

We probably lowered the bar a bit too much and now we are elevating it a bit. I don't expect to see a huge amount of UGC on *Newsnight* in the future [...] But we will employ every trick in the book to bring people to content that is more illuminating and insightful than they will find elsewhere.

This is a relativist position that falls short of an endorsement of core values. Journalists who feel that those values are threatened by technologically-driven reductionism are dismissed as latterday 'Luddites'. They know that the Luddites were not thoughtless vandals opposing progress, but artisans concerned to preserve craft standards and appropriate rates of pay. Two hundred years on, their natural heirs may not face deportation or the gibbet, but they do face an uncertain future, with more illuminating tricks yet to be turned and more cuts to be found.

Endnotes

1. All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from original interviews or meetings with the author.
2. BGAN is a mobile satellite data transfer system that offers internet access at more than twice the speed of GPRS in 99 countries around the world.
3. Ofcom report (2007b): '64 per cent of young people believe that much of the news is not relevant to them', p. 61 and 'Some 46 per cent of people from minority ethnic groups felt that ethnic minorities got too little airtime in mainstream news' (p. 66).
4. Data supplied by Kevin Hinde, BBC FMT Head of Software Development, Journalism, 26 March, 2008.
5. Source: Michael Gray, Interactive Platforms Producer, BBC Audio & Music, 26 March, 2008.
6. Ofcom's 'Second review of Public Service Broadcasting' closed its public consultation on 19 June, 2008.
7. 'BBC Trust rejects local video proposals', 21 November, 2008; http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2008/local_video_prov.html

Chapter Five

Old Sources: New Bottles

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Journalists and Their Sources Online

The relationship between journalists and their sources is central to any claim that the news media may make to a role within a Habermasian 'public sphere'. Through each technological change, from the invention of the printing press, through radio, television and now the Internet, news journalists have sought to play a mediating role between power and the people. Whether they see their role, in the American professionalized model, as merely a conduit for 'objective' information or in the Southern European model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) as interpreter and power broker, or as Silverstone (1988) suggests, as story teller working to re-align cultural ties and allegiances through the establishment and re-enforcing of cultural myth, it is through their choice of relationships and prioritization of information that they seek to reflect, or indeed to determine, the political and cultural agenda of the moment.

So the question of who journalists speak to, how they obtain information, how they evaluate it and whose stories they choose to repeat is critical to any examination of the changing role of the news media. The purpose of this chapter is to consider whether the existence of the internet with its proliferation of sources and criss-crossing interconnected networks, is changing the way in which information is gathered and assessed; whether it is changing the power relationships between those who have always had privileged access to journalists and members of less authoritative organizations, or indeed members of the public; and how it is impacting on journalists themselves and their sense of their own public place.

Broadly speaking, research in this field focuses on two aspects of this relationship. The first envisages an adversarial relationship in which, in the version preferred by journalists (for example, Bernstein and Woodward, 1974), the doughty reporter harries officialdom for the truth behind the official lies. Its mirror-image is suggested by media researchers. Here it is

the official source (primary definer), who holds the power, defines the relationship and ultimately the news agenda, by controlling the flow of, and access to, important information (Stuart Hall et al., 1978). Schlesinger and Tumber (1999: 94) suggest more of a tug-of-war (or dance, Gans, 1979) in which sources compete for the attention of the journalist and for the right to define events. In each interpretation, news is a bone tussled over by those seeking to establish their right to define events ('symbolic' capital) and journalists (flawed or otherwise) who represent 'the public'.

The second approach moves beyond the binary power relationship between sources and journalists and considers the way in which space within the media is contested by organizations and individuals (Fraser, 1997). In this conception, journalists are not merely guardians of the public's 'right to know' but conductors of the information flow. This approach recognizes that sources have a democratic right to be heard and the focus here is on their strategies for representation. Voices rise and fall, as they attract the attention of the professional journalistic gatekeepers. Those with the most power will certainly attract the greatest interest but Manning (2001) and Davis (2002) describe the way in which competing sources have learned to operate within a mediated environment and to make use of the agenda-setting 'tools' (in particular dedicated public relations managers) so that they are capable of challenging the role of traditional primary definers.

