New roles for users in online news media?

Exploring the application of interactivity through European case studies

Brian Trench

In discussions of the information society, technological developments and social relations are often intertwined. Hence the 'wired society' or the 'networked society' becomes both a statement about the telecommunications infrastructure and a metaphor for a society that is more equitable and more open. The notion of 'digital democracy' implies some necessary connection between the provision and adoption of certain technologies and the transparency of political systems. Much discussion of the impacts on news media and on journalism of developments in Internet technologies is marked by a similar elision. The technologies are ‘interactive’, so, it is argued, the provision and consumption of information will also be, in some sense, interactive. It has even been argued that mass media are disintegrating, giving way to user-based media without professional intermediation.

Before the Internet became available to large user bases, The Daily Me – the ‘newspaper’ geared to the individual consumer's needs or wants – had been proposed as a futuristic project. With the roll-out of the World Wide Web as a medium of commercial publishing, the Daily Me found a possible platform. A small but influential group of media professionals became new media advocates, arguing that the function of online media was to give readers what they wanted, through the harnessing of information retrieval software.

Leah Gentry, who had long experience in newspaper publishing, suggested that the assassination of the [US] president was a story that should properly be made available to all, but that, short of such extreme cases, the attention of news media in the online environment had to be focused on giving the readers ‘what they want’ (Harper, 1997). From outside the media professions, Nicholas Negroponte proposed the notion of the newspaper ‘in an edition of one’ (Negroponte, 1995). This represented the achievement of the perfect marketplace, in which the individual consumer is directly linked to the production process.

Daily Me as a non-starter

It is a reminder of how weak the technology community’s understanding of social and psychological factors in technology adoption often is that the Daily Me in its various forms has provem to be a non-starter. Even in the highly attenuated form of personalization services, as found on many Web news sites, the user- or consumer-generated news product has remained a marginal phenomenon. In the discussion in Europe of opportunities for news publishing arising from Internet and related developments, the market-based model of user-driven news has not found a strong echo.

There are, however, many possible intermediate positions between an unquestioning reliance on the broadcast or transmission model of mass media and a reversal of relations to put the consumer in control. The opportunities presented by Internet technologies, and many practices that have grown up in the Internet environment, contain an implicit challenge to much received professional wisdom and theoretical understandings. They draw attention, for example, to how vague the role and image of the news audience are in the theory, professional textbooks and history-writing of journalism.

It is one of the very many valuable contributions of digital media studies to media studies in general that they highlight weaknesses and gaps in established theories and models. Mass media have traditionally relied on their own judgement of what stories are worth telling, on a very largely one-way mode of communication and on an internalized image of their publics. It represents a significant challenge both to received images of journalism within the professional sphere, and to the closely related academic studies of journalism, to put the user/reader/viewer/audience (and the terminology presents its own problems) at the center of the picture. Largely independently of technological developments, there has been a vigorous advocacy in the United States of new forms of 'public journalism' or 'civic journalism', in which the journalist's relationship with the community he or she ostensibly serves has been redefined (see, for example, Rosen, 1999; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Similarly, notions of communication as conversation have been explored in the context of journalism theory and practice. In a rare application of such ideas in a European context, Kunelius (2001) has reported an interesting experiment in applying the conversational mode in the reporting and analysis of public affairs in a Finnish town.

In certain circumstances, however, conversation has already become more than a theoretical notion or experiment. It became a reality, for example, in the heightened publishing activity that followed the events of September 11th 2001. Not only did demand for online information, for multiple sources of information and, indeed, for all media surge in the hours, days and weeks after the September 11th attacks, but the 'audience' became part of the stories. The recycling of victims' and observers' e-mails into the pages of newspapers, of their mobile phone messages into radio, and of amateur video recordings on to television news, brought users into the making of news in remarkable ways.

These experiences raise interesting and challenging questions about the definitions and demarcations of journalism as a professional and social practice, and about the boundaries of news. They hardly support the notion that journalism is redundant, because, as has been claimed, "everyone becomes a journalist" (M. F. Wilson, executive editor of The San Francisco Chronicle, quoted in Bardoel, 1996). But they do give some force to the criticism of journalists for failing to see that they are no longer the exclusive gatekeepers. Steve Yelvington, of Cox Interactive Media, insists that the content of community sites like slashdot.com based on users' contributions should be seen as news (Yelvington, 1999). These experiences also give new force to the analyses, based on consideration of the possible impacts of the Internet, that received theoretical models of journalism based on models of gatekeeping and agenda-setting need to be 'synthesized' with a "theoretical approach that explores the role of journalism as a community builder" (Singer, 1998), that the traditional 'vertical' model of journalism is challenged by the development of 'horizontal' means of mass communication through the Internet (Bardoel, 1996), or that journalists are "losing their importance in communication as authoritative and autonomous producers of messages" (Demers, 1996).

