers is also fundamental to this research in order to gain an insight into the influence of both economic and normative factors. This builds on the findings of Chapters 6 and 9 by again focusing on one specific, unique project. There are concerns amongst some scholars that collaborative journalism is being market driven rather than civic orientated (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Paulussen *et al*, 2007) and audiences are being exploited for free content (Moretzsohn, 2006, Örnebring, 2008) enabling news organisations to cut back on staff. Rather than embracing citizen journalism with the civic aim of widening political engagement by encouraging a diversity of voices and debates on political matters, it may be more realistic to suggest that local British newspapers are utilising active readers as a form of free labour. However as explored in Chapters 6, 7 and 9 it can also be argued that it is possible for economic and civic obligations to co-exist albeit in conflict (Jenkins, 2008).

The second objective of this chapter is to situate the *Citizens’ Eye* collaboration project within this debate and gain an insight into the motivating factors of the *Leicester Mercury* to engage in this co-creative news process. In order to understand motivation, the value of the project to the newspaper must be measured to understand whether or not it is economically driven. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 9 value can have monetary and non-monetary worth, therefore this chapter seeks to explore which values apply to this particular project. RQ2b: What is the value of Web 2.0 audience participation in British local newspapers? has been tailored in this chapter to the more specific research question:

**RQ2b: What is the value of the Citizens’ Eye project to the Leicester Mercury?**

Incorporating content captured by the public into a local newspaper and its website - whether text, photographs, video or audio - has implications for the relationship between professional journalists and their customers/readers. The public has always been a source of information for journalists but under this new model the role of readers is being redefined as pro-sumers, contributors and collaborators (Domingo *et al*, 2008; Allan, 2007; Bowman and Willis, 2003). The balance of power is said to be changing (Benkler, 2006) and with it the gatekeeper role of journalists is being redefined (Singer, 1997). The third aspect of this case study therefore is to analyse the effect of the *Citizens’ Eye* project on the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* to further contextualise the findings of Chapter 10. This chapter will explore how user generated content is sourced, presented and moderated and the role gatekeeping plays in the news production process. This chapter seeks to explore *Leicester Mercury* journalists’ attitudes towards *Citizens’ Eye* and citizen journalism more broadly, as not all of the reporters were aware of the *Citizens’ Eye* pilot project. RQ3: How is Web 2.0 impacting on the role of journalists in local British newspapers as traditional gatekeepers? has therefore been interpreted in this chapter as:

**RQ3: How does the Citizens’ Eye project impact on the role of Leicester Mercury journalists as traditional gatekeepers?**

12.2 Methods

This chapter aims to build upon the findings of Chapters 5, 6, 7,9 and 10 by focusing on a specific project at one of the case study sites. The findings have been drawn from interviews with journalists, readers and the editor of Leicestershire community news agency *Citizens’ Eye*. Further triangulation was achieved via news room observation.

As described in Chapters 4 the researcher spent three weeks at the *Leicester Mercury* during October 2010 and interviewed 20 participants, 19 of whom were editorial staff at the *Leicester Mercury* and one who was editor of *Citizens’ Eye*. The semi-structured interviews were based on the interview guide displayed in Appendix 2a and the relevant information about *Citizens’ Eye* was selected through the question topics discussed in the method sections of Chapters 7, 9 and 10. Each journalist was also asked about their knowledge of the *Citizens’ Eye* project and their attitude toward it. The *Leicester Mercury* editor, deputy editor and *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator were directly involved with the pilot project along with the *Citizens’ Eye* editor. Many of the department heads and reporters had little knowledge of the *Citizens’ Eye* pilot and therefore their interviews were analysed only with regard to RQ3.

The researcher returned to the newspaper in June 2011, eight months after the initial period to interview the *Leicester Mercury* editor, *Citizens’ Eye* editor and *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator for a second time to gain further insight into how the pilot was developing. The researcher also had further ongoing correspondence via email with the editor of *Citizens’ Eye* and Mark Charlton, project co-ordinator at the *Leicester Mercury*.

As outlined in Chapter 5 journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* are referred to in the results section by the letter L and the number of the interviewee, for example L3. Meanwhile readers are given the code LR and their interview number, for example LR3. In this chapter the editor of *Citizens’ Eye* John Coster has been assigned the code LM1 which indicates that he is part of the *Leicester Mercury* case study but he is neither a journalist nor a reader. M therefore represents the word miscellaneous.

12.3 Results

The findings present a detailed insight into an internal case study within one of the case study sites which is situated within a unique set of circumstances. Generalisations about the local British newspaper industry are therefore made with caution. Nether-the-less case studies remain a valuable method in so far as they illustrate frameworks for thinking about issues and focus on contemporary phenomenon such as the *Citizens’ Eye* collaborative pilot project.

The results presented below are divided into five sub sections which set out the context of the project and how the findings inform the three revised research questions discussed above in section 12.1. The sub headings look at the following: establishment of the project, multimedia providers, economic and civic values, sharing the gates and rules of engagement. The first two parts focus on RQ2a, while the third section addresses RQ2b and the final two parts respond to RQ3.

**Establishment of the project**

The *Leicester Mercury* was established as a local newspaper in 1874 and today remains the flagship title of Northcliffe Media, with a readership of 54,000 according to the latest ABC figures. Meanwhile the newspaper’s associated website thisisleicestershire.co.uk receives 388,000 monthly unique users, an increase of 34 per cent year on year. The newspaper has an editorial staff of 60 and the website has one dedicated member of staff in Leicester and a broader web team based in Derby who look after a number of titles. In contrast, *Citizens’ Eye* is a non-professional, multimedia, independent news website established in 2008 which is made up of 18 issues based “agencies” (LM1) for people in Leicester. The individual agencies represent older people, asylum seekers, homelessness, ex offenders, disabilities, heritage and green issues - amongst others. The *Citizens’ Eye* network is made up of 450 volunteers with a core of 40 regular contributors. The organisation describes itself on its website citizenseye.org as: “People without professional journalism training using the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the internet to create, augment or fact check media on their own or in collaboration with others”, (Citizens’ Eye, 2011). The website receives approximately 20,000 views a month and is run by “editor” John Coster (LM1) who also has no formal journalism training.

A relationship between the two organisations began in 2009 when the *Leicester Mercury* editor tasked a senior member of the editorial team, with building community news within the newspaper and on its website. During his research the journalist, who later became the *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator, “stumbled across” (L14) *Citizens’ Eye* and decided it would be best practice to link up with the organisation which had networks across a number of communities, rather than try to create simultaneous networks. *Citizens’ Eye* editor John Coster is paid a small undisclosed “retainer” (LM1) from the *Leicester Mercury* for co-ordinating the volunteers on behalf of the newspaper.

**Multimedia providers**

Volunteers from *Citizens’ Eye* have access to six computers within the *Leicester Mercury* news room where they can upload multimedia content to the newspaper’s network including text, photographs, video and audio. From here it can be accessed by editorial staff on both the newspaper and website. Senior *Citizens’ Eye* volunteers hold regular editorial meetings with the *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator Mark Charlton at the *Leicester Mercury* to pitch ideas.

The majority of the content provided is in the form of text, followed closely by photographs. There is also a small amount of video content, usually following a major event. In interviews, most journalists associated citizen journalism with photographs of breaking news events rather than text, citing as examples the London Bombings and the English Defence League march in Leicester, which took place during the research period. However due to their formal relationship with the *Leicester Mercury*, volunteers from *Citizens’ Eye* break this perceived trend by providing more text than is usually associated with citizen journalism.

This study has identified three ways in which*Citizens’ Eye* volunteers provide content for the newspaper and its website, each instilling the volunteer with a different role.

* *Source*: Contacted by journalist for information, content or comment on a story. For example a quote or a photo of a fire.
* *Resource (independent and directed)*: Source story independently and create own content. Allocated a specific story by the newspaper news desk and asked to report on it. For example attending a ward meeting.
* *Collaborator*: Working alongside a journalist to provide complementary coverage of a story, arranged in advance. For example providing video footage while journalists gather copy and photos.

The biggest area of participation for *Citizens’ Eye* volunteers is as a source and resource, as discussed later in this chapter. Their role as a collaborator is minimal and only occurs occasionally when a big event is planned in advance such as the Leicester Sky Ride City. This is an annual event to promote cycling in the city. *Leicester Mercury* editor Keith Perch (L3) explained that he had a meeting with *Citizens’ Eye* editor John Coster before the event to arrange for volunteers to take photographs in conjunction with *Leicester Mercury* photographers. However this type of collaboration was rare and not always successful. Keith Perch complained that many of the Citizens’ Eye photographers took similar photographs to *Leicester Mercury* photographers rather than complementing their coverage by standing in different locations or indeed covering other community events *Leicester Mercury* photographers could not get to that day. Using *Citizens’ Eye* volunteers as collaborators therefore appeared to be a largely a desire rather than a reality.

Furthermore the research detected four key publishing strands under the *Leicester Mercury* brand which facilitated *Citizens’ Eye* content (see Figure 12.1).

* *Wave supplement*. A monthly pull-out supplement placed inside the *Leicester Mercury*. All text and photographs provided and uploaded by the *Citizens’ Eye* younger people agency. Pages subbed and designed by *Leicester Mercury* journalists.
* *Branded weekly page.* A full page in the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper at least once a week, but up to three times. The page may contain advertising. The text and photos are provided and uploaded by *Citizens’ Eye*. The *Citizens’ Eye* logo is always published prominently on the page (see Figure 12.4).
* *Branded newspaper content*. Additional content (text and/or photos) which cannot fit onto the dedicated *Citizens’ Eye* page or a harder news story which may be placed as a stand-alone story elsewhere in the newspaper. It will be published with the *Citizens’ Eye* logo. This happens on an ad hoc basis.
* *Website content*. Some of the newspaper content is automatically uploaded to the thisisleicestershire.co.ukwebsite and this may include any text/photos provided by *Citizens’ Eye*. This does not usually carry the logo. The *Leicester Mercury* web editor may also manually upload text, photos and video by *Citizens’ Eye* onto the website. Also ad hoc.

Figure 12.1: *Leicester Mercury* and Citizens’ Eye pilot collaboration model

**Economic and civic values**

The involvement of *Citizens’ Eye* volunteers was a strategy implemented by editorial managers and as such serves a number of defined purposes for the newspaper and to a lesser extent the website. Interviews with managers and the project co-ordinator demonstrate that there was a clear economic motivation for using community volunteers. The two-pronged approach was led by a need for more resources to cover a wider range of stories which would in turn attract more readers to buy the newspaper. Keith Perch, editor of the *Leicester Mercury* said “a big part of the partnership is about driving newspaper sales, it is about having more diverse content in the paper and more of the community involved” (L3). The *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator, Mark Charlton, also readily admitted that they were “looking for the Holy Grail of increasing sales of the newspaper” (L14).

Comments were made in interviews with journalists that *Citizens’ Eye* was a useful resource to “fill the paper” (L2) and meant the news desk had “one less page to worry about” (L14). *Citizens’ Eye* was seen as being particularly useful as a resource to report on stories that journalists did not have time to cover such as community events. The point was made that in the past when there were higher staffing numbers, reporters would be routinely sent to report on community stories rather than simply concentrate on high profile news. With less staff, the view of editorial managers was that professional journalists should not “waste time” (L14) doing smaller stories which could be covered by volunteers and instead they should be freed up to concentrate on investigations. Mark Charlton, *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator (L14) further explained:

We have got to create a situation where we can get the best out of our professional journalists and the demand for local news from our communities around Leicester and find a cost effective way of doing that. And while there are people willing to make contributions to the newspaper like *Citizens’ Eye*, community reporters, then I think we would be insane not to try and capitalize on that.

