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## **TWEET FIRST, VERIFY LATER?**

How real-time information is changing the coverage  
of worldwide crisis events

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 From the CNN Effect to the Twitter Effect

*Baghdad, 17 January 1991* – At 2:38 am the First Gulf War officially started with an aerial bombing campaign on Baghdad. At the same instant, CNN (the only Western TV network present in Iraq) started to broadcast the unfolding images of military action from the ground. In the following weeks, millions of viewers could watch the war, as it was happening, live on their TV screens.

CNN coverage of the First Gulf War soon became emblematic of what several experts defined as the *CNN effect*, that is, according to Joseph Nye, “the impact of the increased free flow of broadcast information and shortened news cycles on public opinion in free societies”<sup>1</sup>.

The *CNN effect* “describes a more novel type of media role that is different in nature from the media’s traditional role because it is rapid in its transmission, transcontinental in its reach and qualitatively richer than the past media formats”<sup>2</sup>. As well as redefining diplomacy, foreign policy and military strategy<sup>3</sup>, the CNN live coverage “greatly accelerated the news cycle, starting to redefine the work of the international reporters”<sup>4</sup>. This type of coverage noticeably increased its presence in different media outlets over the next 10 years, defining the era of 24-hour broadcast cable news.

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<sup>1</sup> Bahador Babak, *The CNN Effect in Action: How the News Media Pushed the West Toward War in Kosovo*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> There is no consensus among the academic community on the definition of the CNN Effect. As argued by Babak Bahador (2007): “The CNN Effect is defined by Steve Livingston as the impact of new global real-time media on diplomacy and foreign policy. Piers Robinson describes it as the responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events that are transmitted by real-time communications technology”.

<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by Babak Bahador (2007), “Even George Bush, the US president at the time seemed fascinated, stating that he learned more from CNN than from the CIA”.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Sambrook, *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The changing face of international news*, Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism Challenges, 2010, p. 9.

*Haiti, 12 January 2010* - At 4.53 pm an earthquake of 7.0 Mw magnitude struck the Caribbean island of Haiti. The estimated total number of people affected was 230,000 dead, 300,000 injured and 1,000,000 made homeless. In addition to the collapse of thousands of houses and buildings, most of the island was left without electricity. As is the case with this type of natural disaster, in the aftermath of the quake the Haitian population experienced first of all “a crisis in communicating within a community - that is, as a difficulty for someone to get informed and to inform other people”<sup>5</sup>. With local TV and radio stations out of service<sup>6</sup>, mobile telephones<sup>7</sup> and the Internet were the only resources thousands of people had to communicate emergencies, their food/water needs, and to report people who had been trapped<sup>8</sup>. In this scenario, new communication technologies played a crucial role and among them Twitter became the most important: the first tweet was published seven minutes after the quake, at 5 pm, by Haiti-based user Frederic Dupoux (@FredoDupoux)<sup>9</sup>.

Thousands of tweets were to follow, at a time when only two foreign correspondents were in Haiti: Jonathan Katz<sup>10</sup> from Associated Press and Joseph Guyler Delva<sup>11</sup> who

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Claude, “Studying Disaster: Changes in the Main Conceptual Tools” in *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Questions*, ed. Enrico Luvio Quintarelli, 1998, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> “Haiti’s new media was temporarily paralyzed. All of its newspapers and the most of its broadcasters ceased to function, and it is believed that 33 journalists died in the quake (...) The earthquake destroyed the country’s capacity to produce and distribute newspapers for weeks”, in Nelson A., Sigal Ivan with Dean Zambrano, *Media, Information Systems and Communities: Lessons from Haiti*, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> According to a report by the United Institute of Peace, “approximately 85% percent of Haitian households had access to mobile phones at the time of the earthquake, and although 70% of the cell phone towers in Port-au-Prince had been destroyed in the disaster, they were quickly repaired and mostly back online” - “Crowdsourcing Crisis Information in Disaster Affected Haiti”, *Special Report by United States Institute of Peace*, October 2010 (<http://www.usip.org/publications/crowdsourcing-crisis-information-in-disaster-affected-haiti>).

<sup>8</sup> “Despite the devastation to infrastructure from Haiti’s Jan. 12 earthquake, cell phones are emerging as a lifeline for many survivors” - “Cell phones and radios help save lives after Haiti earthquake”, *Reuters AlertNet*, 24 January 2010 (<http://www.trust.org/alertnet/blogs/alertnet-news-blog/cell-phones-and-radios-help-save-lives-after-haiti-earthquake/>).

<sup>9</sup> The text of the tweet said: “Oh shiet [sic] heavy earthquake right now! In Haiti!”.

<sup>10</sup> “AP’s Correspondent No Longer Has Haiti Beat to Himself”, *Daily Finance*, 15 January 2010 (<http://www.dailyfinance.com/story/media/aps-correspondent-no-longer-has-haiti-beat-to-himself/19317112/>).

