CBC and the Science Academy:
A Participatory Journey

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The publicly funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has a unique, participatory relationship with the science academy that showcases scientific discovery on the Geologic Journey II website—a site run by CBC. Although academics work on interesting projects that have great relevance to those outside academic circles, their work is generally published in journals or texts that are not often accessed or, in some cases, understood by the general public. On Geologic Journey II, a site created in conjunction with the development of a documentary project, contemporary research is highlighted in a manner that makes it easily accessible to a much wider audience. Through the lens of media logic, using the theories of convergence culture and the public sphere, in this paper, I explore how the partnership between CBC and the science academy invigorates public discourse, and why building relationships with community partners makes good business sense for a public broadcaster.

Keywords : Participatory journalism, media logic, public sphere, CBC

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) is world renowned for its high quality, compelling documentaries. It's not just a matter of good journalism, but public service. Generating these long format stories aimed at shedding light on controversial topics, and others that are being ignored, is an integral part of promoting public discourse within Canada's borders and beyond. Although CBC's documentary department does not use audience input to a great extent in generating story ideas or in the production of films, its websites, created in conjunction with documentaries, are a platform for discussion and are kept current by content and comments contributed by community partners and ordinary citizens. Through the lens of media logic, using the theories of convergence culture and the public sphere, in this paper I explore how participatory journalism in CBC's documentary department invigorates public discourse by allowing debate and reflection, and why building relationships with community partners makes good business sense for a public broadcaster.

Most modern news and current affairs production falls victim to what Altheide and Snow (1979) define as media logic. Media logic is a far-reaching theory that embodies not only news epistemology but news consumption and production. No longer is a journalist's goal, necessarily, how best to tell a story but how best to harness information in narrow, industry-standard formats (Altheide & Snow, 1979). Shot selection, edits, and time constraints often trump editorial heft; entertaining the audience and drawing advertisers is the ultimate goal (Altheide & Snow, 1991). Meanwhile, audiences have become so accustomed to news created within these standardized formats that they identify content as news based on the way it is packaged.

Although Altheide & Snow (1991) don't cite ownership and profit-making as a primary factor in the prevalence of media logic, I agree with Habermas (1991) that mainstream journalism is a system based on prioritizing corporate interests over knowledge building—following standardized formats is easier, faster, and cheaper. In this "factory-like" (Carey, 2009, p. 163) news environment differing perspectives are less likely to be found than information fed from public relations specialists. And as a result of these narrowly defined formats of storytelling, hegemonic, narrow views of reality are portrayed to the public (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Altheide, 2006; 2007). Therefore journalism can't live up to the ideal of a democratic tool of society because the flow of information is limited by news practice itself.

Numerous academics have weighed in on the Internet as the ideal public sphere (Beers, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Dahlberg, 2005; de Zuniga, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009), and as an alternative to traditional news production there are countless options on the web. However, as Gillmor (2009) wrote, absorbing information from the Internet is like "drinking from a firehose" (p. 9). And while often touted as such, the Internet is far from Habermas's ideal public sphere. Although there is most certainly opportunity for ordinary citizens to debate, discuss, and form opinion as equals with no bearing on social status, as Rosen (2010) identified "this has never been a description of how public life in a competitive democracy actually works" (para. 25). In fact, social status prevents many from accessing the Internet (Rutigliano, 2009; Alia, 2010), never mind taking part in any type of discourse. No matter the debate over its functionality, Habermas's theory of the public sphere is a useful tool to explore the effects of participatory journalism on public discourse. However, in order to explore the effects of participatory journalism on news practice a more modern paradigm is required.

Jenkins's (2006) *Convergence Culture* focuses on the wild west of emerging media and their precarious relationship with traditional media. Jenkins's definition of convergence hinges on the impact of independent or citizen producers' work on the practice of media professionals, and the idea that grassroots journalism "diversifies" (p. 268) and broadcast journalism "amplifies." Broadcasters have the ability to reach a wide audience; grassroots journalists and ordinary citizens shed light on perspectives sometimes overlooked by their professional counterparts. This is clearly evident in the partnership between CBC's documentary department and its audience and community partners. Documentary websites like *Geologic Journey II* exemplify participatory journalism practices that promote the dissemination of diverse information, knowledge building, and public discourse.

