

QUT Digital Repository:  
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Flew, Terry and Lenffer, Heidi Anna-Maria and McClean, Georgie (2008) *User-generated content and the future of public broadcasting : a case study of the Special Broadcasting Service*. In: *Media, Communication and Public Speech*, 2008 Conference of the Centre for Media and Communications Law, 20-21 November 2008, University of Melbourne. ( Unpublished )

© Copyright 2008 [please consult the authors]

***User-generated content and the future of public broadcasting:  
a case study of the Special Broadcasting Service***

Terry Flew (QUT), Heidi Lenffer (QUT/SBS) and Georgie McClean (SBS)

**Paper presented to 'Media, Communication and Public Speech', 2008  
Conference of the Centre for Media and Communications Law, University of  
Melbourne, 20-21 November, 2008**

*New media formats that engage audiences as producers as well as consumers/users of content are transforming media worldwide, and present particular challenges for public broadcasters as they open up new questions about both the mandated responsibilities of the broadcaster and their responsiveness to new community expectations and needs. This paper considers how the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has been responding to the challenge of user-created content, and adapting to the new environment of participatory media culture. It draws upon an action research framework and ethnographic research into media organizations, and considers SBS's responses alongside the emergence of citizen journalism in Australia.*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been seeing a transformation from the one-to-many mass communications models that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards various manifestations of participatory media culture, enabled by the Internet and networked digital media technologies, and promoting not only niche media but do-it-yourself (DIY) and do-it-with-others (DIWO) social media (Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2008). In this rapidly changing socio-technical context, there is a blurring of lines of authority and information flow between producers and consumers of media, leading to the rise of what Bruns (2008) has termed the *produser*, or the media user that publishes and disseminates digital content as well as consuming media. In an environment where, as Charles Leadbeater has argued, 'the irresistible force of collaborative mass innovation meets the immovable force of entrenched corporate organisation' (Leadbeater 2008: ...), broadcasters are clearly among the large organisations facing

the challenge of how to respond to or resist the bottom-up pressures and new challenges associated with the rise of collaborative social production and user-generated content (UGC) (c.f. Benkler 2006).

In a related but different vein, the ideological authority of journalists as the media professionals best able to interpret social reality and provide a gatekeeping function over the flow of informational content on behalf of a passive public. What NYU Professor Jay Rosen refers to as 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen 2008) are increasingly using social media, blogs, and DIY publishing to develop more news practices as well as conversations around news, that challenge the entrenched division of labour between producers and consumers of news and the associated status of the journalist as the sole "expert" or definer of "reality" (Atton 2004: 41). Various referred to as citizen journalism or participatory journalism, these new bottom-up news practices have been defined by Bowman and Willis as 'citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information ... to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires' (Bowman and Willis 2003: 9), and by Chris Atton as news practices which 'invert the "hierarchy of access" to the news by explicitly foregrounding the viewpoints of ... citizens whose visibility in the mainstream media tends to be obscured by the presence of elite groups and individuals' (Atton 2004: 40).

A research team involving academic researchers from the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has been involved in working with industry partners on developing action research methodologies for better understanding these trends and their implications, from across the media spectrum

from established public broadcasters to small-scale independent online media publishers. The team includes Terry Flew, Axel Bruns and Stuart Cunningham from QUT, as well as industry partners the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Cisco Systems Australia and New Zealand, online publishers The National Forum (publishers of *On Line Opinion*), and public affairs think-tank the Brisbane Institute.<sup>i</sup>

The aims of this Australian citizen journalism project have been:

1. To investigate the scope for an aggregated citizen journalism site to generate new forms of news, information and comment through an action research framework, developed in the context of the 2007 Australian Federal election that was called *You Decide 2007* (Flew and Wilson 2008a, 2008b);
2. To promote user-generated content in the online media sphere, by providing tools and resources that would enable participation by a wide range of interested individuals;
3. To foster the development of online deliberative democracy and policy formation initiatives in order to allow for locality-based content or 'hyper-local' news that may not be the focus of larger, more nationally-focused news organisations;
4. To promote links between established national media organisations (e.g. SBS) with emergent online public deliberation forums (e.g. *Online Opinion*) to promote new forms of interaction in online news media space;
5. To research, document and report on innovations in online citizen journalism in Australia and their relationship to wider Web 2.0 developments, both in Australia and internationally.

This paper draws on the experience of Heidi Lenffer as a researcher 'embedded' within SBS's Digital media unit for two days a week over a 12 month period, as part of a Master of Arts (Research) scholarship undertaken through QUT as a component of the project. To be engaged with the operations of an organisation requires more than simply being in the building and debates about UGC are not necessarily held around the coffee machine. The kind of action research or ethnographic study that can be conducted in this kind of environment requires dedicated conversations about the topic at hand. For Lenffer, this took the form of research resources developed for the SBS stakeholders in UGC, followed by individual interviews with digital media and news staff. Being known to most of the interviewees provided a range of unique insights, as the subjects spoke to the researcher as an insider, as well as a possible conflicted role for the researcher, as the shorthand of familiarity could generate its own outcomes or warp analysis.