This kind of largely speculative analysis accounts for a significant part of the theoretical commentary on trends in media practice that has grown alongside the emergence of new media forms. A more active field of professional commentary, however, focuses on the ways in

which media professionals exploit the interactive features of the World Wide Web to build new relations with users. In his earlier, more optimistic commentaries on new media developments, John Pavlik (1997) foresaw a renaissance of journalism through the adoption and adaptation of Internet-based technologies. By using features of the Internet that allow information to be presented in personally engaging manner – thus, in a new kind of relationship between producer and consumer – journalism would be transformed. Pavlik offered a view of online journalism's development in several phases, with increasing innovation, and increasing responsiveness to users' interests and inputs. His more recent analyses are rather less optimistic about the capacity of new media, as he once put it, to "transform journalism" but he claims to see "the emergence of... a two-way symmetric model of communication in 21st century news operations" (Pavlik, 2000).

The challenges of online news media

Online news media have to face the challenge of a changed information environment. Many of the sources used in journalism are themselves active as direct publishers. Many individuals within the publics addressed by journalism are active as information-seekers, some too as information-providers. Users may have access to the source material from which news reports published in newspapers, magazines, and broadcast on television and radio are generated. On this basis, it may be argued that journalists need to give greater emphasis to the task of orienting readers within a sea of available information than to that of re-telling the stories. The most valuable contribution a journalist can make in many circumstances is to provide a map of the various positions with appropriate signposts to relevant material. Users may work different routes through news material, according to their own previous knowledge of the topic or their level of interest, assembling multiple meanings. The space in online news media to add context and explanation is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. Allied to discussion forums, this may be seen as redefining news as an open process, rather than as a closed product.

Richer forms of communication between author and reader are made possible in the online environment. The reader can have access to the reporter's original data, can set the reporter's conclusions alongside their own or the reporter's own point of departure, and can submit their own comments to the authors and to other users. These possibilities and practices give added value to news material, but also facilitate diverse user experiences and producer-user interchanges. News that is made transparent in this manner is sometimes referred to as 'open-source' (see, e.g. Katz, 1999), in a conscious echo of the terms in which the technologies of the Internet have been developed.

The Internet as a medium for journalism is culturally charged; it is not a neutral, technical space on to which the relative latecomers of online news publishing can inscribe whatever they choose. The values inscribed in the Internet as a cultural space influence the practice, or at least the context, of online journalism. On the basis of the possibilities for a more dialogical practice, we can identify certain professional values as potentially more important in online journalism than in more traditional forms. These values find concrete expression in the application of specific Web features. They speak to a changed relationship between producer and user.

Arising from the consideration of the forms of online journalism, Jay Black has suggested (1998) that a new model of journalism may be emerging in which stories are presented as "data that are full, rich, textured and comprehensive", or "hypotheses tested and retested from multiple perspectives". Journalists' conclusions should be "publicly verifiable and replicable".

Black also urged that journalists be more willing to accept feedback, give expression to more voices and, overall, be more accountable in their work practices.

This was reflected in the 1996 revision of the professional code of the Society of Professional Journalists, in the United States. The revision was "motivated in part by a sense that new technologies for gathering and distributing information were subtly changing the nature of doing journalism" (Black, 1998). The revised code shifts the emphasis from that on objectivity to one on seeking deep truth from multiple sources, to 'diversity', 'avoid imposing values', and 'dialogue with the public' (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

The greater accountability that Black proposes can be achieved through clear identification of the people and interests behind a site and of the sources used in compiling it. Visitors to a site can then make their own judgement about the validity or likely veracity of the information. The application of accountability can go further: where the source material of a news item – press release, official report, speech in parliament – is available on the Web, as it very often is, journalists can provide a link to that material, allowing the reader to see how it has been used. Active Internet users are accustomed to looking at topics from various sources and viewpoints. On the assumption that increasing numbers of users will become ever more proficient in the medium, news stories could be presented as versions, allowing readers to see how they have been assembled. The construction of news could in this way be made transparent.

New media ethics

In accommodating to the greater responsiveness that 'new media' ethics apparently require, journalists can facilitate responses from and discussion among the readers, giving active encouragement in the form of propositions or questions on which contributions are invited, not merely as reactions to a piece of formal journalism but as elements of public discussion of the issue. The users' contributions might then be the basis of further professional-journalist inquiries and interviews with the 'authoritative' sources.