Definition of Terms

There are many terms used to describe forms of journalism created by, or involving some component contributed by, people who are not professional journalists. Nip (2006) says citizen

or grassroots media are created independently with no influence from traditional journalists; public journalism occurs when citizens are involved but journalists retain the gatekeeper role; and she describes participatory journalism as collaboration between citizens and journalists. However, no such clear lines actually exist. Traditional media often use content created by citizen or grassroots journalists. Independent media, such as documentary producers, work with a variety of news networks and funding agencies; and what is often upheld as a pillar of citizen journalism, *OhmyNews*, is in fact a collaborative effort between 60,000 citizen journalists and 60 professional journalists (Young, 2009), with the professionals vetting the content that appears on the website (Kim & Hamilton, 2006). Singer, Hermida, Domingo, Heinonen, Paulussen, Quandt, Reich, and Vujnovic's (2011) description of participatory journalism as "collaborative and collective-not simply parallel-action" (p. 2) captures the essence of this malleable media. For the purpose of this research, participatory journalism is all journalistic content created collaboratively by journalists, independent media, and citizens, as well as content created independently by citizen/grassroots or independent media that is then acquired or used by mainstream media.

Literature Review

Like all other broadcasters, CBC is trying to find an effective way to operate in a new media landscape occupied by countless media producers where information, true or false, moves at lightning speed. Because of the time required to produce content, this is a particularly difficult environment for producers of long format news and current affairs productions. The use of community partners on the *Geologic Journey II* website provides a template for public broadcasters to maximize available resources and, in so doing, subvert media logic and diversify discourse.

Media logic

Although first defined over thirty years ago, Altheide and Snow's (1979; 1991) theory of media logic accurately represents production workflow in modern-day newsrooms. The actual structure of news programs "define all other journalistic practices" (Altheide & Snow, 1991, p. 76). Entertaining the audience is the primary goal and adhering to story format takes precedence over information sharing. You can watch multiple newscasts created by different broadcasters and find the same "rhythm, grammar, and format" (Altheide, 2004, p. 294) in a variety of news stories. Meeting these established norms often means forsaking context and multiple perspectives (Altheide, 2004; Pikkert, 2007). The resulting prevalence of editorial mimicry (Dahlgren, 2009) creates "a narrowing of the range of information being transmitted by the most readily available media channels" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 222). Thus our "collective consciousness" (Altheide & Snow, 1991, p. 252), or, in other words, public opinion, is built upon incomplete, decontextualized information.

The idea that every news story has a beginning, middle, and end is a staple of story structure in journalism, and perhaps the most widespread media logic misnomer. Although it is possible to tell parts of a story, a story isn't complete simply because a portion of it has played out on television (Altheide, 2004). The issue is not how audiences interpret information, but limiting the flow of information available for interpretation. Documentaries can counteract

this phenomenon because there is more space to tell more of the story. Still, people often accept the truth "as the camera records it" (Sontag, 1973, p. 23), and as Sontag identified "this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks." Allowing information first aired on television to live online, and permitting the public and community partners to add their own perspectives to the narrative, leads to richer public discourse.

Community partners positively impact discourse

Mainstream media no longer hold complete control over the trajectory of news stories; ordinary citizens can support or criticize coverage, or produce their own content (Allan, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2003, 2007; Hartley, 2000; Jones, 2009; Shirky, 2008). Anyone can help determine how an event is recorded in the history books (Robinson, 2009), but quality of coverage varies as widely as the producers sharing stories. This raises a number of concerns. The plethora of information available makes it more difficult than ever to weigh the value of content (Bird, 2009) or the quality of sources (Chy, 2009; Yaros, 2009); content is often aggregated based on a producer's popularity (Meraz, 2009); and extremists build social networks that disseminate narrow viewpoints to a narrow audience (Carey, 2005; Dahlberg, 2005). A great need still exists for quality journalism, filtered sources, and well-researched storytelling. However, the constraints of modern production make creating quality content more challenging than ever and finding new avenues and partnerships to sustain information sharing is essential.

Habermas (2008) said, "Intellectuals should make public use of the professional knowledge that they possess" (p. 22). In other words, academics need to share their often publicly funded research to ensure that the results of their intellectual efforts benefit society. In terms of journalistic efforts, Anderson, Bell, and Shirky (n.d.) identified that "there are many opportunities for doing good work in new ways." CBC's *Geogolic Journey II* website offers concrete examples of strategies that can amplify diverse storytelling in traditional broadcast media. Allowing citizens and community partners a high-profile platform to voice their opinions, share their stories, and contribute content creates a platform for discussion and an opportunity for mainstream news to "rethink its approach" (Freedman, 2010, p. 239). The *Geologic Journey II* website exemplifies participatory journalism practices that promote the dissemination of diverse information, knowledge building, and public discourse.