Manning (2001) cites, for example, the effectiveness of Greenpeace in placing environmental issues on the public agenda. However, he points out that these shifts are also dependent on the fortune of the mass movements that promote alternative perspectives. In this conception of the field, improved public relations strategies do not necessarily make news less democratic. They may indeed enable greater public debate by making alternative viewpoints visible and challenging the right of elite sources to define symbolic capital, albeit within what Atton (2005: 349) describes as 'a hierarchy of credibility [...] based on power, legitimacy and authoritativeness'.

The task of this chapter is to consider the effect of the internet as a means of accessing information. Has its democratizing potential - its ability to bring the voices of ordinary men and women into the mainstream process of news construction - been realized? Are new channels of communication opening up the two-way conversation between journalists and elite sources to let in new, competing or simply different concerns? Or is it simply a case of elite sources accessing journalists via new routes: just the same old sources in new bottles?

Journalists in the 'Field'

A sample of 89, single by-lined, news stories was taken from a range of British elite, daily, national newspapers. The journalists who wrote them

were interviewed in detail about the sourcing of each story. (In the context of this research 'sourcing' is interpreted in its journalistic sense as the sourcing of any information, whether from personal exchange, or via secondary media.) They were also asked to nominate an additional story that they personally felt had been important. This formed the core of the research but additional interviews were also carried out to verify and cross-check trends and a smaller sample, from regional newspapers in three different locations, was carried out for comparison.

Although the original intention was to find a representative sample of journalists working for the elite press, it became clear as the research progressed that structural changes within newsrooms - hastened by changes of ownership and the introduction of new technology - were having an uneven effect on the way in which journalists in different positions within the hierarchy and on different newspapers, were able to make use of new opportunities for selection of stories and sources. In order to analyse the use of sources, in the context of these broader structural changes, I have made use of Bourdieu's field theory which allows us to see not only how, but also why, changes are taking place in different ways, across different newspapers.

In Bourdieu's conception of the 'field', power in society is held not only by those who have economic capital, but also by those who wield cultural capital (and through it the ability to establish and maintain social norms which he refers to as 'symbolic capital'). Power within society circulates across and within defined 'fields' of influence (journalism, politics, medicine etc.). Within each of these fields, individuals operate according to a set of norms and assumptions (doxa) which are gradually internalized. Organizations and individuals in a field (and within organizations) are located along an axis. Those controlled by the state, or driven purely by the desire to increase dividends for shareholders, lie at the 'heteronomous' pole, of their professional 'field' whereas those driven more by the desire to maintain their cultural position and influence, lie closer to the 'autonomous' pole (Bourdieu, 2005).

In Bourdieu's own words, journalism is a 'weakly autonomous field' which is, 'structured on the basis of opposition between two poles, between those who are "purist" (most independent of state power, political power and economic power), and those who are most dependent on these powers and commercial powers' (Bourdieu, 2005: 41).

Within the 'field' of journalism, cultural capital (the ability to define and influence events) is prized. So newspapers are keen at least to provide the appearance of independence. In reality, with the exception of the *Guardian*, which is owned by a trust, all British newspapers are owned by large, commercially driven companies, but the logic of elite (as opposed to popular) newspapers requires that the need to please shareholders must always be balanced by the need to maintain influence. In the British newspaper field, elite newspapers, since the late 1980s,

have each occupied a niche roughly corresponding to a segment of political opinion: their fortunes rising and falling due to various external events but maintaining equilibrium within the field. However, '[a] newspaper can remain absolutely the same, not lose a single reader, and yet be profoundly altered because its relative importance in the field has changed' (Bourdieu, 1998: 42).