Journalists who have grown up in the new media, or who have grown over into them, have become accustomed to treat answering such e-mails as an integral part of their job. However, journalists grounded in 'old media' tend to see it as an imposition, or a change of employment conditions to be compensated. Don Siegel, editor-in-chief of the magazine, The Onion, said: "We do feel more in touch with our readers on the Web, just because we get feedback from them, whereas our print version readers don't really write" (Mackintosh, 2000).
Long-established music journalist Karl Dallas declared: "During 25 years writing for Melody Maker comment on my articles was fairly limited, and usually appeared, at the earliest, three weeks after publication. When I started writing about music on the Web, I immediately experienced a completely different timescale and relationship with my readers" (Dallas, 2001).
David Talbot, pioneer Web magazine editor, described his publication Salon as part of a constant feedback loop: "We receive e-mails from around the world that challenge us and provide us with corrections and criticisms. It keeps us honest" (Power, 1999).

An International Labour Organization report on information technologies in the media and entertainment industries reported a BBC News Online executive saying, "We're now gettinn.much greater involvement from the people in the story itself. The journalist's business is becoming much more closely connected to its subjects, and this makes for better reporting and a better relationship between the news organization and its readers. Right now there are four people just sorting through readers' e-mails, so every day we have this immense interaction with our readers. This is fundamentally changing journalism" (International Labor

Organization, 2000).

This acknowledgement of the importance of users'' contributions represents a higher degree of reflexivity than is usually apparent in traditional media. Internet publishers for whom the interactivity of the Web is more than a means of gathering marketing information and hosting opinion polls cannot avoid beginning to see themselves as others see them and, thereby, to question their own values and assumptions. This encourages journalism that is more open to self-questioning than is typically the case for print and broadcast journalism. Using multiple and diverse sources of information to construct stories, as the Web allows and as good practice indicates, also promotes continuous reflection on the manner of doing journalism.

Further, Web journalists have the possibility of tracking the usage of the products they provide, how users move from one part to another, what are their preferences, and so on, through web site user logs. Such information can be valuable guidance in developing editorial policies and layout for a site.

These, then, are some of the possibilities of a changed orientation to users from the producer point of view. But what proportion of users want to follow these paths to additional information or to exchanges with producers and sources? Some studies suggest that enhancements are not wanted, that users prefer more predictable, sequential forms, or even that the demand for interactivity' has been over-stated (Poynter, 2000). Whether it is for such reasons, or for reasons of economy, the potential of new narrative forms and of various forms of interactivity has been weakly realized in online news services, particularly those attached to established media enterprises.

A study of English-language Asian newspapers' online editions noted that "scant use was made generally of the Net's capacity for ... allowing readers to add their content. Options for interpersonal interactivity were virtually nonexistent. Responsiveness to the user was spare as well, on average" (Massey and Levy, 1999). A 1997 survey of users of New York Times online forums showed that they contributed on average twice a week to those forums, but 74 per cent could not remember receiving any feedback from newspaper staff to their messages to staff or to forums (Schultz, 2000). Another US-based survey reported that 33 of 100 newspaper sites ran discussion forums – or, perhaps more significantly, that 67 per cent did not (Schultz, 1999).

Clues as to the attitudes of European media professionals to feedback and interactivity can be found in surveys of Dutch and Flemish online journalists (Deuze and Paulussen, 2002; Deuze and Dimoudi, 2002). Interactivity comes second to speed and immediacy in their ranking of four key concepts but over three quarters of Flemish respondents rated interaction with readers important or very important. Over two thirds of Dutch respondents agreed with the statement that online journalists must sustain a strong interactive relationship with their readers. Nearly three quarters of Flemish and Dutch respondents rate providing platforms for discussion as an important or very important journalistic task. The findings are not unambiguous, however; when compared with Dutch journalists across all media, Dutch online journalists gave significantly less emphasis to giving the public a chance to voice their opinions.

Acknowledgement of the user's importance is an increasing part of media industry discourse. Responding to the invitation of a trade magazine to "name the biggest challenges facing journalists in 2002", the editor of The Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, said: "The readers are in the driving seat: if they want their news on a Personal Digital Assistant rather than newsprint, that's what we had better give them" (UK Press Gazette, 2002). Does Rusbridger's statement reflect a real shift in professional attitudes that is reflected in a new accommodation of users' contributions and demands? Or is it a form of demagogy that masks a marketing agenda?

Case studies

For some possible answers to those questions we turn now to case studies undertaken as part of the European Union-funded MUDIA project[1]. We looked at the roles assigned to users of web news sites in four EU member states, Denmark (DK), France (FR), Ireland (IE) and the United Kingdom (UK). Our approach was to select a sample of case studies in each country – 24 in total – that represented a mix of types, according to the character of the enterprise ('traditional media' or 'Net-native'), the target group or groups, and the visible presence, at first view, of some of the usual interactive features of web sites, such as e-mail alerts, discussion groups and hyperlinks to external sites.