Methodology

Data for this research was collected as part of a larger study on participatory journalism practices at CBC (Blanchett Neheli, 2011). The goal was to develop strategies that could be transferred to a variety of workplaces; thus I used practical action research (Hinchey, 2008) due to its focus on multiple perspectives and collaboration (O'Brien, 1998). My research included the creation and management of a blog where I engaged with my own online audience and received input that helped shape my findings. Singhal's (2011) work on positive deviance directly impacted my sites of study. I was looking for constructive examples of participatory journalism that could prove instructive to the wider journalism community.

Data gathering and procedure

Data for this study was collected through first person interviews with fourteen

subjects from a variety of departments at CBC in Toronto. These interviews were conducted over a seven-month period, from August 2010 to February 2011 and were, on average, 45 minutes to an hour in length. Due to the reflexive nature of action research, some participants were interviewed on multiple occasions. These interviews, partly because of my own experience working in a newsroom, were often more like conversations framed by open-ended questions about the participant's job in particular, and the industry in general. Three topics, however, were always addressed: should the work of independent media and citizen journalists be incorporated into mainstream broadcast news more often? How does the incorporation of independent media/citizen journalists' work impact the quality of broadcast content and, as a result, public discourse? How is the new information infrastructure (i.e., the Internet, web 2.0 technology) influencing broadcast journalism?

The process was very transparent; I posted transcriptions of all of my interviews on my blog, and reflected not only on the data but my own struggle to analyse its significance. This not only allowed research participants to ensure I was capturing their viewpoints, but to contribute ideas. The end result was a fluid, interactive form of enquiry that subverted media logic by opening up channels of communication and providing multiple perspectives.

Ethical concerns and limitations

While doing research in such an open format provides obvious benefits, it also amplifies obvious ethical concerns, including ensuring the anonymity of my participants. Everyone offering an opinion on the site, and the people I interviewed, were cautioned that their thoughts would be broadcast, sometimes unedited, and I would have no control of how they would be used or where they would end up if comments were copied and pasted elsewhere. The influx of information from multiple sources was also challenging as it caused for constant reevaluation of my analysis, and additional data.

Analysis

The thematic analysis included data from interviews, participant observation, information gathered from comments on my blog, and content on the *Geologic Journey II* website. Typical of action research, quotes from participants were coded and categorized (Stringer, 2007; Seidman, 2006), but specific to this project emerging themes were analysed through the lens of media logic and convergence culture. In the larger study of CBC several categories emerged: resistance to change, audience interaction, centralized ownership, quality of journalism content, and the future of journalism. However, particular to this paper, the *Geologic Journey II* website also showed how using online community partners allows for continued coverage and debate of stories that shouldn't, and can't, be contained within the boundaries of a documentary production. Although I focused on uniquely Canadian publicly funded broadcast television, strategies identified are relevant to the journalism industry as a whole.

Findings

A participatory journey

In creating the *Geologic Journey II* website a relationship was formed with geologists tweeting from around the world, as well as blogger-scientists affiliated with the

University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) who contribute content to the site on a regular basis. The impetus for the site was a documentary series focusing on the earth's development, but it is the content of citizen participants and community-partners that keep it current and make it an incredible resource of scientific study available to the community at large.

In the case of the tweeting scientists the documentary department hired a private company to search out the most influential geologic Twitter contributors on each continent. From a short-list of about 30 people, six Twitter feeds that could provide the most insight into geologic projects happening across the globe were selected. Those feeds appear on the left panel of the *Geologic Journey II* website, providing minute-by-minute updates from researchers. At the time of my research, there was information from geologists tracking plate movement and aftershocks in Japan (Allochthonous, 2011) after a massive earthquake and tsunami that killed tens of thousands of people.

In this unique participatory relationship, the science academy, a public broadcaster, and the public at large all merge in a public space to share and access information that would generally only be discussed in academic circles, a journal article, or textbook. And the tweets just scratch the surface of the information that is available. There was also a blog post about what caused the earthquake in Japan, and an explanation of why those of us living in areas considered "safe" in terms of natural disasters should be better prepared to deal with catastrophes (Eyles, 2011). Several UTSC professors and researchers contribute to the site that offer information that is scientifically based and often has an obvious and immediate relevance to citizens who might read the blog.