<sup>11</sup> “His first dispatch on Haiti’s Jan. 12 earthquake was one of the first detailed eyewitness accounts to the outside world reporting on the panic and scale of destruction in the streets of Port-au-Prince. His own home and office collapsed in the quake but his wife, Shirley, and children, Jennifer, 7 and Stephan, 1, survived” - “Haiti: The journalists behind the story”, *Reuters Blog*, 27 January 2010 (<http://blogs.reuters.com/global/2010/01/27/haiti-the-journalists-behind-the-story/>).

was a freelance correspondent for Reuters. Both of them had to attend to their own personal emergencies first: they lost their houses, and had to find missing relatives. The first foreign anchor to arrive in Port-au-Prince was the well-known CNN journalist Anderson Cooper. He started broadcasting his first TV show from Haiti on January 13<sup>th</sup> at 10am<sup>12</sup>. Within 24 hours, even before most military and relief organizations arrived, CNN had eight reporting teams on the ground, with more on the way<sup>13</sup>.

Before CNN started its live coverage and other correspondents were able to reach the island, big news organizations had to contend with an embarrassing “news vacuum”, as underlined by *Columbia Journalism Review*<sup>14</sup>: how to cover the news of the day without any correspondent on the ground? An answer was provided by social media websites, and by Twitter in particular, as Ed Fraser, senior programme editor for Channel 4 News, said to *Press Gazette*<sup>15</sup>: “We had a 24-hour period where we just had to cover the story with what information we could garner. For the first time really, certainly in online terms but also for broadcast, Twitter was one of those vehicles which had a life of its own. It gave us real time information as to what was going on the ground”.

Thanks to the rapid and easily accessible flow of information coming from Haiti, a lot of news media outlets could report the event with first-hand, real-time witnesses from the ground, long before their correspondents were able to reach the Caribbean island. Micro-posts on Twitter, pictures on Flickr and amateur videos on YouTube were used by

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<sup>12</sup> “The CNN anchor who made his name covering Hurricane Katrina flew out of New York at 1AM and filed his first report from the earthquake-shaken region Wednesday morning. ‘On a story like this you need to see it with your own eyes’, he wrote on his blog. Cooper has also been chronicling his journey to Haiti on Twitter” - “Anderson Cooper First Big Anchor On The Ground In Haiti”, *The Huffington Post*, 13 January 2010 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/13/anderson-cooper-first-big\\_n\\_421760.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/13/anderson-cooper-first-big_n_421760.html)).

<sup>13</sup> “New Media Scramble to Cover Haitian Earthquake”, *The Maynard Institute*, 13 January 13 2010 (<http://mije.org/richardprince/news-media-scramble-cover-haitian-quake>).

<sup>14</sup> “One of the striking things about the news out of Haiti in the wake of yesterday’s devastating earthquake is that... given the scope of events, there’s not been that much news out of Haiti. One of the themes in the early reporting, in fact, is in the inability of Haitian Americans to get information about what’s happening in their homeland” – “The Haitian News Vacuum”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 13 January 2010 ([http://www.cjr.org/the\\_kicker/the\\_haitian\\_news\\_vacuum\\_1.php](http://www.cjr.org/the_kicker/the_haitian_news_vacuum_1.php)).

<sup>15</sup> “Haiti: How news broadcasters scrambled for coverage”, *Press Gazette*, 20 January 2010 (<http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=44924>).

big news organizations in the immediate aftermath of the quake, as identified by BBC Monitoring<sup>16</sup>:

“Traditional news media, such as national TV channels and newspapers, accepted the mass of material as vital in delivering the story in its early stages in the context of a severely damaged communications and transport infrastructure, chronic power failure, and extensive damage to key buildings in the capital. Leading US news outlets such as CNN, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times were busy aggregating, sorting and presenting citizen-generated content from an early stage to paint a picture of the start of a humanitarian catastrophe”.

As the journalist Nik Gowing argues<sup>17</sup>, “in a moment of a crisis what is the difference - if any - between the staff reporter who observes, writes, blogs then files an article for an established media organisation, and the motivated amateur or quasi professional who does exactly the same for a web or blog site?”. That is true, above all, in the era of the *Twitter effect*, when, as described by Matthew Weaver, a journalist live-blogging crisis events on the Guardian.co.uk, “first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the video and then the wires”<sup>18</sup>.

Not only news organizations, but also users around the world started to use social media websites to get up-to-date information on the earthquake and to support the local population, as reported by online monitoring service Nielsen on January 15<sup>th</sup>:

“Preliminary analysis of data shows that Twitter posts (“micro-blogs”) are the leading source of discussion about the quake, followed by online video, blogs and other online boards/forums”<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> “New Media Vital in breaking Haiti earthquake story”, *BBC World Agenda*, 22 January 2010, ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122\\_worldagenda\\_haiti\\_monitoring.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122_worldagenda_haiti_monitoring.shtml)).

<sup>17</sup> Nic Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans. The new tyranny of shifting information power in crisis*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Challenges, 2009, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> “Journalism Rules Are Bent in News Coverage From Iran”, *New York Times*, 28 June 2009 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>).

<sup>19</sup> “Social Media and Mobile Texting a Major Source of Info and Aid for Earthquake in Haiti”, NielsenWire, 15 January 2010 ([http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/)).

If what has been written by Foreign Policy associate editor Joshua E. Keating<sup>20</sup> is true, that “the massive Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti was the first “*Twitter Disaster*”, then 20 years after the first Gulf War a new disruptive changeover appears to be impacting the larger media landscape, which is ever more rapid, transcontinental, and qualitatively and quantitatively richer than the *CNN effect*. “We are potentially in a pivotal moment in reporting disasters”, said Glenda Cooper during the 14<sup>th</sup> Guardian Lecture at the Nuffield College<sup>21</sup> arguing that “new technology is altering how we report, where we report from and most of all who is doing the reporting”.