In this paper Bourdieu was referring to the effect of television on French newspapers. A very similar – though more profound – change, is currently directly affecting newspapers in most developed countries and it is having a profound effect on the way journalists work. They are all adjusting working practices in response to new technology but also and far more importantly, because of new commercial pressures in a far more competitive media environment (see Freedman, this volume).

One of the newspapers in this study has recently changed ownership. From interviews both with those selected to discuss their news stories and those interviewed separately, it is clear there is now a new strategy pulling the newspaper (and the journalists who work for it) away from the position it used to occupy towards a far more commercial approach, more akin to a mass market popular newspaper's. This is profoundly affecting the way in which sources are used. Under the previous ownership, senior journalists were expected to be the experts in their subject and worked relatively autonomously. However the new management has used the excuse of technological change as a reason to undermine the position of senior reporting staff (a number of those approached had recently been made redundant or resigned). One senior member of staff quipped that his regular website checks included *Media Guardian*, 'To see who has been sacked'.

There was no evidence that it was an inability to adapt to new technology that was the key issue in staff retention. Rather it was the hunger created by the apparently limitless 'news hole' of the internet which was driving change. Increasingly the emphasis is now on speed rather than depth of work and this militates against follow-up and independent verification of sources. Every journalist interviewed was being affected to some extent by the need for speed and greater output (see Lee-Wright, this volume, for changes at the BBC), but journalists on this particular newspaper are working faster, producing more stories and are monitored more closely by news editors, than those on the other newspapers examined which lie closer to the 'autonomous' pole.

The Struggle for Autonomy

When asked to identify a story which they had written and they considered important, journalists interviewed (on both national and provincial press)

always referred to ones which they had found themselves, which were original and usually followed up with a considerable amount of research. Bourdieu (2005: 40) suggests that this need to differentiate is critical for journalists' perception of themselves and their control of, or at least their role in, the production of 'symbolic capital'. 'To exist in a field is to differentiate oneself. [...] Falling into undifferentiatedness [...] means losing existence' (Bourdieu, 2005: 40).

The individual journalist struggling to stand out, is operating in tension within an increasingly 'heteronomous field'. He or she may be pulled towards the commercial pole dominated by audience ratings, circulation wars and the increasing importance of advertising but, within this field, it is not commercial success but originality and proof of autonomy which are admired. It is the reporter who steps out of line and scoops the best story who provides the paradigm upon which the mythologized vision of the journalist rests. One reporter explained how peer pressure pushes reporters to find their own stories:

I know I'm interested when people bring in really good stories. And if they keep doing it you're slightly insecure about it, 'Oh you're getting all these good stories, where are you getting them from?' So it's an admiration but it's also a slight worry as well. (Interview 7: general reporter, national broadsheet)

This drive for differentiation may not be evident in the bulk of daily journalism but it should not be dismissed if, as Bourdieu suggests, the journalist's desire for differentiation and autonomy serves as the only real counter-weight to growing commercialization and homogeneity (2005: 43, 1998: 33). Across the range of newspapers, those journalists working at the 'autonomous' end of the spectrum (irrespective of their place in the hierarchy) were more likely to report a recent story which they had originated independently of either the news desk, or a news diary. On one newspaper more than half the stories randomly selected were either original or a 'self-generated' follow-up story. At the other end of the spectrum, where insistence on high productivity means that some journalists are asked to produce up to a dozen stories a day, nearly two thirds came either from the wires or were poached from another media outlet (see below).

Some journalists were working under such time pressure that they were not able to point to a single recent incident of a self-generated story although young journalists in particular (on all the newspapers), were prepared to work extra hours, on top of very long days, to find new 'off diary' stories and follow them up. This is not masochism. They know that, whatever the 'desk' might ask them to do in working hours, it is their ability to generate their own stories which will mark them out for promotion.

