

## ‘It’s Genuine, as Opposed to Manufactured’: A Study of UK News Audiences’ Attitudes towards Eyewitness Media

Pete Brown

July 2015





# Contents

Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction	5
2. Methodology	9
3. Findings	13
4. Conclusions	47
Bibliography	51
About the Author	53



## Executive Summary

The aim of this research project is to understand news audiences' attitudes towards eyewitness media, a subset of user-generated content covering photos and videos captured by people unattached to the newsroom but relevant and useful for news journalists.

We show the following.

- Audiences have embraced eyewitness media as a vehicle for newsgathering and storytelling. Across our groups, unaffected by age or background, there was consistent praise for (a) the immediacy it brings to news coverage and (b) its perceived authenticity.
- Audiences are often highly sophisticated in their understanding of quite nuanced aspects of the news they consume – perhaps more so than they are sometimes credited for. Far from being passive, uninterested 'consumers', participants in all of our groups were extremely thoughtful in their assessments of eyewitness media's contribution to journalistic output. They were knowledgeable of its strengths and accepting of its weaknesses, recognising the compromises it requires of them as news consumers (e.g. lower quality footage in exchange for immediacy).
- Concurrently, however, in areas that concern the professional practice and legal framework for news production, news audiences' knowledge and understanding is rather less developed. For example, while the ability to verify eyewitness media is among audience members' foremost expectations of journalists, few have any real grasp of what this process entails, how difficult and time-consuming it can be, or the extent to which skilled journalists are able to corroborate the authenticity of a piece of content. Additionally, they are largely oblivious to the legal issues surrounding news outlets' use of eyewitness media.
- While audiences appear highly progressive in their embrace of eyewitness media, they retain rather more traditional ideals regarding their expectations of journalists. They look to news professionals to 'add value' by (a) identifying only the most newsworthy 'amateur' material – separating the news from the noise of social media – and (b) verifying content to ensure its authenticity prior to publication. Some also express an expectation of journalists to protect them from graphic/distressing eyewitness media. In this regard, the findings of this research credits journalism with a more important and more central role than is sometimes assumed when it comes to digital media. It also shows that audiences do not judge content differently just

because it is based in whole or in part on eyewitness media, but bring a broader set of expectations they have of news journalism as such and of specific brands in particular to their engagement with eyewitness media used by news organisations.

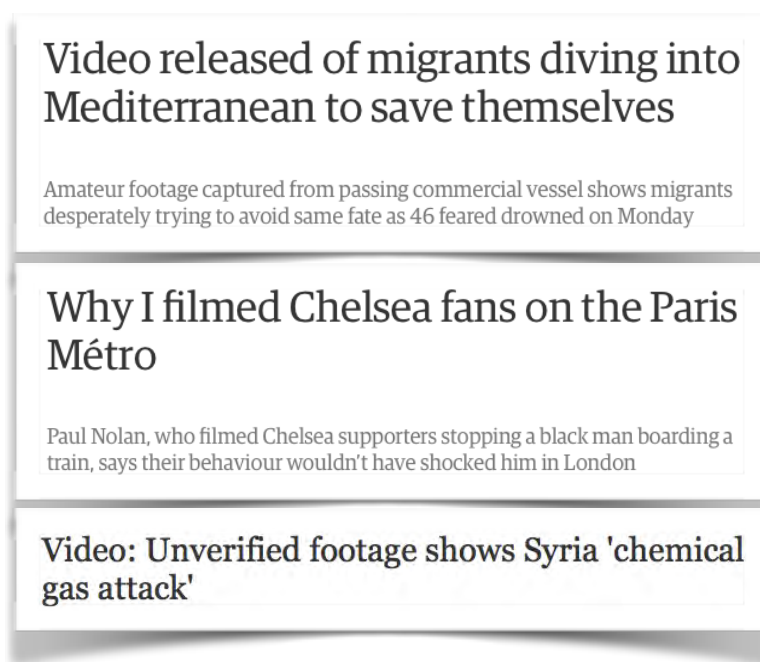
- At times audience members expressed a preference for eyewitness media over content produced by professionals, citing a heightened level of intimacy and authenticity. Eyewitness media, some people suggested, had aided their ability to comprehend complex stories or relate to them in a way they did not feel would have been possible if they had been solely reliant on professional news output.
- Although immediacy is very highly valued by news audiences of all backgrounds, this comes with caveats. There appears to be minimal appetite for unverified content and participants were far more likely to endorse waiting for eyewitness media to be vetted than be served content that could be inaccurate or misleading.
- Audience members – potential eyewitnesses/content creators of tomorrow – frequently expressed disdain for the process through which many news organisations currently seek to secure permission to use eyewitness media. The permission requests were variously described as confusing and intimidating, while some participants said their wording would make them less inclined to share content and may encourage them to demand payment. This is counter-intuitive to news production and the current situation seems untenable.

The analysis is based on 10 focus groups conducted in various locations around the UK. In the focus groups we explored audience members' awareness of and attitudes towards the manner in which eyewitness media is gathered, verified, and used by journalists, structured around the following six questions, discussed in more details in the rest of the report:

1. What *qualities* do eyewitness media bring to news output?
2. How do they see the importance of *verifying* eyewitness media?
3. What is their attitude towards the importance of *crediting* eyewitness media?
4. To what extent do they feel news organisations have an obligation to *label* eyewitness media?
5. What are their attitudes towards the process through which journalists seek *permission* to use eyewitness media on social media?
6. What *reservations* do they have about eyewitness media in the news?

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of people using smartphones and other portable devices to capture and share newsworthy moments is inescapable. From the shocking images of people desperately trying to escape a sinking dinghy in the middle of the Mediterranean to Paul Nolan's video of Chelsea supporters racially abusing Souleymane S on the Paris Métro to activist footage documenting the ongoing atrocities in Syria and Iraq, this content, captured by people unattached to the newsroom, has become a cornerstone of the contemporary news landscape.



**Figure 1. Headlines of stories told through eyewitness media**

This 'amateur' footage is often described as user-generated content (UGC), a broad, all-encompassing term that can suffer from meaning all things to all people. The BBC (2014), for example, takes UGC to mean 'digital video and images, mobile text messages, blogging, message boards, emails and audio submissions'. Similarly, Anderson (2013) takes 'quite a broad and literal view of user-generated content' so as to cover 'any content not created by [a news outlet's] staff', including photos and videos, blog posts and other written articles, and comments on articles, columns, or analysis. This report, like the other work I have done in this area (see Brown, 2015; Wardle et al., 2014a, 2014b), focuses on a specific subset of UGC, namely the digital *media* – photos, videos, and audio – of newsworthy moments or events captured by non-professionals unattached to the newsroom. As such, it is not concerned with text-based content (blogs, message board posts, emails, comments, etc.) or anything else that does not fit into this definition. With my colleagues I have argued that UGC is too broad a term to adequately reflect this subset of

content or the phenomenon from which it emerges (see Eyewitness Media Hub, 2014). Our preferred alternative is 'eyewitness media' and this is the term that will be used throughout this report.

The phenomenon of eyewitness media has blurred the line between news audiences and news producers. Rapid advancements in mobile technology, coupled with the proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and, more recently, Periscope and Meerkat, mean that anyone armed with a smartphone has the capacity to document and broadcast events in a way that was previously the exclusive realm of professional journalists. Despite resistance in some quarters, there is no denying the impact eyewitness media have had on the news industry in recent years. As Richard Porter, controller of BBC World (English), put it, this content 'has become a central element of the newsgathering process now. No question about that' (quoted in Wardle et al., 2014b: 21).

But while much has been made of the extent to which eyewitness media have infiltrated news output and the impact they have had on professional journalists' workflows, relatively little is known about news consumers' attitudes towards this content. Indeed, work in which I have been involved has covered content studies of broadcast television (Wardle et al., 2014a) and online newspapers (Brown, 2015), interviews with uploaders (Brown, 2015) and a production study of news managers and journalists (Wardle et al., 2014b). Up to now audience research has been the missing piece of the jigsaw.

The purpose of this research is to explore knowledge of and attitudes towards eyewitness media among UK news audiences. It was designed to answer six research questions:

1. What qualities do UK audiences believe eyewitness media bring to news output?
2. What are UK audiences' attitudes towards the importance of verifying eyewitness media?
3. What are UK audiences' attitudes towards the importance of crediting eyewitness media?
4. To what extent do UK audiences feel news organisations have an obligation to label eyewitness media?
5. What are UK audiences' attitudes towards the process through which journalists seek permission to use eyewitness media on social media?
6. What reservations do UK audiences have about eyewitness media in the news?

These questions were designed to examine the same areas of eyewitness media as were explored in our earlier studies of journalists' production



processes/workflows (Wardle et al., 2014b) and output (Brown, 2015; Wardle et al., 2014a), thereby completing the trinity of *production*, *content*, and *reception*. To address these questions we conducted 10 focus groups in various locations around the UK, including participants whose ages ranged from 16 to 87. These proved so fruitful that, despite originally planning to conduct 12 focus groups, we took the decision to stop after 10 as we felt we had reached ‘theoretical saturation’, i.e. the point at which ‘comments and patterns began to repeat and little new material was created’ (Livingstone and Lunt, 1993: 181, see also Bryman, 2012).

The findings outlined in this report focus solely on the UK and are intended as a building block in our wider attempts to understand audience responses to eyewitness media. After all, eyewitness media are a global phenomenon. Even in countries where they have not necessarily penetrated the mainstream news media to the extent one might expect, such as India, for example (see Bélair-Gagnon and Agur, 2013; Brown, 2015), it is predicted that this will soon change as mobile technology becomes more accessible and online infrastructures rapidly disseminate and improve (see e.g. Barot, 2014). In countries where it is already a mainstay, our earlier cross-national work around content and production has highlighted numerous similarities in terms of how eyewitness media are gathered, handled, and used by international news outlets (see Brown, 2015; Wardle et al., 2014b). Thus, while we may hypothesise that there are likely to be similarities in audience members’ awareness of and attitudes towards eyewitness media across countries (particularly those where major news outlets make frequent use of this material, such as Australia, France, USA), it would be injudicious to make any such claims without supporting empirical evidence. Indeed, a cross-national study of audience attitudes towards eyewitness media is an area in which future research would be hugely beneficial.

This report is structured in accordance with the research questions outlined above. In the following chapter I outline the methodology employed in this study. I then present findings regarding audiences’ attitudes towards eyewitness media in the news before exploring more specific areas around the verification, crediting, and labelling of this content. To conclude the findings chapter, I discuss some of our participants’ reservations about eyewitness media, paying particular attention to discussions around graphic and/or distressing content.



## 2. Methodology

We conducted ten focus groups with a total of 52 participants, whose ages ranged from 16 to 87. Focus groups took place in Brighton, Manchester, Norfolk, and Stratford upon Avon in March and April 2015.

Group no.	Description	No. of people	Gender	Ages
Group 1	Online acquaintances	6	5f, 1m	20s–40s
Group 2	Online acquaintances	3	3f	20s
Group 3	Online acquaintances	9	1f, 8m	30s–50s
Group 4	Friends	4	2f, 2m	20s–30s
Group 5	Friends	3	1f, 2m	20s
Group 6	Friends	6	5f, 1m	20s–30s
Group 7	Badminton club members	4	5f	60s–80s
Group 8	Undergraduate students	5	3f, 2m	18–19
Group 9	Sixth-form students	5	2f, 3m	16–17
Group 10	Bridge club members	7	5f, 2m	50s–70s

**Figure 2. Composition of focus groups**

All participants were chosen on the basis of having an active interest in the news (the criteria for this was that they engaged with a visual form of news every day, i.e. television, online, newspapers). Some groups were chosen because they were active users of social media (the foremost source of most eyewitness media) and were expected to have particular knowledge of, or perspectives on, news gathered and shared via the social web. Others were chosen because, as a group, they were not necessarily expected to have any special knowledge of social media and were more likely to engage with the news via the more traditional platforms of television and newspapers (e.g. an over-60s badminton club and a bridge club). In all cases, groups were designed to be broadly representative of the ‘interpretive communities’ in which people might typically discuss news stories (Kitzinger, 2004: 174). Efforts were also made to include participants with a wide range of demographic characteristics. Some groups were specifically targeted to ensure a wide range of ages were included in the sample (e.g. sixth-form students

and over-60s badminton players) and locations were chosen so as to include (a) middle-class suburbia and more traditionally working-class urban areas, and (b) towns and cities in a variety of geographical locations, hence a town on the south coast (Brighton), rural areas in the east (Norfolk), a market town in the Midlands (Stratford upon Avon), and a major city in the north-west (Manchester). In every instance, recruitment took place via an intermediary known to a member of the research team. Intermediaries were given details of the eligibility criterion and liaised with the lead researcher throughout the recruitment process.