The mix of traditional media and Net-native organizations was skewed somewhat by the need to take account of the activities of other partners in the MUDIA project. Thus, the French and UK samples comprised exclusively Net-native sites, because newspaper publishers and broadcasters in those countries were being surveyed for other purposes in the project. The Danish and Irish samples comprised a mix of traditional media and Net-native enterprises. In the overall sample of 24 case studies, 18 sites were classified as Net-native and six as belonging to traditional media.

The country samples each included general news providers, and sites with more narrowly defined missions to provide news and information exchange on such topic areas as human rights, sport, health, technology or women's issues. It should be noted that the 24 sites were all businesses in the common understanding of the term. Thus, amateur enthusiasts' Web logs and community sites were not included; nor were participatory sites such as the various national versions of Indymedia.

The case studies were conducted during the period between October 2001 and May 2002 and involved reviews of the 24 sites, semi-structured interviews with editorial personnel in each of the organizations, and a survey of editorial staff working for those organizations, together with a control survey of communities of online journalists in each of the four states.

The review of the sites was conducted on the basis of a matrix developed for this study, and in which ten interactive functions were rated as representing low, moderate, or high levels of interactivity and assigned a score of 1, 2 or 3, respectively. The principal criterion for this rating as low, moderate or high was the extent to which the site user was facilitated and encouraged to participate in the site's overall activity.

The scoring system allowed for a maximum score of 20 points; the initial selection process ensured that the minimum would be more than zero. As it turned out, the case studies fell into two larger groups, with ten rated at 13-15 points, one site alone in middle position at 11 points, and the balance of 13 sites rated at 3-9 points. It should be understood that the lower ratings reflected in some cases a generally weak interest in facilitating user involvement, but in other cases, a highly focused use of specific user-oriented services such as discussion boards. The top ten included at least two sites from each of the four countries, tending to confirm that we had achieved reasonably comparable sub-samples. Eight of the top ten were classified as Net-native, reflecting closely (80 per cent) the weight of this sector within the overall sample of case studies (75 per cent). It is already revealing of a difference between countries to which we shall return that the two traditional media organizations represented in the top ten are based in Denmark.

All but two of the interviews with senior editorial personnel were conducted over approximately 40 minutes in their places of work. The two exceptions were interviews with representatives of French sites that were conducted by e-mail, because of practical difficulties

in arranging face-to-face interviews. The interview guide referred to the respondent's knowledge of their site users' profile, the strategies used to build user loyalty, the means provided for the user to give feedback, the use made of the feedback information, the facilities for users to contribute to news content, the weight attached to user contributions in the overall publishing strategy, and related questions.

The analysis of the interviews yielded dominant themes that were grouped under three broad headings – Delivery, Contribution and Editorial Integration. Under the first heading, Delivery, respondents described how they were responding to user demand by delivering services through a range of media alongside the Web, including, and specifically, e-mail and SMS (short messaging service) on mobile phones. Of the 24 case studies, all were rated as having made a commitment to multi-platform delivery.

In some cases, this multi-platform delivery was represented as a form of personalization. The editor of Ananova (UK) coupled personalization and providing "breaking news quickly" – but on topics that users have previously indicated are of particular interest, Ireland.com (IE) emphasized the 'elective' character of personalized news and, in this context referred to the use of databases as a means of storing news so that it can be 'pulled down'.

A common thread of most of the responses was the emphasis on the value of e-mail to maintain regular communication with users. All sites surveyed offered a number of e-mail-based news products that required subscription. Irish Abroad (IE) and Enduring Freedoms (FR) stated that 80 per cent of their users had signed up for e-mail products, and Oneworld (UK) described e-mail as "the killer application".

Several sites offered e-mail alerts based on keywords that users have selected. Electric News (IE) referred to this as matching the users' needs – "they can rely on us to filter a lot of the noise out".

By contrast with this heavy reliance on the older technology of e-mail for building relations with users, the sites surveyed were rather hesitant about committing to newer technologies such as delivery to PDAs (personal digital assistants). Perhaps reflecting the negative experience with WAP (wireless application protocol), in which services are little used, or have been discontinued, the respondents indicated they were waiting for a business model for delivery to PDAs to emerge before moving firmly in that direction. Many stated that they already had the technical capacity to provide such a service. According to Ingenioren (DK), "if there is user demand or if there was a business model for payment for fast news [via PDA] then we could prioritize it".