This provides rather more texture to the figures provided in research by Cardiff University (Davies, 2008: 5) suggesting that only 12–20 per cent of stories are generated 'entirely by reporters who write them'. Journalists need time to generate their own stories. Increasing speed and rolling deadlines dictate that only the most easily available sources will be used and that means the sources that the journalists already know. On local and regional newspapers phone calls from the public are still a key source of stories. On the nationals, even self-generated stories tended to emanate from, or be accessed via, known sources because they are trusted and more easily verified:

I can't think of a decent story that I've got from somebody that I'd never met or heard of before. [...] maybe unsolicited in the respect that I'd not actually heard of them before but it was a part of a relationship I built up with people in the area generally. (Interview 7: general reporter, national broadsheet)

On national dailies, stories directed to specific journalists, from unknown sources, were rare enough to be remarked on:

I received an anonymous envelope from somebody containing a two-page print out from a spreadsheet showing what had been spent. It's only the second time in my life I've had such a document sort of sent through the post. (Interview 5: specialist reporter, national broadsheet)

I liked that story. You always dream of that happening to you, when somebody just rings you up and says 'guess what, this is going on'. (Interview 10: specialist reporter, national broadsheet)

Both these stories required extensive follow-up research and independent verification from authoritative sources to ensure that they didn't expose the newspapers involved to legal action.

Some stories originated on the 'net' but they tended to be found on the less well travelled parts of official websites, where internal documents, the agendas of up-coming meetings, Freedom of Information responses, or minutes of public meetings may be posted. Much of the material that in the past would have come via photocopies in brown envelopes, can now be found published on, or hinted at, in forums or websites of official, or semi-official organizations. Specialist journalists both locally and nationally (or those interested in building up a specialism) quickly become familiar with the relatively small number of related unofficial sites but they are becoming less useful as a means of finding original material because they are equally available to anyone with the knowledge to find them.

Although journalists said that they were finding stories on the net, they were often discovered via another newspaper or specialist magazine websites (a tried and tested source for national newspaper stories) rather than through trawling blogs or news groups. Only the political correspondents considered blogs to be of major importance (see Couldry and Davis, this volume); most other journalists dismissed them as mainly unsubstantiated 'gossip' though they may be consulted to get a general sense of the 'way the wind is blowing' on a specific topic. Although this was a small sample it is worth noting that not a single story on a national newspaper was initiated by a blog. This differs from American research suggesting that 'Weblogs have become a mainstream source for the traditional media' (Messner and DiStaso, 2008: 454).

User Generated Content (UGC) has been suggested as a new way of getting stories (Singer, 1997; Thurman and Hermida, 2008). Indeed some suggest that the future of journalism lies in 'allowing the public [...] to be part of the production' (Beckett cited in Marsh, 2008: 33). I found only two instances in national newspapers of a story being discovered via unsolicited material sent electronically to a newsroom. One was a case history and the other a significant source for a follow-up story. One section editor had given a reporter the job of checking incoming emails for stories and case studies. But although several said that they read comments posted under their own stories and often found them useful, on the whole, reporters did not trawl through UGC because it was perceived to be too time-consuming, untrustworthy and rarely produced genuinely new information. Most original stories were found the 'old-fashioned way' through talking to people, listening and following hunches. As one section editor observed:

The people who spend the whole day sitting at their desks researching on the internet don't get the stories. They've broken the link between the unique relationship part of journalism, which is number one of what journalism is about, and the greater efficiency that the net can bring. It's only a tool and people forget that sometimes, they think it's the whole thing. And unless you have the relationships, you can't do it. (Interview 1: section editor, national broadsheet)