## **The Potential of Online News**

SBS has long made a significant contribution to the Australian media landscape both as a generator of unique multicultural content and an aggregator of international sources. As noted in *The SBS Story*, a recently published analysis of SBS by Ien Ang and Gay Hawkins, SBS TV began exploiting international satellite news feeds in the 1980s to create a new, outward-looking news service, a radical departure from the parochialism of other Australian broadcasters at that time. (Ang et al 2008: 179)

Online participants in this study, however, were wary of an over-reliance on international news agency services for both SBS Television and SBS Online in the diversified media environment. They expressed the concern that, in an environment of access to multiple sources online and direct from satellite, audiences 'are not going to come to SBS to get a regurgitation of the same thing' they can access elsewhere (Veo).

Amongst the various forms of user generated content (UGC) now populating the web, blogs serve an important function. In the context of global concentration of news and information sources (Thussu 2007), bloggers are increasingly seen as valuable

contributors to news reporting. Niche reporting in individual blogs and loyal readerships around specialist interest areas or particular points of view offer a rich information resource and set of contacts. These resources are seen by many as of increasingly importance to traditional media forms, including public service broadcasters. Previous SBS Online producer Miguel D'Souza described the internet a broadcaster's 'best friend' due to its capacity to 'link SBS into the world' and to best utilise the functions of a newsroom.

I think the Chinese Olympic torch relay has been a very interesting issue and that news editors around the world would have been able to ignore it, had it not been for the cumulative effect of all that user footage put up online by Tibetan action groups. In the sense that when Scott Parkin and his mates climbed up the Golden Gate Bridge to put up the Free Tibet sign, there was no news crew there, they filmed it themselves, distributed it through their own blog and I pointed it out to our news editor who then got his video producers to edit their footage into our online report. At any other network this would happen every day, but at SBS it's a big thing and I think that's because it's new thing that will continue to happen and only get bigger. ~ Miguel D'Souza

D'Souza proposed the concept of 'meta-news-blogging' and described SBS as a potential 'meta-news-aggregator'. This is innovative news-gathering model would capitalise on the networks of information that are readily available via the internet and the blogosphere in particular.

If you find out that 'x' event has happened in Burkina Faso for example, and that a certain blogger witnessed it, another blogger documented it with video, and yet another blogger with images and a report, then that immediately places you right there. The next step is- and this is where the old media comes back into it- the editors and producers are the ones that can determine whether this is something SBS should be putting out. Interest in the story alone says that 'yes' we should broadcast this. Your Charter should tell you yes or no. So you've sourced a blogger who's found a story that no one else is carrying, then that blogger's report should be then carried on the news site as an aggregated story which become a discussion thread in a sense, more than an actual news story URL. The next step is that this thread will feed into the production of the terrestrial news bulletin which in turn is then rebroadcast online. It's effectively just a new way of serving up

content that you can test against all of the existing aspects of the mandate. ~  
Miguel D'Souza

Aggregating niche reporting and commentary of the blogosphere in an effective manner would demand that a newsroom be committed to immersing their journalists in the news culture of the Internet. In his study of online news sites in the United Kingdom, Thurman (2008) observes that this is a significant faultline between established journalism culture and practices and the information-abundant environment of networked digital media. Thurman found that, as well as concerns about the quality and balance of user-driven contributions to online news sites, there was also the problem that 'having worked in newspaper or broadcast environments where the amount of space or time available for content is limited, most online editors seek out content that has a broad appeal [whereas] the niche audiences reached by most bloggers are very different' (Thurman 2008: 144).

SBS Online participants described the potential for building a broadly outsourced network of online specialists on particular issues to assist with news reporting and helping to ensure that this meta-news gathering process was thoroughly conducted. Manager of SBS Online Marshall Heald suggested that broadcasters would be able to establish a network of informal specialist 'reporters' in the community by creating UGC opportunities with specific and narrow concepts, where the users with the appropriate expertise or knowledge areas could respond to an identifiable need. Executive Producer of SBS Online News Valerio Veo identified a two-fold potential for developing an issue-based, international network from the SBS audience: tapping into existing ethnic communities to gather cultural insights; and providing the audience with an opportunity to present their experiences of newsworthy overseas events. These community links could be utilised in the context of issues and events rather than the ad-hoc 'UGC free-for-all' found on most online news media sites – the classic 'Got a good story? Send us a sms' model (Heald). Acknowledging the reality of limited resources, this strategy would allow SBS to offer the audience an opportunity to influence the news agenda by contributing knowledge on a range of issues in Australia and overseas.