If we allow ourselves to paraphrase the *CNN effect* of the 1990s, this changeover in the media landscape could be called the *Twitter effect*. As was true for the *CNN effect*, which was “caused by more than just the CNN organization”<sup>22</sup>, the *Twitter effect* must also be considered as a symbol of a much broader phenomenon, concerning several online tools oriented to the publication of user-generated, real-time content (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc)<sup>23</sup>.

The *Twitter effect* is not only changing the way in which people communicate during crisis events, but also how big news organizations cover them. If the *CNN effect* required your own correspondents being on the ground in order to broadcast live footage, then the *Twitter effect* allows you to provide live coverage without any reporters on the ground, by simply newsgathering user-generated content available online.

Just as the *CNN effect* was crucial in centring media and political attention on a global crisis, the *Twitter effect* too promises to offer a more in-depth coverage of natural

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<sup>20</sup> “Lost in #Haiti”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2010  
([http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/22/lost\\_in\\_haiti](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/22/lost_in_haiti)).

<sup>21</sup> “Anyone here survived a wave, speak English and got a mobile? Aid agencies, the media and reporting disasters since the tsunami”, Glenda Cooper, The 14th Guardian Lecture, 2007  
([http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield\\_Guardian\\_Lecture\\_2007.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield_Guardian_Lecture_2007.pdf)).

<sup>22</sup> Bahador Babak, *The CNN Effect in Action: How the News Media Pushed the West Toward War in Kosovo*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> According to Dan Gillmor, author of *We the Media* (O'Reilly, 2004) and an expert in citizen journalism, the turning point for user-generated content being embraced by the mainstream media has to be considered the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, when all TV networks relied on footage coming from normal people armed with digital cameras. The Haiti Earthquake represents a further step in this process, with a greater emphasis on the real-time potential of user-generated content for live coverage of a disaster.

disasters and 'forgotten' wars, to provide visibility to threatened voices and political protests in less democratic countries, to quickly spread information regarding upcoming catastrophes and/or current health pandemics. More importantly, it promotes an idea (and practice) of a journalism more oriented to the "process" of news-making and more open to a diversity of sources than traditional mainstream coverage could produce today.

In this historical changeover from the mainstream, televised, one-to-many *CNN effect* to the grassroots, Internet-based, many-to-many *Twitter effect*, a lot of questions arise over news organizations which, as argued by Nic Newman<sup>24</sup>, "are already abandoning attempts to be first for breaking news, focusing instead on being the best at verifying and curating it".

What is not yet clear, however, is how traditional journalism can successfully integrate this continuous flow of grassroots, first-hand reporting, which is sometimes helpful, but which in other instances is clearly overwhelming and potentially unreliable, due to source-check difficulty and what Nic Gowing calls the "tyranny of real time"<sup>25</sup>: "When to take on the tyranny of the time and intervene with real-time information, even if it is incomplete, possibly flaky and probably cannot be verified with 100 per cent accuracy? (...) You can be *First*, and you can be *Fast*. But in entering the race for the information space how *Flawed* – how mistaken and inaccurate – might you be?"<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2 Project Overview

In order to better understand what the impact of the *Twitter effect* has been on mainstream news organisations during worldwide crisis events, the questions I want to address in the present paper are the following:

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<sup>24</sup> Nic Newman, *The rise of social media and its impact on mainstream journalism*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Challenges, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> "Ten years ago the typical institutional assumption was of a relatively leisurely period of up to 24 hours to gather data internally and then respond publicly. By around 2005, the time created by new realities of real-time tyranny had probably shrunk to between two and four hours. By 2009 my analysis is that the time available is down to no more than a few minutes, although maybe one hour of occasionally two if luck is on the institution's side" - Nic Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans. The new tyranny of shifting information power in crisis*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Challenges, 2009, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

- 1) How is the *Twitter effect* changing the coverage of crisis events around the world? Do user-generated contributions actually help produce more timely and accurate reporting?
- 2) To what extent does user-generated content replace old-school ways of reporting during a crisis event?
- 3) What happens to the journalistic standards of relevance and reliability in the age of the *Twitter effect*?

In order to answer to these questions, I will focus my attention on the online coverage of the Haiti Earthquake in three mainstream online media outlets: Bbc.com, Guardian.co.uk, cnn.com. After a brief overview of the role of social media (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Ushahidi) in the aftermath of the quake (Chapter 2), in Chapter 3 I will describe the different approaches to social media at the BBC (more centralized), The Guardian (more decentralized) and CNN (community-centered). In the fourth Chapter I will use content-analysis to find out in more detail how the BBC, The Guardian, CNN and New York Times covered the disaster.

First, I will focus on the online coverage in the 24-hour period following the earthquake, when most of these news media outlets had no correspondents in Haiti and could only rely on user-generated contributions available on Twitter, YouTube and other social networks. I will try to figure out how these news organization have incorporated social media content into their live coverage, and what criteria (“first tweet, then verify?”) they use in deciding whether to trust these contributions or not.

Second, I will also analyse the stories published on the disaster a week later, when all these news organizations had their own correspondents on the ground: did they still continue to rely on UGC content? Or did they prefer to rely only on their reporters as eyewitnesses? Content analysis of stories published online will be carried out alongside interviews with editors and correspondents who worked on the coverage of the Haiti Earthquake. In this way, it will be possible to understand also how the *Twitter effect* is changing the behind-the-scenes practices of journalists.

