

Visitor Generated Content (VGC) and Ethics – what we might learn from the media and journalism

Dr. Jenny Kidd, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University kiddjc2@cardiff.ac.uk @jenkidd

It strikes me as pertinent that, as we embark on our journey with VGC over the course of the AHRC project – iSay (see www.isayevents.wordpress.com) - before we cosy up to this term VGC, before we accept the frames within which participation is being engendered in our museums and galleries, that we see what, if anything, can be salvaged from the experiences of others.

I set myself the challenge of trying to condense the literature around USER-generated content (UGC) that has been emerging for a decade or more in media and journalism studies, with a view to seeing what pitfalls we might wish to avoid, what challenges we might come across, and what opportunities we might embrace as we go forward. Surely, if our media industries, most notably of course the BBC, have been doing this for ten years there must be some reflections emerging about what constitutes ethical practice, what a successful UGC project looks like, and how we might embrace the democratic potentials of the media. Yet, if it is these things we are interested in, I have to say it all makes for rather depressing reading - the reasons for that will become clear. Nevertheless, I promise we will end on a point of clarity, a positive of sorts.

First, I'll give you some headlines from that literature, focusing on what is seen to be the potential added-value of UGC for audiences, and institutions. Then I'll come on to talking about what I think this means for us in consideration of 'the museum'

Framing UGC – Audience value

In the literature, there are a number of claims made about the potentials of UGC that are no doubt familiar to us:

- That they might provide a means for influencing traditional media to diversify their content and the range of voices on offer. That they might provide voice to those disenfranchised and marginalized by corporate media.
- That the media might benefit from the omnipresence of the citizen journalist; that news might become more immediate, relevant, and truthful to the experiences of people on the ground
- That it might engender increased social connections between people (as in much of the talk about Web 2.0)
- That it might decrease gatekeeping to the production of news, and to the setting of news values
- That increased production of online content might translate into increased civic engagement in both online and offline contexts
- That it might similarly result in increased participation in the life of one's community.
- That it might result in increased psychological empowerment
- That it might facilitate a re-conceptualisation of the audience as an active citizen rather than an active consumer

The last of these is a particular pre-occupation of much of the media studies literature.

Traditionally 'the audience' has been understood and defined through its homogeneity and passivity and understood most readily through its patterns of consumption, defined and addressed, indeed ascribed use-value, in advertising.

But with the advent of digital technologies and the audiences capacity for UGC, the rhetoric (at least as regards the potentials of media) has shifted. Theoretical models for understanding audiences have proposed that our uses of media are more active, goal oriented, and that, in actual fact, we should be talking about the people 'formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006). This phrase, used most famously by journalism professor Jay Rosen has become something of a manifesto for proponents of UGC and web 2.0. The implications being that UGC recognizes the multi-faceted, distributed, increasingly vocal, and increasingly powerful, nature of digital citizens.

Most of the literature is however inconclusive about how far this has happened within the media and journalism. And some of it argues that, under the auspices of empowerment, democracy and interactivity, quite the reverse has taken place. That in most instances, ‘Participation [in UGC] (irrespective of its level) does not automatically equal either production or power’ (Jonsson and Ornebring, 2011). In fact, according to Jonson and Ornebring, calls for UGC in mainstream media continue to do so within a context of consumption ‘Users are identified as consumers but approached as citizens’ (141). We perhaps think we have power, voice, and the attentions of the media, but subtly, and troublingly, our contributions are undermined and undervalued, or sought only at the level of the innocuous and banal.

The research shows that UGC is most often sought – generated – in the arena of the everyday or popular culture, leaving the ‘serious business’ of information, hard factual news and politics to the professionals. (Jonsson and Ornebring, 2011, Paulussen and d’heer, 2013). This leaves UGC firmly in the realm of the cultural public sphere or the private sphere, which is not traditionally linked to democracy or the political sphere, raising questions about the democratizing potential of the media. Divisions of tasks and labour between amateur and professional then remain very much unchanged.