This strategy could draw from audiences and contributors caught in the middle of events or conflicts and are able to record the happenings with portable technology. Veo lamented the lost journalistic opportunity during the previous Israeli-Lebanon war

of collaboration with the active Lebanese community in Australia who were emailing photos back and forth to relatives, developing a unique perspectives on the conflict.

As with any conflict governments try to shut down the electronic lines of communication; trying to cut off the country from the internet which is virtually impossible. So people are always breaching those boundaries and we're seeing photos that governments don't want us to see as a result, and to deny our audience that opportunity is just doing ourselves and them a massive disservice. ~ Valerio Veo

While UGC and citizen journalism offer a range of new possibilities for traditional media, they also raise a set of unique and significant issues, particularly for public broadcasters such as SBS. These challenges can be broadly grouped into three areas:

- Organisational and operational concerns;
- Branding, quality and credibility; and
- Legal and policy limitations.

In this paper, we will briefly canvas address each of these areas.

## Organisational and Operational Concerns

### *User-generated content strategies and staff views at SBS*

Analysis of interviews conducted with SBS staff challenge some of the assumed polarities often set out in literature on citizen journalism between the perspectives of 'traditional media practitioners' and UGC advocates.

SBS staff participants with a background in online media, at both management and web producer levels expressed enthusiasm about the potential of UGC, and believed that online engagement would be central to the future of media platforms. SBS was considered more likely to benefit from additional elements to the qualities of 'openness, frankness, and a two-way exchange' (Heald). The association with interactive media was seen as the 'magic dust' that would assist SBS to engage with audiences as a forward-thinking network (D'Souza). Participants were careful to clarify that this did not mean they were advocating the indiscriminate, wholesale uptake of UGC, rather they emphasised that UGC was not the 'core business' of SBS, nor was it the primary solution to increasing web traffic or improving the quality of broadcasting (Heald, Veo). Some claimed that traditional broadcasters had underestimated the capacity of their audience to become credible sources for news, and stressed the necessity for SBS to begin developing tools for online interactivity to greatly expand the vision for audience participation in broadcasting.

In contrast to the literature which often claims that traditional media organisations tended to be biased against blogging in favour of professional journalists, online participants were optimistic about the value of incorporating bloggers from the community, and cited logistical constraints such as underdeveloped online tools as the factor that had previously limited this at SBS.

There was less unanimity of opinion, however, about the role that UGC would play within news. Valerio Veo and Miguel D'Souza from SBS Online expressed visions for how UGC could have a wider transformative impact upon news broadcasting, capitalising on the niche reporting and wealth of footage available online.

If someone's there on the ground capturing the image that you don't have... to ignore that is cutting off your nose to spite your face, pure and simple. ~ Valerio Veo

Participants from television news management expressed a similar degree of conviction in the importance of engaging the creative abilities of the SBS audience, however they revealed a more modest appraisal of the potential uses of this UGC.

SBS had both the media and language resources to 'bring the world to the Australian public', according to online producer John-Paul Marin. The ethnically diverse nature of the SBS audience was acknowledged to be a rich resource for creating a news agenda that was reflective of the diversity of views in multicultural Australia. Participants expressed a strong sense of public responsibility in providing a platform for the expression of multicultural Australia (Charlie, Marin, Veo). This sentiment was often related to perceived requirements of the broadcaster's public Charter to represent the needs and identities of the Australian public.

Online participants saw television news management as resistant to UGC due to a lack of comfort with the form, although no specific examples of resistance to UGC strategies were given. This was attributed to differences in departmental approaches. Online participants suggested that television management would not be prepared to incorporate UGC into television news bulletins (Veo). In contrast with these perceptions of conservatism, television news participants expressed an overall positive attitude towards UGC. *World News Australia* Executive Producer Mark Boyd and *Dateline* Executive Producer Peter Charlie described SBS's audience as a 'vast, untapped resource of potentially enormous benefit' that SBS would be 'very interested to capitalise on' (Boyd, Charlie). There was a notable absence of the wariness that was common to surveyed senior media executives in Europe and North America, who identified the UGC movement as one of the biggest threats to their business (Accenture 2007). It was initially difficult to gauge whether this favourable attitude reflected a rhetorical commitment to engagement rather than a particular enthusiasm about UGC.

Differing positions that did exist were largely as the product of differences in the formats of television and the internet. Online participants acknowledged that the newsroom was where 'the risks of UGC are most starkly born out', and that news management, therefore, had the most at stake in exploring this space (D'Souza, Hammerschmidt).