*Citizens’ Eye* was acutely aware of the short term fix volunteers were providing the newspaper but saw it as mutually beneficial as it allowed it to meet its remit of getting unheard voices into the mainstream media. “*Citizens’ Eye* is not the answer (to cut backs in newspapers) but at this particular moment in time citizen journalism is in the right place at the right time...it is a force for opportunity not destruction,” said its editor John Coster (LM1). This type of coverage builds on the British alternative press movement of the 1960s as discussed in Chapter 1. The alternative press turned away from official sources and instead “reported the views and actions of people living on housing states, of those involved in community groups, of rank-and-file trade union activists, unemployed people, and the views of those active within the women's and gay movements and the black communities” (Harcup, 1998, p.106). As Harcup notes, although this movement was ultimately quashed by the mainstream market-driven press, the commercial press was nether-the-less forced to take notice of ordinary citizens and this has further developed through the introduction of the web. In this study it was evident that the *Citizens’ Eye* project was replicating the ethos of the alternative press model and in turn this was impacting on the content of the mainstream press, in this case the *Leicester Mercury*. By involving more readers the *Leicester Mercury* was providing alternative voices and broadening its content, which albeit a secondary motivation, enabled greater civic participation. “They fill in a grey area that reporters would not always pursue. Things we wouldn’t see as that important, they cover quite intensively,” said Mark Charlton, *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator (L14).

The value of *Citizens’ Eye* to the *Leicester Mercury* was primarily aresource and an opportunity to widen content of the newspaper to drive sales. Civic participation was arguably happening by default reflecting Jenkins (2008) model of a rewarding mutually beneficial relationship with potentially conflicting agendas.

**Sharing the gates**

During the period of the research journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* were regularly sharing newspaper pages with citizen journalists who worked under the umbrella of *Citizens’ Eye*. Yet interviews with editorial staff revealed that aside from managers, many journalists had little knowledge of *Citizens’ Eye* or interest in the project. However there was widespread acknowledgement of the impact of citizen journalism and user generated content more generally. The majority of participants had a largely positive attitude towards citizen journalism particularly as a source of information on which to develop stories. One reporter remarked that citizen journalism could produce compelling content particularly during major breaking news events but “it has to be put together, it has to be moulded and presented by a team of experienced journalists who know the best way to do that,” (L7). This supports findings that the majority of journalists were reluctant to relinquish control to citizen journalists despite recognising that the traditional role of journalist-as-gatekeeper was adapting. As outlined in Chapter 10 there were a variety of suggestions on the modern role of a journalist which centred around verification, truth seeking and bringing information together. It was strongly felt that the information age and ubiquity of citizen journalism called for an even greater need for professional journalists to “sort the wheat from the chaff” (L16), what Singer (2009) refers to as sense-makers.

As discussed above, managers at the *Leicester Mercury* identified citizen journalists as a production resource to cover news stories whereas journalists viewed them as a source to pass on information to them. Yet these two functions were not static. There was fluid movement between citizen journalists as resource and source, depending on the type of news story. For example if a citizen journalist acting as a resource sent the newspaper a written story about a major car crash they had witnessed the story would be handed to a professional journalist for development. In this case the citizen journalist reverted from a resource to a source. Conversely if a *Citizens’ Eye* volunteer informed a journalist that there was a charity event taking place (acting as a source) they might have then been asked to cover the event themselves with text and photographs thus moving into the role of resource.

Editorial staff of all levels agreed that there were some stories that could be covered by non-professionals particularly community/charity events, bottom tier council meetings such as parish or ward meetings, self-interest news and expert opinion such as a classical music columnist. Self-interest news would include a community or individual promoting their own event or cause, as illustrated in Figure 12.4. This study classified these stories as low level reporting as this matches the category often described by journalists and academics as ‘soft news’. Stories which fitted into the opposing high level reporting category which were viewed as only to be carried out by professional journalists were identified as court cases, top tier council meetings such as city or county council meetings, investigative journalism, major events and breaking news. Again the belief that hard news, or high level reporting as it is described here, remained the preserve of professional journalists, was shared by journalists interviewed in the international research of Singer *et al* (2011).

This two tier structure is demonstrated in Figure 12.2 and was devised from data gathered via interviews and news room observation. These tiers (sometimes referred to as hard and soft news) were also fluid with citizen journalists stepping into the high level reporting sphere by collaborating with professionals on major events or during breaking news.

Figure 12.2: Tiers of reporting

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **High level reporting** | | **Low level reporting** |
| Court cases | | Charity/community events |
| City council meetings | | Ward meetings |
| Investigative journalism | | Self-interest news |
| Major events\* and | breaking news\* | Expert opinion |

Work of professional journalists only Work which may be carried out by citizens

\* These can be complemented by citizen journalists providing additional material such as eyewitness accounts, video, audio and photography

Tiers of reporting enabled a structure where the skills of a journalist could be maximised to “add value” (L3) to the newspaper and citizen journalists could add value by reporting on their communities and giving expert opinions. Keith Perch, editor *Leicester Mercury* (L3) said:

We have to work out what can a journalist do that nobody else can do. What are journalists doing at the moment that anybody can do. It (professionalism) doesn’t add a lot of value to a one paragraph news in brief telling people that that WI (Women’s Institute) are meeting next Wednesday, you don’t need to be a brilliant journalist to write that. But you probably have to be a pretty experienced journalist to go and sit in a crown court and cover that properly.

These divisions in labour illustrate an environment where gates of information are shared but the control is balanced in favour of the professional news organisation.

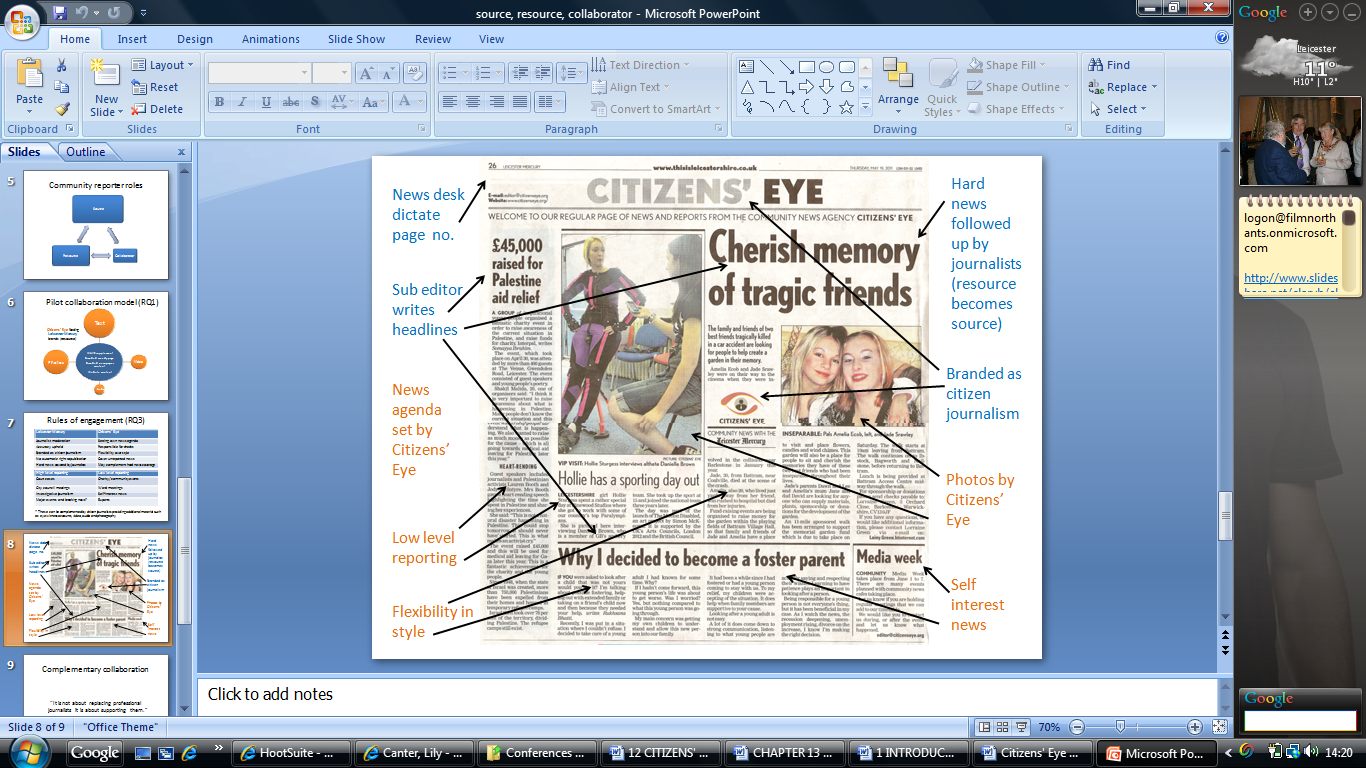
**Rules of engagement**

An illustration of citizen journalists partaking in low level reporting, acting as resources, was the production of the branded *Citizens’ Eye* page as outlined above. Although the content was moderated by professional journalists it did not conform to a traditional gatekeeping structure. *Citizens’ Eye* set their own agenda by sourcing stories and they were able to “write about things important to them and not what we are dictating,” said Mark Charlton, *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator (L14). The volunteers were also responsible for fact checking their stories, a role usually given to professionals. There was also flexibility in the writing style of *Citizens’ Eye* reporters and it did not conform to the traditional NCTJ style of news reporting. Stories often had no quotes, were subjective and shifted between the third and first person.

The moderation from journalists came into play when the content was placed in the newspaper. The news desk decided which page and day the *Citizens’ Eye* content would appear on and this was often chosen when there was a large newspaper that needed pages filling towards the back end. The design of the page was carried out by a sub editor who would write the headlines, edit stories to fit and place stories as leads, shorts or news in brief as they would with the work of a professional journalist. The content would also be checked for “accuracy, legal issues and decency” (L3). *Citizens’ Eye* was not resistant to this moderation and indeed welcomed it. “If their training and expertise means by subbing it more people will read it then that is what it is about,” said editor John Coster (LM1). The page was also clearly branded as *Citizens’ Eye* which reflected the desire of citizen journalists and professionals. The rules of engagement are summarised in Figure 12.3 below. Citizen journalists wanted their work to be recognised as such and journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* unanimously agreed that citizen journalism/user generated content should always be marked as such and never confused with professional content, so readers were able to recognise that it met a different set of standards. Indeed this also correlated with the views of readers. Interviews conducted with readers at the two case study sites found 85 per cent agreed that reader content should be marked as such, making it distinguished from professional content. One *Leicester Mercury* reader (LR3) commented: “There should be a distinction between reader and reporter content, that should remain quite clear otherwise you get into muddy waters.” This reflects the results of international research by Singer *et al* (2011) which found the citizen journalism was branded as such or published in separate areas on newspaper websites, to distinguish it from the content of professional journalists.