Under Contribution, the interview respondents discussed a range of means by which users could interact directly with the site, with the editors and journalists, and with other users. Fifteen of the 24 case studies were rated as providing a channel for user contributions, but the degree of emphasis on this aspect of the service differed much more across the case studies than in relation to the delivery theme. For Ananova (UK), promoting user contributions is explicit policy – "we like them to tell us their news". So too for Football365 (UK), which started by providing news rather in the manner of popular newspaper but responded to user demand by increasingly emphasizing the users' comments. Sport.fr (FR) defines its distinctiveness in terms of the possibilities for users to communicate with, and leave their mark on, the site. Irishhealth (IE) presents itself as a source of hard news but publishes all stories with a request for comment, as well as having discussion facilities around individual health themes. Oneworld (UK) has discussion boards on all subject areas and, at the time of our survey, was preparing to start an online collaborative broadcasting service, in which "film-makers, activists, interested people and students" contribute video or audio clips to stories.

However, several of the sites insisted strongly on the limits of such user contributions, Ireland.com (IE) was concerned that its activities should not affect perception of the newspaper, The Irish Times, whose resources, brand and ethos lie behind the site – "people know what The Irish Times is. We don't want to tamper with that". Similarly, the focus of the online edition of the daily newspaper, Jyllands-posten (DK), is on supporting the print edition and the web site does not include strategies for having users shape news content. One Net-native site, Electric News (IE), explained its choice not to include discussion boards on grounds of "what journalism should be". But this site, like others who had also chosen not to provide discussion boards, acknowledged that such services are popular and can build relations.

One form of user contribution found on many of the sites is the regularly updated user poll, on which the users are asked to click on buttons to indicate their 'yes' or 'no' to a given question. Although this is a very limited form of user contribution, operated under strict control by the service provider, it was reported to be popular with users. In some cases, several thousand votes were recorded daily. This may be taken as an indication of users' wish to participate. However, this opportunity for participation is built on a model of journalism that largely obscures the users – for example, Jyllands-posten (DK) admitted that their journalists rarely checked the results of these polls.

We found significant differences between online news services of existing traditional news providers (print or broadcast) and Net-native providers in the strategies adopted towards users. Net-native sites appeared to be attempting more actively to integrate user contributions in their services; they were readier to break away from traditional news structures in responding to user demand. Editorial Integration arose as a strong theme because it was partly in order to ensure greater user responsiveness and better cohesion between the several parts of media enterprises – particularly those with both online and print or broadcast services – that some of the sites surveyed set about integrating their operations in a single newsroom structure. This aspect of convergence was examined more closely in another of the MUDIA studies (see The European Multimedia News Landscape, posted at www.mudia.org). It presented itself for consideration here, under the study of user roles, because respondents saw editorial integration as a means of providing more differentiated content and thus a better, more user-oriented service.

In the early days of online publishing within larger media enterprises, the online divisions were often physically removed from established newsrooms, and populated by staffs of different experience, age, qualifications and culture from those of the established journalists. Following widely reported examples in the United States, but also based on their own specific experiences of the disadvantages of separation, some of the case studies have brought their operations together. Onside (DK), which is the online sports service of the Danish broadcaster TV3, implemented a rotation system under which broadcast journalists spend some of their time in the online service. This was explained as a means of ensuring that the quality of content published online was equivalent to that of the broadcast service.

Ingenioren (DK), a weekly technology newspaper with an online service, established through user surveys that they could meet user demand more effectively through integration of their services, and through the combination of the print journalists' subject expertise and the online journalists' user responsiveness. Jyllands-posten (DK) reported that the news editor of the online service had become "the most central person in our [combined] newsroom". That respondent had taken integration a step further by retraining print journalists to think of the audio-visual aspects or possibilities of their stories in order to guide the production of multimedia content for the online service.

One of the general features emerging from the case study interviews was the lack of detailed

information held by the respondents on user demand and user profile. Only a small number of the 24 news organizations had conducted recent user surveys. The others were relying on older surveys many of which had been conducted by the marketing department and so were focused on the business model and not on identifying user demand for news content. Also, due to a general reluctance to implement mandatory registration sites tended not to be gathering information from their Web servers about user profile. The third part of the empirical study of user roles in online news comprised a survey of media professionals working in the 24 sites selected as case studies and, more broadly, in online journalism in the four countries in which those case studies were located.