## **Branding, quality and credibility**

### ***Agenda-Setting and Audience Engagement***

In considering the scope for adopting UGC strategies within a multi-platform media content provider such as SBS, a important distinction needs to be made between its broadcast and online platforms. <sup>1</sup> In television news in particular, the contribution of UGC to the news production process was seen as one of 'filling the gaps' with supplementary material. Participants stated that agenda-setting was primarily the business of journalists and the news team, and that the journalist's and news producer's duty was making executive decisions about 'the things we think Australians should know about' (Boyd) in line with SBS's Charter obligations. Television news, in other words, was still seen as characterized by traditional lines of authority between professional news producers and a dispersed mass audience.

Due to the tightly packaged nature of television news and current affairs, and the high standard of specialist skills involved, television participants asserted that audience contribution during the production stage was practically unfeasible. They acknowledged that the sourcing of UGC from SBS viewers in order to broadcast on television was 'both rare and difficult' (Boyd), and could not relate one instance where this had happened. Without the budget for foreign bureaus, SBS News is to a large degree an aggregator and re-packager of material from international news agencies (APTN, Reuters, BBC, CNN). The value that SBS brings to the coverage was to re-version this coverage to appeal to Australian audiences and make editorial decisions about credibility, balance and relevance. The wealth of professionally shot and reliably verifiable footage provided to SBS from this range of international news services meant that user-generated stills or video were not considered to be sufficiently addressing a gap in available material to be 'worth the risk'.

Boyd, responsible for SBS's two main-channel nightly international news bulletins, believed sourcing UGC in the form of news video was much more suited to smaller, locally-based television stations, such as in rural towns, where the immediacy of the location would aid the speedy verification of material. This may suggest that it is the ABC, with its 57 locality-based news services throughout Australia, that may be a

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, broadcasting refers to television. SBS Radio has a long history of engaging non-professionals as participants in its scheduling, particularly in order to ensure representativeness and reach in its non-English language programming.

more obvious site for developing 'hyper-local' UGC in the form of audiovisual news content.

For SBS, as a world news broadcaster in Australia it's very hard for us to say to everybody in the world, 'send us your vision'. There are just too many difficulties of language, technology etc. But for a newsroom in Orange it's much easier to ask viewers in Mudgee to send through images of the big fire 100kms down the road, because you're speaking the same language and you're within in the same market. ~ Mark Boyd

The internet was seen as the primary domain for audience participation in media, and SBS Online was consistently viewed as a better platform than SBS Television for the development of UGC. Online was thought of as having unlimited space for media content, which provided the opportunity to 'throw everything up there as it happens and giving the audience some room to work through the bits that interest them' (Veo).

Television participants believed that providing avenues for contributing UGC as well as other forms of audience participation such as chat rooms, discussion groups, blogs etc. was important to allow the audience to feel like they could contribute to the network. International current affairs program *Dateline's* EP Peter Charlie considered there to be great potential for UGC to strengthen SBS's relationship with its audience by inviting them to become content producers. This opportunity would serve to make them feel as if they were an important part of the network by allowing them to voice opinions and create stories.

People would feel more connected to the network if they knew their material was being seriously considered to make it probably onto the website, and maybe onto television. It's a two-way benefit: Non-SBS employees feel like their voice can be heard and it services the need of SBS to find out what else is going on. ~ Peter Charlie

To this end, *Dateline* had been regularly soliciting viewers for video material and story ideas, and the positive response from viewers was evident in the piles of burnt CDs arriving weekly to the executive producer's desk. Charlie acknowledged that the odds of any of this material being broadcast quality were almost negligible; however, the value of this interaction was not considered as being related to whether or not these user contributions would ever be aired.

Admittedly very little of it actually makes it to air because the material might not be appropriate or not well-shot or pushing a certain editorial line that I don't feel is properly thought through. But we're still very open-minded about people sending content in, and if we uncover an interesting story this way then everyone who watches *Dateline* is better for it. ~ Peter Charlie

These user-generated story submissions were also considered to be valuable as a 'direct way of establishing what people care to watch and learn about'; the 'perfect litmus test' for gauging what is appealing, or relevant to viewers (Charlie).

There were occasional examples of members of the public providing SBS with raw video footage of a topical scenario, usually from a remote or inaccessible location, that television news editors had been able to produce into a story.