Figure 12.3: Rules of engagement

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Leicester Mercury** | **Citizens’ Eye** |
| Journalist moderation | Setting own news agenda |
| Accuracy upheld | Responsible for checks |
| Branded as citizen journalism | Flexibility over style |
| No automatic right to publication | Cover unreported news |
| Hard news covered by journalists | May complement hard news coverage |

Figure 12.4: An example of the *Citizens’ Eye* page in the *Leicester Mercury* and the rules of engagement applied

12.4 Discussion

By the end of the follow-up interview period in June 2011 it was evident that the pilot project at the *Leicester Mercury* was still evolving and attitudes and models of news production were beginning to take shape. There was evidence of a step towards a co-creative commons-based news platform (Deuze, 2008) but much of the control still lay in the hands of the traditional media platform and its professional journalists. This relationship was mutually beneficial none-the-less and pointed towards a greater level of civic participation albeit motivated by economic goals.

As Jenkins (2008) suggests, grassroots contributors may find themselves in conflict with their conglomerate partners and in this particular pilot project the research identified that there was a struggle over the type of stories *Citizens’ Eye* covered for the *Leicester Mercury*. An example of this conflict was the *Leicester Mercury* editor wanting to use *Citizens’ Eye* more effectively as a resource to cover ward meetings to expand beyond the “self interest news” (L3) he claimed it produced. “There has been a struggle between John Coster and ourselves to get a certain sort of reporting done...There are some areas in which we need to be assigning them work rather than what they want to write about,” said Keith Perch (L3).

The role of journalist-as-gatekeeper was shifting in this collaborative project but a level of moderation was still being maintained and indeed was expected and relied upon by citizen journalists. The research appeared to indicate that citizen journalism and professional journalism could only co-exist rather than each survive in isolation. “It is not about replacing professional journalists it is about supporting them,” said John Coster, *Citizens’ Eye* editor (LM1). A standpoint echoed by Keith Perch (L3) who said: “There is a role for professional journalism and a role for citizen journalism. The future belongs to both. It is not an either/or.” As a result the local media landscape that appeared to be emerging was a complex one with few definitive boundaries. It was a place where the public, via citizen journalism, flowed between the role of source, resource and collaborator.

It was also interesting to note that there was lack of communication between *Leicester Mercury* editorial managers involved in the *Citizens’ Eye* project and the larger editorial staff about the initiative. This echoed findings from Chapters 5, 8, 9 and 11 in which a lack of communication and leadership meant participatory journalism was developing at a slow pace. Rather than integrating the *Citizens’ Eye* project into the daily routine of the news room and the consciousness of reporters, managers chose to view the project as separate from, or irrelevant to, the work of professional journalists. Again these results were similar to the findings of Singer *et al*’s (2011) international research which found that citizen journalism initiatives tended to be “kept at arm’s length from professional news operations” (p.29).

Indeed it has become much more apparent since the research was carried out that the pilot project was not providing suitable content for the *Leicester Mercury*. The WAVE supplement is no longer being published and the regular *Citizens’ Eye* page has been dropped. The explanation for these changes appears to be multifaceted. A change in editor at the WAVE meant the *Leicester Mercury* felt they would not be supplied with sufficient content to sustain the 16 page monthly supplement. From follow up correspondence in January 2012 it was clear to the researcher that the newspaper regretted the fact it had to stop publishing the product and clearly stated that it wanted to keep the WAVE supplement. The cutting of the *Citizens’ Eye* page was a separate issue and the researcher deduced that this part of the partnership was not working as effectively as the *Leicester Mercury* would have liked, as previous interviews had already indicated. A series of changes were made to the newspaper and a focus was placed on ideas to “drive revenue” (L14), again showing the newspaper’s emphasis on economic factors over civic ones. However submissions from community reporters including many *Citizens’ Eye* reporters were still being published ad hoc in the newspaper and arguably had grown in number according to the *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator.

Although the *Citizens’ Eye* collaboration project was not entirely successful it appears that it did help to open up the newspaper to more citizen journalism from a variety of outlets. By testing the field with an established community reporter organisation the *Leicester Mercury* was able to experiment, test and define the boundaries between citizen and professional journalism. The *Leicester Mercury* is now looking to have a percentage of its newspaper content provided by the local community for free. This reflects a strategy across the whole of Northcliffe’s titles which was outlined in the annual report of its parent company - the Daily Mail and General Trust - in 2009. The report (DMGT, 2009) states:

A number of Northcliffe’s titles, both daily and weekly, are undergoing remarkable design changes to better reflect the essence of their communities and people with local skills, in an ever-widening range of topics, are being recruited on a pro bono basis by Northcliffe’s editors to add breadth and surprise to their titles.

Although the report claims these changes are being made to add breath to their newspaper titles the dominant factor is a need to maintain profit margins by cutting costs. The report begins by outlining the “unprecedented” trading conditions, the fall of advertising revenues by 30 per cent, the decline in circulation revenues by seven per cent and an overall decline in revenue of £94 million (DMGT, 2009). A similarly bleak economic picture is portrayed in the 2010 annual report (DMGT, 2010) with newspaper circulation revenue down six per cent and advertising revenues down seven per cent. Although the advertising decline was slowing by this point Northcliffe continued to cost cut throughout 2011, which eventually led to the departure of Keith Perch, editor of the *Leicester Mercury* in October 2011. Subsequently in the beginning of 2012 the *Leicester Mercury* was continuing to look for ways to utilise free content and this was indicated to the researcher in follow-up correspondence.

**Conclusion**

This chapter indicates that the inclusion of citizen journalism in titles such as the *Leicester Mercury* is clearly driven by economic factors but what remains to be seen is whether opening up the content to a potentially wider variety of voices does ultimately lead to greater civic participation.

**Chapter 13: Conclusion**

3.1 Introduction

Audience participation is undoubtedly impacting on the way in which news companies operate and on the traditional roles and routines of journalists. As this thesis has illustrated, Web 2.0 has brought with it many economic and journalistic challenges for local newspapers, several of which are still being resolved. The brand of news providers like the *Leicester Mercury* and Bournemouth *Daily Echo* now extend far beyond the printed newspaper and include not only the website but also associated social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. The relationship between journalists and readers is therefore far more complex than in the past, as vast numbers of readers can now contribute to the news production process at different stages, with varying levels of moderation.

This thesis has sought to unpick how the relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their readers is changing in the context of Web 2.0 through a series of research questions, outlined in Chapter 1. The picture that has emerged is a multifaceted one, with some contradictory responses, but it gives an indication of the perspectives of local journalists, news organisations and audiences in this field of inquiry, whilst also resonating with international findings.

This concluding chapter summarises the overall findings from research questions 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b and 3 set out in Chapters 5 to 12 to address the final research question **RQ4: To what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspaper within Web 2.0?**

This conclusion also seeks to clarify the broader themes identified in various chapters and bring them together in a cohesive argument. The first section of this chapter (13.2) will therefore summarise and reflect on the key themes extrapolated from the thesis findings and outline a model which may help scholars in their consideration of online audience participation particularly within the context of local news. Building on these summaries the next section (13.3) turns to RQ4 and explores whether local British newspaper journalists are stepping towards a more collaborative approach with their readers and where the future of this relationship may be headed. Section 13.4 takes a more reflective approach and discusses areas for further research in the field of audience participation by identifying some of the limitations of this study. The penultimate section (13.5) develops further possibilities for research by highlighting the use of methodologies in this study and how new data gathering techniques were developed. It also discusses how these methods may be utilised by other researchers studying online content. Finally, the last section (13.6) reflects on the impact of the thesis on practitioners, researchers and educators and makes a plea for pragmatic engagement between the three parties to tackle the challenges and restrictions identified in the findings of this study.

13.2 Reflective summaries

Chapters 5 to 12 of this thesis have examined a series of research questions and discussed the findings of the two case study sites, in the context of the literature outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. This section now seeks to summarise the key themes of this study, taking a view across all of the findings chapters and bringing the results together. Four key themes have been identified which will be explored under the following sub sections: the failure of economies of scale, shift in participatory patterns, dazed and confused gatekeepers, and, alternative business models. The final concluding paragraph entitled: fluid state of change, reflects on the title of the thesis and the conclusions that can now be drawn from it.

**The failure of economies of scale**

A recurring theme of this research has been the impact of economic imperatives on the work of journalists. The two case study sites represent two of the biggest regional newspaper publishers in Britain – Northcliffe Media and Newsquest – who are both part of wider conglomerate organisations as discussed in Chapter 1, section 1.5.2. Both publishers have rapidly expanded since the 1990s and their portfolios now include hundreds of regional and national newspapers, plus hundreds of editorial and advertising websites (Newsquest, 2012; Northcliffe, 2009). As discussed in chapter 2 this concentration of media power makes publishers dependent on advertiser support and shareholder profitably (Herman, 1997) and leads to homogenous content. It also means companies are not prepared to take risks (Curran, 1991) and the focus is on targeting consumers rather than empowering citizens. This focus on high profit margins has caught the attention of politicians with some claiming that local people do still want a local newspaper but they are being let down by these big companies (Moss, 2012). Bishop Auckland Labour MP and Shadow Media Minister [Helen Goodman](http://helengoodman.co.uk/) told the BBC in May 2012 that local newspaper chains needed to rethink their high profit margins:

Last year Johnston Press made a 17.5 per cent operating profit. Compare that with Tesco - the most successful retailer in the country - that had a profit margin of six per cent. If Tesco can keep going with a six per cent margin, the local newspaper chains really ought to be able to get their business models right (Moss, 2012).

Herman argues that this focus on high profit margins is ultimately endangering citizens’ ability to participate in public affairs and the effective working of democracy (1997) and there is much evidence to support this argument in this thesis. Organisational restrictions, born out of large scale commercial structures, are holding back the potential for greater audience participation and the ability to harness Web 2.0 for democratic functions. This is due to a lack of resources in the form of equipment and staff which is preventing journalists from engaging in two way interaction with their readers. Further restrictions include the censorship of social media and a lack of communication or leadership which is preventing journalists from experimenting or finding new ways to engage with their readers. The economy of scale is also suffocating journalists by creating restrictive homogenised websites, centralised subbing and web teams and forcing editors to focus on cost cutting rather than develop participation for journalistic or democratic purposes.

These organisational restrictions are ultimately holding back collaborative journalism and creating an environment where there are confused and contradictory notions of what the role of a journalist is within Web 2.0. With better resources, a clear strategy and independence to innovate, journalists would be able to facilitate audience participation for non-economic purposes to create better journalism which could in turn enlighten and educate their readers and enable them to reach mutual understanding of the common good (Eriksen and Weigard, 2003).

**Shift in participatory patterns**

The findings of this thesis indicate that audience participation is on the increase and this is largely due to deterministic factors including wider access, ease of access and the low cost of access. There are also cultural factors at play including the expectation of participation from audience members. The results also suggest that the diversity of audience members online is slightly more diverse than offline audiences and newspaper websites and associated social media networks are attracting new audiences who do not access the printed product. However it must be recognised that despite an increase, participatory audiences are still a minority.