The Power of Public Relations

While the reporters identified the off-diary stories as the ones that seemed important, the bulk of reporting on all newspapers involves routine sourcing, analysing and structuring of information which is anticipated rather than random, offered freely by sources rather than being unearthed and produced under enormous time pressures, to

relentless deadlines (Schlesinger, 1978; Golding and Elliot, 1979). Most of the time, rather than forcing information from those who are trying to hide it, journalists are sifting out which, of many competing voices, are sufficiently important to deserve space in a story and in what order they should be used. The rise of the public relations professionals (Davis, 2002) over the last 20 years has meant that journalists are faced with a great deal more information than ever before. As one specialist correspondent explained:

Being a [...] journalist is rather like standing in the middle of a hurricane trying to pick out twigs. You're [...] constantly looking around to see what's significant. (Interview 5: specialist correspondent, national broadsheet)

One of the biggest changes brought about by the internet is the tendency of organizations concerned with a breaking story to send out emailed responses to an entire press list. In the past, organizations wishing to respond to a breaking story would have had to talk to a news agency, in the hope that their contribution, or part of it, would be circulated to all news desks via the 'wires'. Now they can bypass the agencies and go directly to the journalist's inbox with a complete and unedited statement. Journalists working on a breaking story can simply check their inbox for relevant names and will probably find that they have comments from a wide range of different parties without ever needing to make a call.

When they make follow-up calls, a specialist reporter will probably have a mobile phone contact with the major players, and be able to speak to them directly. It is clear that the more important a reporter is, the more likely it is that they will have direct contact, via email and mobile phone, with key sources. An experienced general reporter on a national newspaper will get 50 or 60 emails each day, most from PR companies. More junior reporters will have to spend time phoning around and asking for press releases – or checking organization websites in the hope that they have been published online. One specialist who had been promoted without being given time to research her 'patch' bemoaned the fact that to begin with press officers didn't know who she was and she found herself missing important statements.

Lewis et al. (2008: 20) found that:

41 per cent of press articles contain PR materials which play an agenda setting role or where PR material makes up the bulk of the story. As we have suggested, this is a conservative, baseline figure. If we add those stories in which the involvement of PR seems likely but could not be verified, we find that a majority of stories (54 per cent of print stories) are informed by PR.

This figure is almost certainly too low. In the day-to-day world of journalism, every single major public announcement can be classified as 'PR' and every organization wishing to address journalists will use public relations techniques. American research found that even when news is about unexpected events, 'the one predictable component of coverage is the presence of official sources' (Livingstone and Bennett, 2003: 376). Often these calls are to verify information or provide a right of reply so simply adding up the amount of copy which appears to have been initiated by PR, or in which PR has been used, tells us little on its own. Nor is there any reason to assume that the use of PR is 'by definition' evidence of a democratic deficit in the news media. It rather depends where the PR emanates from. Indeed, it could be argued that the improved understanding of public relations, by groups who are not powerful and do not have automatic access to journalists, has played a role in democratizing news (Manning, 2001; Davis, 2002) by challenging the position of primary definers. 'Pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1971) such as demonstrations, pickets and 'stunts', for example, are used by non-governmental organizations to draw attention to events and ideas which are not in the mainstream and which might otherwise be missed.

However, as more and more organizations learn public relations techniques and use email and the internet to address journalists, old power relationships may be actually intensifying (see Fenton, Chapter 9, this volume). Specialist reporters, trying to deal with a 'blizzard' of information, will prioritize known organizations just in order to control the flow. Emails from unknown individuals will not necessarily be opened and according to one interviewee, are usually dealt with in about 'ten seconds'. Junior reporters using Google to find contacts will be faced with a mass of undifferentiated information. Their biggest fear is using information that turns out to be false so, particularly when working at speed, they will also prioritize known and therefore 'safe' organizations. The question of a 'safe organization' varies as issues (and their attendant lobbyists) move up and down the news agenda (see Manning, 2001).