When planning the research we had targeted groups of five or six persons. Following best practice guidelines we over-recruited for each group. Varying levels of attendance meant that groups ranged in size from three to nine, with an overall average of between five and six. All groups were moderated by Pete Brown, with additional assistance from Jenni Sargent (Groups 1–3) and Dr Mary Ellen (Group 9). All participants were asked to sign a consent form confirming their willingness to be recorded and, where necessary, quoted in the final report (all names have been changed to ensure participants' anonymity). Focus group discussions were recorded with iPhones and dictaphones. The resulting recordings were transcribed by Pete Brown.

All focus groups lasted around 90 minutes. They followed the same structure and were divided into three sections. They began with a general discussion about participants' news consumption habits and their awareness of eyewitness media in the output they consume. All participants were asked if they could recall specific stories that had contained an element of eyewitness media and whether they associated this content with particular types of news stories and/or platforms. This was followed by a modified version of the 'news game', a focus group exercise devised by the Glasgow Media Group that asks participants to assume the role of a journalist and actively construct their own news bulletin (for a full discussion of the 'news game', see Kitzinger, 1990). In our version of the news game, participants were divided into small teams and given the following scenario.

It is 10.30pm on a Friday night. You are part of a skeleton staff working in the newsroom of emhubTV, a 24-hour rolling news channel. News is emerging on social media that a police helicopter has crashed into a busy pub in Glasgow city centre. No journalists have had a chance to reach the scene and your editor wants a story ready to go to air in 20 minutes.<sup>1</sup>

---

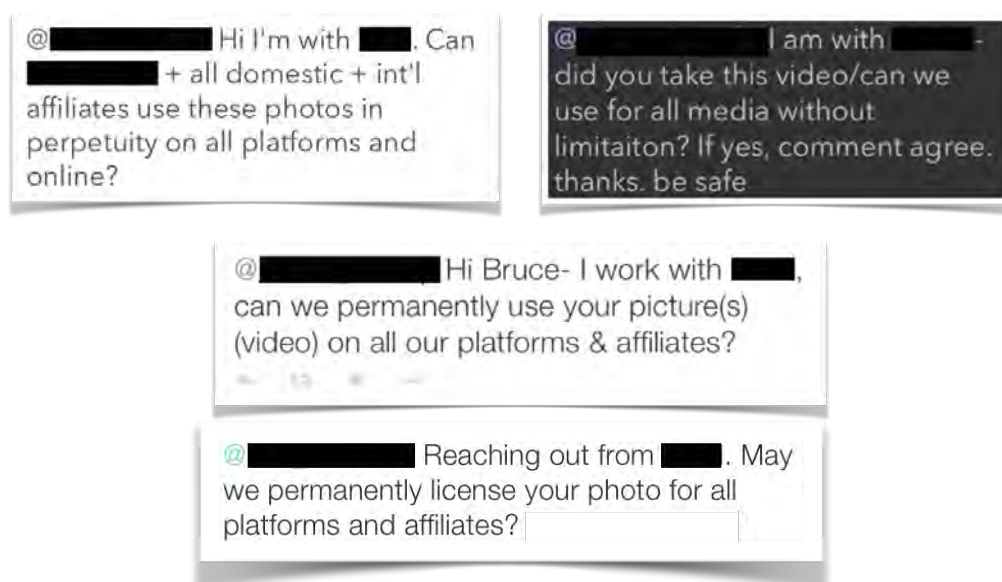
<sup>1</sup> This scenario was based on the Glasgow helicopter crash of 29 Nov. 2013. This specific event was chosen because it had featured prominently during our study of global TV news and we had access to a wide variety of the eyewitness media that had been used during the broadcasts included in our sample (Wardle et al., 2014a).

Each team was given a folder containing information about the story, sticky labels with which they could add 'onscreen' information, and 18 A4 cards, each of which showed how a different graphic, photo, or video relating to the story would look if used during the broadcast. Each card contained fictional information about the specific piece of content, designed to stimulate discussion about the aspects of eyewitness media that interest us and which related to our research questions (e.g. information about the item's source, the content creator, its verification status, crediting information, whether emhubTV had the content creator's explicit permission to use the image, etc.). Although 14 of the 18 cards showed media said to be eyewitness media (11 of which were genuine pieces of eyewitness media produced during the Glasgow helicopter crash of November 2013), we deliberately included a range of non-eyewitness media items similar to those used by 24-hour news channels when news of the real-life crash first broke so that participants were able to construct a story without eyewitness media if they so desired (e.g. breaking news graphics, a stock image of the pub, satellite images of the area, etc.). Videos were made available via tablet computers. Participants were then tasked with deciding which media items they would use in their *ideal* news bulletin, as opposed to constructing the story they would expect to see (i.e. although the role-play exercise required participants to take on the roles of journalists, they were asked to use their knowledge and expectations as *audience members* to guide their editorial decisions). On completion of the news game, each team was asked to present their bulletin to the group and then talk through their rationale for including/excluding media items.

Using the news game as a springboard for broader discussion, we then explored participants' knowledge of and attitudes towards a variety of issues relating to eyewitness media and the news, including:

- the value (or otherwise) of eyewitness media to news output;
- the importance of labelling eyewitness media, i.e. how important it is that audiences are informed when news outlets utilise content that has not been produced by a news professional;
- the importance of crediting the creators of eyewitness media;
- opinions about paying for eyewitness media;
- the importance of gaining permission to use eyewitness media;
- understandings of the verification process and the importance placed on content being verified prior to publication;
- opinions about different types of eyewitness media, e.g. video vs still images.

To conclude the session, we implemented an activity designed to acknowledge that, in the right circumstances, all citizens could potentially find themselves straddling the fuzzy middle ground between audience member and news producer (i.e. any individual with a smartphone who happens to capture footage of a newsworthy event has the potential to make the transition from news consumer to news producer). To achieve this we turned the news game on its head and asked participants to assume the position of a content creator/uploader who had captured footage of a breaking news event. In addition to asking some general questions about what expectations they would have of news outlets that wanted to use their content, we asked participants to critique a series of genuine permission requests that major news outlets have sent to content creators via Twitter (see Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> Participants were then asked to share their initial reaction to the wording of the requests and to discuss how they thought they would respond if they were to receive such a tweet from a news outlet courting them for their content.



**Figure 3. Permission requests sent to uploaders by news outlets via Twitter**

As with all focus groups, our intention was not to generalise about entire populations. That is not possible with qualitative focus groups composed of such a relatively small number of people. Instead, our objective was to explore some of the attitudes – both shared and oppositional – of people with an active interest in mainstream news output. In this regard, we feel our goal was achieved as our focus groups were, without exception, lively and successful in terms of the range and depth of discussion between participants. The key findings from these discussions are presented in the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The names of news organisations were not blanked out during the focus group exercise.

### 3. Findings

Audiences are well accustomed to seeing eyewitness media in the news. In every group, participants could recall with ease news stories they had seen that contained an element of eyewitness media. These included local, national, and international stories and, while 9/11 and the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris were frequent points of reference, examples were rarely restricted to the most recent or most high-profile stories. In one group, a participant made reference to the 1991 murder of Rodney King, highlighting audience members' ability to project into the past through the prism of eyewitness media.

Eyewitness media were often associated with certain *types* of news story, such as vehicle crashes, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and extreme weather. Although 'The Dress'<sup>3</sup> – a viral sensation that gained global notoriety in February 2015, just prior to our focus groups – was cited in Group 8 (undergraduates), we were surprised by the relative infrequency with which participants discussed viral media or 'softer' news – the types of stories that are typically associated with more derogatory conceptions of this kind of content.

#### *Positive Values of Eyewitness Media: Authenticity and Immediacy*

At the core of our focus groups was a small team exercise in which participants were asked to construct a news bulletin using an array of photos and videos, many of which were eyewitness media. This exercise – a modified version of the 'news game' developed by the Glasgow Media Group – was deliberately designed to allow participants to construct their news bulletins without using eyewitness media if they so desired. However, every team in every group chose to use eyewitness media. Having asked our groups to reflect on their 'editorial' decisions, we used their rationale as a platform for discussing their attitudes towards eyewitness media in the news more generally. During these discussions, participants were overwhelmingly positive in their appraisals of the value they believe eyewitness media add to news output (I discuss the minor reservations some participants expressed later in this report). Although reasons varied between participants – Ben (Group 8) was the only participant to argue that 'shock value' made eyewitness media 'more engag[ing]', for example, while Colin (Group 3) cited the case of Ian Tomlinson as evidence that it can uncover stories that otherwise could/would not be told – two dominant themes recurred across every group: *immediacy* and *authenticity*.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The dress' is a viral photo and meme which became popular in February 2015. The photo, originally posted to Tumblr, showed a washed-out image of a lace dress and gained notoriety due to a dispute over whether the garment was blue and black, or white and gold. As of 29 June 2015, BuzzFeed's article on the subject had been viewed over 38 million times. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/catesish/help-am-i-going-insane-its-definitely-blue>

Interestingly, participants' reverence for the perceived authenticity and immediacy of eyewitness media was consistent across all groups, unaffected by age, demographic, knowledge/experience of social media, etc. This was something of a surprise, as we had hypothesised that older participants, less accustomed to using smartphone technology and seeing such content shared via social media, might be less enthusiastic about seeing eyewitness media incorporated into professional news output. However, Raymond (Group 10), part of a group of senior bridge club members, juxtaposed the apparent authenticity of eyewitness media with more 'manufactured' (non-user generated) content:

Raymond: It's **actually genuine**, as opposed to, sort of, manufactured. You know, it's catching things *as they happen*, which is much more important I think. **We're looking for the immediacy of the situation**, so when someone captures an accident or a robbery happening on their phone, it is actually *of the event* rather than (*tails off*) ... They can never reproduce it.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the specific term 'immediacy' was used by other members of the same group, such as Sylvia, who considered it the most quintessential aspect of news and also touched upon the authenticity of eyewitness media:

Sylvia: I think it's more important to have something that's shot by an amateur who's actually at the scene –

Boris: Yeah, absolutely.

Raymond (*Agreeing*): Mmm.

Sylvia: ... that's **the immediacy of it**, *that's the news*, and that's it.

Jackie: I keep thinking of 9/11 when –

Sylvia: Yeah, and they were running down that street –

Jackie: – running down that street and suddenly ... the towers collapse –

Sylvia: ... **you were there**, weren't you, **you were in it, watching it**.

Lucy (Group 1), a young professional in her late twenties, was one of multiple participants to speak positively about eyewitness media's capacity to capture the essence of a news story before the scene of the event is 'cleaned up'. Her general assessment then became the catalyst for other participants to recall memories of following specific news stories through eyewitness media:

---

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this report, bold text is used to highlight pertinent themes and italics are used for emphasis in speech.



Lucy: I guess just most stories [contain eyewitness media], anything with a crash, or a disaster, or terrorist attack or anything ... [With] most stories **the first person** that got there has, you know, particularly for stuff like, I don't know, crashes or explosions, **has the best picture or the most newsworthy picture** because it's **before stuff got cleaned up** or, you know, put out, that kind of thing, so most stories I guess you see a sort of grainy video that they'll say is shot by someone.  
[...]

Debbie: The biggest [example of eyewitness media in the news], probably the most recent for me was Charlie Hebdo, where there was that footage from that guy on the roof ... That was really **the first footage I think we saw of what was happening on the street** there because there really wasn't very much news coverage because it happened so quickly there ... That was quite a big deal this year because everyone was on Twitter seeing what was happening and **the first things that were coming up** were the retweets of the public.

Sarah: Days like that when a story starts and then unfolds all day, like the London riots and stuff that just snowballs, and the Charlie Hebdo thing, and it just suddenly was happening in three different parts of Paris, I suppose **the first thing people saw** was, yeah, a photo someone had taken, a video someone had taken, **because the news organisations just can't keep up**. It's got to be the people on the street, in the right place, at the right time taking the picture.