A key part of this increase is due to the socialisation of news and participation. Taking part in the news process is increasingly a social act where private and public interests overlap. Readers enjoy debating news stories, interacting with one another, sharing news and to a lesser extent taking part in the gathering of news content and interacting with journalists. This chimes with existing international research which suggests that “sharing is becoming central to the way people experience the news” (Hermida *et al*, 2011, p.7) and that news is a socially-driven activity, especially online. However participation comes more through sharing than through contributing to the news (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). This thesis also found that as well as sharing news, readers like to share their opinions and move beyond sharing into active participation by taking interacting with other readers.

The Theory of the Interlocking Public (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007) is central to understanding who, how and why people participate. As argued throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapters 5, 7 and 8, everyone is interested in something and they will engage in varying levels of participation depending on the topic. These levels of participation will range across a spectrum from those who simply view news content online, to those who share news stories, through to those who produce news content or respond directly to news content. Active audiences can participate in a variety of ways, as illustrated in Table 2.2, with some methods being more involved than others. For example producing original news content would be more involved than voting in an online poll or liking a news post on Facebook but both would be classed as active participation in this study.

This thesis proposes that the more a person has a personal stake in an issue and a strong understanding of the issue, the more likely they are to engage actively in the news process. The model illustrated below in Figure 13.1 proposes how the Theory of the Interlocking Public could be interpreted as sitting alongside the Web 2.0 participation model outlined in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2. This model proposes that all audience members move between passive, sharing and active stages depending on the news story, but they largely remain passive.

Figure 13.1: Spectrum of audience activity

**Passive**

viewing, selecting, navigating

**Sharing**

dissemination

**Active**

newsgathering,

production, responding

**Audience participation levels**

**Dazed and confused gatekeepers**

Throughout the research process it has been apparent that journalists hold their professional skills in high regard and they are generally dismissive of the capability of readers to produce journalism. Content gathered or produced by the public is most often viewed as poor quality, inaccurate or defamatory and to be used only as a source of information, feedback or to fill a gap in resources on an ad hoc basis. Journalists therefore assign readers roles in the newsgathering and responding stages only, but are unwilling to let them into the production stages. As Heinonen (2011) found in similar international research, journalists are more hesitant to assign users proactive roles as co-workers or view them as integral participants in the actual process of creating journalistic news content. However there are some exceptions to these traditional approaches. The *Citizens’ Eye* and *Leicester Mercury* project in this PhD study sought to move toward this more collaborative co-worker approach, but the project was short lived due to a variety of reasons, including the loss of key members of staff driving the pilot. The *Leicester Mercury* editor Keith Perch resigned and the *Leicester Mercury* *Citizens’ Eye* project co-ordinator Mark Charlton took voluntary redundancy in the 2012 round of job cuts. Again economic imperatives took precedent over this potentially successful collaborative project.

Yet despite evidence that the role of journalist-as-gatekeeper still remains in-tact the data also indicates that most journalists are aware of the need to adapt and they see their role as changing, something which most embrace. Rather than acting as gatekeepers of information who decide which news makes it to the public domain (new breakers), journalists see themselves as increasingly playing the role of authenticators of information, who provide accurate, reliable news with a broader analytical context (verifiers and analysers). These changes are perceived by journalists as strengthening their ‘professional’ status rather than undermining it. The skills and training obtained by journalists enable them to be trusted sources of quality news which will continue to set them apart from citizen journalists and the wider public. However despite seeing themselves as “the defining actors in the process of creating news” (Heinonen, 2011, p.52) most journalists in this study also recognise the need to interact with their audiences to a greater extent and acknowledge that there is more demand from the public to be involved in the news process, even if journalists will only enable this within certain boundaries as discussed above. This has enabled a space for a “greater diversity of voices” (Hermida, 2011c, p.187) who may have been held back at the gates in the past. Indeed the desire from journalists to interact more with readers is in many cases curtailed by economic constraints or a lack of clarity of what is expected of them, again due to a failure in communication and leadership.

An interesting contradiction revealed in this research project is the existence of traditional gatekeeping as discussed above, alongside secondary gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) from audiences. Although journalists see themselves as defining what is newsworthy and despite the fact that they rarely allow audiences into the production stage of the news process which includes the selection of content, they are actually influenced by audience news selection preferences. There is evidence of the use of web analytics to gauge the most read and most commented on stories on the case study websites and to place stories in more or less prominent positions on the website in response to these. Journalists also often talk about follow up stories in response to reader comments. Although this would have existed in the past in response to the Letters Page it has become more prevalent in the Web 2.0 era due to the quantity of data available. It appears that news selection is increasingly being influenced by what is popular with readers rather than what is in the public interest or deemed newsworthy. This secondary gatekeeping could arguably be seen as serving an economic and civic function. By responding to demand the case study sites are following the market to try and increase website hits but simultaneously there are responding to stories that matter to the public which may have been overlooked by journalists, and as the data suggests this is often stories on public affairs rather than sensationalist or entertainment based stories.

A further significant finding of this research, which is currently understudied, is that journalist-audience participation via Web 2.0 appears to have developed the desire for journalists to build a personalised brand. The journalists most active on social media networks and blogging platforms see it as an opportunity to build a personal brand, as well as to promote the brand of their news organisation, by interacting and engaging with audiences. Journalists are able to create a more personal identity and personal following which they perceive as more attractive to readers than their homogenous, faceless news organisations. Simultaneously, whilst building a personal brand they are also indirectly promoting their associated news organisation, by identifying themselves as a journalist for said organisation. It would therefore be interesting to research further whether there is a demand from audiences for this more personal approach in local British newspaper companies as other studies would suggest (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Hermida *et al*, 2011).

As well as journalists building personal brands online, news companies are utilising audience participation within Web 2.0 as a means to build their company brand across multiple platforms. This thesis has substantiated other recent research (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Phillips, 2011) that also illustrate how news organisations are using social media networks as marketing tools to promote their brand and direct people to their website or newspaper. Also by increasing participatory elements on their websites, news companies are aiming to build a loyal customer base which is invested in their product and more likely to return because they enjoy the participatory elements on offer.

**Alternative business models**

Highlighted throughout this thesis has been the fine balance faced by journalists between economic and civic obligations. Audience participation is subject to professional, market and social factors (Domingo, *et al*, 2008) but in this thesis the market factors currently appear to be the strongest force. Local British newspapers operate within a commercial model and therefore it should be expected that economic goals will drive the business. However as Vujnovic (2011) argues although money is needed to underwrite the social goal of journalism, the augmentation of media revenue should not be the goal in itself. But with their exceedingly high profit margins, as discussed above, it appears that local news publishers have tipped the balance too far in favour of commercial goals. Indeed current profit margins are likely to be unsustainable (Fowler, 2011) which may force such companies to redress the balance between economic and civic obligations.

The solution to this imbalance may actually lie outside the conglomerate news organisations such as Northcliffe Media and Newsquest. The independent local newspaper industry in Britain which is based on a variety of business models is fairing much better in the current economic climate. These companies have much lower profit margins and lower debt levels, and many are family-owned. Meanwhile the *Maidenhead Advertiser* is the UK’s only trust-owned local weekly newspaper, which distributes profits to local causes. All of these independent newspapers concentrate on local news and sport and devote substantial coverage to local government, crime and courts as well as community events (Fowler, 2011). They are also developing new methods of online and digital delivery. Former regional newspaper editor Neil Fowler (2011) argues that these small business models “could be the foundation for the future” (p.24) because the current economies of scale model is failing both the market and the public.

There is a growing belief among some commentators that there needs to be a radical change in ownership of such bodies if they are to survive and the conduit of local news and scrutiny is to remain” (Fowler, 2011, p.22).

Furthermore Fowler argues that the big four UK regional press publishers – Johnston Press, Trinity Mirror, Northcliffe Media and Newsquest – should return their hundreds of newspaper titles to local ownership (Ponsford, 2011).

British independent charity Nesta, which invests in innovate community projects, also believes small businesses could hold the key to the future of local media and redress the balance between economic and social needs. The charity launched an investment programme in 2012 to understand the potential economic and social opportunities for hyperlocal media in the UK (Nesta, 2012). The programme – Destination Local – offered 10 organisations up to £50,000 to develop the next generation of hyperlocal media services who would make the most of mobile technologies to deliver geographically relevant local media. Jon Kingsbury, programme director said the aim of the programme was to understand whether these new technologies and platforms could deliver sustainable, scalable models that served local communities and delivered economic benefit (Nesta, 2011). Furthermore Jeremy Silver, Nesta creative industries lead specialist of the technology strategy board, argued that the business models of traditional local media, print and broadcast, had been undermined by the internet but the future may rest with a new model:

The combination of social media with location-aware technologies, the lowering of barriers to entry for self-publishing, and the high degree of user-engagement now visible online suggests that new models for local media might emerge out of new smarter uses of enabling technologies. We believe that the UK could be a great source of innovation in this field and that this could have value to communities around the world (Nesta, 2012).

The same argument is being made in America, where small businesses are beginning to find successful online business models. As Briggs (2012) convincingly argues the building of the future of news “is more likely to happen in new entrepreneurial ventures than through continuing to try to right the unwieldy old ships of media” (p.xv). Furthermore Briggs reasons that these new enterprises should be economically and socially balanced in approach by serving society in a sustainable and profitable way. They must also create a new relationship with the public and collaborate with them (Briggs, 2012).

**Fluid state of change**

The title of this thesis points to the examination of the changing relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their audiences within the context of Web 2.0. Within this title there is an assumption that the relationship is changing although it does not state what it is changing from and to. A thorough analysis of the structural and cultural changes in the two news rooms in this study strongly indicates that this ‘changing relationship’ is in a constant state of flux and the exact nature of this change is still unquantifiable. Rather than the relationship shifting from one thing to another, it is in a process of disruption and fragmentation with journalists and audiences taking on multiple contemporary roles whilst simultaneously maintaining some of their traditional roles.

13.3 A step towards collaboration

This thesis has attempted to explore a series of research questions to ultimately examine to what extent is a new form of collaborative journalism emerging in local British newspapers within Web 2.0? As the summaries in section 13.2 suggest there are gradual shifts occurring in local British newspapers and the relationship between journalists and audiences is evolving, albeit at a relatively moderate pace. Economic conditions and dismissive attitudes toward the public are restricting journalists from fully engaging with their audiences although the potential for collaboration exists.

Nether-the-less the research confirms the existence of pockets of collaborative journalism although these tend to be experimental in nature. Individual projects such as the *Citizens’ Eye* initiative as well as individual journalists, are embracing collaborative methods even if they are not embedded into the culture of the news organisation as a whole. For example *Leicester Mercury* politics correspondent David MacLean talked of opening up documents to the public via his blog to enable people to identify news stories or offer expert input, a device commonly used by the *Guardian* website as part of its open source journalism policy (Guardian, 2009). Meanwhile Sam Shepherd, digital projects co-ordinator at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* was developing collaborative communities via social media network Flickr with the public playing an active role in supplying content, moderating it and selecting which photographs should be published in the newspaper and on the website.

This is just one example of how social media networks in particular are enabling audiences to participate in all stages of the news production process and there is a growing trend amongst individual journalists to embrace this change and work with their audiences. This is also creating a more interactive news process with journalists publically communicating back and forth with audience members on social media networks.