There was a story I worked on some years ago that came to us from somebody from Korea who'd gone into China and filmed a lot of North Koreans who were fleeing to northern china and living in the hills within mountains and holes in the ground. And that was extremely informative and a moving story that I ended up producing and writing. So that's one example of a story that came to us not from SBS staff but from people outside the organisation who feel they have an interesting story to tell. ~ Peter Charlie

These instances, where the audience was able to influence the news agenda, were rare. However, their existence demonstrates that television news management are willing to engage with user-led participatory media culture so far as it does not compromise broadcasting quality or SBS brand identity. This does not detract from the validity of the participatory interactions so much as reflect the high skill levels required of the television medium and hence its limitations as a site for broad audience participation. This consideration provides a more nuanced context for understanding the different scales of vision regarding UGC between the online staff and television staff, and in particular why the television journalists viewed UGC as having a supplementary rather than transformative impact on news production.

### ***Professional Skills and the Question of Quality***

Ensuring that SBS produces the best quality news and information was a clear priority to participants, who emphasised how important professional journalism skills

were to the editorial processing of authenticating UGC and putting it into context. This included the critical analysis of news events, verification of information, identification of political agendas or spin, explanation of rhetoric, and building narrative out of audio-visual material. The 'in-built cynicism' of trained journalists, the vigour with which they examine news events, and the credibility of the SBS brand, were considered to be valuable differentiators between public broadcasters and the blogosphere (Boyd, D'Souza).

You need to vigorously test the quality of the information you're getting. Pick up the phone, email, make contact with people... then publish it if it's good. As a journalist, I'm thoroughly excited about this, because rather than replacing journalism, quite the contrary, it's actually placed a premium on our skills and finally made society realise how vitally important journalists are to the functioning of society. ~ Miguel D'Souza

The advantage of having a network of verifiable resources available to SBS, with half a dozen different sources for video news (BBC, CNN, Reuters etc.) and access to field experts who have been reporting from the ground for several years, means that theoretically all prospective UGC would have to meet a high standard of relevance and value-add in order for a broadcaster to consider it useful. This belief in the need to control, moderate, and editorialise UGC was also reflected in the views of editors from British media new sites, to the point that this editorialising process was considered to be a central selling-point for public broadcaster, most notably the BBC (Thurman 2008: 144).

I don't think there's every going to be the many-to-many information model that has been talked about where basically citizen journalists broadcast to other citizens without the mediation of journalists. I mean, that may happen, but there will be a lot of deception because unfortunately there are a lot of unethical people out there or even just people that don't know what degree of accuracy or balance is required to present a good article or news story. So I think for the credible sources they will still need a degree of filtering and mediation, even from people who have the best intentions let alone people who will try and manipulate it for unethical reasons whether they're purely personal, malicious, commercial, political, whatever. ~ Mark Boyd

Participants argued that the shift towards news immediacy and reporting on-demand had heightened the importance of placing caveats around UGC, so that compelling user-generated footage could be broadcasted faster – with the safety-net of disclaimers. Participants acknowledged, however, that audiences were sophisticated enough to place their own intellectual filters on what they saw in order to discern the differences between news produced by trained journalists and a piece of UGC. This was not touted as a new skill; rather, Veo likened to the same filtering process that audiences use to understand when they are having a news agenda set to them by a traditional newsroom. The potential damage to brand reputation from unfiltered news content remains considerable, as indicated by the fall in Apple's stock price in October 2008 that arose from a hoax news story on the CNN *iReport* UGC site that reported that Apple founder and CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a heart attack.

At the same time, there was the view that public broadcasters are best placed – both philosophically and practically – to maximise the vision of the participatory media movement. Participants identified the quality reputation of the SBS brand as being central to the future success of interactive strategies on the SBS websites. The SBS brand was described by staff as 'widely loved' and 'cherished' for its focus on unique reporting, world-oriented perspectives, original content, and depth of analysis. SBS's Charter was seen as providing guidance for producers and editors to make sensible editorial decisions when faced with an array of new media technologies.

It's a refreshing thing to have clear, Charter-driven mandates rather than commercial ones because the charter-driven ones help you hang good content ideas and good content technologies on, rather than merely chasing a share price. SBS is in a fantastic position because of the very fact that our Charter clearly spells out what it is we're here to do, and it says we need to encourage interaction with our audience, so this gives us a way forward. ~ Miguel D'Souza

### ***Barriers to participation***

Editorial quality is only one element of the limitation on these kinds of contributions. Where SBS has created dedicated online platforms for UGC video, initiatives like *Change the World in 5 minutes*, or *The Movie Show* user reviewers, there have been

low responses. Marshall Heald noted that such initiatives were only successful when amateur content producers with specialist skills, a very small group, responded. Marin acknowledged that non-professionals who had skills to create broadcast quality content would eventually want to cash in on those skills, and SBS might have to consider paying for UGC.

The technology has been out there for a while now and people are probably honing their skills. So I wonder whether they still really want to just get lots of views on *YouTube* and share it with as many mates as they can, or whether they're saying, 'Well wait a minute, you're a content aggregator, my content's pretty good, so I want something back from you'. ~ John-Paul Marin

A recent OECD report into UGC has noted the movement towards the monetisation of UGC and the problems this posed in the process for defining the term, which was previously characterised by non-financial motivations, such as 'connecting with peers, achieving fame, notoriety or prestige, and expressing oneself' (OECD Report 2007: 20).