This passage provides useful insight into how and why the perceived authenticity and, in particular, immediacy of eyewitness media are considered such valuable qualities by news audiences. Lucy aligned the immediacy of eyewitness media with the 'best' and 'most newsworthy' content, surmising that it carries a weight of authenticity that cannot be recaptured once the scene of the event has been altered and sanitised ('cleaned up'). As the conversation evolved to cover more specific stories, Debbie and Sarah drew upon memories of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris, recalling how eyewitness media had provided the first pictures of the event and surmising that this type of content, captured by people at the scene, had enabled them to keep abreast of developments more quickly than would have been possible had they been solely reliant on footage produced by news professionals. That said, it should be noted that, on the frequent occasions that these sentiments were expressed across our groups, participants were invariably sympathetic to the fact that news crews cannot be omnipresent. In this regard, the focus of their positive appraisals of eyewitness media was very much on its ability to *supplement* and *enhance* professional journalism

rather than *replace* it (I return to this issue during a discussion of eyewitness media as a stopgap).

Delving further into the issue of authenticity, it was noteworthy that some participants were able to draw upon memories of news stories that had been told through eyewitness media, project into the past, and recall how the 'authentic' account of the non-professional storyteller had aided their understanding of the subject matter. A particularly strong example of this occurred during Group 6, when a number of participants embarked upon an incredibly rich and insightful discussion about content produced by Farah Baker, a 16-year-old Palestinian woman who 'live tweeted' a series of photos, videos, and commentary of Israeli missile attacks from her bedroom in 2014, some of which were published by mainstream UK news outlets:

Lorna: There was the girl on Twitter, who was in Gaza, who was tweeting about her experiences. **And it made it seem more real.** Like, **you were more able to understand what it might be like to be there.** So she had, like, a video of herself talking and you could hear the bombs going off in the background –  
(*Gasps around the table.*)

Elaine: So scary.

Lorna: – and the noise, she recorded the sound of what it sounded like when a bomb went over your head, so like that whistling sound. And that just kind of gives you this kind of like ... **you're suddenly able to imagine what it's like to be there in a way that you can't –**

Dawn: Yeah.

Lorna: It's, I don't know, **it's too distanced when there's a news reporter standing there.**

Dawn: Yeah.

Elaine: Yeah, **it's more controlled**, isn't it? But when **you're there –**

Lorna: Yeah.

Dawn: Yeah.

Elaine: ... it's like she's living it, *it's actually happening*. And she's in that situation and the news reader can leave, hopefully, but she can't, that's her life.

Lorna: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

Although long, this extract is worth considering in its entirety because it highlights a number of noteworthy points. First, it illustrates the power some eyewitness media can have to make a lasting impression on audience members. In this instance, Lorna could vividly recall numerous specific details about the footage Farah Baker had posted to Twitter and which had been broadcast on television news. Second, the conversation again

highlighted the value some audience members place on the perceived authenticity of eyewitness media, with references to the added 'realness' of seeing news events through the prism of eyewitness media. Third, direct comparisons are made between the 'authentic' portrayal of the eyewitness (Farah Baker, in this instance), to which participants felt they could relate, and that of the 'more controlled', detached professional journalist. Finally, this group felt that Farah Baker's eyewitness footage had aided their ability to understand a complex world news story because it enabled them to better contextualise the lived 'reality' of the situation and empathise with the subject due to 'suddenly' being able to conceptualise the situation in a way they did not believe would be possible without this eyewitness media.

Enthusiasm for these qualities of authenticity and (increased) intimacy were not exclusive to accounts of distant world news stories such as 9/11 or Middle Eastern conflict. Some groups cited them in relation to local stories. For example, when recalling local newspaper coverage of an English Defence League march in Brighton, Lizzie (Group 2) argued: 'I think it [eyewitness media] makes it [the story] **real**. Rather than, say, a stock image of some men marching holding an EDL sign, it's taken from someone who's actually there, it's hectic and it's a bit chaotic, **which is exactly how it would have been**, you know, **rather than something captured from a distance**.'

Elsewhere, there was also a suggestion that the 'raw' nature of eyewitness media could give it a more authentic tone than the more heavily edited and produced content produced by news professionals:

Chris: I think I have a distrust of the professional footage because, you know, it's heavily edited.

Elaine: Mmm, I [tend to] think they've chopped and changed it, edited it.

Dawn: So you're more trusting of the amateur?

Chris: I'm more trusting of the more spontaneous stuff.

Unpacking the feedback from our focus groups, a picture begins to emerge in terms of how and why audiences believe eyewitness media helps to create an 'authentic' depiction of the day's news. From Sylvia's memories of eyewitness footage shot at street level during 9/11 (*'you were there... you were in it, watching it'*) and Lorna and Elaine's memories of watching Farah Baker's footage from Gaza (*'when you're there'; 'you [are] more able to understand what it might be like to be there'*), it appears that one key strength of eyewitness media is its ability to make a given situation more relatable, somehow transporting audience members to the scene of the event. More broadly, these conversations illuminated some of the distinctions audience

members draw between ‘amateur’ eyewitness media and that produced by professionals (Figure 4).

<b>Eyewitness media</b>	<b>Professional media</b>
‘Genuine’/‘real’	‘Manufactured’
Specific moment that can ‘never be reproduced’	Inauthentic reproductions after the event
Accurate depiction of the scene (pre-‘clean up’)	Less accurate depiction (post-‘clean up’)
Intimate	Distanced
Spontaneous	Controlled
Unedited	Heavily edited’/‘Chopped and changed’

**Figure 4. Distinctions drawn between content produced by eyewitnesses and news professionals**

### *Verification*

In every group, participants were able to give a rough, albeit simplistic, overview of what they understood the term verification to mean in relation to eyewitness media and the news, e.g. ‘That it’s legitimate’ (Natasha, Group 2), ‘It’s not a lie’ (Dawn, Group 6), ‘It’s not fake in any way. The person using it was definitely there and took it and has given permission to use it’ (Elaine, Group 6), ‘Is it true or not? Is it real or not?’ (Janet, Group 7). Some participants also took the opportunity to express their disdain for the term ‘verification’. For example, one of the undergraduates dismissed it as ‘kind of a gimmicky word anyway’ (Ben, Group 8), while a member of the senior badminton club was highly critical, stating, ‘it doesn’t mean anything really, does it, “verified”’, before saying, ‘it sounds a bit jargon-ish this, “it’s been verified” (*other participants agree*). You know, we all skate over the word, thinking “Well, that’s alright then” and it could be something that we wouldn’t agree with, “verified”’ (Dorothy, Group 7).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the lack of information most news organisations divulge about this aspect of their workflow, the people in our sample were largely oblivious to what the verification process entails or the extent to which skilled journalists are able to verify the finer details about a piece of eyewitness media. In multiple groups participants speculated that journalists could do little more than ask the uploader to confirm details about the content they had posted to the web:

Carla: I suppose then the question is: What constitutes verification? Because if you spoke to that person that wanted to be part of the news item [the uploader], then clearly he would say, 'Yes, this is this specific incident and I was there and I took this photo', erm, so I don't know, what constitutes verification? [Group 2]

Ben: I mean *they're* saying it's reliable but ... when you say verified, it might not be true. [Group 8]

In addition to lacking knowledge about the processes through which journalists can seek to verify content, some participants occasionally lacked awareness about *why* news organisations need to verify eyewitness media. During Group 2, for example, Lizzie argued vehemently that it would be unnecessary for a journalist to contact an uploader to corroborate details about an image if its content seemingly spoke for itself, neglecting to consider the possibility that the content could be manipulated or hoax material:

Carla (*describing her understanding of the term 'verification'*): That they've spoken directly to the person to confirm that they were there and that this is a photo of that *particular* event –

Lizzie: I don't think you need to speak to someone to verify an image –

Carla: – or that you've got some expressed –

[...]

Lizzie: But sometimes you can tell from an image that that *is* the image of that particular event. Like, how often do police helicopters crash into pubs? [I]f it's verified then you know that it's of that ... particular event, it hasn't been taken at another time in an incidence (*sic*) that just looks ... similar. But this [the Glasgow helicopter crash] is quite a unique case ... isn't it, police helicopter crashing into the roof of a pub. It's a specific pub and it's a police helicopter, **you can tell by looking at the image that it is of that incident.**

Similar sentiment was expressed during another group, when Alicia and Mike initially suggested they would be content to be served unverified content as long as it *appeared* to show the event in question, although both later concurred that the decision to publish such material may impact negatively upon their perception of the news outlet in question:

Alicia: ... but if it's not verified and **you can tell it's actually from the scene**, I don't know, **I wouldn't mind** –

Mike: Yeah, I wouldn't mind.

Alicia: – it's a difficult question.

Zane: I guess that I probably wouldn't be bothered by it, **I'd just think that it's less reliable than other sources** –

Mike: Yeah.

Alicia: Yeah.

Zane: ... and if there's, you know, if there's lots of other news channels covering the same story then it [the channel running unverified content] might not be as reliable as the other ones. [Group 4]

On the whole, however, participants who were happy for unverified content to be published by news outlets were very much in the minority. Across the groups there was a sense that audience members look to journalists to perform a 'gatekeeping' role with eyewitness media. They expect journalists to be 'performing checks' (Dorothy, Group 7) before giving the green light for content to be published – even if they aren't entirely sure what those checks might entail. As one participant put it, bluntly, 'If they're not sure about it they shouldn't broadcast it' (Ruth, Group 7).

Participants' reasons for expecting eyewitness media to be verified were numerous. However, two themes that ran through much of the discussion around verification were *professionalism* and *trust*. There was a general sense that verification is an integral part of a journalist's professional duty and that audiences place trust in them to perform this duty prior to publishing eyewitness media. Failure to do so equated to a breach of trust and risked the integrity of the offending news outlet. On the latter point, Jimmy (Group 5) argued that news outlets should always verify content 'to save a potentially embarrassing situation' because 'if they posted something and it turned out not to be legit[imate] it would ... bring that news broadcaster's credibility down. People would just be like, 'Oh, well that wasn't very professional'.'

On these themes of professionalism and trust, participants in Groups 6 and 8 talked in remarkably similar terms about: (a) their expectations of journalists to verify eyewitness media as a basic requirement of their jobs, (b) the trust they place in journalists to perform this task, (c) their belief that verification is a key mechanism through which journalists add value to news output, and (d) the disappointment they would feel if they thought news outlets were simply publishing eyewitness media that was freely available online without subjecting it to an additional layer of verification. During Group 6, for example, Elaine was a lone voice in stating that it was acceptable for news outlets to publish unverified content if they attached a disclaimer. Other members of the group swiftly weighed in and articulated why they would consider this unacceptable:

Elaine: I would like to see it with the tag that it has not yet been verified, and I believe I've seen that on some footage before –

Dawn: I wouldn't.

Chris: I wouldn't want to see that, **I'd think that's lazy**.

Dawn (*addressing Elaine*): Why? Because I'm there to be informed.

Lorna: You can't un-see something like that.

[...]

Dawn: **I trust them because they're professionals** –

Lindsey: Yeah.

Lorna: Yeah.

Dawn: **That's their job and I want them to do their job properly**. And if **you don't I'm not interested**. That's it, that's it.

Chris: It screams of, like, **zero quality control** if you just put anything on the TV and go 'There you go, that might be true'.

Dawn: Yeah, exactly.

Lindsey: **Anyone can do that**.

Dawn: I see them as professionals and I want them to do a job, and if they're not delivering, then I'm not interested.

Among the group of undergraduates (Group 8), participants agreed that verification was a rudimentary expectation of journalists and that they placed trust in them to complete this as part of their professional duty. People in this group also saw verification as a key way through which journalists 'add value' to content that savvy internet users may be able to find for themselves:

Emma: I don't think a lot of people watching the news or looking on the apps or whatever would think, 'Are these real? Are these, like, verified?' and stuff like that, **we sort of assume** –

Anna: Yeah, **we trust** –

Emma: Yeah, **we trust the news companies** –

Fred: They should be adding value though, shouldn't they? **They shouldn't just be plucking stuff out of the internet** and just putting it onto their news site. That [verification] is **part of their job** and they should verify the sources where possible.

Emma: There's a level of trust because, like, they're such an important part of how we know what's going on in the world or the country or the town, like, no matter what scale it is. So I think there is a level of trust and I think it's important.