In the fifth and final chapter I will try to explain the main opportunities and limits of real-time coverage of a crisis event for news organizations. In particular, I will try to illustrate how user-submitted content is changing journalistic standards of relevance and reliability, and how news organizations can assure some degree of accountability and trust in user-generated contributions, particularly during crisis situations.

## 2. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HAITI

### 2.1 Social media: a first rough draft of history?

*“Oh shiet [sic] heavy earthquake right now! In Haiti!”* This message, posted at 5 p.m. local time on Twitter.com, is one of the earliest live pieces of evidence of the earthquake hitting Haiti on 12 January 2010. Twitter user Fredo Dupoux<sup>27</sup> (a Port-au-Prince-based blogger and photographer) published his note seven minutes after the first shock, promptly followed by dozens more tweets assessing the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, at that moment no correspondent from major Western media outlets was present on the Caribbean island, with the exception of an Associated Press reporter and a Reuters local stringer. Telephone lines were partially cut off, thus preventing most communications with government officials or the many aid workers active on the island. In a repeat of the aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the USA, social media emerged as a crucial tool to receive breaking news directly from the ground at Haiti. The major difference from six years earlier, when communications relied mostly on SMS (phone text message) or pictures quickly shot with cellular phones, was that in 2010 people online could take advantage of the many tools available on the Internet.

Indeed, while initially people resorted essentially to Twitter due to its immediacy and versatility, within a few hours other social media were also used to disseminate a variety of audio, video and text material. The first images of the devastation that hit Port-au-Prince appeared on Facebook and TwitPic. Similarly, the earliest videos of rescue operations were shared on YouTube and iReport (CNN’s user-generated content platform). Many eyewitness accounts from Haitians surfaced only via Skype.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://twitter.com/#!/fredodupoux>

So once again social media took charge of “breaking the news” to the world about a major crisis event. At the same time, online media open to user-generated content, were able to employ these resources to provide real-time information in a rich, diversified, and contextualized fashion.

Twitter first, but immediately followed by Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Skype, traditional blogs and innovative crowdsourcing projects (such as Ushahidi), contributed largely to the creation of a “first rough draft of history” of the Haiti earthquake, to quote the famous publisher of the Washington Post from 1946 to 1961, Philip L. Graham. Without these tweets, videos, and audio files shared online by dozens of people on the ground, the “news-vacuum” that characterized traditional media in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake would have been much larger<sup>28</sup>.

## 2.2 Twitter

Right after the first tweet by Fredo Dupoux, dozens of other users rushed to the microblogging service to inform the outside world on the Haiti situation. "*Earthquake 7 Richter scale just happening #Haiti*", writes user FutureHaiti<sup>29</sup> a few minutes after Dupoux's tweet. At 6 p.m. local time, an update is signed by user RAMHaiti<sup>30</sup>, the nickname of Richard Morse, a musician and manager of the well-known Oloffson Hotel in Port-au-Prince: "*were ok at the oloffson..internet is on !! no phones ! hope all are okay..alot of big building in PAP are down!*".

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<sup>28</sup> As pointed out by Matthew Ingram, senior writer at the tech-blog GigaOm.com: "In any disaster, one of the first things that people look for — not just journalists, but readers too — is the eyewitness account, the first-person description, the man on the scene. Whenever something like the earthquake happens, thousands of editors and producers at newspapers, radio programs and TV networks clog the phones trying to reach someone, anyone, who can provide a personal account: they call homes, schools, stores, friends, distant relatives. What was it like? Where were you when it happened? What happened next?" — "Twitter: the first draft of history?"

(<http://www.mathewingram.com/work/2008/05/12/twitter-the-first-draft-of-history/>).

<sup>29</sup> <http://twitter.com/FutureHaiti>

<sup>30</sup> <http://twitter.com/RAMhaiti/>

With all communication channels out of order in the areas hit hardest by the earthquake, the major media outlets which were still without correspondents on the ground quickly resorted to Twitter as a reliable source for their news-gathering.

On Twitter one of the most active users was Carel Pedre<sup>31</sup>, famous host of the “Radio One Haiti” show. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake he shared dozens of tweets, along with early images on Facebook and Flickr and video-interviews via Skype. At 7 p.m. Carel tweeted: *“If U Need To get in Touch With Friends & Family in Haiti. Send me a Private Message with names and Phone Numbers. I'll get Back to U!”*. Messages started flocking to his account. And when, a few hours later, an aftershock made Haiti tremble once more, Pedre was again among the first users to tweet: *“After Shock every 10 Mns! I can't stay where I am! I have to be in a safe place! I got All the Message! I will do my best To Call ur family”*.