Speed and Cannibalization

Lewis et al. (2008) also point to the growing role of news agencies in providing stories. National newspaper journalists interviewed for this research rarely referred to taking stories from the 'wires'. They didn't need to because they usually had the same selection of statements from all the major players in their own inbox (see above). What seems to be a rather more salient trend is direct cannibalization of copy. The 'pack behaviour' in which journalists are anxiously looking over their shoulders to make sure that they are not falling behind (or moving too far ahead) of their rivals, was first described by Crouse (1973) in his coverage of the

1972 American presidential campaign, but it has clearly been exacerbated by the pressure of online 24-hour rolling news.

As Bourdieu has observed, competition in fields of cultural production tends to increase uniformity (2005: 44; 1998: 23) and this has certainly been the case with the increased competition between news outlets on the Internet. In daily print journalism, reporters didn't know if they had been 'scooped' by a rival until the next day's papers came out, when it was too late to do anything about it. Now every story goes on line within minutes and journalists are under intense pressure not to miss anything that has appeared on a rival website.

There is now a widespread practice across the news media, of reporters being asked to rewrite stories appearing elsewhere, in some cases without a single additional telephone call, and to lift quotes and case histories without any attribution. American newspapers apparently object to this practice and are therefore credited when material is lifted. One British publication that has also objected is *The Stage*. In a letter to *Press Gazette* (1 August, 2008: 14) *The Stage* editor, Brian Attwood, accused the *Daily Telegraph* of making use of unattributed material lifted from the magazine without asking for permission. But in general, British newspapers seem willing to tolerate behaviour by rival organizations that is clearly in breach of copyright law, and work is being attributed to writers who have no means of knowing whether anything they have 'reported' can be verified. Sources were not only (in some cases) not being checked, there were instances in which reports had been cobbled together so fast that they didn't actually make sense. One journalist said, of a piece written in fifteen minutes flat: 'The trouble is the news desk dictates what we write even if the facts don't stand up' (specialist reporter, national broadsheet). Another said, 'I was told that I didn't need to check sources because it came from the *Daily Mail*' (general reporter, national broadsheet).

This manic recycling of copy is reminiscent of a trend found in American research, of journalists quoting bloggers, who in turn derive their news information from other news media (Messner and DiStaso, 2008: 459). The same fear of missing something (and being called to account by the 'desk') means that editors and specialist reporters have become hyper-vigilant, regularly checking the BBC, Sky News and the one or two newspapers considered to be direct rivals. One specialist admitted speaking twice a day to the reporter covering the same patch in a rival newspaper. For many reporters there are only two kinds of stories: those you generate yourself exclusively and 'pack journalism' with stories being slightly re-angled to fit what one reporter termed the political 'G. Spot' of the newspaper. One specialist complained:

There is a real problem when you're at conferences that if your colleagues are going to do the story you've pretty much got to do the story. In the past you would have been able to say to the news desk,

look, my colleagues are doing a flaky story, we don't do flaky stories, let's not do this story. And all that's gone. (Interview 12: specialist correspondent, national broadsheet)

The incidence of direct cannibalization of stories from another outlet varies across the field. The higher the number of stories being 'churned out' per reporter per day, the more likely it is that direct borrowing of copy, including case histories and unverified quotes, will occur. Those reporters with higher status may be able to maintain more control of their own time and therefore the quality of the work they do. As one remarked, 'The trick is to be bossy with the news desk. You have to own your own time' (interview 15: specialist correspondent, national broadsheet).

Improving Access to Stories and Sources

Time pressures are being felt everywhere and reporters are clearly turning round routine news stories at high speed but, at the more 'autonomous' end of the spectrum, follow-up phone calls are still the norm (if only to try and get a slightly different quote) and alternative opinions are sought. More importantly, for those who have the time to explore its possibilities, the Internet is not just a machine demanding more and faster copy, it is also a means of improving the collection of information and greatly enhancing the quality of information gathering:

I was able to get him to send his evidence direct to me by email which meant that process took, you know, fifteen minutes as opposed to arranging a meeting with him for him to give me a paper, which may take him an hour to produce and then, thanks to the new video part of the Parliament website, I could watch him giving evidence from my desk. So I can kind of cover a detailed hearing, but it also means I can do something else that day as well. I don't have to devote the whole afternoon to covering a story. It also means I can file it earlier. (Interview 6: specialist correspondent, national broadsheet)