The BBC practices selective remuneration according to an editorial judgment about the work invested in and value of the contribution (Thurman 2008: 148). This may be seen as reverting the interaction back to the standard commissioned content model. The significant difference, however, would be in the reduced rate of pay. Remunerating models for UGC such as South Korea's hugely successful *Oh My News* have demonstrated that amateurs were willing to produce content for a nominal fee.

In spite of the recent limitations of user-generated video initiatives, Hammerschmidt considered video uploads as being central to future SBS UGC strategy. Participatory events such as sporting or cultural festivals were considered to be opportunities for building community by allowing users to 'broadcast themselves'. Hammerschmidt also cited potential for SBS to provide a cultural space for emerging artists or community activism (similar to the BBC *iCan* model) based around ethnic, regional or special interest groupings.

## Legal and Policy limitations

### *Moderation and legal risk*

Online participants acknowledged the importance of legal responsibility and the responsibility of SBS to avoid promoting racial vilification and defamation, as the case for employing pre-moderation strategies (Hammerschmidt, Marin, Veo). Other areas of risk included contempt of court, religious vilification; copyright, and trademark issues. Pre-moderation, the strategy required for lowest legal risk, was, however, described as the 'death knell' (Heald) for discussion as it sapped the immediacy and power of the interaction.

In an ideal legal world we would have people watching the site and doing live moderation 24 hours a day or pre-moderating content on the basis of a 3-second delay or something like that. Obviously that would be virtually impossible to resource and the whole project would grind to a halt. ~ Sally McCausland

This view is supported by users who consider 'moderated UGC' to be an oxymoron; arguing that the policing of grass-root initiatives like UGC neutralises the efficacy of the movement. Marin emphasised the importance of a fast turn-over process for publishing comments so as to guarantee a satisfactory user experience for those who invested time and emotional energy in writing a comment.

Online participants overwhelmingly favoured post-moderation as a preferred strategy in order to preserve the natural movement of conversation, freedom of expression, an immediate user experience, and a more satisfying sense of community (Hammerschmidt, Marin, Veo). Finding a balance to this tension between legal risk and user freedom was identified by the SBS Legal representative as the 'big challenge' in the realm of hosting UGC on SBS websites (McCausland).

It became evident that tensions arose from consideration of the worst case scenario, and that the staff's day-to-day experience with UGC had instilled a general confidence in the maturity of the SBS audience demographic and, therefore, low-level risk of UGC.

I think there's a tendency to focus on the 1% of scenarios that are

problematic at expense of the 99%. In my experience the 99% has been so overwhelming that I'm less concerned with the 1%, which is the risk mediation issue we were talking about. The legal team is there for the 1% but I'm much more focused on growing the potential of the 99% as part of the everyday of what we do. ~ Marshall Heald

We haven't experienced a high level of legal issues to date from our user forums; people are generally responsible and don't want to go around and defame other people. There are some obviously who try to stir the pot but most people are really just interacting in good faith as they would in any community so it's not necessarily the case that we're always trying to pull back from difficult legal issues. For many years SBS have had audience feedback from our telephone call-ins and emails, so we have a very close relationship with the audience as it is. The UGC on our website is very much an extension of that really; it's not a terribly new thing. ~ Sally McCausland.

The degree of risk associated with the one percent of problematic content remains a central question, however, and the volume and anonymity of contributions associated with a large scale vision for UGC requires a much more comprehensive strategy than previous audience feedback mechanisms, forums or live talkback.

The current SBS working moderation strategy employed for the sites of SBS shows such as *Insight* and *Newstopia* have been based upon website traffic patterns. Within three hours after a SBS television program going to air the online views and user interaction had peaked and subsided back to nearly zero. SBS has employed moderators specifically to pre-moderate the user commentary for the duration of the three hours in order to process the bulk of comments immediately.

The SBS *World Game* website involves members of the online community in moderating the forums, which allowed for a more nuanced filtering process of knowing when people are pushing boundaries and knowing when comments will be 'taken with a grain of salt' (Vevo). There was also a strategy, supported by general consensus, of selective pre-moderation for sensitive areas such as certain current affairs topics.

## **SBS's Evolving UGC Strategy**

SBS Online advocated the importance of establishing a consistent, holistic presentation of the user experience. Opening up a network to user interactivity comes with the responsibility, according to Marin, of making that experience unique and satisfactory. This strategy would involve setting up some kind of a 'constitution' that would lay out the landscape for the audience; the boundaries which designated the terms of use, and the responsibilities that SBS would observe in this space.