Due to his “journalism” credentials, Pedre was one of the sources used by most major Westerners to cover the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Probably his online presence also helped him to save a few victims, as detailed in the account published on the Groccots’ Mail (South Africa’s oldest independent newspaper).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <http://twitter.com/#!/carelpedre>

<sup>32</sup> “Pedre was driving his car along the streets of the capital when the ground started moving violently; houses were tossed into the air and walls came tumbling down. As a trained journalist, Pedre’s intuitive reaction was to jump out of his car, take photos with his iPhone and post them on the web. He took six photographs of houses that had collapsed and streets that had been ripped apart, but, because the earthquake had knocked out cellphone communication towers, he couldn’t post any of the pictures. Pedre, along with all the other inhabitants of the city, were shocked into panicked action. Pedre’s first priority was to find out what had happened to his family. (...) Pedre parked his car at the Radio One station and ran two miles to his house to discover his daughter was safe. He returned to the station to find that it somehow still had internet access and he was able to post the first pictures of the calamity onto Twitter and contact friends and family in the outside world using Facebook. As soon as the news of the disaster filtered out of the country, foreign news organisations began trawling social media sites and quickly found Pedre. He was surprised to learn just how interested the rest of the world was in the Haitian earthquake. Major networks from all corners of the globe were soon calling him for interviews about the magnitude of the disaster. Some used telephones while others were able to make Skype connections. (...) He used Twitter and Facebook to inform relatives about who had survived and who still needed attention. In one particular incident he heard about a boy who had been trapped for 16 days under a pile of rubble. Pedre used Google Earth to locate the boy and then used Facebook to guide a rescue team to him. His knowledge of social media and his expertise in using what was available helped save at least one life and certainly helped alleviate the misery of many others” – “How social web saved a life”, *Grocott’s Mail*, 07 July 2010

Along with Pedre, Richard Morse (RAMHaiti) and Fredo Dupoux posted several tweets in the earthquake's aftermath, sharing personal accounts from different areas of Haiti:

*"people in large -numbers are singing prayers downtown"*

9pm @RAMHaiti

*"It's really ugly, just like in a bad dream. people need help, get out and help ! #haiti*

*@eq"*

10pm @fredodupoux

*"Phones are mostly down but sometimes you get lucky. I hear that epicenter of quake was near PauP @asger\_letih"*

10pm @RAMHaiti

*"Just came back from -market. It looks like ground zero. people are trapped it's dark we need light and cell phone service"*

10pm @fredodupoux

Among the most active users of social media we should also include Troy Livesay<sup>33</sup>, a U.S. Christian missionary who, quoting Lewis MacLeod<sup>34</sup>, Media Analyst at BBC Monitoring, "posted some of the most moving tweets in a constantly updating flow of information". At 12:09 a.m. on 13 January he tweeted: "*Church groups are singing throughout the city all through the night in prayer. It is a beautiful sound in the middle of a horrible tragedy*".

As mentioned in the first chapter, the only staff correspondent of a major mainstream media present that day in Haiti was Jonathan Katz of the Associated Press. His house

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(<http://www.grocotts.co.za/content/how-social-web-saved-life-09-07-2010>).

<sup>33</sup> <http://livesayhaiti.blogspot.com/>

<sup>34</sup> "New Media Vital in breaking Haiti earthquake story", *BBC World Agenda*, 22 January 2010 ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122\\_worldagenda\\_haiti\\_monitoring.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122_worldagenda_haiti_monitoring.shtml)).

was destroyed by the earthquake and he spent several hours looking for his family members before being able to send over some initial dispatches. However, after transmitting the first news items and images, Katz moved on to constantly update the official Twitter account of the Associated Press. This new way of reporting has now become commonplace for a good correspondent in a crisis situation – as the AP Executive Editor Kathleen Carroll explained to the *Columbia Journalism Review*<sup>35</sup>:

“Covering tragedies of the magnitude in Haiti has been a sad part of what the AP has done quickly and reliably for decades. By using Facebook and Twitter accounts to interact with our audience and learn more about what they want to know, AP will strengthen its already dynamic relationship with its member news organizations, other customers and news consumers throughout the world”.

Twitter has become not only an innovative, real-time distribution channel for mainstream media, but one of the news sources preferred by the final users as well. “Haiti Earthquake” was the top fourth trend item on Twitter for all of 2010<sup>36</sup>, right after “Gulf Oil Spill”, “FIFA World Cup” and “Inception”, and preceding such popular items such as “Apple iPad” and “Justin Bieber”. In the “News Events” it gained second spot.

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<sup>35</sup> “New Media Crucial In The Aftermath”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 13 January 2010 ([http://www.cjr.org/the\\_observatory/new\\_media\\_crucial\\_in\\_aftermath.php](http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/new_media_crucial_in_aftermath.php)).

<sup>36</sup> <http://yearinreview.twitter.com/trends/>

## NEWS EVENTS

1. Gulf Oil Spill
2. Haiti Earthquake
3. Pakistan Floods
4. Koreas Conflict
5. Chilean Miners Rescue
6. Chavez Tas Ponchao
7. Wikileaks Cablegate
8. Hurricane Earl
9. Prince Williams Engagement
10. World Aids Day