Anna: Yeah, **the real responsibility** to kind of make sure that you're giving a good, true, verified version of events.

Emma: Yeah.

These comments highlight how and why verification has become such an important part of the contemporary journalist's toolkit. With many news-hungry audience members able to track down eyewitness media relating to a given news event via their preferred social media platforms, they expect news professionals to go the extra mile. They expect them to have the necessary skills to sift through the available content and perform the technical checks required to verify its authenticity and separate the wheat from the chaff, the news from the noise. In the groups cited above, it was unacceptable to 'just put anything on the TV and go "There you go, that might be true"' (Chris, Group 6) or for journalists to 'just be plucking stuff out of the internet' (Fred, Group 8). As one person put, 'Anyone can do that' (Lindsey, Group 6). Instead, the additional layer of verification, of which our participants seemed less capable/aware, was a key mechanism through which they looked to journalists to perform 'quality control' (Chris, Group 6) and 'add ... value' (Fred, Group 8).

#### 'THIS CANNOT BE INDEPENDENTLY VERIFIED'

In addition to developing our understanding of audiences' knowledge and understanding of verification, we also wanted to get a grasp of attitudes towards a specific phrase often used in conjunction with eyewitness media: 'This content cannot be independently verified'. This phrase is highly contentious and has been phased out by some major news organisations. The Associated Press has stopped using it (Wardle et al., 2014b: 59) and a report by the BBC Trust, published in 2013, advised that it should not be used on screen or in script (BBC Trust, 2013). However, in other newsrooms it remains a standard phrase, acting as an insurance policy in recognition that newsrooms can rarely be 100% certain about the veracity of a piece of eyewitness media.

In keeping with the general lack of enthusiasm for unverified content, attitudes towards this phrase were mostly – although not exclusively – negative. For the numerous participants who did not feel that there was any place for unverified content in professional news output, this phrase did nothing to alter their perspective. However, it should be noted that some people were more forgiving, and at times actively enthusiastic about it, seeing this phrase as an admirable attempt at being transparent or an inevitable and understandable consequence of news outlets' attempts to meet the demands of the contemporary 24-hour news cycle. This conversation from Group 3 presents a useful overview of some of the arguments for and against using partially unverified content with a disclaimer:



Gavin: I've never heard the phrase, but if I did hear the phrase, it would make me think of *Drop the Dead Donkey*<sup>5</sup> (*starts laughing*), where he used to chuck a baby's shoe in every photo he took ...

Colin: I think it's important. I mean, I recall when I've heard things like that before and while the trust in the mainstream media is kind of diminishing and diminishing **at least it kind of says, 'Look, we're trying to be transparent,** we don't actually know that this is real'. I'd rather see something presented in that way than just go into the mindset ... where you're watching the TV and you're just absorbing everything and not questioning. So **it gives some semblance that they're trying to be objective,** so I'd prefer them to say it, myself.

Don: Yeah, I think in that case **you're willing to give them the benefit of the doubt,** aren't you? Because they're trying to get as much information as they can, they're up against their own deadlines, it's like well we [news outlets] can't give you [the audience] no story, so let's try and give you what we can. **There's an element of trust there,** they're not going to get it right 100% of the time, but ...

[...]

Jeremy: ... [T]here's a little bit that makes me uneasy about that as well: 'We're chasing our own arse after social media, we can't actually verify this but we're going to show this to you anyway.'

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, some participants said that they are more tolerant of content that is not 100% verified if it is being published by a news outlet they trust and respect. When asked about the phrase 'This cannot be independently verified', participants in Group 1 said:

Sarah: We trust certain news stations.

Colleen: Well that's, you know, that's a good point. If I saw the BBC using it [that's one thing, but] if there was *Sun TV* or *Mirror TV* ... I would think, 'Well I'm not even going to believe anything you're saying then', so that's a very good point about building the trust with your news supplier.

During Group 6, Elaine spoke about having heard this phrase without prompting from the moderators. She too argued that her trust in certain outlets would be a factor in her willingness to accept content that had not been fully verified:

---

<sup>5</sup> *Drop the Dead Donkey* was a UK sitcom set in the offices of GlobeLink News, a fictional TV news company.

Elaine: I trust the *Guardian* and the BBC so much that if they said 'pending verification' I would happily still watch it then wait [for confirmation of verification].

#### IMMEDIACY VS VERIFICATION

Given the great stock placed in the immediacy of eyewitness media we were interested in improving our understanding of whether there was any kind of tension between news audiences' desire for immediacy and their concurrent expectation of verification (a potentially time-consuming process). The first thing to note on this is that people had no real grasp of how long verification can take. This is no great surprise, given (i) the general lack of understanding about what verification entails and (ii) the varying levels of verification required from one piece of eyewitness media to the next and the impact this can have on the length of the process.

Dorothy: ... 'not being 100% [verified]' – what does that mean? They had a glance at it? Or does it mean they've spent weeks (*adopts sarcastic tone*) 'verifying' it? [Group 7]

Across our groups, people's overall attitudes towards verification dictated their willingness to wait to be shown images from the scene of a breaking news event. For the people who expect journalists to verify eyewitness media before allowing it to be published – which, as noted, was the dominant view across our focus groups – there was a strong sense that they would always rather wait and have the reassurance that their chosen news outlet was confident about the veracity of the content. In other words, immediacy is important but does not come at any cost; any waiting time is a worthwhile trade-off for the reassurance that comes from knowing a piece of content has been thoroughly verified. When debating this topic, there was plenty of sympathy for journalists regarding the likely frustration of having to sit on a strong piece of eyewitness media while attempting to verify its veracity:

Jeremy: I can imagine as a journalist it's incredibly frustrating if there is a video knocking around on Facebook that tells the story you want to tell and you can't actually run it ... but then **that's also actually holding themselves to that kind of slightly higher account**, possibly. [Group 3]

Fred: If it's breaking news and it's happening *now*, and you need to ask someone, it might take you an hour to get verification, then it's not *breaking news* any more is it! It's just a very tough industry to work in. [Group 8]

Elsewhere, people questioned news organisations' motivations for publishing eyewitness media before they had been fully verified. Participants in Group 2, for example, criticised this approach on the grounds that it was putting competitive/commercial motives – a desire to beat rivals to a 'scoop' – ahead of what they saw as journalists' obligation to inform their audience as objectively and thoroughly as possible. Debating whether they would rather be served unverified content or wait 20 minutes for verification checks to be conducted, they said:

Lizzie: Wait the 20 minutes because I think that their motivations for trying to show the unverified image early isn't because they want the viewers to see an accurate picture of the story, I think if they show it early without verifying it it's just because they want the scoop or they're trying to be a bit sensationalist about it and they know it's a really good picture, and if it's a really really good picture then wait the 10 or 15 minutes it takes to verify it and show it then.

Carla: I sort of agree with that. I can understand *why* a newsroom would want to use the picture immediately but I think their intentions are exactly what [Lizzie] said, it's to show the story first or to capture the viewers rather than [because] they're interested in portraying an accurate account.

Natasha: Yeah, I'd rather wait the 20 minutes as well. I think the purpose of the news should be to be informative, not to be the first to have a story

Lizzie: If they're not willing to wait it kind of shows that they're not really valuing truth over anything else.

### *Labelling: Audiences Do Not Feel Eyewitness Media Need to be Explicitly Labelled*

Some news outlets, when incorporating eyewitness media into their output, will explicitly inform their audience that the content was produced by someone unconnected to the newsroom, acknowledging its 'amateur' status either in a voiceover or via written captions such as 'Amateur footage' or 'Activist video'. (For the sake of consistency this practice will be referred to as 'labelling' hereafter). Reasons for doing so are varied and during interviews with news professionals working in this space we found very little agreement about what constitutes best practice (Wardle et al., 2014b). Some saw labelling as an insurance policy in case something goes wrong (e.g. footage is exposed as inauthentic), some thought it an important part of being transparent with the audience, some thought it useful for highlighting that the low(er) quality

footage had not been produced in-house, others felt it was an editorial judgement or entirely unnecessary.

Prior to commencing this research, we expected at least some audience members to feel that news outlets have a duty to acknowledge when the content they are serving up is user-generated as opposed to professional (i.e. footage filmed by their own journalists, agency staff, etc.). This was based on the assumption that some would see labelling as an important part of their chosen news outlets' commitment to transparency. However, the findings in this area were perhaps the most surprising aspect of the study as, in every group, participants were adamant that they did not need to be explicitly told when they were being served eyewitness media.

Reasons for this varied but by far the most common explanation was that audience members could 'just tell', due to the inferior aesthetic quality of the content. In Group 3, participants touched on a couple of reasons in quick succession:

Thomas: I don't think it matters. I mean, at the end of the day ... you'll see a story, you'll digest it and you'll move on.

Gavin: Often it's quality of it, you can tell that it wasn't a professional.

Don: You can decipher that yourself, can't you? I don't think 'I'll turn that off because it isn't a real cameraman', so you just run with it, don't you?

Thus, for Thomas and Don the story was the foremost issue of concern; the source of the content through which that story was being told was of secondary importance. For Gavin and Don, the quality of the footage was the telltale sign. Elsewhere, participants suggested that labelling was an insult to their intelligence. In Group 4, for example, Mike alluded to this while referencing the visual labels that are sometimes added to television coverage:

I think you'd have the intelligence to know, wouldn't you? (*Other participants voice agreement.*) I don't think you have to [be explicitly told] ... You get that a lot when it is amateur footage, it will say 'amateur footage', but you can sort of tell. I'm not going to write in and complain because, you know, the BBC isn't paying the cameramen enough.

Notably, this attitude was not exclusive to any particular age group or to participants with a particularly strong knowledge of social media (e.g. those that are accustomed to seeing smartphone photos and videos shared via social platforms on a daily basis). During Group 10, bridge club members also

argued that explicit labelling was unnecessary as they had the ‘intelligence’ to recognise eyewitness media.

Adele: It’s usually obvious, isn’t it?

Boris: Yeah, of course it is. We’re all intelligent. We’re intelligent people watching it. We know what’s happening, we know it’s only a smart phone. We don’t expect it to be any different to what it is.

Adele: No, you can tell what it is.

When asked to elaborate on how they were able differentiate between professional footage and eyewitness media, a number of participants joined the discussion, identifying appearance/quality and, interestingly, immediacy as key characteristics that distinguish eyewitness media:

Adele: Well it just **doesn’t look professional**, does it? It doesn’t look the same –

Harriet: The **quality** –

Adele: Yeah, the **quality is not the same at all**.

Harriet: ... and it’s **happening too soon after the event** to be a professional –

Adele: Unless they happen to be passing by!

Harriet: A professional isn’t going to be there.

Raymond: It’s actually genuine, as opposed to, sort of, manufactured. You can’t manufacture things as they happen, which is much more important I think. We’re looking for the immediacy of the situation, so when someone captures an accident or a robbery on their phone, it is actually *of the* event rather than (*tails off*) ... They can never reproduce it.

As noted, the overall consensus that audience members consider labelling to be unnecessary was a surprising finding. We assumed at least some of our focus group participants would expect an explanation for when/why content professional news outlets were relying on content produced by non-professionals who typically won’t have any specialist training and may have specific political motivations.<sup>6</sup> However, the comments we heard suggest that audiences fully accept that the traits which some may view as the negative hallmarks of eyewitness media – e.g. lower resolution footage, less skilled camerawork, etc. – very much go with the territory and are ultimately a price

---

<sup>6</sup> With hindsight more could perhaps have been done to explore attitudes around labelling in relation to eyewitness media produced by groups with particular political motivations or who are promoting a specific cause. Participants did occasionally discuss content produced by ISIS of their own accord, but this was not a topic that was addressed through a specific question or exercise. This is an area that could be explored in more depth in future research.

worth paying if the content allows journalists to tell the story with the immediacy and authenticity audiences so revere. Indeed, this view was crystallised during an exchange in Group 4:

Alicia: I don't think quality is that important as long you can see that it was actually filmed by somebody who was there. Even if you can barely see what's going on, that's the most important thing, I think –

Susie: Yeah.

Mike: Yeah.

Alicia: ... because, obviously, you can get a proper video made by [a professional news crew] maybe next day or something, but it's not going to be the same because it's not going to be exactly the time when it happened. I don't think quality is that important.