There is also evidence that journalists are going beyond traditional sources of information to harness “collective intelligence” (O’Reilly and Battelle, 2009; Jenkins, 2008) from the public although this is usually then verified with official sources. Although journalists are aware that the public is a valuable source and resource, and that there is some convergence of roles between journalists and audience members, there is little support for the view of the public as co-workers. The argument that journalists should be working with “gifted amateurs” to form a “profitable cooperation of hybrid activity” (Lewis, 2011, p.4) is not supported in this thesis, suggesting attitudes of local newspaper journalists are similar to their national counterparts as described by Heinonen (2011).

It is however possible to speculate that under a different business model with less economic constraints journalists may be able to innovate and experiment with collaborative models and develop this form of journalism in the future, which in turn may lead to a shift in attitudes which views audience participation in a more positive light.

13.4 Further research

The findings in this study have highlighted many of the challenges faced by journalists and the ways in which journalism and audience participation is altering in local British newspapers due to the impact of interactive technologies. As outlined in Chapter 3 a case study approach was deemed the most approach research method to tackle the research questions raised, particularly as this enabled the researcher to study a “contemporary phenomenon within its real life context” (Yin, 2003, p.13). However despite a taking a triangulated approach with both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study, as with all research, remained limited in its scope. This section therefore addresses the limitations of the study and how these areas can be exploited for further research to develop additional knowledge in this field of inquiry.

The two case study sites were selected for their unique elements within a typical commercial framework and because the case study design sought comparison rather than replication. The argument set out in Chapter 3 explained that by building on a pattern of case studies from across the world it was possible to generalise findings (Roberts, 2005). Indeed the findings of this study have illustrated that many, although not all, of the findings concur with international research by a variety of scholars. This study can therefore be placed within an international framework and help to build a knowledgeable and empirical in-depth picture. Generalisation is therefore possible (Seawright and Gerring, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003) even with the use of just two case studies. However in order for the results to enhance the generalisability of this research further comparisons would be necessary to allow the unique features of the cases to be more readily identifiable (Bryman, 1989). This PhD study focused on two local British newspapers within an industry that includes 1,300 core newspapers and 1,500 websites (Newspaper Society, 2010) in Britain alone. It would be particularly fruitful for further replication case studies to be carried out at newspapers within the Northcliffe Media and Newsquest publishing companies who own 314 newspapers between them (see Table 3.1) as well as comparative studies at newspapers owned by Johnston Press and Trinity Mirror, the top two regional newspaper publishers. Furthermore given the conclusions outlined in section 13.2 a significant area of research that is urgently required is a comparison with independent local newspapers to understand whether the restrictions identified in this study exist within a different business model.

During preparation for this thesis it became apparent to the researcher that investigation into the field of local British newspapers and the internet was slight, thus justifying how this study was able to identify a gap in the research and bring forth a contribution to knowledge. A large part of this gap was a lack of research on audiences and a focus on journalists, as argued in Chapter 1, section 1.5. This study has attempted to partially fill this gap by using quantitative and qualitative methods to record audience data. However it must be acknowledged that the total number of responses from audiences in the online questionnaire and telephone interviews was slight. The questionnaire elicited 177 responses from *Leicester Mercury* online users and 328 from Bournemouth *Daily Echo* online users. Given that there were no financial resources to support the questionnaire, no incentive for users to take part and the placement and promotion of the questionnaire relied entirely on the good will of the case study sites the response rate was satisfactory. The completion rates of 67 per cent and 72 per cent respectively were also deemed acceptable. However in real terms the responses represented just 0.05 per cent of the *Leicester Mercury*’s 388,000 monthly unique users and 0.09 per cent of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*’s 382,000 monthly unique users. That being said the questionnaire was only promoted for two weeks on each of the case study websites meaning that the responses may have represented 0.09 per cent of *Leicester Mercury* online users and 0.17 per cent of Bournemouth *Daily Echo* online users. Furthermore the reader interviews involved an even smaller sample of five *Leicester Mercury* readers and 12 Bournemouth *Daily Echo* readers. These numbers represent only a fraction of the potential online audience and therefore a widespread and potentially funded audience research project would be needed to record more representative results.

Although the audience research data was limited in its representativeness the qualitative data drawn from journalists was much wider and representative in scope. A third of all editorial staff were interviewed at both case study sites (19 at the *Leicester Mercury* and 18 at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*) and much consensus was found within each case study site and between them. This number of interviews represented a much higher proportion of staff than many research projects in this field have conducted. For example research by Singer *et al* (2011) conducted 67 interviews between 24 newspapers with no more than five staff members interviewed at each. Similarly an in depth case study of Media General’s converged Tampa News Center in Florida by Garrison and Dupagne (2003) interviewed just 12 journalists out of a total 415. And two comparative case studies by Aviles and Carvajal (2008) of multimedia news rooms in Spain interviewed 10 out of 85 journalists at Novotecnica and seven out of 107 journalists at La Verdad. The data derived from journalists interviewed in this PhD thesis was therefore considerably more substantial in volume. Yet there was further capacity for interviews with more senior members of staff. The interviews in this study focused on editorial staff from trainee reporters to the editor but did not include interviews with staff with regional or national positions within the company. Many of the findings discussed the motivations and economic imperatives of the two newspaper companies as well as the motivations of journalists. However information about the two companies as a whole were largely speculative in nature as they were gleaned from journalists’ perspectives. Although the editors at both case study sites were able to represent the company and were more aware of the strategic plans there was no representation from general managers, regional digital teams or those in charge of digital media operations across the company. It would therefore be useful for further research to explore whether the perspectives of journalists matches with the reality and the perspectives of the strategic decision makers.

Another area for development, as identified in Chapter 9, is the need for greater understanding on the deliberative nature of audience participation. This thesis has concluded that online audiences are participating in greater numbers and are being exposed to a wider range of voices and opinions than their offline counterparts but it is unclear whether this leads to further political action or ultimately influences their voting decisions. The value of participation was largely explored from an accessibility and inclusivity perspective for audiences and from a journalistic and economic perspective for journalists but the measurable value to democracy was limited. Again larger audience research would be needed in order to tackle these research areas, something which was beyond the resources of this study.

As argued at length in Chapter 3, the advantage of case study research is that it allows for the examination of a subject within a real time context. However this is also one of the disadvantages particularly for a PhD research project which may take several years to complete. This study has gathered data in a rapidly evolving field which is constantly undergoing change, restructure and the introduction of new technology. In the year it took to collect the data many changes occurred at both the case study sites in regards to staffing, projects, policies and the use of online technology. For example the *Citizens’ Eye* project at the *Leicester Mercury* was all but abandoned, as discussed in Chapter 12, and the editor of the newspaper, Keith Perch, resigned. Furthermore Northcliffe Media announced job losses and restructuring in the editorial department. Meanwhile the thisisleicestershire.co.uk website was redesigned with new features such as the ability to rate comments and upload user generated content. The newspaper also launched a Facebook page which was not in existence during the research interview period. At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* there were also job losses and restructuring, and the editor Neal Butterworth also left the newspaper. Although the website did not change, Newsquest introduced a new social media policy and more of the newspaper’s journalists began using Twitter for their job.

All of these changes within a relatively short space of time are evidence of the need to continually update research and they identify areas where this particular study could gain further data. The content analysis of the Facebook profile at the *Leicester Mercury* could be carried out on a larger sample and the content analysis of Twitter users could also be expanded at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. It would be interesting to compare whether journalists at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* are now using Twitter in a similar fashion to journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* now they are more familiar with the medium and it is becoming part of normal practice. Similarly changes may have been made to the confusing moderation systems at both case study sites. Furthermore it would be interesting to explore how a change of editor at both newspapers has impacted on attitudes towards Web 2.0 and audience participation.

The two case studies in this research have highlighted changes in journalism but also where the status quo is being maintained. As the industry goes through rapid technological transformation it is important for research to keep abreast of the impacts on journalism and journalists through continual analysis. This PhD thesis therefore aims to add to the emerging patterns of case study research in the field of news and audience participation whilst also acknowledging that it is only the beginning of further, recurrent research.

13.5 Use of methodologies

This thesis has used a combination of traditional qualitative and quantitative methods (interview, questionnaire, observation) whilst also developing new techniques to construct a viable content analysis. The rationalisation for the use of these methods was set out in Chapters 3 and 4 and was further substantiated by the volume and richness of data examined in Chapters 6 to 12. Certainly the length of this PhD thesis is in part due to the quantity and quality of data that the methods extracted. That being said the researcher recognises that the methods had limitations in their construction and utilisation particularly as both were carried out by one individual, allowing for a greater risk of subjectivity. As discussed in section 13.4 further comparative or replication case studies would validate both the analysis and the methodological approaches. It would also be useful to incorporate software to record and compare the ages, length of service and job title of journalists in greater depth so more comparisons could be made across different newspaper titles, in particular to discover whether the age-related findings of Robinson (2010) are contradicted at other case studies.

The method of data collection that requires most reflection is the content analysis of social media networks Twitter and Facebook, due to their unique nature. Although all content analysis methods are largely original in nature as they depend on many variables, they are usually based on similar research and can follow existing patterns, with the use of familiar software. However as considered at length in Chapter 4, for this thesis the researcher had to construct a coding system for a field of research that was largely untapped. Twitter and Facebook are in their infancy in research terms and as such there was little material published which used content analysis as a method for examining them. Indeed the researcher only found relevant Twitter-related research by searching on Twitter itself, rather than through traditional means. The problem of a lack of related research was compounded by the fact that Twitter and Facebook are constantly evolving websites which introduce new layouts, tools and navigations procedures several times a year and they contain live information which is updated in real time. It was therefore difficult to devise a content analysis for two websites that never remained static in content or design. Furthermore the software available to capture content on both websites was not appropriate to this study as it focused on capturing trends based on key words rather than entire individual profiles. The researcher therefore had to construct a unique coding category and unique way of capturing the material, both of which are outlined in Chapter 4, sections 4.5.2 and 4.5.3. The advantage of this approach meant that the content analysis could be tailored to the research questions and literature review of this study and could set a template for other researchers looking to analyse similar content as this field of research develops.

The methods designed in this PhD thesis have already made an impact on further research and are currently being developed by academics at The University of Sunderland. A paper based on Chapter 11 of this thesis was presented at the MeCSSA 2012 conference (Canter, 2012), where it won the SAGE Convergence prize (University of Bedfordshire, 2012) and attracted the interest of scholars researching Twitter, disintermediation and the changing role of the sports journalist (Hall, 2012). Working with his colleague John Price, Lee Hall aims to develop a content analysis to capture the interaction on Twitter between users and journalists, and between users and football clubs and users and football players (personal communication, May 15, 2012). The content analysis will use the coding categories set out in this thesis as a starting point, in particular the different types of interaction that can happen on Twitter classified as Traditional, Informal and Personal in this study, as defined in Chapter 4.

13.6 Plea for pragmatic engagement

Local journalism is facing an uncertain future following the “crisis” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee,2009, p.3) brought about by increased competition for people’s media consumption and advertising revenues. Local newspapers in particular are “in the jaws of an extraordinary pincer movement of structural change and economic downturn...with potentially alarming ramifications for local democracy and the generation of news” (Fowler, 2011, p.22). Chapter 1, together with section 13.2 of this chapter, have outlined efforts being made by governmental and charitable bodies to secure the future of local news to make sure journalists are able to continue to provide a public service to local communities.