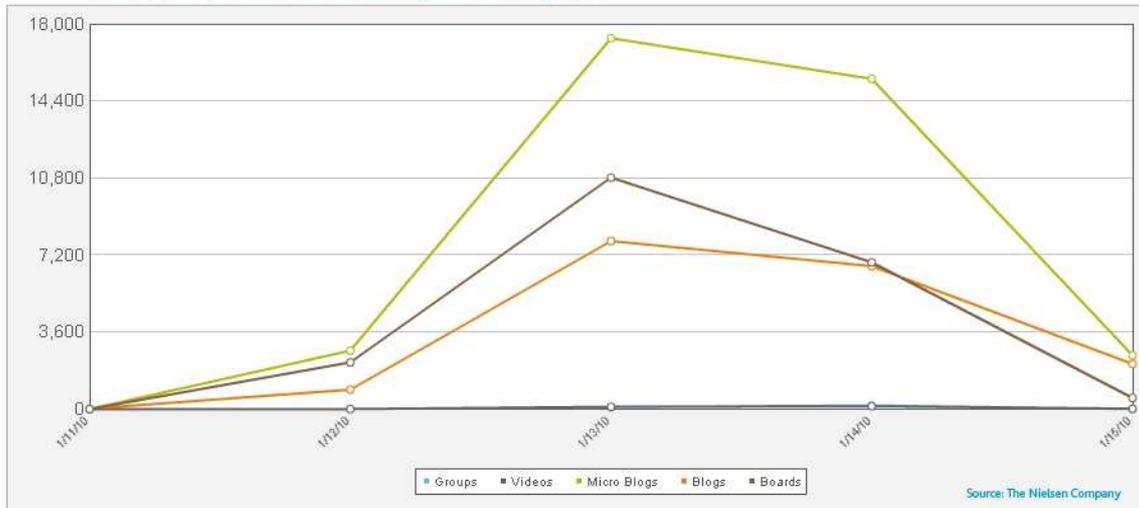
A report<sup>37</sup> published by the media research agency Nielsen on 15 January 2010, three days after the first shock, confirmed Twitter's central role in news-gathering on the Haiti earthquake:

"Preliminary analysis of data shows that Twitter posts ("micro-blogs") are the leading source of discussion about the quake, followed by online video, blogs and other online boards/forums. While most online consumers rely on traditional media for coverage of the quake, they are turning to Twitter and blogs to share information, react to the situation and rally support. The Twitter account for the Red Cross, which on average, had been adding roughly 50-100 followers a day before the quake, has gained more than 10K followers since. Currently, blog posts about Haiti's quake also make up nearly 3% of all blog posts at Nielsen's BlogPulse.com search engine".

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<sup>37</sup> "Social Media and Mobile Texting a Major Source of Info and Aid for Earthquake in Haiti", *NielsenWire*, 15 January 2010 ([http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/)).

Discussions of Haiti Earthquake by Source



Just a few hours after the major shock, several charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started using Twitter to inform and make people aware about the earthquake. The most active NGO was undoubtedly the International Red Cross, thus opening the way to a very successful fund-raising effort.<sup>38</sup> Quoting the Twitter-tracking service Sysomos<sup>39</sup>:

“Twitter has emerged as a place to highlight breaking news, galvanize people around the world, and help raise money for charities and other causes. So it has not been surprising to see the earthquake in Haiti become the dominant topic of conversation this week.

According to our data, there were 2.3 million tweets about “Haiti” or the “Red Cross” from Jan. 12 to Jan. 14, and nearly 150,000 tweets that included “Haiti” and “Red Cross”. Of the 2.3 million tweets, 59% were retweets.

<sup>38</sup> “The American Red Cross, which is working with a mobile donations firm called mGive, said Thursday that it had raised more than \$5 million this way. ‘There is an enormous outpouring for this effort’, said Wendy Harman, social media manager at the Red Cross. ‘It’s such an easy way to give and pass around through social sites on the Web’. The mobile donations are part of a larger surge of money flowing to the relief effort. The Red Cross said it had collected nearly \$35 million as of Thursday night, surpassing the amounts it received in the same time period after Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami” – “Burst of Mobile Giving Adds Millions in Relief Funds”, *New York Times*, 14 January 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/technology/15mobile.html?>).

<sup>39</sup> “Haitian Earthquake Dominates Twitter”, *Sysomos Blog*, 15 January 2010 (<http://blog.sysomos.com/2010/01/15/haitian-earthquake-dominates-twitter/>).

There were also 189,024 tweets that included “90999”, which can be used to donate money to the Red Cross via a text message”.

Several other NGOs and charities resorted to Twitter as a news distribution channel, including<sup>40</sup> the United Nations<sup>41</sup>, Mission Manna<sup>42</sup>, CARE USA<sup>43</sup>, and Doctors Without Borders<sup>44</sup>.

If it is true that Twitter proved itself a very effective tool for NGOs, Government agencies and news organizations, it should also be noted that a few days after the tragedy the communication flow on the microblogging platform started showing some sort of ‘dark side’. Indeed, as CNN<sup>45</sup> and Foreign Policy Magazine pointed out<sup>46</sup>, many false rumours about supposed relief initiatives were quickly spreading on Twitter:

“A Twitter message stating that UPS was offering free shipping to Haiti and another that U.S. airlines were flying doctors to the country for free - when in fact, the country was completely closed to commercial flights in the days following the earthquake - led those companies to be deluged with phone calls and requests they couldn’t answer”<sup>47</sup>.

## 2.3 Video

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<sup>40</sup> “Role of Social Media in Haiti”, Online report (<https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AWtdQpCO9fVmZGd4Y3drNG1fMTQxM2J0bXByZjI&hl>).

<sup>41</sup> [www.twitter.com/UNHaitiInfo](http://www.twitter.com/UNHaitiInfo)

<sup>42</sup> [www.twitter.com/MissionMANNA](http://www.twitter.com/MissionMANNA)

<sup>43</sup> [www.twitter.com/CAREUSA](http://www.twitter.com/CAREUSA)

<sup>44</sup> [www.twitter.com/MSF\\_USA](http://www.twitter.com/MSF_USA)

<sup>45</sup> “Twitter hoax spreads rumors of airlines’ free flights to Haiti”, *CNN.com*, 15 January 2010 (<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/TECH/01/14/twitter.hoax.haiti/>).