### *Crediting*

Attitudes towards crediting varied, although there was an overall sense that, as news *consumers*, people neither noticed nor particularly cared whether or not content is credited. The opinions expressed in Group 10 were typical of this standpoint:

Harriet: I don't care [about crediting].

Adele: I think if they know [who took the footage], then I think that it's courteous that they do [credit].

Jackie: But in a rolling [news situation] like this I'm not really interested in who took the shots –

Boris: No.

Sylvia: No.

Jackie: – so even if they were up there saying 'Thanks to ...' I wouldn't be looking at [it thinking], 'Ooh, that was taken by my friend John'.

*(Laughter around the table.)*

Boris: They always credit their own reporter – you know, '[name of reporter] at the scene', but again I'm not really bothered, so I'm not bothered about the member of the public.

This general indifference towards crediting is not entirely surprising, as one would expect this to be an issue of greater concern to content creators/uploaders than the audience (for a case study involving an uploader whose content was used by a newspaper without credit, see Brown, 2015). Indeed, some people stated that while they weren't remotely interested in news organisations' crediting practices in their capacity as *viewers*, they would feel differently if it were their own content or that of their friends that was being used without credit.

Mike: I mean, as a consumer, [crediting] doesn't really bother me, I wouldn't be like 'Ooh, I want to see the guy's Twitter handle who's posted that', but if it was one of my friends or myself that's posted it, and a news organisation used it without crediting ... I'd be a bit annoyed about that. But as a consumer it doesn't bother me. But if the shoe was on the other foot then it probably would annoy me. [Group 4]

One surprise was the cynicism – which at times verged on animosity – that numerous groups showed towards uploaders who wish to receive attribution when news outlets use their eyewitness media. Instead of seeing crediting as a legal requirement to which news organisations are expected to adhere (e.g. giving 'sufficient acknowledgement' is seen as being key to a fair usage defence: see Rendle and Ferrity, 2015), many people viewed it as cynical opportunism on the part of uploaders pursuing fame, extra Twitter/Instagram followers, or other forms of shameless self-promotion.

Gavin: I'm not interested either in them giving them [uploaders] credit or not giving them credit.

[...]

Thomas: For the person [uploader], it's important, obviously, otherwise they wouldn't ask for it. But for the viewer? –

Claude: Doesn't matter at all.

Thomas: Absolutely, no relevance.

Claude: Unless it's a really artistic photograph and you want to go and see their other photographs.

Thomas: But **it's all about ego** for the person that's done it –

Claude: Yeah, exactly.

Don: Yeah.

Thomas: – **they're wanting to get their 15 minutes of fame** or further their career if they're going down that path. [Group 3]

Where people were more open to crediting, it was generally seen as an optional courtesy rather than an obligation. The legal requirement to credit was not mentioned in any of the groups, suggesting that education could be improved in this area. The only group to buck the overall feeling of indifference was Group 6 (friends, mid to late 20s), in which numerous people argued that crediting was extremely important and one woman said she actively looks for attribution when viewing news coverage that contains eyewitness media. Even where people in this group did not feel that they themselves would wish to be credited if they contributed content, there was a

strong sense that news organisations should credit consistently so as to be fair towards those for whom crediting is more important:

Lindsey: Where do you draw the line if you don't credit [eyewitness media]?

Lorna: I don't think I would be bothered if I wasn't credited, but **I am more bothered about other people being credited.**

Elaine: I would be *furious* if I wasn't credited.

Dawn: I think you should be credited.

Elaine: **Attribution is essential.** It's almost like copyright, but you can't copyright what's just happened, but you bothered to record it on your device ...

Chris: You've done them a favour

Elaine: You've done them a favour, yeah, yeah!

Dawn: Yeah!

[...]

Elaine: **I look for names.** If I see it's amateur footage, I'm thinking, I'm often looking [at] who took it because if it was me I would *want* that credit. I'm quite needy.

[...]

Lindsey: I don't think I'd care, but I think **I would care more about the implications of not being credited in terms of what that means for other people.** Say, for example, if you are professional photographer but you don't work for the BBC –

Lorna: Yeah, yeah.

Lindsey: – and they've got your work on there, and they've taken it, because it's then where do you draw that line? ... If you're not working for them, are you still an amateur in their eyes? [Group 6]

#### SCREEN CLUTTER AND CREDITING USERNAMES

One aspect of crediting with which broadcast journalists have to contend is 'screen clutter', i.e. inelegant textual credits that fill valuable onscreen real estate. One of the ways through which we sought to stimulate discussion about this topic was by including photos with specific crediting credentials as part of the News Game. These included:

1. An image onto which a credit containing a somewhat inelegant fictional Twitter handle had been burned using a green Comic Sans font ('Copyright @EGoZaAS');
2. An image onto which a small logo containing the name of a fictional photographer had been burned into the top-left corner ('GB Snaps, Glasgow');



3. An image participants were told they had permission to use providing they gave an onscreen credit to the fictional Instagram handle @cazzyjohn1968 (sticky labels were provided for the purpose of adding onscreen information, but only one team decided to use them to add credits).



**Figure 5. An example of a card used during the News Game**  
(Credit for original photo: Wesley Shearer/@scotscribbler/Twitter)

Decisions around which of these images they would be happy to see in a news broadcast created a lot of discussion. Very few participants took issue with the image containing the ‘more discrete’ GB Snaps logo (Anna, Group 8). As expected, some groups were repelled by the notion of broadcasting an image containing a Comic Sans logo. However, resistance to this was not as widespread as might have been expected. In Group 8 (undergraduates), for example, one team rejected it on the grounds that it was ‘obtrusive’, but the other decided that, while the DIY credit was ‘a bit of an issue’ (Fred, Group 8), the image was strong enough to warrant inclusion. In another group, one team decided that, while the onscreen credit was regrettable, it was not a barrier to publication because ‘that’s the way of the world these days’ (Don, Group 3). Even in the two older groups – whose participants were not social media users and therefore might have been expected to be baffled/irritated by the syntax of Twitter/Instagram handles – teams decided to include the images that contained burnt-on credits. When asked to explain their rationale, the teams in Group 7 (over-60s badminton club) admitted that they hadn’t

even noticed the green text, while members of the bridge club explained that the strength of the image superseded any concerns about the visibility of the uploader's credit.

Adele: We were looking at it as a viewer so whether it had got [a] copyright [label] on there or not was immaterial to us.

Harriet: Yes, as a viewer it was not affecting us.

[...]

Adele: You'd probably blank it because you'd be looking at the image.

(*Jackie and Harriet voice agreement.*) [Group 10]

Indeed, not only were the older participants less affronted by social media credits than anticipated, but the only group to express negative feelings about the *visible* impact of crediting social media handles was the one consisting of teenage undergraduates, all of whom were active social media users. On the subject of crediting an Instagram account, they said:

Anna: ... I mean, that would put me off using that actual [piece of eyewitness media] because that would **somewhat bring down the professionalism of a news report**, to kind of be introducing these, you know, slang nicknames and all sorts of things you get on social media.

Fred: Yeah, a username rather than an actual person.

[...]

Alice: I think it sort of lowers the quality of the story as well if you're saying, 'This is only so I can get more Instagram followers'

Anna: Yeah, it gives that kind of feel to it. [Group 8]

When asked to elaborate on why they felt a credit containing a social media handle made a news story appear 'less professional', they explained:

Anna: That brings down the kind of tone it, that introduces a level of informality that I don't think is appropriate in these kinds of news reports.

Fred: I think it would be better to have the person behind the account ... I think it should still be the *name* of the person who's using the account with the photo. [Group 8]

There are two main points to take away from these discussions. The first is that it is almost impossible to make assumptions about news audiences. As outlined above, our expectations were confounded in terms of different age groups' attitudes towards onscreen credits to social media users. The second, is that 'screen clutter' is not *necessarily* a significant issue for audiences *per se*.

While there was strong resistance in some quarters, more often than not our focus group participants concluded that content was king and a strong image that made a valuable contribution to the story trumped any concerns about onscreen credits being a visual distraction (if indeed they even noticed the credit). Thus, if concerns about screen clutter are a deciding factor between crediting and not crediting, then the former, more legally sound approach seems prudent, particular if it achieves the balance between being clear enough to satisfy the uploader and discreet enough for the audience to ignore.

### *Replicating Problematic Crediting Practices*

As a final point on this topic, one notable finding was that participants occasionally replicated some of the more problematic crediting practices employed by some news outlets. For example, during the News Game, Mike (Group 4) described his team's decision to credit an image solely to Twitter:

We're going to go with this [photo]. We've not been given permission, but we're going to say we got this from Twitter, so we're going to credit Twitter with it, so we'd have it [saying] 'From Twitter' and the Twitter logo.

Referring to a different image – about which participants were told permission for publication had been given to rival organisations but not their own – he said:

We're going to use this [photo]. We're not going to ask for permission, we're going to presume we've got permission and we're going to credit Twitter with it because that's where we've taken it from.

The other member of Mike's team did not challenge this decision, nor did other members of the group. While we cannot make sweeping generalisations, this finding does raise questions about people's knowledge of their rights and of UK news organisations' obligation to credit/give sufficient acknowledgement to the content creator (where desired by the content creator). What's more, participants in Groups 4 and 9 explicitly articulated the belief that, when content is uploaded to a social network, it becomes the property of that network and the uploader relinquishes all rights of ownership. This, of course, is not the case and is an area in which education could and should be improved. One way in which news outlets could contribute to this process is by making it policy not to credit eyewitness media solely to platforms, as this is a practice that implies the platforms are the owners/creators of the content rather than the medium through which its creator(s) posted it to the web.

## Permissions

One of the foremost methods through which journalists currently seek permission to use eyewitness media in their output is by contacting the content creator via whichever social network they used to post their photo or video. These permission requests can take many forms. Some organisations employ a brief, informal approach, e.g. ‘Hi, please can we use your picture? Thanks.’ Others have sought to develop more extensive wording in an attempt to cover broader usage, e.g. ‘Can we and all domestic and international affiliates use these photos in perpetuity on all platforms and online?’

During our focus groups, we presented participants with three genuine examples of some of the more ‘thorough’ permission requests used by major news organisations:

- ‘Is this your photo? May [news organisation] use it on all platforms in perpetuity with credit to you?’
- ‘Reaching out from [news organisation]. May we permanently licence your photo for all platforms and affiliates?’
- ‘Can we and all domestic and international affiliates use this photo in perpetuity on all platforms and online?’

When presented with these examples, focus group participants were highly critical. Some expressed surprise that this is a method through which permission is sought, e.g. ‘And this is what they tweet?’ (Sarah, Group 1), ‘Would they be tweeting these expecting just to get a simple yes response on Twitter? And that’s it, they need to stick it in 140 characters and get a yes back? And that’s legal is it?!’ (Debbie, Group 1). Undergraduates in Group 8 described the language as ‘formal’, ‘insensitive’, ‘not very approachable’ (Emma), and ‘very impersonal’ (Anna). One said the author ‘seems like a robot rather than a person’ (Ben).

A frequent criticism expressed across the groups was that the wording constituted confusing and/or intimidating legalese that the average person would most likely not understand:

Jackie: A lot of legal words (*multiple participants voice agreement*) that Joe Bloggs on the street wouldn’t have any idea what they meant, [and] wouldn’t know what they were saying yes to.

Adele: Wouldn’t have a clue, no. [Group 10]

Barbara: What’s it all about? What does it all mean? I mean, **it’s gobbledygook**, isn’t it!

[...]

Janet: It's a bit beyond me. **I don't really understand it anyway.**

Dorothy: Well that's right, that's why we need to point out that there's **no point in using words that people don't understand.** [Group 7]

Lizzie: I think it's quite **intimidating**, actually. You would almost feel like you don't want to say no because **it sounds so official** and so, like, 'Ooh, we're [Global News Organisation]', and **using words I don't even understand.** [...] 'Affiliates' and 'internationally' and stuff, it all just sounds very grand and intimidating for the average Joe Bloggs on Twitter taking pictures. [Group 2]

Criticisms of the 'confusing', 'jargonistic' language were not the only way in which participants suggested these permission requests may be counter-intuitive for news organisations. Time and again people reported that the wording created the impression that the eyewitness media in question must have monetary value.

Boris: 'Oh, **do you mean my photograph is worth a lot of money?**'

Harriet (laughing): Yes!