This would translate into some form of online policy document and would inform an over-arching strategy that expressed: 'SBS is serious about involving our audience, and this is how we're going to treat our community and this is how we want them to participate' (Marin). Within this holistic approach, however, Heald argued it was crucial to retain the flexibility to accommodate demographic differences for the various SBS programs and make case-by-case decisions about UGC approaches.

### **Key findings**

- *Media workers engaged in news production for SBS were ideologically receptive towards user participation.*
- *Media workers at SBS asserted the importance of maintaining editorial control over the news production process, including UGC.*
- *Moderated UGC initiatives across SBS websites produced unique interactions between users and between SBS and its audience.*
- *The participatory user movement speaks directly to public service media organisations of their need to reshape themselves to suit the emerging mediasphere.*

## **Recommendations for further research**

### **Further exploration of the role and impact of UGC on public service media.**

A core question remains around the feasibility for public service media to relinquish the degree of editorial control necessary for engaging in more substantial forms of UGC collaboration. At SBS, the limitations to UGC initiatives were often presented as being the result of inadequate resources and funding as well as the challenges of editorial standards and legal risk. As SBS continues to invest into UGC, longitudinal research would demonstrate whether these additional resources serve to ameliorate the problem or whether the issues of quality maintenance, retaining credibility and averting legal risk present a continued barrier.

The level of editorial intervention required of public service media may mean that PSB cannot accommodate collaborative models of 'produser' engagement. There is also a need to test the assumption that the incorporation of divergent public interests and concerns will indeed improve public service content, given the re-emergence of demand for 'expert' knowledge and the 'serendipitous discoveries' of a packaged information agenda.

### **Exploration of the potential for online interaction to promote cultural interaction and enhance social cohesion**

An important area for further exploration is the capacity for the transformation of public discourse on a range of issues through public platform for a range of diverse cultural, religious and political perspectives. Research into moderated participatory spaces could search for evidence that indicates genuine interaction with alternative opinions rather than the 'echo chamber' effect of self affirming views.

A further area of interest would be a comparative inquiry into the differences between user-generated debates on commercial versus public service media websites, which could generate findings about the ways in which public remit values impact the quality of discussion in the media sphere.

The intersection of old and new media formats represents a rich field for research into the redevelopment of models for public communication and information delivery.

## **Conclusion: Public Service media**

Acknowledging that public service broadcasting should evolve alongside technological advancements and embrace the full spectrum of content delivery platforms represents an important shift in the conception of 'public service broadcasting' to 'public service media' (Lowe and Bardoel 2007, Jakubowicz 2007; Moe 2008; Leurdijk 2007). This transition requires more than merely the funding to roll out the appropriate digital channels and technological means for multi-platform production and distribution. It requires a commitment to a new model of 'on-demand' service provision characterised by many-to-many consumption patterns, which necessitates new approaches to content development and exploitation. The perceived dilemma for broadcasters in the face of these developments is regarding the choice of whether to 'open up or hold back' (Kjus 2007: 135, quoted in Dunn 2008).

For many broadcasters, the prospect of 'opening up' to the on-demand model is not so much a choice, as a challenge contingent on the availability of adequate resources, management of risk and achieving organisational consensus. There is no 'right' model for all public broadcasters, but consistent re-evaluation and reinvention is necessary for the pursuit of maintaining relevance. As broadcasters aspire to play a strategic role in the on-demand environment, decision-makers should consider the unique remits of the organisation along with its particular resource situation.

Public service media organisations, as required by their public remits, will continue to seek out new ways of facilitating citizenship and forms of audience engagement that address ideals of universalism, quality and relevance. Editorial standards enshrined in *Codes of Practice* requirements as well as legal risk still limit full engagement with audience interaction. The challenge remains to find a model that preserves the credibility of these new spaces and delivers on public interest obligations.

The enthusiasm many have proclaimed for the online space must be tempered by the recognition that credible, trusted sources will continue to play a significant, perhaps heightened, role in a world of increasing user generated content and amateur opinion online. The value of editor-controlled broadcasting, some argue, may even be reinforced by user-generated media as audiences are increasingly exposed to the emerging 'wealth of junk' that was previously filtered out in top-down models of journalism (Singer, quoted in Bruns 2005: 13).

The problem of disengagement with top-down media forms is real, yet the answer is not a complete discrediting of existing models of editorial intervention. The 'editor', in whatever form this takes, still has a crucial function in filtering, curating and contextualising content for audiences. The editorial process amounts to the 'sense-making' component of journalism, which Hartley argues is the cornerstone of the profession (Hartley 1996: 52), and Curtis suggests can circumvent the 'Balkanisation of ideas' of the blogosphere by creating a narrative of meaning (Curtis 2007).