<sup>46</sup> “Lost in #Haiti”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2010 ([http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/22/lost\\_in\\_haiti](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/22/lost_in_haiti)).

<sup>47</sup> “On January 14th, one of the trending topic on Twitter was “UPS is shipping to”. The topic consisted mainly of this message retweeted: “UPS is shipping to Haiti for free today UNDER 50 POUNDS- Clothing and Food Drives at all United Way and Salvation Army”. That was not true, as explained by an UPI’s spokesperson: “In a blog post Wednesday on UPS’s Web site, a spokeswoman debunked the rumor and said that destruction of Haiti’s roads and communications networks ‘means our own shipping services to Haiti are on hold’. UPS is donating \$1 million to help the people of Haiti through relief agencies, she said” - “Haiti: False Rumors on the Twittersphere”, *Foreign Policy*, 14 January 2010 ([http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/01/14/false\\_rumors\\_on\\_the\\_twittersphere](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/01/14/false_rumors_on_the_twittersphere)).

The same Nielsen Media report<sup>48</sup> revealed that, right behind Twitter, image and video sharing websites emerged as the most prolific online sources. At 10 p.m. on 22 January 2010, the American Red Cross shared on YouTube its first video shot in Haiti. Another video<sup>49</sup>, shot by a CCTV camera in a local bar (showing a group of people wildly running outside as soon as they feel the first shock) was quickly uploaded to YouTube and then re-broadcast by major all-news TV networks. The same happened to another video shot with a cellular phone showing a large smoke cloud wrapping Port-au-Prince.

On 12 January a new amateur video, showing the heavy destruction of Les Cayes and many people wandering around in shock, gained over 2 million hits and received a special mention in the News category of YouTube Trends<sup>50</sup> (the annual list of most viewed videos on the platform owned by Google). Haiti was also the most searched term on YouTube for the month of January 2010.

However, as Lewis MacLeod of BBC Monitoring pointed out<sup>51</sup>, it was a traditional news-caster, CNN, which was the top recipient of video contributions from Haiti shared on iReport, its platform devoted to content submitted directly by citizen-reporters:

“The broadcaster with the most material on the quake from such sources appeared to be CNN. Video reports from citizen journalists come into the CNN iReport desk where they are vetted for verifiability by editorial staff. Around two years ago, the iReport section of CNN's website, where people can upload video material and contact details, became a usable source for CNN when vetting procedures were put into place”.

In the USA, the TV network CBS also broadcast many videos shared on YouTube in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Among them was a video shot by a security

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<sup>48</sup> “Social Media and Mobile Texting a Major Source of Info and Aid for Earthquake in Haiti”, *NielsenWire*, 15 January 2010 ([http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/)).

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9mN-f6SLqI>

<sup>50</sup> <http://youtube-trends.blogspot.com/2010/12/top-news-politics-videos-of-2010.html>

<sup>51</sup> “New Media Vital in breaking Haiti earthquake story”, *BBC World Agenda*, 22 January 2010 ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122\\_worldagenda\\_haiti\\_monitoring.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122_worldagenda_haiti_monitoring.shtml)).

camera at the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince<sup>52</sup> and another raw video showing the first rescue operations being organized in the MINUSTAD (United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti) building<sup>53</sup>.

Finally, the BBC, CNN and other major news network all broadcast the first personal account by Carel Pedre, who shot a video in his radio station and promptly uploaded it to YouTube.

## 2.4 Pictures

The first pictures publicly available online were shot by Carel Pedre on his iPhone and then shared on Facebook, TwitPic and iReport. Also Twitter user @MarvinAndy published several images in the earthquake aftermath, “resulting in tens of thousands of views and countless retweets”<sup>54</sup>. A search for “Haiti Earthquake” on the photo-sharing website Flickr returns about 34,000 pictures, many shared by NGOs active in Haiti: on 12 January 2010 the British Red Cross, for instance, compiled an album<sup>55</sup> with hundreds of pictures taken on the ground. Many of those images have been used by major newspaper and TV networks to illustrate the effects of the earthquake before professional images from news-wires became available.

Soon iReport also became another fist-hand source for images, particularly due to user Jonathan de la Durantaye who shared dramatic photos of a heavily damaged Port-au-Prince. These resources were regularly used by the US all-news networks as background images during their real-time coverage of events unfolding in Haiti.

## 2.5 Facebook

More than news sources, Facebook has quickly emerged as a major vehicle for mobilizing people and spreading word of mouth information for donations. In the days

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<sup>52</sup> The CBS posting had over 717,000 views and the original had over 800,00 viewers at the time of writing.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSd9a-FFzW8>

<sup>54</sup> “Haiti Earthquake: Twitter Pictures Sweep Across the Web”, *Mashable*, 12 January 2010 (<http://mashable.com/2010/01/12/haiti-earthquake-pictures/>).

