

Chapter 63

Ethical Challenges for User-Generated Content Publishing: Comparing Public Service Media and Commercial Media

Ceren Sözeri

Galatasaray University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Mainstream online media is gradually encouraging user contributions to boost brand loyalty and to attract new users; however, former “passive” audience members who become users are not able to become true participants in the process of online content production. The adoption of user-generated content in media content results in new legal and ethical challenges within online media organizations. To deal with these challenges, media companies have restricted users through adhesion contracts and editorial strictures unlike anything encountered in the users’ past media consumption experiences. However, these contractual precautions are targeted to protect the media organizations’ editorial purposes or reputations rather than to engage ethical issues that can also ensure them credibility. It is expected that some public service media strive to play a vital role in deliberative culture; on the other hand, some commercial global media have noticed the importance of worthwhile user-generated content even though all of them are far from “read-write” media providers due to the lack of an established guiding ethos for publishing user-generated content.

INTRODUCTION

The mainstream online media gradually encourages user contributions including articles, comments, photos, and videos to boost brand loyalty and attract new users. However, the adaptation of user-generated content has introduced new social, legal, and ethical challenges. In addition to the question of how user contributions are in-

volved in the newsgathering process, content that includes abusive language, offensive comments, or trolling is considered a threat to the credibility of news organizations. Benkler (2006) defined credibility as quality that is measured by some objective criteria and relevance (p. 7). Moreover, general measures of media credibility, such as comparing perceptions of the “believability, reliability, fairness, lack of bias, balance, community

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affiliation, ease of use, completeness, composure, sociability, accuracy, or attractiveness of the media themselves” (Chung, Kim, & Kim, 2010, p. 673) inherently include user-generated content as part of media content.

To deal with credibility concerns, the media organizations tend to have users adopt agreements in the form of “terms of use” or “privacy policy” to protect the organization’s rights and conduct; additionally, the media organizations reduce their own risk of liability for the unlawful acts of others. Although it is expected that content providers take steps to help control the most extreme content (Williams, Calow, & Lee, 2011), these user agreements are treated as adhesion contracts and protect, in fact, only one side’s rights without assuming any responsibility for the content, for which the users assume all the risk.

This chapter examines how media publishers handle the ethical and legal challenges of publishing user contributions by comparing public service media and commercial media. For this research, the user contribution patterns of three different types of public service broadcasters (SBS, the Special Broadcasting Service of Australia; the BBC, the Public Service Broadcaster of the UK; and PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service of the USA) were analyzed, and on the other side, CNN, NBC, the *New York Times*, Reuters, *Le Monde* and *The Guardian*’s user contribution strategies were examined in terms of their conditions, editorial guidelines and privacy policies. Toward that end, the next part of this research focuses on the theoretical background of audience evolution, audience engagement in content production, and the resulting consequences for the new media environment. In this section, unlike past media consumption experiences, the contractual relationship between the users and the media organization is examined in terms of the scope of the contracts, the moderation of user-generated content, and the ethos adopted by commercial and public service media organizations. In the last part, the potential of user-generated content and unanswered ethical

concerns are discussed from the perspective of the diversity of point of view, the credibility of media organizations, and the deliberative online media environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Changing the relationship between news organizations and the audience is one of the significant indicators of digital culture (Deuze, 2006). “The people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) are no longer passive recipients of media; rather, they participate, debate, create, and share. Axel Bruns (2005) described them as producers because of their engagement in non-traditional forms of content production, and their involvement in produsage, which refers to user-led content creation environments. To some extent, this reconceptualization of the audience and their “newfound” production capabilities has replaced established media organizations. At the same time, these organizations intend to adopt this emerging audience factor into their business strategies (Napoli, 2010). They are providing new functions such as hosting and search functionality for massive aggregations of content produced by others (Napoli, 2009).

Although online media organizations are increasingly promoting bottom-up participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) and creative activity (Svoen, 2007), the technical and content quality of user-generated content is still guaranteed through the choice of traditional media “gatekeepers” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). Moreover, this process reflects the conflicting expectations between media corporations and consumers. The content that comes from the users does not always meet the expectations of the media organization and other users in terms of quality. On one hand, Shirky (2008) wrote that these concerns sometimes arise from professional self-defense such as “professionals see the world through a lens created by other members of their

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