Results of this research would suggest that big media companies such as Northcliffe Media and Newsquest are failing to fully meet the participatory needs of their local audiences and their dominance in the market place means they are able to drown out other voices rather than facilitate wider democratic engagements. Therefore if there is to be anything that can be described as local journalism in the near future it needs to come through reflective engagement with audiences and journalists gained through academic research such as this thesis.

Furthermore the future of local journalism depends not only on research but on collaboration between academics, journalism educators and practitioners. As recent research by Harcup (2011) illustrates teaching and research influence each other continually and research into journalism is vital for society and democracy. The same study also identifies that research “could be beneficial to media industries” (p.29). This notion is not a new one and even before the introduction of the web Bourdieu strongly advocated the role of academics in the public sphere (Webb *et al*, 2006). Furthermore the French sociologist called upon journalism to give social scientists, critical writers and artists a greater voice to strengthen the deliberative ideal of reasoned discourse.

This thesis therefore makes a plea for pragmatic engagement between journalists, researchers and educators to enable journalism programmes to equip students with the appropriate skills needed to enter digital, multi-platform news rooms. As Price *et al* (2012) also argue the confusion amongst journalists over the accepted use of social media networks could be reduced with clearer guidance and education in how to use these platforms. However it is impossible to teach digital journalism theory and practice unless educators have a clear, contemporaneous understanding of what is happening in local news rooms. Only by being informed by research can journalism educators have a greater understanding of what is happening in such a disparate industry. The benefits of such research would be twofold; firstly to inform journalists and the industry on emerging patterns, best practice and audience expectations and secondly to feed this information into journalism education so when students enter the marketplace they are leading the industry rather than following it.

The role of academics can help to break down barriers between the ultimate autonomy that journalists seek according to Bourdieu (2005) and the normative role Habermas (1989) wishes journalism to play in the public sphere. Indeed the Guardian Media Group, which operates the Guardian newspaper and website, is already making strides in this field having worked with the University of Cardiff, City University and London School of Economics on numerous applied research projects. The core purpose of the Guardian Media Group is to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian (GMG, 2012) which in turn strengthens its cultural capital and moves its position towards Bourdieu’s (2005) autonomous pole in the journalistic field. However despite this autonomy the Guardian Media Group works collaboratively with academics and the public, to create the open source journalism referred to above in section 13.3. It is therefore possible for journalists to be autonomous, overcome structural constraints and to facilitate the public sphere simultaneously, thus enabling them to partially dissolve professional boundaries - however this is currently the exception rather than the rule.

Research such as this thesis also has a role to play by not only highlighting the good and bad practices of the journalistic field but by informing journalism of the future. Collaborative and participatory journalism has the power to engage audiences and increase democratic involvement amongst audiences. Indeed a greater focus on, and development of, collaborative journalism for its democratic value could help journalism address its current malaise which is weighted far too heavily on economic capital, the problems of which have come to the forefront of British consciousness via the 2012 Leveson Inquiry into press ethics. But in order for journalists to move closer to the field of cultural capital and gain greater integrity and reputation, they need to “open the door to civil society” (Benson, 2009, p.189). Finally, not only do journalists need to be less economically motivated but they also need to approach audience participation with less scepticism.

Despite its normative tones this research does not hail Web 2.0 as the panacea of collaborative journalism, but prefers to view it as a useful tool with great democratic potential when placed in the correct hands. Journalists are the ultimate driving force in this field and they have to overcome structural constraints, cultural traditions and seemingly passive audiences to create a truly collaborative model of journalism.