Online surveys present several methodological issues that affect their representative, and there is little that researchers can do to eliminate those difficulties. We are making no claims that the survey responses can be generalized to online journalists in the four member states, but these responses do provide some comment and counterpoint to the findings of the case study interviews. The survey was conducted among media professionals engaged in producing online news content in the four member states selected for the case studies. There were two samples: online staff working for the news organizations in our case studies, and a wider group of online professionals working in other news organizations. Notice of the survey was sent to contact persons in each of the case study enterprises for further distribution to their staffs, and to mailing lists and web sites dedicated to discussion of online journalism. The questions under User Profile, Loyalty, Interactivity and User contribution took the form of statements on which respondents were asked to rank their opinion as to whether they: Strongly agree (coded 5); Agree (4); Mixed feelings (3); Disagree (2); Strongly disagree (1). The response from the sample of professionals working in the case study enterprises is estimated at about 40 per cent - we did not have a precise count of the total numbers involved. Responses came from 20 of the 24 case study enterprises. The response rate from the wider community of online journalists was much lower, but is impossible to estimate as there are no figures for this population. The response rate varied significantly across the four countries, with responses from Denmark accounting for nearly half (46 per cent) of all 138 responses received. Responses from France, where the questionnaire was distributed in French, accounted for 16 per cent of all responses, wilh most ul these coming from the wider journalism community.

It cannot be claimed, therefore, that the survey is representative of views within this emerging professional sector, but it can be taken as a useful indicator of professionals' perceptions of users' roles in the broader communication process. There were no significant differences between the responses from the case studies sub-sample and the sub-sample from the wider online journalism community.

Of the 22 statements on which respondents were asked to indicate their opinion, the six that attracted the highest level of agreement are listed below. A rating of 5 indicated strong agreement, and 1 strong disagreement.

Including hyperlinks can make a news story more valuable to users	4.32
Accuracy and reliability in news are the best way to build user loyalty	4.23
E-mail alerts about news help encourage users to return to a site	4.09
I welcome direct user feedback on my work	4.01
Users of our site have more opportunity now to interact with reporters than they did five years ago	3.92
It is important for editors and writers to read user contributions to discussion boards and online polls	3.86

From these and further responses a profile of online media professionals might appear to emerge that is strongly disposed to active engagement with their users. But setting these results

alongside the reviews of the case study sites, and the interviews with those sites'' senior personnel, indicates rather a contradiction between perception and practice. The professionals surveyed wanted very much to 'do the right thing' for their users, e.g. include helpful hyperlinks, take account of their feedback, and read their views. The evidence from the site reviews and the interviews suggested that they did not *do so* to the same degree. A large majority of the stories published on the case study sites appeared without hyperlinks to external sites, and in Jyllands-posten (DK), for example, it was admitted that the journalists rarely visited the discussion boards or read the results of online polls –and this was in one of the more user-responsive of the case studies.

The survey responses point to further contradictions, in that the statement, "I welcome direct user feedback on my work" (rated 4.01, and ranked fourth most strongly supported of 22 propositions), attracted significantly stronger support than the statement, "Users want to interact directly with reports and editors online" (rated 3.47, ranked 15). These responses suggest that professionals see user feedback as desirable in abstract, but much less so when it implicates them individually.

Conclusions

Among the conclusions we drew from this series of case studies are the following:

- There was little evidence of a 'new paradigm' in online journalism, in the sense that this might refer to disappearing boundaries between producer and user
- The traditional model of journalist story-telling based on authoritative selection of the salient 'facts' survives strongly in the new environment
- The traditional model of a newsroom based on clear hierarchies and role demarcations also survives strongly in the new environment
- Interactivity in its many and varied forms is being applied at generally low levels, but unevenly across the online media sectors

Facilities for tracking usage of sites are little used; information captured by these means is not part of a feedback loop to editors, writers and designers We observed also tnat there were discernible differences between member states in the degrees of openness to innovation in producer-user relationships. These differences may be based in part on national journalism cultures, but also in part on differentiated responses to technological developments in the wider cultures of each country. Danish online journalists, whether working in traditional media or Net-native enterprises, were markedly more open to incorporating user contributions, and to professional and organizational innovation, than their counterparts in the other countries. French online journalists appeared least user-responsive and least innovative, with the British and Irish professionals in intermediate positions. These differences were reflected even in the levels of interest in our research itself, as indicated in the responsiveness to requests for interview and to the survey questionnaire. The national differences observed here conform to those observed in other cases, where, for example, EU member states have been grouped as light, medium or heavy users of communication technologies (Servaes and Heinderyckx, 2002). A similar pattern of three clusters was observed in the EU-funded media training project, JetPilot (1998-99), in which the present author participated.

However, the strongest conclusion of the present project had to do with a factor that was not directly on our agenda – economic survival and the business model. Over the period of the

interviews and surveys, and in the months immediately afterwards, significant changes occurred in the status of several of the enterprises, including the introduction of charges at Ireland.com, cessation or suspension of publication by Transfert, Infoscience. Central European Review (later to merge with another online service, Transitions Online), Megastories, and reductions in online staff at RTE, Ireland.com, and Ingenioren.