Google, Factiva, and Lexis Nexis (or other 'cuttings' sites) are the most used tools. They are used to locate people and to find additional information - almost always from official sites or other trusted media. Official websites have massively increased the efficiency of fact-finding. Journalists can trawl the sites to look for reports, press releases, statements and other background information. Much of this would previously have been held in newspaper libraries where it could be accessed by trained librarians; but there is no doubt that for journalists trained to use web-searching tools intelligently, the speed and scope of

the net and the ability to make connections between disparate pieces of information or names, makes it a very powerful tool. Three reporters mentioned original stories they had put together by following a hunch (or a tip) and cross-checking masses of data simply using Google. However, it must be said that very few journalists know how to use web-searching tools. Most simply admit that they write a name into Google.

Reporters who are trying to build up a specialist beat will regularly read online information from the organizations in the field just to keep on top of information and events. The web also allows them unprecedented access to dissenting voices. Press officers may dominate the field when a new product is launched but if it does not work, it is a work of moments to find a website, blog or Facebook group complaining about it. Such comments are fast taking the place of a 'vox pop' picked up on the street. Neither can be said to be verifiable, but the online version can be accessed in less than the time it takes to walk to the lift. Some reporters sign up to forums and participate in online debates in their field, listening out for the kind of chatter that heralds a concern worth following up.

A number of reporters mentioned signing up to a website called *They Work for You*, which sends out email alerts every time a particular MP makes a statement in Parliament; a rather more efficient use of time than trawling through the official transcript every day. The internet also provides a direct line to small organizations which in the past would have had much more difficulty accessing reporters and it allows reporters in a UK newsroom to read papers and journals from across the world alerting them to issues which may not yet have hit their shores.

Of all the web tools it is the 'people finding' and social networking sites that have had the greatest impact. General reporters regularly use people finding sites, including electoral registers and directory enquiries, which can be aligned to produce names, addresses and phone numbers (although at the time of writing there is debate about outlawing the selling of electoral registers):

I mean if you're out on the road you'll see the likes of myself sitting there on the mobile phone to the researcher while I'm on the internet doing my own research. I'll take a laptop but that will get me the wires, it will get me emails, somebody can send me the electoral registers on there, and then I can cut and paste it [the result] into my sat nav. and it will take me there in my car. It's wonderfully Batman.
(Interview 4: general reporter, national broadsheet)

They also use social networking sites of all kinds to track down individuals, and the friends of those individuals. One journalist told me that he had numerous accounts in several countries in order to access such information. Only one reporter expressed any scruples about the use of

material that people would almost certainly consider private. Most felt that, if it could be accessed publicly, then it was public. If there has been a real change it is here and it is not an increase in democracy. Those whose Facebook sites are being trawled for information are rarely the great and the good (they know how to protect themselves). It is young people, often victims of crime, who have no idea how public their information actually is, who are being exposed to public scrutiny. It is hard to see how this has provided any extra power to the individual. It is the journalists who are in control of these interactions.

Face to Face Interactions

Most journalists questioned feel that the time they used to spend meeting sources has been curtailed by the higher speed of work and that this has impacted unfavourably on their ability to get good stories. Those who did manage to find time for meeting contacts were clear that this was important and several people referred to such a meeting as the original source for off-diary stories. It wasn't that these people whispered secrets in their ears; it was more that the informal chat and buzz opened up avenues of questioning which simply would not have arisen in a more controlled setting or via email. One specialist remarked that attending a briefing was worth the extra time because he regularly found three stories worth pursuing rather than just one. Following up press releases may be the bread and butter of daily journalism but it is 'exclusives' that provide the jam - the thing which makes the job worthwhile.