As such, according to Jonson and Ornebring, ‘UGC represents *both* an empowerment of citizens and an “interactive illusion” (141) UGC, they say, ‘could represent new opportunities for representation and recognition for groups outside the mainstream, but based on the evidence of this study it currently does not’ (140). Leung says that it is possible that ‘through participation, empowerment may emerge’ but issues a warning that ‘a lack of *meaningful* participation ... can be disempowering.’ (Leung, 2009: 1331)

Framing UGC – institutional value

So what then of the claims that made about the Institutional value of UGC? Why would institutions be motivated to pursue the UGC agenda?

The reasons that it has been ascribed value in the media and journalism broadly tend to fall into four categories that keep cropping up in the literature:

Firstly, the value of the content's contribution - That the content itself is valuable - whether it's a comment on a news story, a digital story, or a video that eventually gets shown on the news perhaps. (As we've seen in actual fact it gets used in very circumscribed ways) Secondly, it is seen as being a core part of development and an indicator of innovation. Thirdly, it has use-value as a branding strategy - a way of creating and upholding close relationships to audiences. And lastly, and perhaps least imaginatively, that the user's personal trail of information might have value. That is, it can be used or sold to advertisers (profiling). In this view, the active user is a 'tool' for the companies to exploit in order to create other kinds of value (eg economic through advertising). (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012)

But alongside this, the literature reveals a staggering number of *negative* associations made by the professionals who took part in the various research projects, who mostly view UGC and its possibilities in very conservative terms. This especially seems to have been the case in research at the BBC (Thuman, 2008; Williams and Wardle, 2010; Williams et al, 2010):

In sum, professionals remain skeptical about quality of UGC and its value (Paulussen and d'heer, 2013) – talk about 'loser generated content' rife in newsrooms in mid-noughties. UGC is understood as ...

- Always potentially inaccurate, false or untrustworthy
- Imbalanced and lacking objectivity and impartiality
- Libelous
- Lacking in authority
- Outside of editorial control and standards
- Rejected a 'real' journalism
- As being overblown in terms of how its potentials have been debated - that it is not that revolutionary
- It is 'raw material' and editorial control remains very much in the hands of the 'experts'.

And contributors are often understood as crackpots or extreme in their viewpoints.

As such, its no wonder that moderation has been such a key factor in the discussion about UGC. In one study, more than 80% of content produced by members of the public was pre-moderated (Thurman, 2008, although this is now changing with the BBC especially spearheading post-moderation). As such, UGC comes to be seen as ‘material to be processed’ (Williams et al, 2010). Moderation is a costly business in resource terms, and is seen by the professionals as an onerous, uninspiring and time-consuming task.

According to the research, at the BBC at least, UGC remains outside of the mainstream or on the margins. As such according to a colleague of mine and his co-authors in 2010 ‘the public ‘subsidise’ the corporations newsgathering efforts’ (Williams et al, 2010: 96) rather than becoming collaborators in the process as might be the aspiration. The ”participatory and democratic possibilities of UGC are often an afterthought, if they are mentioned at all’ (according to Williams and Wardle) and, overwhelmingly, ‘journalists have remained journalists and audiences have remained audiences’ (2010: 792). So much for the prosumer in this context. UGC is pure source material and is processed as such.

So, there I was thinking the view looked very bleak indeed. What could I conclude from all of this that would be valuable, or give a nod to how we might like to proceed in the museums sector?

And then I found a paper in *Journalism Studies* by Hanska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) that began to present an alternative narrative of what is happening at the BBC with regards to UGC. And all because of this moment:

[IMAGE: ARAB SPRING]

Research carried out into the workings of the BBC during and after the Arab Spring starting in 2010 tells a more complex and, I think, encouraging story. A series of interviews with BBC news editors and producers who had turned to UGC as a means of documenting the Arab Spring had been forced to re-consider their positions on it, and *negotiate* a new stand point.