Reduction in resources tended to mean a reduced effort in developing interactive features of web sites and promoting effective interaction between producers and users. Already in the late 1990s there were signs of retreat from the experimentation of the early phase of Web news publishing. In 1997, John Pavlik, a long-time observer of trends and practices in online journalism, set out a possible evolution of Web journalism from 'stage one', where the emphasis was on 'repurposing' of previously available news content, through 'stage two' where original content with hyperlinks and other interactive features is created, to 'stage three' where content is designed specifically for the Web and involves experimentation with new forms of story-telling (Pavlik, 1997). Pavlik posited that "new media can transform journalism". Two years later, in the same publication, a journalist who spent two years with the online service of Fox News in the United States considered that Web journalism increasingly resembled forms that developed in television and news agencies and that "experiments in story-telling are on an indefinite hiatus" (Houston, 1999).

It may be, therefore, that the shake-out of 2001 merely accentuated and accelerated developments already under way. It should be underlined, however, that the boundaries of the research reported here were set down in terms of the 'media industry'. The sites surveyed were those of more or less conventional businesses; higher levels of innovation and, in particular, greater openness to interaction with users may well be found in the productions of hobbyists and hackers, in community sites and so-called Indymedia. Our assignment was to undertake a 'prognostic study' that would offer some guidance to industry players and professionals. For reasons that should by now be clear, we were reluctant to offer any prognoses. We were all too aware that had we done these studies two years earlier, our conclusions might have been very different and we might have felt greater confidence in pointing to future possibilities or probabilities. We might, consequently, have been more dramatically incorrect in our prognoses.

Our difficulty in this respect relates to a wider problem of trend-spotting which we call the problem of past, present and future. The historical, or past, problem has been one of discerning the continuity and the novelty in online journalism. The descriptive, or present, problem has been one of determining which of the many strands of emerging and current practice can be taken as representative. The prognosis, or future, problem has been one of too often taking hopes as realities. This theoretical and methodological problem has been reflected in the inconsistent use of 'will', 'may', 'should', 'can' in discussion of current and emerging practices.

When, for example, John Pavlik (2000), one of the most prolific US writers on online news practices, says that the inverted triangle form of news story is "becoming obsolete in the online news world", what is the status of that statement? Is it an extrapolation from observation of past and present trends? Is it a prediction? Is it a hope?

In the European context, Mark Deuze (2001) has contributed very valuably to the literature on online journalism. He bases one analysis on 'ideal-typical' forms of online journalism as elaborated by "an increasing number of professionals and academics". Does this reference to increasing numbers give these ideal-typical forms added weight as identifiable practices or trends? Jim Hall (2001) writes in the introduction to his very useful Online Journalism: a critical primer: "Within five years more people in the developed world will get their news from the Internet rather than from a daily paper". He might have been more qualified in his

prediction if he had recalled, that Nicholas Negroponte (1995), looking five years forward from the mid-1990s, had written with the same certainty: “In the year 2000 more people will be entertaining themselves on the Internet than by iooking at what we call the networks today.”

These few examples are intended to underline the difficulty of identifying trends and emerging practices, and, thereby, of offering scenarios and prognoses. Some of this difficulty, as reflected in the published literature, may arise from the provenance and purpose of research in this field. Kopper and colleagues (2000) noted that most research on online journalism is conducted by media institutions and most is privately funded. It tends to be ad hoc, seeking to address conjunctural business or technical issues. From a European perspective, we are also bound to note that most of the defining studies have come from North America. Kopper et al wondered, with justification, if public institutions were finding it difficult to “react to the pace of changes in mass communication”. It may be that companies, professional groups and, indeed, individual researchers are similarly challenged.

References

Bardoel, J. (1996), ‘Beyond Journalism: a profession between information society and civil society’, European Journal of Communication, 11:3, pp. 283-302.

Black, J. (1998), ‘Journalism Nethics’, Convergence, 4:4, pp 10-17.

Dallas, K. (2001), ‘Now The Punters Talk Back’, The Journalist, April 2001.

Demers, F.(1996), ‘Impacts des nouvelles technologies de I'information et communication: destructuration (et restructuration?) du journalisme’, Technologies de I'information et Societe, 8:1, pp. 55-70.

Deuze, M. (2001), ‘Online Journalism: Modelling the First Generation of News Media on the World Wide Web’, First Monday, 6:10 (2001), posted at http://firstmondav.org/issues/issue6_10/deuze/

Deuze, M. and C. Dimoudi (2002), ‘Online journalists in the Netherlands – towards a profile of a new profession’, Journalism, 3:1, pp 85-100.