*(Laughter among the group.)*

Boris: That's what that's saying to me.

Jackie: 'In perpetuity and, er, license, affiliates—'

Adele: And **if they're that desperate it must be worth loads of money!**

*(More laughter.)* [Group 10]

Dorothy: I would just write back and say, 'How much?

[...]

Janet *(reading through one of the permission requests)*: ... 'Is this your photo?' Yes ... 'Can we use it?' Yes, **how much are you paying me?**

And that's it. [Group 7]

This kind of language, our participants suggested, created numerous potential barriers of which news outlets should be aware. For example, some argued that such wording would incentivise them to demand payment where they previously would not have done. Others suggested that, while they themselves would not wish to make financial gain, they would be inclined to reject a journalist's approach on the grounds that they would not want a news organisation to profit from their content.

Gavin: **The way they've worded it, I'd now want money.** *(Other participants voice agreement.)* If I put it on Facebook or I put it on Twitter, then I didn't care. Now they want it. If they hadn't asked me, I

wouldn't care. I'd actually sort of say, 'I'm really glad they used my photo, that was cool' if they hadn't asked me. **Now that they've asked me and they've worded it that way, I want some cash!**

[...]

Jeremy: ... I know what you meant actually (*nods towards Gavin*), you're right, **that makes you go, 'Hang on a minute, how much is this worth?'** [Group 3]

Karen: That [wording] makes me think that they can sell it though –

Debbie: Yeah, **you'd charge them for that.**

Karen: – and even though *I* wouldn't want to make money out of it, **I don't want them to make money out of it.** [Group 1]

Oftentimes participants were equally critical of the less verbose permission requests some organisations send out (e.g. 'Hi, please can we use your photo? Thanks. '), arguing that they are insufficiently informative and do not allow for sufficient dialogue between the eyewitness and the news organisation:

Carla: I don't think that's informative *enough* because it's use my photo *for what?*

(*Agreement around the room.*)

Lizzie: Yeah, something along the lines of, 'Hi, can we use your photo in our broadcast this evening?' [would be preferable]. Something time specific. 'We can chat more about how you want us to use it later.'

Natasha: I would prefer that.

Carla: I don't think it's appropriate to agree anything via Twitter or social media because [on] Twitter you're limited to 140 characters and I don't think it's responsible for somebody like [Global News Organisation] that that's how they gain their permission to use photos from the public.

Lizzie: They could say 'Can we use your photo? Call us or give us your number so we can call you to talk about it', you know, and just open up the two way communication a wee bit. [Group 2]

During a focus group in Brighton, participants recalled seeing an eyewitness being bombarded with permission requests on Twitter after posting a photo of people running through the town's street in their underwear during a freak storm. As this conversation developed, members of the group expressed concern about how simplistic permission requests could leave eyewitnesses exposed to possible exploitation:

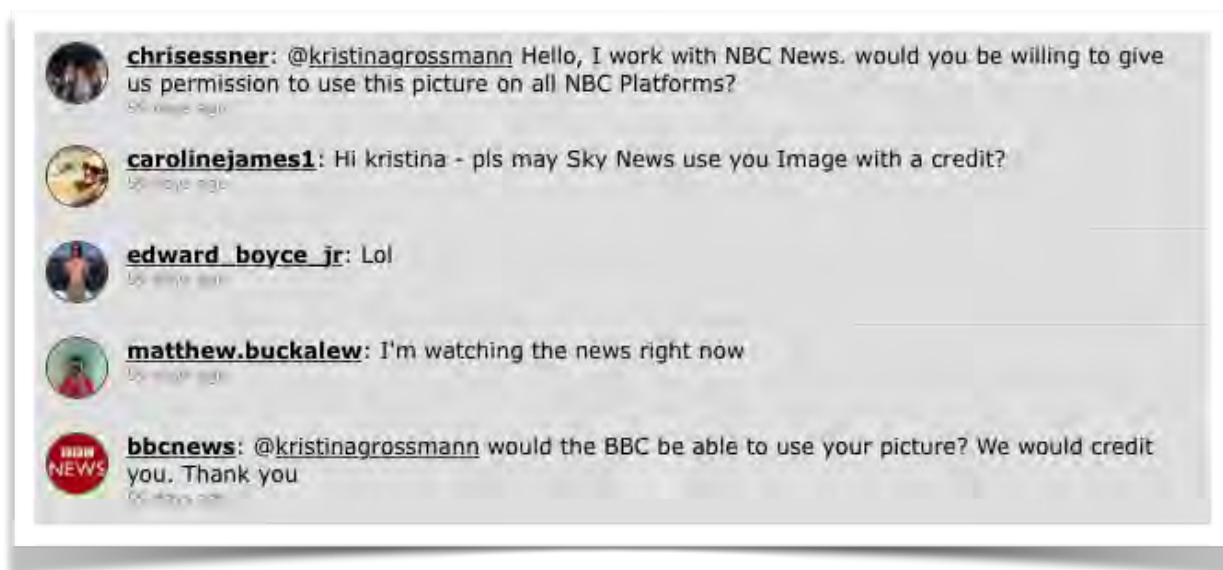
Colleen: I've noticed a lot when someone [from a news outlet] will ask [an uploader for permission to use their content] and they'll just simply say, 'Mind if we use your photo?' and *nothing else*. (Other participants express surprise.) The *Argus* does it all the time.

Lucy: The running down the street one, that was ridiculous, wasn't it –

Colleen: Yes!

Lucy: – like, a *thousand* people contacting them, [saying] 'Hey, we're from this, we're from this, can we use your photo?' and I remember thinking at the time, I was like, you've got no idea, you don't know what rights you're giving up there at all, what do they mean by 'use', that could mean anything. That could be like their new poster campaign for the next year for their newspaper! [Group 1]

This is a very tricky situation that requires careful consideration. As ever more journalists recognise that the social web is fertile ground for eyewitness media this practice of chasing permission through legally questionable online requests that could confuse uploaders and leave them in dark about their rights and ability to control their content seems increasingly untenable.



**Figure 6. Three of the numerous permission requests sent to an Instagram user after the emergency landing of a plane in March 2015**

In short, the current situation whereby journalists clamour to access eyewitness media by bombarding uploaders with individual permission requests cannot continue. A balance needs to be struck. On the one hand, news organisations, their lawyers and rights departments, no doubt driven by fear of potentially costly legal ramifications, are constructing standardised permission requests designed to cover them for all eventualities. Concurrently, though, our findings suggest that the wording of some of the

more 'thorough' requests may act as a deterrent to uploaders who would otherwise be willing to share their content. That is, 'confusing', 'intimidating', or 'official' sounding permission requests – all designed in good faith to make news organisations' intentions appear transparent – may in fact be creating an additional barrier between uploaders and news outlets. Our findings suggest that the technical-sounding nature of such requests may turn uploaders off from sharing their content or may make them more inclined to request payment. Given that these more detailed permission requests resulted from an understandable nervousness about relying on simpler, less formal permission requests, it seems we have reached an impasse. This is an untenable situation – and alternative wording is not the solution.

One suggestion that has been mooted is for a collaborative 'pool' system. Under a more centralised system such as this, uploaders would be able to give consent for their content to be placed into a pool feed from which it could be accessed by the pool's named member organisations, thereby reducing the possibility of being bombarded with tens, or at times hundreds, of permission requests from individual news outlets wanting to use the photo or video in their coverage, each with different terms or expectations in terms of future usage. This approach could be beneficial for organisations that affiliate with the pool because they would gain access to the eyewitness's content as soon as they had agreed to the terms of the pool instead of having to wait for a reply to their organisation's specific request.

Findings from this research suggest that, for any such system to be successful, it would need to give uploaders the opportunity to stipulate exceptions and refuse permission to organisations/outlets with whom they do not wish to be associated. This power to be selective is the content creator's prerogative and can be frequently observed on social media platforms when news outlets are courting a particular piece of content (see Figure 7, below). This was also a recurring theme among our focus group participants:

Sandy: If Fox News asked me for a photo I wouldn't say yes, because I don't agree with their views and what they tell their viewers so I wouldn't want them to use something of mine, especially not credit me for it because I wouldn't want to be associated with them

Jimmy: Yeah, definitely. [Group 5]

Colleen (*elaborating on a comment that she would wish to be selective about sharing her content*): Yes, absolutely ... anything that's sort of tabloid-y, outrageous, sensational ... is to me just a load of crap that I don't want to be involved with. [Group 1]



Lizzie: Like we said before, we're picky about who we want to use our work and I'm not trusting their judgement on who they give my photo to. Like, *you* can have it, but I don't trust your judgement deciding which of your affiliates can use it ...

Karen: [I would say] You're not licensing it. [Group 1]

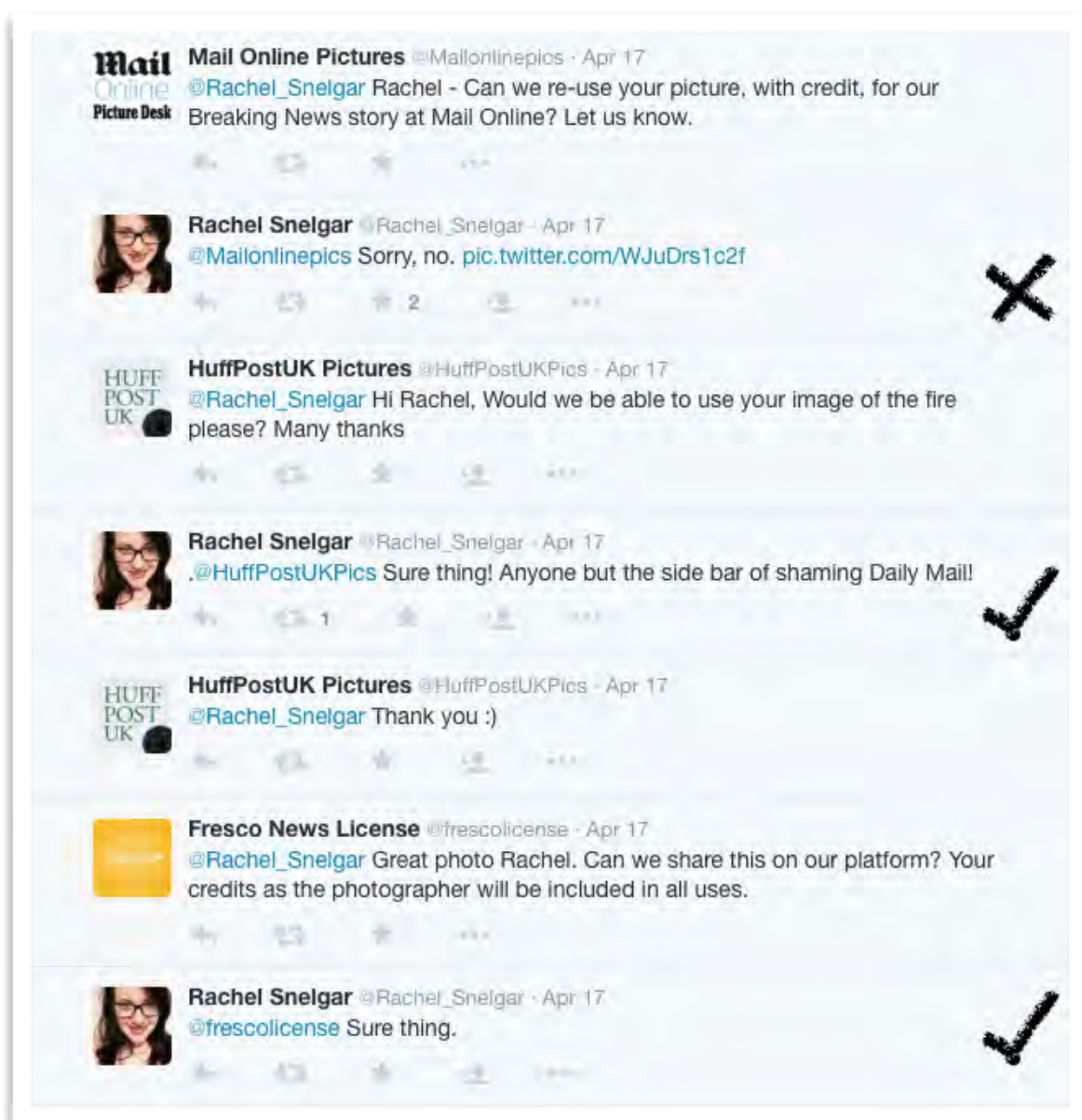


Figure 7. A Twitter user exercising her right to be selective over which news outlets receive permission to use her eyewitness media

## Drawbacks of Eyewitness Media: Unwanted Exposure to Graphic Content

As discussed earlier, one of the qualities of eyewitness media most valued by audiences is its perceived authenticity, or 'realness'. However, this realness –

and the intimacy some participants feel it creates between them and the subject – can have drawbacks, particularly when it comes to graphic/distressing content.