The use of UGC in this context (which ultimately became one of the major stories of the Arab Spring) began in an ad hoc manner, but over time, became much more of a collaborative endeavor. As the BBC became more confident in their use of UGC so too did the creators of that content. The workflows of the newsrooms had to find ways of accommodating the content, and so too, the creators had to find ways of meeting the ‘requirements’ of the journalists. It became clear that content that could not be verified could not be shown, so protesters began using establishing shots to verify their positions and timings. As it became clear that content of higher quality would be more likely to air, so the protesters started producing higher quality output. The BBC became better able to find and prompt UGC that would tell the story in ways that allayed the fears we recounted earlier (see Hanska Ahy and Shapour 2013 for more).

This might seem like a cynical practice of containment and institutionalisation – shaping the use of the media so it fits the pre-existing frames and requirements of journalists, and so it might have been, but it might equally be understood, the researchers say, as the creators learning how to ‘game’ the system – to utilize it to tell their story. Even to set the news agenda in their favour.

This, I think, indicates a new, and more creative, tension.

Those who were involved in the revolt used the institutional framing of the BBC to mark authority, legitimacy and give voice to the content that they had created. At the same time, the ability to tell the story using this content conferred legitimacy on the BBC as a news organization even when they could not be there on the ground. A more symbiotic relationship perhaps than we started with.

It’s taken a long time to get to that point, and it strikes me that we in the museums sector, could do to speed up the process of ‘becoming ethical’ in our dealings with UGC/VGC.

This discussion of uses of UGC highlights the importance of contextualizing such activity. Making statements about *why* the activity is being encouraged/recognized, *where* it is

happening, *who* is representing the host institution within the various forums, *what* forms of activity will be most useful, and *how* the audiences themselves can sculpt and navigate the engagement are all crucial to the success of VGC. Understanding how to read the frames within which such activity is being encouraged and experienced (or within which it happens unprompted or unfacilitated by an institution of course) is also crucial. When the way a project is framed, and the way it is understood, are in alignment, a user will better understand the context for the activity, what is expected of them, how their contribution will be valued and crucially, how it will be 'institutionalised'.

Risk-averse museum cultures often mean participatory projects do little more than pay lip-service to notions of empowerment, interactivity and democracy (if you don't believe me, see Bernadette Lynch's research (2011, 2013), or my own (2009, 2011 forthcoming 2014). Nina Simon says that the 'holy grail of social discourse [is] where people interact directly with each other *around* content' (Simon, 2007. My emphasis). With UGC, the participants and their voices *become* the content, and the ethics of this need more consideration. There is something of a commodification of community occurring; UGC communities arising around cultural institutions are being ascribed value, but what kind of value is less clear. Perhaps, for the moment at least, being seen to be involved in this kind of activity is the end goal in itself. Conflating the ease of launching UGC initiatives with assumptions that the dialogues they elicit will be easy to 'manage' shows a fundamental mis-understanding of the nuances of the various platforms within which they take place.

The museum continues to highlight a number of knotty juxtapositions; public experiences and private engagements, personal and communal pasts, singular narratives and multiple viewpoints, subject and object, onsite and offsite, history, memory and forgetting. VGC can of course potentially help the museum to illuminate and explore some of these tensions with their visitors, but only if their use is framed and understood in alignment. Without such alignment, museums run the risk of alienating, frustrating, appropriating or dis-empowering through the very media whose rhetorics of democracy, community and inclusion they have found so seductive.

A number of questions arise for further research, and for debate within and beyond the museums sector: Is the museum interested in the quality of process or the quality of product

of the VGC? Do the creators feel the same? Is it audience led or content led? How does VGC fit within the processes of institutions' workflow models? What if it doesn't? What does the institutionalization of VCG look like in the museums context? Is it a process of incorporating those media, or (the more cynical sounding) containing them? What is the role of the cultural public sphere? And ultimately, will the financial 'bottom line' be the determinant of the place of UGC in the museum of the future?