Deuze, M. and S. Paulussen (2002), ‘Research Note: Online Journalism in the Low Countries - basic, occupational and professional characteristics of online journalists in Flanders and the Netherlands’, European Journal of Communication, 17:2, pp 237-245.

Hall, J (2001)., Online Journalism: a critical primer, London: Pluto Press.

Harper, C. (1997), ‘The Daily Me’, American Journalism Review, April 1997

Houston, F. (1999), ‘What I Saw in the Digital Sea’, Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 1999

International Labour Organisation (2001), Symposium on Information Technologies in the Media and Entertainment Industries: Their Impact on Employment, Working Conditions and Labour-management Relations, Background Document, Geneva: International Labour Organisation.

Katz, J. (1999), ‘Jane's open-source breakthrough: model for news media', posted at http://www.freedomforum.org/templates/document.asp7documentlD=11383_

Kenney, K. (2000), A. Gorelik and S.Mwangi, ‘Interactive Features of Online Newspapers’, First Monday, 5:1 (2000), posted at http://firstmondav.org/issues/issue5 1 /kennev/

King, E. (1998)., ‘Redefining Relationships: Interactivity between News Producers and Consumers’'', Convergence, 4: 4, pp 26-32.

Kopper, G., A. Kolthoff and A. Czepek (2000), ‘Research Review: Online Journalism - a report on current and continuing research and major questions in the international discussion’, Journalism Studies, 1:3, pp 499-512, 2000.

Kovach, B. and T. Rosenstiel (2001), The Elements of Journalism - what newspeople should know and the public should expect, New York: Crown Publishers.

Kunelius, R. (2001), 'Conversation - a metaphor and method for better journalism?', Journalism Studies, 2:1, pp 31-54.
Mackintosh, H. (2000), 'The Revolution will not be Televised', The Guardian (24 February, 2000)
Massey, B. L. and M. R. Levy (1999), 'Interactivity, Online Journalism and English-language Web Newspapers in Asia', Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 76:1, pp 138-151.
Negroponte, N. (1995), Being Digital, London: Hodderand Stoughton.
Neuberger, C, J. Tonnemacher, M. Biebl and A. Duck (1998), 'Online - the Future of Newspapers? Germany's Dailies on the World Wide Web', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 4:1 (1998), posted at http://www.ascusc.org/icmc/vol4/issue1/neuberger.html
Pavlik, J. (1997), 'The Future of Online Journalism: bonanza or black hole?', Columbia Journalism Review, July/August, pp 30-36.
Pavlik, J. (1999), 'New media and news: implications for the future of journalism', New Media and Society, 1:1, pp 54-58.
Pavlik, J. (2000), 'The Impact of Technology on Journalism', Journalism Studies 1:2, pp 229-237.
Power, C. (1999), 'Internet grabs headlines from traditional media', The Irish Times (22 October 1999)
Poynter Institute (2000), Stanford Poynter Project, posted at http://www.poynter.org/eyetrack2000/
Rosen, J. (1999), What Are Journalists For? New Haven: Yale University Press.
Schultz, T. (2000), 'Mass Media and the Concept of Interactivity: an Exploratory Study of Online Forums and Reader Email', Media Culture and Society, 22:2, pp205-221.
Schultz, T. (1999), 'Interactive Options in Online Journalism: A Content Analysis of 100 U.S. Newspapers', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 5:1, posted at http://www.ascusc.org/icmc/vol5/issue1/schultz.html
Servaes, J. and F. Heinderyckx (2002), 'The 'new' ICT environment in Europe: closing or widening the gaps', Telematics and Informatics, 19, pp 91-115.
Singer, J. (1998), 'Online Journalists: foundations for research into their changing roles', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 4:1, posted at www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol4/issue1/sinqer.html
Society of Professional Journalists (1996), Code of Ethics, posted at www.spi.org/ethics code.asp
UK Press Gazette (2002), 'The challenges ahead', UK Press Gazette (4 January 2002)
Yelvington, S. (1999), 'What Every Editor Should Know about Online Reporting', presentation to NetMedia conference 1999, posted at http://www.velvinqton.com/netmedia/1999/netmedia.html
Yeshua, D. and Deuze, M. (2000), 'Online Journalists Face New Ethical Dilemmas: Report from The Netherlands', posted at http://home.pscw.uva.nl/deuze/publ15.htm

Notes

[1] MUDIA, Multimedia Content in the Digital Age, was funded under the EU's Fifth Framework Programme of Research (Information Society Technologies). The project was co-ordinated by Institute of Infonomics, University of Maastricht, Netherlands. For the contribution to the project from the Centre for Society Technology and Media (STeM), Dublin City University, research assistant Gary Quinn undertook the field work.