Many of our groups entered into discussions around eyewitness footage of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris, which occurred in January 2015, a couple of months prior to our focus groups. In Group 2, after Colette had articulated her view that it is ‘unnecessary’ for news outlets to show footage or audio of the point of death, Lizzie said, ‘I deliberately didn’t watch the video, actually’. In other groups, there were lively discussions among participants who, like Lizzie, had tried to avoid footage of the shootings, but, unlike her, had ultimately still found themselves exposed to distressing images, against their will. One such discussion took place in Group 6:

Elaine: ... I didn’t watch any video footage, I didn’t want to. The only footage I saw was a still of that policeman lying on the ground about to be shot on the front page of the *Metro* [newspaper]. **It upset me.**

Moderator: So there was no avoiding it?

Elaine: **I couldn’t avoid it.** I pick up the *Metro* every morning and I **wish I hadn’t seen it**, but I saw someone (*indecipherable audio*) before they died. **It was horrible.**

Lorna: That sounds like a much more traumatic image than what I saw ... all I saw was them in a car, get out of a car and shoot a gun, but I didn’t see –

Elaine: The human kind of reaction ...

Lorna: That sounds like a much more horrible image than what I saw.

Elaine: **It was horrible**, yeah. It was massive, **it was horrible.**

Opinions about being confronted with graphic/distressing eyewitness media – and the negative impact that unwanted exposure can have on audience members – were expressed in other groups. During another discussion of the Charlie Hebdo footage, participants in Group 3 questioned whether it was necessary for graphic eyewitness media to be shown in news output at all:

Claude: I think a lot of the things on the news, they don’t need to show the images ... You shouldn’t need to see the horrible image to know it’s a horrible situation.

[...]

Felicity: **It’s sticks with you ...**

Claude: That’s exactly it.

Felicity: You know it’s horrible and the story is enough. You don’t need to see something that graphic. Like, yeah, OK, some things really

do need imagery but when it's something that **really will stick with you** and **can really haunt you**, it's just not necessary.

When another participant challenged Felicity on whether she was actively *choosing* to watch graphic/upsetting content (e.g. by pressing play on Charlie Hebdo videos embedded into online news articles), she retorted, '**It's being shoved down your throat ...** If I'm reading an article and it's just *there*, **I can't not see it if it's there** ... I can't just like blur it out.' The pair engaged in a lively exchange before another participant, Richard, came to Felicity's defence, arguing that some news websites' handling of graphic content makes exposure to it unavoidable:

Richard: Quite often, on a lot of the news feeds you will often have the video frozen ... which you can then press play on, but it will be frozen at the point of a pixelated [dead] person with his arm down and you know what's going on. And that *isn't* something you press play on, **that's something just there and thrown down your throat** ... You don't need to [press play to see the distressing footage].

As Richard continued, other members of the group joined in the discussion, raising the question of whether some news outlets were overstepping the mark in terms of their willingness to publish graphic/distressing content due to the commercial pressures of operating in the highly competitive online news environment and the widespread availability of graphic content on the internet more generally:

Richard: Why even show the image? If you tell me that a policewoman was shot on a street by some idiot, in my head, I've seen enough things, I know what that looks like, I don't need to see a pixelated picture of that. And it's there, you don't have to press play, **it's just there in front of you.**

Don: I don't condone it, but it's a ratings driven business, isn't it? It's there for a reason.

Felicity: I understand that.

Richard: It's in everything. There was a story yesterday of a wrestler that was killed and every single article about that had a picture of him up against the ropes and **I don't need to see it.**<sup>7</sup>

Don: Problem you've got though, is people will find another way to watch it.

Richard: Absolutely, but if you want to do that, you can do that –

---

<sup>7</sup> Here Richard is referring to the death of Mexican wrestler El Hijo del Perro Aguayo.

Don: So yeah, it's not necessary ...

Richard: ... but you can search for beheadings, you can search for stonings, you can search for rape, you can search for anything. So what? What we're saying is that there're a lot of these things that are **just thrown down your throat** and you *can't* get away from it.

Even from these examples it is clear that some news consumers feel they are being exposed to graphic/distressing eyewitness media against their will. Among the extracts above were phrases such as:

- 'I couldn't avoid it'
- 'it's shoved down your throat'
- 'I can't *not see it*'
- 'you can't get away from it'
- 'it's just there in front of you'

Describing the impact of seeing such content against their will, participants said:

- 'It upset me'
- 'It was horrible'
- 'I wish I hadn't seen it'
- '[it] really will stick with you'
- '[it] can really haunt you'

The latter three quotes are, I would argue, particularly striking, as they highlight the lasting effect that distressing eyewitness media can have on an unwitting viewer. Of course, these responses could arguably be applied to graphic content of all varieties – not just eyewitness media. However, I feel it is important that they are highlighted because our participants brought them up specifically in the context of eyewitness media. What's more, I would argue they are particularly noteworthy in light of our findings about added authenticity/realness and intimacy audience members attribute to eyewitness media. That is, for all that concerns about graphic/distressing content may apply to all varieties of news output, these perceived characteristics of eyewitness media *specifically* may mean that editors need to give *additional* consideration to whether or not to publish such content if there is a possibility that its 'amateur' status may increase the level of distress to viewers.

Many news organisations are aware that vicarious trauma is a very serious and real issue among staff that work with distressing eyewitness media on a frequent basis (see Feinstein et al., 2014; Wardle et al., 2014b: 113–18). Some have procedures in place to allow staff affected by vicarious trauma

resulting from viewing distressing content to access counselling, request that they are given a break from working on traumatising stories, etc. The findings from this research suggest that more could perhaps be done to ensure that audience members who are similarly reluctant to view distressing eyewitness media do not find themselves subjected to it against their will (even if the content in question is not necessarily as graphic or extreme as that being processed by journalists on the frontline).

The first question that needs to be addressed is how much graphic or distressing imagery needs to be shown in order to provide the audience with sufficient context about the story (if any). The second issue relates to how news outlets can ensure they provide sufficient warning about the existence of graphic content in their output, as it was clear from our focus groups that some participants felt they were being exposed to distressing images against their will. Third, it seems some audience members feel online outlets could do more to ensure videos containing graphic imagery are not frozen at a point that could still be distressing to people who do not wish to view the content. Similarly, consideration should also be given to disabling the 'autoplaying' of any potentially distressing content.

While news platforms (in the more traditional sense) must continue to endeavour to give due consideration to their audience before publishing graphic/upsetting content, social media networks should also consider if they could do more to reduce the chances of their users being subjected such content against their will. This topic came up in a couple of focus groups, including Group 6, wherein Lindsey and Elaine, both of whom had earlier described how they actively tried to avoid images of the Charlie Hebdo shootings, discussed their experiences of using Facebook:

Lindsey: A lot of people who don't want to see it [graphic/upsetting content] are seeing it anyway because they're just scrolling through Facebook.

Elaine: Yeah, *it's like your choice is taken away* ... You can report it [to the social network], but you've still seen it.

### **Closing Thoughts: Audiences View Eyewitness Media as a Stopgap Rather Than a Replacement for Professional Content**

As has been noted, our participants were unwaveringly positive in their assessment of eyewitness media's contribution to news output, occasionally identifying characteristics they found preferable to professional content. It is important, however, that this positive attitude is not overstated or caricatured. A commonly shared view across our focus groups was that while eyewitness media was an invaluable asset for covering breaking news events,

it did not – and could not – represent a total replacement for professional journalism.

Reflecting on the content their teams had chosen to include in their News Game bulletins, participants would describe photos and videos as ‘perfectly useable’ and ‘perfectly acceptable’ for telling the story (Richard, Group 3). In numerous groups, participants described eyewitness media in terms of being a sufficient temporary stopgap until professional footage became available. Take, for example, this exchange from Group 4:

Alicia: I think about the news [organisations’ output], the most important thing is ... that they have to be as new as possible, if that makes sense? So I wouldn’t wait until the next day to get the professional video or something, this [eyewitness media] is better to me ...

Mike: Yeah, it’s better, definitely.

Susie: Yeah, I agree.

Zane: Yeah, I think that because you know that more professional footage is on its way, you’re **kind of happy** with that [eyewitness media] **for the time being** (*other participants voice agreement*) because how fast news works, it’s kind of like, **within the half hour they’re going to have, like, a professional video of it or something.**

In other groups, participants created specific distinctions between eyewitness media and professional content. In Group 6, Lorna and Dawn shared the view that while eyewitness media was acceptable for keeping them informed during in the early stages of a breaking news situation, they would consider it insufficient as the sole source of content once journalists had been given the opportunity to gather and corroborate facts about the event:

Lorna: With breaking news, if I care about it, like if it’s something that I’m really interested in, then ... I probably would be more than happy to see that [eyewitness media] –

Dawn: Yeah.

Lorna: ... but if it’s something that I’m just reading about in the *Guardian* I wouldn’t expect to see a user-generated picture, I’d be disappointed.

Moderator: You’d be disappointed to see that?

Lorna: Yeah, because I feel like it’s a lower quality of news that, like, **it gives you something at that specific moment**, so when you want to know what’s happening, **that’s good enough**, but if you’re reading about it later, with all of the facts, knowing everything you can about it, I want the best.

Dawn: I totally agree with that. If it's past tense I'm happy to see it all professionally done, but as it's happening I'm happy to see user-generated [content].

These quotes highlight audience members' tendency to view eyewitness media as a sufficient but imperfect stopgap. It is 'perfectly acceptable' (Richard, Group 3), 'good enough' (Lorna, Group 6), or enough to make them 'kind of happy' (Zane, Group 4). As such, it is depicted as a welcome and valued addition to journalists' arsenal, but far from a fully blown substitute for professional content. Its foremost purpose, as far as many of our participants were concerned, was to capture specific moments – moments that otherwise could not be captured. Beyond those moments, if/when news professionals are able to access the scene, eyewitness media is deemed less valuable and professional content takes precedence. This finding may be of particular interest to news organisations that are seeking to cut costs by cutting back on professional photographers and filling the void with eyewitness media submitted by their audiences (see Linford, 2012).

This application of eyewitness media is also very much in keeping with how we found global 24-hour news broadcasters to be using it in their content (Wardle et al., 2014a). During that study, we observed the same few eyewitness media photos and videos being used on heavy rotation in the early coverage of events such as the Glasgow helicopter crash of November 2013 and the razing of Lenin's statue in Kiev during the Ukrainian protests, up until the point that agency footage became available, when the eyewitness media were swiftly sidelined in favour of the agency pictures – even if the professional content was less dramatic (Wardle et al., 2014a: 39–40).





## 4. Conclusions

This research demonstrates that audiences are often highly sophisticated in their understanding of quite nuanced aspects of news output – perhaps more so than they are given credit for. Far from being passive, uninterested ‘consumers’, participants in all of our focus groups were extremely thoughtful in their assessments of eyewitness media’s contribution to journalistic output, demonstrating that this phenomenon, which has become such an integral part of the newsgathering process, is something about which they are not just aware but have also formed distinct, at times very strong, opinions. They are knowledgeable (and accepting) of the strengths and weaknesses of this content, and attitudes towards its use were surprisingly similar across demographics. On the flip side, however, there are areas in which knowledge is rather less sophisticated, such as the legal issues surrounding the use of this content and certain integral aspects of journalists’ professional practices (e.g. the verification process and the extent to which skilled journalists can corroborate the authenticity of a piece of eyewitness media).