For example, within her blog, one of the researchers linked to a UTSC article that highlighted a study she had conducted in Pickering, Ontario that showed contamination levels in Frenchman's Bay "greatly exceeded provincial water quality standards" (Gratton, 2010) because of salt run-off from nearby highway 401. Although this study appeared in *Sedimentary Geology*, academic journals have a very narrow audience—CBC websites have much broader viewership. This multi-layered partnership has the potential to greatly impact public discourse. Jenkins (2006) identified this type of convergence as a "paradigm shift" (p. 254) because "medium-specific content" is being used on "multiple media channels." Two normally disparate communities, the science academy and broadcasters, are coordinating to allow easy access to relevant information, and packaging it in a manner that makes it reachable to a much larger audience. However, Jenkins (2006) observation that this paradigm creates "more complex relations" (p. 254) is also accurate. There are some areas of concern regarding this partnership, specifically ensuring that it is designed to promote information sharing, not UTSC itself.

On my first visit to the site, it seemed some pages were simply a blatant promotion of the university, as opposed to scientific sites of discovery. Subsequent changes did make it seem less like an advertisement; however, a bar still appears at the top of every blog section that includes the line "Find out what it takes to pursue an advanced education in science that may someday put you in the spotlight as an expert guide on The Nature of Things" (Geologic Journey II, n.d.). Some of the articles seem more geared to attracting potential students than highlighting any type of scientific activity.

In a blog post titled *High school students visit UTSC* (Geologic Journey II, n.d.)

there was great detail about the interesting equipment the students were able to use, but no real information on the relevance of the experiment they performed. It was packaged as a scientific blog post—but there was no science in it. If the quality of content being produced is subpar or has a primary goal of its own, in this case free publicity, the actual information being released for public consumption is limited, thus negatively impacting the opportunity for critical public discourse. But the benefits likely outweigh the issues. For a story to live online, it needs to be continually updated and developed, not necessarily by the journalist(s) who created the story in the first place. As EMPLOYEE A pointed out,

> Some of the posts have been really interesting...if there is some kind of news event to do with volcanoes or earthquakes or something like that I can just email them and say, "Can somebody comment on that?" And then it's a good way for me to publish something and I can put that out on our social media tying it to a news event. I don't find it a lot of work, but I find it a useful way to keep the website fresh, because we can't be generating content after the fact.

As Jones (2009) identified, "journalistic production of facts—a traditional defining feature of journalism—is simply no longer good enough in the contemporary context" (p. 138)—the savvy online audience expects stories to be updated and users to be part of the process. *Geologic Journey II* is so effective because community partners are contributing content on an ongoing basis, something the documentary department simply doesn't have the resources to do. Although a better effort perhaps should be made to clarify what qualifies as acceptable material in this type of participatory partnership, informing versus promoting, the relationship between the documentary department and UTSC is an excellent example of how academia and journalists can work together to educate the public —and how scientists can use their own voices to share information, instead of relying on a journalistic translation of their work.

The Doc Zone–Building community and knowledge

Proportionally, a "much smaller audience" may be interested in watching long format stories (EMPLOYEE K), but CBC documentaries are still popular—sometimes garnering viewership of seven or eight hundred thousand people at initial airing (EMPLOYEE A). There is still an appetite for long form journalism that focuses on using the highest journalistic standards and most informative storytelling techniques to build knowledge, not just entertain. In terms of promoting discourse, documentaries are now more easily accessible because they live online after their television debuts, and less concern over space and time constraints allow for even greater information sharing. EMPLOYEE B pointed out that much of the material gathered to create a documentary doesn't make it to television and the web is "a great way to make that material available." As well, a documentary web or social media site is a place where people can go to further discuss and form opinions on controversial matters. Each site is a macro platform for debate in the public sphere, compared to the micro platform of 18th century German table societies, French salons, or English coffee houses (Habermas, 1991).

The juxtaposition of the coffee house and the Internet provides a useful means of comparison because it highlights the concept that location, or proximity, is no longer an obstacle

to involvement for those who have access to technology. As opposed to the citizens of one small community discussing its issues in a public place, public opinion is formed and shaped by an online audience communicating from around the world about events that could be happening anywhere in the world, often from the privacy of their own home. At CBC, attention is paid to ensure no libelous comments are aired and discussion remains respectful, but information is expressed in a manner largely designated appropriate by the participants themselves.