**Appendices**

Appendix 1a

**eSurveryPro questionnaire**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **1. Are you male or female?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Male | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark61.gif | 61.15% | 181 | | |  | | --- | | Female | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light39.gif | 38.85% | 115 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **2. How old are you?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | 15-20 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark1.gif | 1.35% | 4 | | |  | | --- | | 21-30 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light13.gif | 12.84% | 38 | | |  | | --- | | 31-40 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark17.gif | 16.89% | 50 | | |  | | --- | | 41-50 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light28.gif | 28.04% | 83 | | |  | | --- | | 51-60 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark15.gif | 15.20% | 45 | | |  | | --- | | 60+ | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light26.gif | 25.68% | 76 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **3. Where do you live?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Bournemouth | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark43.gif | 42.91% | 127 | | |  | | --- | | Outside Bournemouth but within Dorset | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light44.gif | 43.92% | 130 | | |  | | --- | | Outside Dorset but within the South West | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark1.gif | 1.35% | 4 | | |  | | --- | | Outside the South West but in the UK | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light5.gif | 5.41% | 16 | | |  | | --- | | Outside the UK | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark6.gif | 6.42% | 19 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **4. What is your annual income?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | £0-9,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark14.gif | 13.85% | 41 | | |  | | --- | | £10,000-19,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light25.gif | 25.34% | 75 | | |  | | --- | | £20,000-29,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark27.gif | 27.36% | 81 | | |  | | --- | | £30,000-39,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light17.gif | 16.89% | 50 | | |  | | --- | | £40,000-59,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark13.gif | 12.84% | 38 | | |  | | --- | | £60,000-99,999 | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light2.gif | 2.03% | 6 | | |  | | --- | | £100+ | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark2.gif | 1.69% | 5 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **5. What level are you educated to?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | No formal qualifications | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark10.gif | 10.14% | 30 | | |  | | --- | | GCSE or equivalent | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light26.gif | 26.35% | 78 | | |  | | --- | | A Level or equivalent | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark23.gif | 23.31% | 69 | | |  | | --- | | Undergraduate degree | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light28.gif | 27.70% | 82 | | |  | | --- | | Postgraduate degree | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark12.gif | 12.50% | 37 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **6. How often do you visit the Bournemouth Echo website and/or its social media websites (ie Facebook, Flickr,Twitter, blogs) and/or receive email/RSS alerts from the newspaper?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Every day | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark89.gif | 89.19% | 264 | | |  | | --- | | Every week | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light9.gif | 9.12% | 27 | | |  | | --- | | Every month | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark1.gif | 0.68% | 2 | | |  | | --- | | Every 2 to 6 months | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light1.gif | 0.68% | 2 | | |  | | --- | | Never | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark0.gif | 0.34% | 1 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***296*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***28*** | | |
|  |
| |  | | --- | | **Page 3. Changes in news consumption** | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **7. Which of the following statements best describes you?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | I have only ever visited the Bournemouth Echo online (website and/or social media links such as Facebook, Flickr,Twitter, blogs etc.) and never read the newspaper | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark22.gif | 22.34% | 63 | | |  | | --- | | I previously read the Bournemouth Echo print newspaper but now only visit the Bournemouth Echo online | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light50.gif | 50.35% | 142 | | |  | | --- | | I visit the Bournemouth online and read the Bournemouth Echo print newspaper | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark27.gif | 27.30% | 77 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***282*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***42*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **8. Before the Bournemouth Echo had multimedia content (videos, slideshows, comments on stories) did you do any of the following? (tick all that are relevant)** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Ring the newsroom with a story | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark7.gif | 7.00% | 21 | | |  | | --- | | Ring the newsroom with a photo or video | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light2.gif | 2.33% | 7 | | |  | | --- | | Write to the letters page | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark12.gif | 12.33% | 37 | | |  | | --- | | Ring the newsroom to complain about a story | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light2.gif | 1.67% | 5 | | |  | | --- | | None of these | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark77.gif | 76.67% | 230 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***282*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***42*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **9. Do you prefer the Bournemouth Echo website to the print newspaper?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Yes | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark60.gif | 59.57% | 168 | | |  | | --- | | No | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light6.gif | 6.38% | 18 | | |  | | --- | | I like them both equally | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark28.gif | 27.66% | 78 | | |  | | --- | | Don't know | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light6.gif | 6.38% | 18 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***282*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***42*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **10. If you prefer the website, please indicate the reasons why (tick all that are relevant)** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | It is convenient | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark44.gif | 43.54% | 182 | | |  | | --- | | It has better content | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light4.gif | 4.07% | 17 | | |  | | --- | | I like the multimedia content (videos, slideshows, graphics etc.) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark11.gif | 11.48% | 48 | | |  | | --- | | I like being able to interact by leaving comments, sending in stories/video/photos etc | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light16.gif | 16.03% | 67 | | |  | | --- | | I like being able to interact with other readers | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark9.gif | 9.09% | 38 | | |  | | --- | | I like being able to interact with the journalists | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light6.gif | 5.74% | 24 | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15144&surveyID=123162) | Other (Specify) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark10.gif | 10.05% | 42 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***202*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***122*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **11. Indicate your top three reasons for visiting the Bournemouth**  **Echo website** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | To read the stories (news, features, sport, entertainment etc.) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark44.gif | 44.43% | 275 | | |  | | --- | | To read blogs | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light7.gif | 7.11% | 44 | | |  | | --- | | To look at photos and video content | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark13.gif | 12.92% | 80 | | |  | | --- | | To look at the advertisements | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light4.gif | 3.55% | 22 | | |  | | --- | | I like adding comments to stories | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark11.gif | 10.50% | 65 | | |  | | --- | | I like sending in my stories, photographs, video clips | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light1.gif | 1.29% | 8 | | |  | | --- | | To interact with other readers | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark5.gif | 4.52% | 28 | | |  | | --- | | To interact with journalists | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light1.gif | 1.45% | 9 | | |  | | --- | | No other reason | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark9.gif | 9.37% | 58 | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15145&surveyID=123162) | Other (Specify) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light5.gif | 4.85% | 30 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***282*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***42*** | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **12. Rank each of these statements according to how important they are to you** | | | | | | | |  | extremely important | Important | fairly important | not very important | not important | Number of Respondents | | I expect the Bournemouth Echo online to have 24 hour rolling news | 40% (115) | 35% (99) | 14% (40) | 7% (21) | 2% (7) | 282 | | I expect to be able to comment on Bournemouth Echo stories | 19% (55) | 29% (83) | 19% (54) | 20% (58) | 11% (32) | 282 | | I expect the Bournemouth Echo online to publish reader stories, photos, videos | 14% (41) | 28% (80) | 28% (81) | 23% (65) | 5% (15) | 282 | | I expect to be able to access the Bournemouth Echo online via my mobile phone / hand held device | 19% (54) | 13% (39) | 13% (38) | 26% (74) | 27% (77) | 282 | | I expect to be able to access the Bournemouth Echo online from any location in the world | 31% (89) | 25% (72) | 17% (49) | 14% (41) | 10% (31) | 282 | | ***Number of Respondents*** | | | | | | ***282*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | | | | ***42*** | | |
|  |
| |  | | --- | | **Page 4. Online participation** | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **13. How often do you do any of the following activities?** | | | | | | | |  | Every day | Every week | Every month | Every 2 to 6 months | Never | Number of Respondents | | Read Bournemouth Echo tweets on Twitter | 9% (25) | 3% (10) | 1% (4) | 1% (4) | 84% (231) | 274 | | Read Bournemouth Echo updates on Facebook | 4% (13) | 2% (7) | 1% (3) | 1% (4) | 90% (247) | 274 | | View Bournemouth Echo YouTube channel | 0% (2) | 1% (4) | 2% (7) | 5% (15) | 89% (246) | 274 | | View Bournemouth Echo photo galleries on Flickr | 2% (6) | 3% (9) | 9% (25) | 15% (43) | 69% (191) | 274 | | Read stories on the Bournemouth Echo website | 79% (219) | 14% (41) | 1% (3) | 1% (3) | 2% (8) | 274 | | Read Bournemouth Echo email newsletters (after signing up for them) | 8% (22) | 3% (10) | 2% (6) | 0% (1) | 85% (235) | 274 | | Read Bournemouth Echo RSS feeds (after signing up for them) | 9% (26) | 2% (7) | 1% (3) | 0% (2) | 86% (236) | 274 | | ***Number of Respondents*** | | | | | | ***274*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | | | | ***50*** | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **14. How often do you participate in any of the following?** | | | | | | | |  | Every day | Every week | Every month | Every 2 to 6 months | Never | Number of Respondents | | Comment on Bournemouth Echo website stories/blogs | 4% (11) | 16% (45) | 9% (27) | 19% (53) | 50% (138) | 274 | | Comment on Bournemouth Echo updates on Facebook | 0% (2) | 3% (9) | 0% (1) | 2% (7) | 93% (255) | 274 | | Resond to Bournemouth Echo tweets on Twitter | 0% (1) | 4% (11) | 3% (9) | 2% (7) | 89% (246) | 274 | | Submit photos to Bournemouth Echo Flickr groups | 0% (0) | 0% (2) | 1% (3) | 3% (10) | 94% (259) | 274 | | Send photos to the Bournemouth Echo newspaper or website | 0% (0) | 0% (1) | 2% (6) | 10% (30) | 86% (237) | 274 | | Send video to the Bournemouth Echo newspaper or website | 0% (0) | 0% (1) | 0% (0) | 2% (7) | 97% (266) | 274 | | Send stories to the Bournemouth Echo newspaper or website | 0% (1) | 0% (2) | 2% (6) | 10% (30) | 85% (235) | 274 | | Email journalists | 0% (0) | 0% (2) | 4% (13) | 15% (43) | 78% (216) | 274 | | Take part in a Q&A session on the Bournemouth Echo website | 0% (0) | 2% (6) | 3% (9) | 18% (52) | 75% (207) | 274 | | ***Number of Respondents*** | | | | | | ***274*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | | | | ***50*** | | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **15. How often do you do any of the following sharing activities?** | | | | | | | |  | Everyday | Every week | Every month | Every 2 to 6 months | Never | Number of Respondents | | Share content from the website or email it to a friend | 4% (13) | 14% (39) | 15% (42) | 26% (72) | 39% (108) | 274 | | Retweet a Bournemouth Echo tweet on Twitter | 1% (3) | 2% (8) | 5% (14) | 1% (4) | 89% (245) | 274 | | Link to a Bournemouth Echo story from another website such as Facebook, Flickr or personal blog | 0% (2) | 4% (11) | 8% (24) | 10% (28) | 76% (209) | 274 | | ***Number of Respondents*** | | | | | | ***274*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | | | | ***50*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **16. Which sections of the Bournemouth Echo online are you most likely to participate in or share with others? (i.e not just read/view)** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | News | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark54.gif | 54.36% | 243 | | |  | | --- | | Sport | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light13.gif | 13.20% | 59 | | |  | | --- | | Entertainment | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark10.gif | 10.07% | 45 | | |  | | --- | | Community | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light18.gif | 18.12% | 81 | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15150&surveyID=123162) | Other (Specify) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark4.gif | 4.25% | 19 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***274*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***50*** | | |
|  |
| |  | | --- | | **Page 5. Motivation and value** | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **17. What motivates you to participate in the Bournemouth Echo online? (other than reading/viewing the website and social media pages) Tick all that are relevant.** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | I don't participate, I only read/view the Bournemouth Echo online | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark29.gif | 29.13% | 141 | | |  | | --- | | It makes me feel part of the newspaper | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light7.gif | 6.61% | 32 | | |  | | --- | | I get satisfaction from seeing my stories/photos/videos in the newspaper/website | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark4.gif | 3.51% | 17 | | |  | | --- | | I like to interact with the journalists | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light3.gif | 3.10% | 15 | | |  | | --- | | I like to interact with other readers | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark10.gif | 10.33% | 50 | | |  | | --- | | I like to share news with friends | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light5.gif | 5.37% | 26 | | |  | | --- | | It makes me feel more up to date with the news | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark12.gif | 11.98% | 58 | | |  | | --- | | I like to be able to have my own say | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light16.gif | 16.32% | 79 | | |  | | --- | | I find it fun and entertaining | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark8.gif | 8.26% | 40 | | |  | | --- | | It helps me to make sense of complex topics | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light3.gif | 3.31% | 16 | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15151&surveyID=123162) | Other (Specify) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark2.gif | 2.07% | 10 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***251*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***73*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **18. Tick each of the statements that apply. Participation (other than just reading/viewing content)...** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Not relevant as I don't participate | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark37.gif | 36.75% | 140 | | |  | | --- | | Gives me a sense of community | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light11.gif | 11.29% | 43 | | |  | | --- | | Enables me to share information and news with others | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark14.gif | 14.17% | 54 | | |  | | --- | | Enables me to take part in moral, ethical or political debates | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light18.gif | 18.11% | 69 | | |  | | --- | | Empowers me to take further action (outside the Bournemouth Echo) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark6.gif | 6.30% | 24 | | |  | | --- | | Helps me to vent my anger / dissatisfaction | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light13.gif | 13.39% | 51 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***251*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***73*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **19. Which one of these reasons do you most visit the Bournemouth Echo online for?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Its educational value (to learn about topical debates) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark2.gif | 2.39% | 6 | | |  | | --- | | Its informational value (to gain local news and information) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light91.gif | 91.24% | 229 | | |  | | --- | | Its entertainment value (to pass the time and have fun) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark3.gif | 3.19% | 8 | | |  | | --- | | Its social value (to have something to talk about with friends/family) | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light3.gif | 3.19% | 8 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***251*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***73*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **20. Which one of the following words describes comments on stories most accurately?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Thought-provoking | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark16.gif | 15.94% | 40 | | |  | | --- | | Informative | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light46.gif | 45.82% | 115 | | |  | | --- | | Entertaining | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark20.gif | 19.92% | 50 | | |  | | --- | | Irrelevant | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light12.gif | 11.95% | 30 | | |  | | --- | | Abusive | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark6.gif | 6.37% | 16 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***251*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***73*** | | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **21. Do you think your participation (other than reading/viewing content) adds value to the newspaper online? And if so, how?** | | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15155&surveyID=123162) | ***Number of Respondents*** | | 251 | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | 73 | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **22. Do you think your participation is valued by the Bournemouth Echo and its staff?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Yes | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark15.gif | 14.74% | 37 | | |  | | --- | | No | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light8.gif | 7.97% | 20 | | |  | | --- | | Don't know | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark39.gif | 39.04% | 98 | | |  | | --- | | Not relevant as I don't participate | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light38.gif | 38.25% | 96 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***251*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***73*** | | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **23. Do you think taking part in the Bournemouth Echo online has an impact on the content of the Bournemouth Echo printed newspaper? If so, how?** | | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15157&surveyID=123162) | ***Number of Respondents*** | | 251 | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | 73 | | |
|  |
| |  | | --- | | **Page 6. Collaborative journalism** | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **24. Where do you think a major local news story is most likely to break first? (tick one)** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Social media website like Twitter | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark16.gif | 15.88% | 37 | | |  | | --- | | Bournemouth Echo social media link | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light3.gif | 3.00% | 7 | | |  | | --- | | Bournemouth Echo website | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark41.gif | 40.77% | 95 | | |  | | --- | | Bournemouth Echo newspaper | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light5.gif | 5.15% | 12 | | |  | | --- | | Other newspaper | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark1.gif | 0.86% | 2 | | |  | | --- | | TV | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light11.gif | 11.16% | 26 | | |  | | --- | | Radio | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark19.gif | 18.88% | 44 | | |  | | --- | | Other website | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light4.gif | 4.29% | 10 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***233*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***91*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **25. Which one of the following statements do you most agree with? (tick one)** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Most news stories online originate from outside the mainstream media | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark31.gif | 31.33% | 73 | | |  | | --- | | Readers online give more depth to news stories via comments, photos and videos | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light19.gif | 19.31% | 45 | | |  | | --- | | Readers online help to raise the profile of new stories | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark13.gif | 13.30% | 31 | | |  | | --- | | Readers online keep news stories running for longer | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light14.gif | 13.73% | 32 | | |  | | --- | | Readers have no influence over news stories online | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark22.gif | 22.32% | 52 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***233*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***91*** | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **26. To what extent do you think Bournemouth Echo journalists work with their online audiences to create news content?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Not at all | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark9.gif | 9.44% | 22 | | |  | | --- | | Not much | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light33.gif | 32.62% | 76 | | |  | | --- | | Not much but it is improving | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark30.gif | 30.04% | 70 | | |  | | --- | | Quite a lot | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light24.gif | 24.46% | 57 | | |  | | --- | | A lot | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark3.gif | 3.43% | 8 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***233*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***91*** | | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **27. What would improve audience participation on the Bournemouth Echo website and/or its social media pages (Facebook, Flickr,Twitter, blogs etc.)?** | | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15161&surveyID=123162) | ***Number of Respondents*** | | 233 | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | 91 | | | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **28. Would you personally participate more often if those improvements were made?** | | % of  Respondents | Number of  Respondents | | |  | | --- | | Yes | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark26.gif | 25.75% | 60 | | |  | | --- | | No | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/light33.gif | 32.62% | 76 | | |  | | --- | | Maybe | | http://www.esurveyspro.com/Temp/dark42.gif | 41.63% | 97 | | ***Number of respondents*** | | | ***233*** | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | | | ***91*** | | | |  |  | | --- | --- | | **29. Are there any personal factors that would make you participate more in the Bournemouth Echo website? (For example: more time, better broadband connection)** | | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | [Details](http://www.esurveyspro.com/SummaryReportDetail.aspx?questionID=15163&surveyID=123162) | ***Number of Respondents*** | | 180 | | ***Number of respondents who skipped this question*** | 144 | | |

Question 30 asked respondents if they would take part in an interview and to leave a contact telephone number or email address.

Appendix 1b

**Questionnaire cover page**

This anonymous questionnaire is for the purpose of a research project studying local newspapers online and is being undertaken with the permission of the Leicester Mercury / Bournemouth Daily Echo. The data will be stored securely and confidentiality is guaranteed. The anonymous results will be made public in a report in 2012. You may withdraw your response at any time. For questions and complaints contact Lily Canter via email: jop09lrc@sheffield.ac.uk   
  
IN ORDER TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR THIS QUESTIONNAIRE YOU MUST VISIT THE LEICESTER MERCURY / BOURNEMOUTH DAILY ECHO WEBSITE OR RECEIVE ITS UPDATES VIA EMAIL / RSS FEEDS OR VISIT ITS SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES SUCH AS TWITTER, YOUTUBE, FACEBOOK OR BLOGS.  
  
NB: If a question refers to the 'Leicester Mercury / Bournemouth Daily Echo online' it includes thisisleicestershire.co.uk/bournemouthecho.co.uk and all its social media networks such as Twitter, YouTube and blogs.  
  
THE QUESTIONNAIRE IS 5 PAGES LONG AND WILL TAKE APPROX 5 to 10 MINUTES TO COMPLETE   
  
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your opinions are very important to this research.