The findings of this research suggest that eyewitness media have not just become an accepted element of news output, but one that is actively embraced, revered by UK audiences of all ages for its capacity to illuminate stories with a degree of immediacy and authenticity that professional content simply cannot match. This, however, does not – and should not – sound the death knell for journalists, as some have suggested. Instead, it acts as a reminder that the profession and, indeed, the overall media landscape is shifting and evolving in line with rapid developments in digital technology. Audiences may have a strong appetite for eyewitness media and breaking news, but a great many still rely on and expect journalists to separate the news from the noise so as to inform them as thoroughly and objectively as possible. As such, our findings (re)highlight the essentialness of verification skills to the contemporary journalist. This is where many of our focus group participants looked to their news providers to bring an element of quality control and order to the ‘noise’ of the social web and to ‘add value’ to stories told through the prism of eyewitness media – even if they did not necessarily know what this process entails. As a logical continuation of this point, the general lack of enthusiasm for unverified content also (re)highlighted the fruitlessness of taking risks in this area. There are no prizes for being first to be wrong when it comes to publishing eyewitness media.

In what will be a surprise to some, criticisms of eyewitness media’s inferior aesthetic qualities seem misplaced, as there appears to be an overwhelming acceptance that this goes with the territory and is a price worth paying for the authenticity and, in particular, immediacy they bring. However, this, too, comes with caveats. For many people, eyewitness media are something of a stopgap – an indispensable stopgap, but a stopgap all the

same. Beyond the initial breaking news situation audiences depend on news professionals to provide footage and analysis with the clarity and quality required for them to fully comprehend the story. This is a finding that should strike a particular chord with any news organisations seeking to cut costs by cutting back on professional photographers and filling the void with material submitted by their audiences.

The supposed authenticity of eyewitness media – its ‘realness’ – also brings added considerations for news professionals, particularly with regard to eyewitness content that contains distressing imagery. Many news organisations have recognised vicarious trauma as an issue of concern for their staff and have taken steps to address this problem. Our findings highlight the importance of ensuring the same consideration is given to the audience when publishing graphic or upsetting eyewitness media. Even though the majority of the most graphic imagery is likely to be left on the cutting room floor, some audience members recalled seeing eyewitness footage that had upset them. During discussions of this topic, it was not uncommon to hear phrases such ‘I don’t need to see it’ and ‘I couldn’t avoid it’. While the former should be a reminder that the average viewer’s tolerance of/resistance to distressing content may be considerably lower than that of a journalist, the latter should reaffirm the importance of (i) giving audience members due warning about the existence of potentially upsetting imagery and (ii) ensuring viewers are not inadvertently exposed to such content through ‘autoplay’ videos or screengrabs that leave little to the imagination. These issues are relevant for how media organisations work with eyewitness media, and how violent and graphic news content is handled and presented to audiences more generally.

Our research suggests that UK audiences are generally indifferent about whether or not eyewitness media is credited or labelled (i.e. whether they are explicitly informed that content has been produced by someone unconnected to the newsroom). The former finding is not at all surprising; crediting was always likely to be an issue of far greater concern to the originators of the content (i.e. the people who would receive attribution for their work) than to those consuming it. The latter finding, however, was a little more surprising, as we had expected some news consumers – possibly the older demographic, less accustomed to seeing videos and photos being shared via social networks on a daily basis – to expect their trusted news providers to justify when and why they were serving up ‘amateur’ content. However, the near unanimous response across the groups was that people did not need to be alerted to this fact because they could ‘just tell’. As someone who has lost many hours to the detective work of trying to establish whether or not unlabelled content used in TV bulletins, online newspapers, and broadcasters’ websites had been produced by an eyewitness as opposed to a professional, I would question this assumption. Indeed, the possibility

that audience members may be overestimating their ability to differentiate between professional content and that produced by an eyewitness leads me to conclude that labelling is more essential than ever. Either way, we would urge that our findings regarding the general indifference towards both labelling and crediting should not be used as justification for slipping into – or continuing with – bad habits in either area, not least because, in the case of the crediting, the consequence could be a hefty legal bill.

Regarding the process through which news outlets gather eyewitness media, the current situation, whereby journalists bombard uploaders with permission requests via social media platforms, surely cannot continue. In the absence of a viable alternative, some news organisations have resorted to issuing standardised permission requests designed – or hoped, at least – to cover themselves for all eventualities, casually asking unwitting uploaders to blindly hand over their content for use *where* the news organisation wants (on 'all platforms', by all 'domestic and international affiliates'), *when* they want, and for *as long* as they want ('in perpetuity', 'permanently'). However, not only is the legality of this approach debatable (it is unclear whether this language is any more likely to stand up in court than a simple 'Can we use your pic?'), it may also be counter-intuitive. Our focus group participants – potential eyewitnesses of tomorrow – repeatedly expressed disdain for, and/or resistance to, the verbose, jargonistic, and, for some, confusing and intimidating language through which these news outlets are seeking to secure content. Perhaps the finding that will set alarm bells ringing the loudest is that many said that this approach would make them more likely to demand payment before handing over their content.

Smart news organisations, alert to the need to establish strong, ethical, collaborative relationships in this area, will recognise that this is not viable in the mid to long term. And alternative wording is not the answer. Instead, people in this space need to invest time and energy in establishing a framework that hits the hitherto elusive sweet spot of (i) enabling news organisations to gather newsworthy content quickly enough to meet the demands of their audiences while (ii) respecting the rights and wishes of its creator. This, of course, is easier said than done. But strides are beginning to be made. Perhaps the pool system suggested in some quarters will evolve into a tangible solution. Regardless, if I were to make a contribution to this conversation based on the findings of this research, it would be that any potential solution must give content creators the power to be selective about which news outlets are and aren't permitted to benefit from the use of their work. This is their prerogative and is an issue about which a great many of our focus group participants were hugely passionate.

In sum, the enthusiasm shown by the participants in this research suggests that news organisations can ill afford to disregard the power of

eyewitness media or the value placed on it by their audiences. Those with an eye on tomorrow will prioritise, and invest in, the resources required to ensure they thrive in this area. But this doesn't mean anxiously awaiting the day the 'amateurs' replace the professionals. Far from it. It means recognising the importance of having journalists fluent in the skills and technology required to gather, verify, and disseminate the important, interesting, and vital information audiences so crave in a way that is accurate, transparent, accountable, and ethical. While this research may have been restricted to one country (for now), these are surely aspirations that transcend geographic or cultural borders and stretch the length and breadth of the borderless digital media landscape of today – and tomorrow.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, K. (2013) 'Clear Editorial Goals Essential to Effective UGC Strategy', *The Knowledge Bridge*, 22 Mar. <<http://www.kbridge.org/en/clear-editorial-goals-essential-to-effective-ugc-strategies>> (accessed Apr. 2015).
- Barot, T. (2014) 'The Rise of Digital India', *NiemanLab*, 17 Dec. <<http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/12/the-rise-of-digital-india>> (accessed Apr. 2015).
- BBC (2014) 'User Generated Content FAQ'. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/terms/faq.shtml>> (accessed Apr. 2015).
- BBC Trust (2013) *A BBC Trust Report on the Impartiality and Accuracy of the BBC's Coverage of the Events Known as the 'Arab Spring': Follow Up Report*. <[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our\\_work/arabspring\\_impartiality/follow\\_up.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/arabspring_impartiality/follow_up.pdf)> (accessed May 2015).
- Bélair-Gagnon, V., and Agur, C. (2013) 'When Print is Thriving, Where does Social Media Fit? A Look at Practices at India's The Hindu', *NiemanLab*, 14 Jan. <<http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/01/when-print-is-thriving-where-does-social-media-fit-a-look-at-practices-at-indias-the-hindu>> (accessed Apr. 2015).
- Brown, P. (2015) *A Global Study of How Online Newspapers Use Eyewitness Media*. Eyewitness Media Hub. <<http://www.emhub.co/research>>
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eyewitness Media Hub (2014) 'Cleaning up the Wild West', *Medium*, 11 Aug. <<https://medium.com/@emhub/cleaning-up-the-wild-west-818c0ed6cc61>> (accessed May 2015).
- Feinstein, A., Audet, B., and Waknine, E. (2014) 'Witnessing Images of Extreme Violence: A Psychological Study of Journalists in the Newsroom', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 5(8): 1–7.
- Kitzinger, J. (1990) 'Audience Understandings of AIDS Media Messages: A Discussion of Methods', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 12(3): 319–35.
- Kitzinger, J. (2004) 'Audience and Readership Research', in J. D. H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger, and E. Wartella (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 167–81.
- Kitzinger, J., and Barbour, R. S. (1999) 'Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups', in R. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*. London: Sage, 1–20.
- Linford, P. (2012) 'Photographers Face Axe as UGC Picture Site Launched', *Hold the Front Page*, 18 Jan. <<http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2012/news/photographers-face-axe-as-ugc-picture-site-launched>> (accessed Apr. 2015).
- Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (1993) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. London: Routledge.

Rendle, A., and Ferrity, C. (2015) 'Practical Guidance for Dealing with UGC in News Reporting', Taylor Wessing, May.

<[http://www.taylorwessing.com/download/article\\_ugc\\_newsrooms.html](http://www.taylorwessing.com/download/article_ugc_newsrooms.html)> (accessed May 2015).

Sharman, D. (2014) 'Johnston Press Extends Photographer Cull across North', Hold the Front Page, 6 Nov.

<<http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2014/news/jp-cuts-photographers-across-the-north>> (accessed Apr. 2015).

Wardle, C., Dubberley, S., and Brown, P. (2014a) *Amateur Footage: A Global Study of User-Generated Content in TV and Online-News Output – Phase 1 Report*, Apr. New York: Tow Center for Digital Journalism/The Tow Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Wardle, C., Dubberley, S. and Brown, P. (2014b) *Amateur Footage: A Global Study of User-Generated Content in TV and Online-News Output*. New York: Tow Center for Digital Journalism/The Tow Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

## **About the Author**

Pete Brown is co-founder and lead researcher at Eyewitness Media Hub. Last year he worked alongside Dr Claire Wardle and Sam Dubberley on a major content and production study of eyewitness media in broadcast news, funded by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University. More recently he completed a follow-up study of online news, analysing 28,000 pages from eight major newspaper websites and interviewing uploaders whose content was found during the research. Pete holds a PhD from Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

## SELECTED RISJ PUBLICATIONS

Robert G. Picard (ed.)

**The Euro Crisis in the Media: Journalistic Coverage of Economic Crisis and European Institutions**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (ed.)

**Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Wendy N. Wyatt (ed.)

**The Ethics of Journalism: Individual, Institutional and Cultural Influences**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Raymond Kuhn and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds)

**Political Journalism in Transition: Western Europe in a Comparative Perspective**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Nigel Bowles, James T. Hamilton, David A. L. Levy (eds)

**Transparency in Politics and the Media: Accountability and Open Government**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Julian Petley (ed.)

**Media and Public Shaming: Drawing the Boundaries of Disclosure**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Lara Fielden

**Regulating for Trust in Journalism: Standards Regulation in the Age of Blended Media**

David A. L. Levy and Robert G. Picard (eds)

**Is there a Better Structure for News Providers? The Potential in Charitable and Trust Ownership**

David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds)

**The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy**

## CHALLENGES

John Lloyd and Laura Toogood

**Journalism and PR: News Media and Public Relations in the Digital Age**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

John Lloyd and Cristina Marconi

**Reporting the EU: News, Media and the European Institutions**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

James Painter

**Climate Change in the Media: Reporting Risk and Uncertainty**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Suzanne Franks

**Women and Journalism**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Naomi Sakr

**Transformations in Egyptian Journalism**  
(published jointly with I.B.Tauris)

Nick Fraser

**Why Documentaries Matter**

Nicola Bruno and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

**Survival is Success: Journalistic Online Start-ups in Western Europe**

John Lloyd

**Scandal! News International and the Rights of Journalism**

Richard Sambrook

**Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The Changing Face of International News**

James Painter

**Summoned by Science: Reporting Climate Change at Copenhagen and Beyond**

John Kelly

**Red Kayaks and Hidden Gold: The Rise, Challenges and Value of Citizen Journalism**

Stephen Whittle and Glenda Cooper

**Privacy, Probity, and Public Interest**

Stephen Coleman, Scott Anthony, and David E Morrison

**Public Trust in the News: A Constructivist Study of the Social Life of the News**

Nik Gowing

**'Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans: The New Tyranny of Shifting Information Power in Crises**

Andrew Currah

**What's Happening to Our News: An Investigation into the Likely Impact of the Digital Revolution on the Economics of News Publishing in the UK**