Conclusions

The availability of information is creating better opportunities for checking material, finding alternative sources and improving the reliability, independence and therefore the democratic and cultural relevance of newspapers. At the same time, the speeding up of news reporting and the need to be visible on the net is impacting directly on the quality of follow-up of routine news. It would seem from the evidence here that, far from broadening and democratizing, the Internet is actually narrowing the perspective of many reporters.

Information that is publicly available on the web is being 'cannibalized' and re-angled with minimal verification. Journalists are being used simply to reorder copy or, in the case of large public reports, to look through and pull out the information which is most likely to 'hit the political spot' for their own newspaper.

Given the speed of work, and the sheer amount of traffic and noise that journalists are exposed to every day, it is not easy for ordinary citizens to make direct contact with reporters on national newspapers (although phone calls from members of the public are still a key source for local newspapers) and there was little evidence that reporters are actively monitoring UGC for new ideas and angles. It is not that they are refusing to pay attention to this material; they are simply overwhelmed with information, much of it aimed at them personally. In order to pick out the important information from the 'blizzard' they are forced to create systems of 'filtration' based on known hierarchies and news values.

With so little time at their disposal journalists tend to prioritize known, 'safe' sources, much as Golding and Elliot observed in accounts of television news production in the 1970s. At some newspapers, the combination of staff reductions and speeded-up production schedules mean that only the most established journalists, with the highest level of personal autonomy, will regularly have the luxury of phoning a number of different people to verify information, or probing for alternative views or contradictions. The youngest journalists, in some organizations, are barely leaving the office, making it difficult for them to make the face-to-face contact on which (there was almost unanimous agreement) all original stories are based and damaging their professional development.

The only significant movement towards a broadening of sources and contacts is in the use of social networking sites, electoral rolls and online directories by journalists. This 'virtual doorstepping' has made it very easy to find people who might in previous years have been able to maintain privacy. The overall effect, certainly in relation to general reporting, is that the power of the journalist has grown versus the power of other citizens, not the other way around.

This narrowing of source relationships is not an inevitable consequence of the use of the internet and the response to the speed-up varies according to the kind of organization journalists work for, and their place in the organizational hierarchy. Some reporters are trading speed of access to routine information, for time to work on new stories. However the effort this requires seems disproportionate. Right across the spectrum the sense was that reporters were fighting for the right to work autonomously, against news editors who seemed determined to chain them ever more tightly to their computers. One young journalist had filed thirteen stories the previous day. A dubious record if quality counts for anything.

Where journalists are allowed (or make) the time, there is evidence that alternative sources are making their voices heard. Some journalists are keeping in close 'virtual' touch with small organizations working in their field of interest. Inevitably, given the highly politicized nature of the British national press, reporters will only be keeping an eye on those which are

of interest to their particular audience. There is also evidence that where journalists know how to use web search tools, some are using them to access and cross-check information which would formerly have been very hard to collect. This has certainly increased the scrutiny of politicians in particular. However, training seems to be concentrating more on the techniques of delivery (video and sound) than on routinely used techniques of research.

Newspapers that are too eager to embrace the speed of online news are in real danger of undermining the very point of reporting and the individuality of their 'brands'. The growing and unchecked propensity to 'cannibalize' copy from other newspapers is leading to a greater homogenization of news content. Online it is difficult to maintain 'difference' because stories will simply be stolen by every other outlet. If the commercial reason for producing exclusive material no longer exists then there is less incentive to invest in original reporting. But if news outlets are increasingly borrowing from an ever-decreasing pool of original material there is a real risk of damaging the very material upon which commercial news production is based. Unusually perhaps, the requirements of democracy and commercial survival seem to be pointing in the same direction, indicating a need for reporters to be allowed to move back towards a more autonomous place within the field. Until that happens, one is forced to conclude that the overall effect of the internet on journalism is to provide a diminishing range of the same old sources albeit in newer bottles.