Appendix 1c

**Reader consent example**

[Reader email address here]

CONSENT  
  
I *(reader fills in name here*) agree to the following:  
  
1. I have read the attached information sheet and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project  
  
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving reason and without there being negative consequences. In this instance I can contact Lily Canter on 07714 595970 begin\_of\_the\_skype\_highlightingend\_of\_the\_skype\_highlighting. In addition should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions I am free to decline.  
  
3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.  
  
4. I give permission for Lily Canter to have access to my anonymised and audio recorded responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research material and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report that results from the research.  
  
5. I agree for my participation to be recorded on an audio device over the telephone.  
  
6. I agreed for the data collected to be used in future research.  
  
7. I agree to take part in the research project.

Appendix 2a

**Interview guide and checklist**

*Summary*

1. General information:
2. description of research and its publication
3. significance/purpose of interviews
4. format of interview (timings, questions, openness) / recording
5. consent/confidentiality
6. any questions?
7. Read information sheet
8. Consent form
9. Questions
10. Conclusion: valuable information, thanks, what happens next, any questions?

*Question guide*

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Name:

Current job title:

Age:

How long an employee here:

How long a journalist:

What is your understanding of the term ‘interaction’ and ‘participation’

CHANGE IN NATURE OF INTERACTION

1. How has the internet changed interaction between newspapers and readers?

-probe for elaboration

-probe for examples

-probe for significance

1. Who is interacting? How? How many? Comparison to paper?

MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

1. Do you think newspaper publishers, journalists and readers have different reasons for wanting to increase interaction between newspapers and readers?

Can you explain the motivation for each?

1. Are they any barriers to increasing interaction?
2. Why do you think readers like to participate? (**status**, to connect, to **entertain**, to **inform**, be creative, satisfaction, sense making, **social/sharing**)

VALUE OF PARTICIPATION

1. Is reader participation valuable?

-Why/why not?

-How?

-For whom?

1. On the whole would you say readers participate for educational, informative, entertaining or social reasons?

GATEKEEPING ROLE

1. How has journalists’ control over the news changed with the widespread use of the internet?

1. What is the role of a journalist when anyone can be a global publisher? (analyser, context provider, human algorithm, moderator, shape conversations)

COLLABORATION

1. Can you think of an example of a story where you/ your colleagues have collaborated closely with the public?
2. How common is this collaboration?
3. With this in mind do you think journalism is becoming more collaborative?
4. Will there always be a role for journalists?

**ANY THING MORE WOULD LIKE TO ADD**

CHECKLIST

**Mutual understanding by summarising comments**

**Raise contradictions**

**Remember probes**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| INTERACTION  Breaking news |  |
| Social media |  |
| UGC |  |
| Email |  |
| Multimedia |  |
| Expectations |  |
| Rolling news / breaking news |  |
| Mobile devices / personalisation |  |
| Their say |  |
| How many / what extent want to interact |  |
| How job different / or not |  |
| Reluctance to change |  |
| MOTIVATION  Competition |  |
| Branding |  |
| Cheap |  |
| Commercial |  |
| Source for stories |  |
| Empowering citizens / feel empowered |  |
| Community engagement |  |
| Consumers or citizens |  |
| Easier |  |
| Resources |  |
| VALUE  Debate  Scrutiny  Community  Social  Personal interest  Abusive |  |
| GATEKEEPING  What sets you apart |  |
| Threat |  |
| Undermine |  |
| Improving |  |
| Reluctant to relinquish control |  |
| How much control needed |  |

Appendix 2b

**Information sheet**

RESEARCH PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

*You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.*

**Title:** Web 2.0 and the changing mediated relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their audiences

**Researcher:** Lily Canter, PhD student at The University of Sheffield

**Description:** A study to investigate how the internet is changing the relationship between journalists and readers. It will explore how readers/audiences/internet users are participating in the news process and what motivates them to participate. It will also examine why journalists encourage/discourage participation and how it affects their job and control over news content. The project is due to take place over a six month period from September 2010 to February 2011 but your individual participation should take no longer than 15 - 45 minutes.

**Process:** The research involves a case study of two local British newspapers. At each newspaper there will be a questionnaire of internet users, interviews with readers, interviews with journalists, news room observation and an analysis of the newspaper websites and social media networks.

**Taking part:** It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason. If you are taking part in an interview you will be asked to sign a consent form.

**Confidentiality:** All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you sign a consent form to the contrary specifying that you wish to be identified.

**Audio recording:** If you are taking part in an interview the audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

**Results:** The results of the project will be published in a PhD thesis and be available online.

**Ethics:** This project has been ethically approved via The University of Sheffield Journalism Studies department’s ethics review procedure.

**Complaints and contact:** Any complaint or enquiries should be directed to the principal investigator Lily Canter. She can be contacted on 07714 595970 or via email: [jop09lrc@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jop09lrc@sheffield.ac.uk)

*Thank you for participating. Your help with this project is extremely valuable.*

Appendix 2c

**Journalist consent form**

#### Journalist Participant Consent Form

|  |
| --- |
| Title of Research Project: Web 2.0 and the changing mediated relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their audiences.  Name of Researcher: Lily Canter  Participant Identification Number for this project: Please initial box   1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated *[insert date]* explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative   consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or  questions, I am free to decline. *In this instance I will contact Lily Canter on 07714 595970.*   1. PLEASE TICK ONE OF THE THREE FOLLOWING BOXES ONLY:   I give permission for my **name and job title** only to be included in the report so that I am  identifiable.  I give permission for my **job title** only to be included in the report and  understand that this may make me identifiable.  I wish that my responses will be kept strictly **confidential and anonymous**. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised and audio recorded responses.  I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be  identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.   1. I agree for my participation to be recorded on an audio device   5. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research  6. I agree to take part in the above research project.  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of Participant Date Signature  (*or legal representative*)  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Lead Researcher Date Signature  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*  Copies:  *Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project’s main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.* |

Appendix 2d

**Journalist interview analysis grid**

Participant details

Participation number:

Sex:

Age:

Job title:

Management (yes/no):

Newspaper:

Anonymity status:

Analysis grid

Red categories are hierarchal – only select one (most dominant)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1a. Changed nature of interaction** |  | **1b. Motivation for change**  (journalist/readers) |  |
| Significant increase in active audiences |  | For journalists:  To increase profits |  |
| Increase in active audiences but still the minority |  | To keep up with competition |  |
| No increase in active audiences |  | To create better stories |  |
|  |  | To empower citizens |  |
| TICK ALL THAT APPLY: |  |  |  |
| Interaction more immediate |  | For readers:  To harness democratic participation |  |
| Interaction more global |  | To inform / be informed |  |
| Interaction the same but different tools |  | To share experiences |  |
| Interactive audience more diverse |  | For entertainment |  |
| Audience expect interaction |  | To gain status |  |
| **Quote:** |  | **Quote:** |  |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2a. Nature of reader interaction** |  | **2b. Value of interaction**  (journalists/readers) |  |
| Reporting on an assigned story |  | For journalists: |  |
| Commenting on stories |  | Attracts new audiences |  |
| Communicating via social media |  | Creates brand loyalty |  |
| Sending in photos |  | Promotes brand |  |
| Sending in videos |  | Useful resource/labour |  |
| Sending in text (press releases or completed stories) |  | Useful source (information, ideas, material, research) |  |
| Fact checking |  | Creates follow-up stories |  |
| Emailing letters |  | Public gauge / feedback |  |
| Incomplete tip offs / story ideas |  | Holds journalists accountable |  |
|  |  | Damages the brand |  |
|  |  | Irrelevant / no value |  |
|  |  | For readers: |  |
|  |  | Enables political engagement |  |
|  |  | Enables moral/ethical debate |  |
|  |  | Enables readers to hold journalists accountable |  |
|  |  | Enables opinions to be heard |  |
|  |  | Enables readers to obtain information |  |
|  |  | Creates a sense of community |  |
|  |  | Entertainment value |  |
|  |  | Status value |  |
|  |  | Venting /abusive / no value |  |
| **Quote:** |  | **Quote:** |  |
| **3. Impact on gatekeeping role** |  | **4. To what extent collaborative journalism** |  |
| TRADITIONAL ROLE  Journalist role is redundant |  |  |  |
| Journalist role is under threat / undermined by Web 2.0 |  |  |  |
| Journalist role is adapting |  |  |  |
| Journalist role is unchanged |  |  |  |
| MODERN ROLE |  |  |  |
| Shape conversations |  |  |  |
| Amplify voices |  |  |  |
| Verify information |  |  |  |
| Other |  |  |  |
| ROLE OF MODERATION |  |  |  |
| UGC/reader content must be moderated by journalists | yes/no |  |  |
| UGC/reader content should be marked up as such | yes/no |  |  |
| DISTINGUISHING FACTORS / PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS |  |  |  |
| Training / experience |  |  |  |
| Quality |  |  |  |
| Objectivity |  |  |  |
| Public trust |  |  |  |
| Accountability |  |  |  |
| Reliability / accuracy |  |  |  |
| Access / resources |  |  |  |
| ATTITUDES |  |  |  |
| Journalist reluctance to relinquish control to readers | yes/no |  |  |
| **Quote:** |  | **Quote:** |  |

Appendix 3

**Observation guide**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date  Time  Subject Location | Observations: verbal and non-verbal  Comments, conversations, actions, environment (physical/social) | Reflections  Observer influence, observer thoughts | Subject clarification | Subject validation |
|  |  |  |  |  |

OBSERVATION THEMES

Demand for internet

Competition

Broad consumer content

Consumers not citizens

Commercial imperatives

Personal vs public

Same job different tools

Professionalism

News as social

Expectation

Role of journalist

Losing control

Value of participation

Multiple unheard voices

Citizen empowerment

Collective intelligence

Collaboration

Appendix 4

**Participant codes for journalists**

(which take into consideration anonymity requests)

LEICESTER MERCURY

L1 Reporter

L2 Jason Senior, picture editor

L3 Keith Perch, editor

L4 Laura Elvin, trainee reporter

L5 Alison Curtis, senior reporter / news desk assistant

L6 Alex Dawson, features editor

L7 Lee Marlow, feature writer

L8 Angela Bewick, web editor

L9 Martin Crowson, chief rugby correspondent

L10 David MacLean, politics correspondent

L11 Reporter

L12 Reporter

L13 Richard Bettsworth, deputy editor

L14 Mark Charlton, assistant editor / Citizens' Eye co-ordinator

L15 Russell Taylerson-Whyte, feature writer

L16 Rob Tanner, chief football correspondent

L17 Reporter

L18 Peter Warzynski, senior reporter

L19 Ian Griffin, business editor

BOURNEMOUTH DAILY ECHO

B1 Sam Shepherd, digital projects co-ordinator

B2 Reporter

B3 Reporter

B4 Chris Parnell, chief sub editor

B5 Web team member

B6 Web team member

B7 Neal Butterworth, editor

B8 Andy Martin, head of multimedia and content

B9 Steve Smith, senior reporter

B10 Reporter

B11Feature writer

B12 Sports reporter

B13 Ed Perkins, deputy editor

B14 Sports reporter

B15 Reporter

B16 Reporter

B17 Feature writer

B18 Reporter

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