Highlighting stories of community partners and ordinary citizens on a public platform that encourages discussion and action exemplify the ideals of participatory journalism. It is also essential to have sites that help aggregate quality in an age when big corporations like BP can buy Google search terms in an effort to control information sharing online. That's what happened after the oil spill in 2010 (Mathieu, 2010), and more recently when a California water district paid $200,000 of taxpayers money for "glowing coverage" on a website deemed a news channel by Google (Romenesko, 2011). One study found people couldn't tell the difference between "astroturf organizations," what appear to be grassroots sites that actually promote corporate interests, and community activism (Cho, Martens, Kim, & Rodrigue, 2011). If the "potential for depth is where the mainstream media could go to reclaim their relevance" (Bird, 2009, p. 46), the *Geologic Journey II* website seems a perfect example.

Bureaucratic bottleneck

Although the documentary department has an extensive library of content and resources on its website, it seems the size of the bureaucracy at CBC gets in the way of other departments making the best use of it. Several examples were given of the online news department neglecting to link to existing CBC content housed on the documentary sites, and instead using generic Associated Press stories that every other network also carries. EMPLOYEE M says the number of departments and platforms asking for links make it impossible for the main website to accommodate every request: "It's probably not a matter of systemic resistance" but " lack of communication." EMPLOYEE M also believed "more was not necessarily better online" and too many links would put online users off, not draw them to the site. However, unique content can be what singles you out:

> EMPLOYEE A: The only way to differentiate yourself from the other sites is to use content that nobody else has. When the volcano erupted [in Iceland] I had _____ write up a blog post about how he went there six months ago and what it felt like to climb up the volcano and how it was ready to go and how dangerous it was. Nobody else had that. A real geologist who was at the location six months ago—but do you think they used it? I can't understand why not.

First-hand accounts from informed community partners provide more insight and knowledge building than generic stories written by-design to fit any platform. If CBC's goal is to make its website a leader among news organizations and a valuable source to Canadian citizens, it needs to showcase more of the one-of-a-kind content being created by the documentary department, and linking to that material is the easiest way to do so.

Organizational challenges aren't the only type of resistance to increased community interaction. Even among journalists there is a "digital divide" (EMPLOYEE H). Many people

working within the documentary department are unfamiliar with how to use social media as a resource, promotional tool, and platform for public discourse (EMPLOYEE A). Several employees identified lack of time and training as key issues in understanding and using social media. EMPLOYEE I said one reason some journalists don't incorporate or use social media is that "they don't believe in it." In order to move forward as an institution CBC needs to confront the schism between those who think participatory sites and social media are useful tools and those who see them as journalistically irrelevant, which might best be tackled through new media training.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The formalized relationship between CBC and UTSC is an example of participatory journalism that widens discourse in the public sphere, shedding light on dialogue within a specific community and making it accessible to the rest of society. Academics work on interesting projects that have great relevance to those outside academic circles. Unfortunately, most people don't have access to the journals or texts their work is published in, or can get through the often complicated and dense papers their findings are housed in. On *Geologic Journey II*, contemporary research is highlighted in a manner that makes it easily accessible to anyone who accesses the CBC website. Although CBC needs to be careful that the content contained within this site is central to building knowledge, not promoting the university itself, the site provides a great opportunity to showcase scientific findings and make them accessible to a wider audience.

The resistance of the main website to link to documentary websites, whether it be systemic or not, also needs to be addressed. The doc material is unique, well researched, and often written by someone with first-hand experience in the subject matter. If CBC wants to continue to serve its mandate to inform Canadians and therefore promote informed discourse, it only makes sense to showcase original content as much as possible.

Notes

Since the time of my data collection, the information on *Geologic Journey II* has become dated; the last UTSC blog was posted back in August 2011 and at last check the Twitter feed wasn't working. EMPLOYEE A said this is because it's hard to track content in the long term with so many new projects coming online, but efforts were planned to fix a complicated technical glitch with the Twitter feed. Despite these setbacks, *Geologic Journey II* still provides a valuable model of how mainstream media can build partnerships and create content with its community—and that type of forward thinking is what will keep CBC relevant.

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