The popular Web 2.0 imagery of a multi-directional conversation between audience and journalist is of distant relevance to a public broadcaster like SBS. The news model where editors filter and continue to determine what is 'suitable/unsuitable for publication', is the basis of the 'gatekeeper' concept (Bruns 2005: 11). 'Gatekeeping', as practiced by traditional journalists will continue to be necessary as it meets a consumer demand for filtered, expert and packaged content.

This filtering and moderation process is resource intensive, however. SBS currently receives no Government funding for online activity. This is clearly out of step with the realities of contemporary media organisations and the expectations of audiences. This study revealed a genuine desire to pursue progressive models of communication within SBS, coupled with a belief that audiences have content of value to contribute.

SBS can play a crucial role in online audience interaction and citizen journalism by engaging with the cultural and linguistic complexity of contemporary Australian society. SBS is able to facilitate diverse and nuanced public debates by reflecting perspectives which are rarely represented in Australian mainstream media or, for the most part, the existing blogosphere. SBS's plans for the future include a proposal for the development online language hubs to create virtual 'town squares' for over seventy Australian language communities, with platforms for user generated content focused on cross cultural interaction and engagement. This area provides fertile ground for greater participation in public life for all Australians, regardless of their location, primary language spoken or cultural background.

## Bibliography

Accenture. 2008. User-Generated Content is Top Threat to Media and Entertainment Industry, Accenture Survey Finds. URL:

[http://newsroom.accenture.com/article\\_display.cfm?article\\_id=4534](http://newsroom.accenture.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=4534).

Ang, I., Hawkins, G. & Dabboussy, L. 2008. *The SBS Story*. Sydney: UNSW Press.

Atton, C. 2004. *An Alternative Internet*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Benkler, Y. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bowman, S. & Willis, C. 2003. *WeMedia: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. American Press Institute.

Bruns, A. 2005. *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Curtis, A. 2007. The TV elite has lost the plot [Interview with Andrew Orłowski]. *The Register*. 20 November, 2007. URL:

[http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/20/adam\\_curtis\\_interview/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/20/adam_curtis_interview/)

[accessed 31/10/08].

Dunn, A. 2008. Audience generated media: the challenge for public service broadcasters—an Australian perspective. Paper presented to *Creating Vaue: Between*

*Commerce and Commons*. ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation International Conference. Brisbane, 25-27 June.

Flew, T. & Wilson, J. 2008a. Citizen Journalism and Political Participation: The *Youdecide 2007* Project and the 2007 Australian Federal Election. *Australian Journal of Communication* 32(2), 17-37.

Flew, T. & Wilson, J. 2008b. Journalism as Social Networking: The Australian *Youdecide* Project and the 2007 Federal Election. Proceedings of the Communications Policy and Research Forum 2008, 47-61. URL:

Hartley, J. 1996. *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*. London: Edward Arnold.

Jakubowicz, A. 2007. 'Public Service Broadcasting in the 21st Century' in: *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, RIPE@07, Nordicom: Sweden.

Jenkins, H. 2006. *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kjus, Y. 2007. 'Ideals and Complications in Audience Participation for PSM' in: *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, RIPE@07, Nordicom: Sweden.

Leurdijk, A. 2007. 'Public Service Media Dilemmas and Regulation in the Converging Media Landscape' in: *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, RIPE@07, Nordicom: Sweden.

Bardoel, J. & Lowe, G. F. 2007. 'From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media' in: *From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media*, RIPE@07, Nordicom: Sweden.

Moe, H. 2008. Dissemination and dialogue in the public sphere: A case for public service media online. *Media, Culture and Society* 30(3): 319-336.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2007. Participative Web: User-Created Content. Directorate for Science, Technology, and Industry. Committee for Information, Computer, and Communication Policy. Paris: OECD.

Rosen, J. 2008. A most useful definition of citizen journalism. *PressThink: Ghosts of Democracy in the Media Machine*. July 14. URL:  
[http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2008/07/14/a\\_most\\_useful\\_d.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2008/07/14/a_most_useful_d.html).

Shirky, C. 2008. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organisations*. New York: Allen Lane.

Thurman, N. 2008. Forums for Citizen Journalists? Adoption of User-Generated Content Initiatives by Online News Media. *New Media and Society* 10(1), 139-157.

Thussu, D. K. 2007. *International Communication: Continuity and Change*. London: Hodder Arnold.

---

<sup>i</sup> The project was supported through Australian Research Council Linkage-Project LP 0669434, *Investigating Innovative Applications of Digital Media for Participatory Journalism and Citizen Engagement in Australian Public Communication*. The authors and the project team wish to acknowledge the support of the ARC for enabling us to undertake this project.