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/britishredcross/sets/72157623201983100/>

immediately following the earthquake, the social network created and promoted a page called "Global Relief". Randi Zuckerberg, manager of Facebook non-profit initiatives, wrote the following in a blog post:

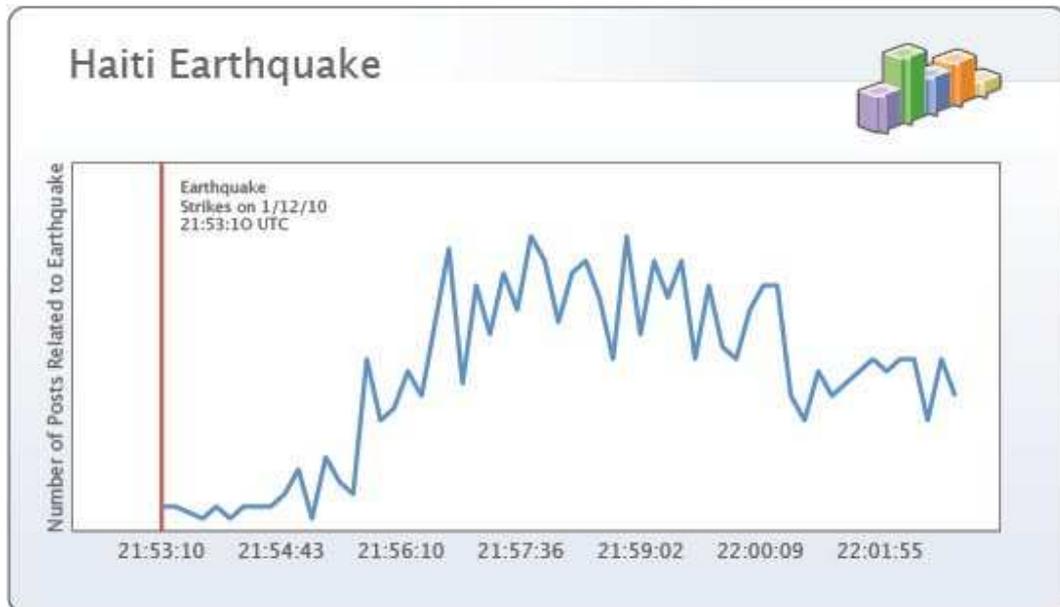
"Every minute, people have been posting more than 1,500 status updates on Facebook that contained the word 'Haiti'. People have contributed thousands of dollars through the Causes application on Facebook, and groups including the American Red Cross, Oxfam America and Partners in Health have mobilised supporters through their Facebook pages and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in the last 24 hours alone" she said.

As a consequence, Haiti became the top fifth item most discussed throughout 2010 on Facebook, as stated by the Facebook Memology 2010<sup>56</sup> (the annual report listing the most discussed issues on the social network):

"Within one minute of the 7.0-magnitude earthquake's strike, status updates started rolling in. With the infrastructure in Haiti badly damaged, many of the first reports were from people in the nearby Dominican Republic (where earthquake is "terremoto"), who felt the powerful quake at a distance. Firsthand reports peaked four minutes after the quake hit, at a rate of 120 a minute. It took another couple of hours for the world to learn of the disaster, and a day later people on Facebook were discussing it at a peak rate of 1,800 posts per minute".

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<sup>56</sup> <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=466369142130>



## 2.6 Skype

Given the general unavailability of local telephone lines, soon this well-known VoIP (Voice-over-IP) program emerged as a valuable tool to gather the first personal accounts from Haitians (as video and audio files). Carel Pedre used Skype to have interviews with CNN, BBC, France 24, the New York Times and other media outlets. An example also taken up by Ansel Herz, a freelance journalist from Petionville<sup>57</sup>:

“There was ‘devastation everywhere,’ said Pedre. ‘People are coming together and helping others survive,’ he said, adding that ‘not a lot in the way of help was coming from the authorities and the peacekeepers’. He told how he witnessed rescue efforts with pickaxes at the partially collapsed cathedral building, and how for people who were already poor ‘it was difficult to describe the problems facing them’.

<sup>57</sup> “New Media Vital in breaking Haiti earthquake story”, *BBC World Agenda*, 22 January 2010 ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122\\_worldagenda\\_haiti\\_monitoring.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122_worldagenda_haiti_monitoring.shtml)).

Skype was also key in the coordination of humanitarian aid. As detailed in the report “Role of Social Media in Haiti”<sup>58</sup>, Yves Colon, the Director of Internews Haiti, communicated with aid workers and colleagues via Skype in the post-quake period, since he couldn't get through via mobile phone at first. He stated: “I use Skype to communicate with people. The other day I did an interview with a radio station in New York City and that was the first time the host had ever used Skype. I was in Haiti and I was teaching someone in NYC to use Skype”.

## 2.7 Ushahidi Haiti

Two hours after the first shock in Haiti, the Ushahidi Haiti Project<sup>59</sup> was ready to be launched at the Fletcher School of Boston's Tuft University. The project was obviously based on Ushahidi, an open-source platform enabling users to gather and disseminate information in a crowdsourcing fashion in crisis situations. Implemented for the first time on the ground in Kenya, during the 2007 post-electoral conflicts, Ushahidi integrates SMS messages, tweets, e-mails, blog posts and other user-generated content available online on a dynamic map. This strategy allows the user, on the one hand, to centralise a variety of bottom-up contributions in a single place, thus preventing the volatility and noise typical on Twitter and other social networks. On the other hand, we have a new information tool being assembled in real-time, a useful instrument for the news-gathering of traditional mass media and also for government agencies and NGOs to better coordinate their activities on the ground. Indeed, each content item published on Ushahidi also includes its specific GPS data<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> “Role of Social Media in Haiti”, Online report  
(<https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AWtdQpCO9fVmZGd4Y3drNG1fMTQxM2J0bXByZjI&hl>).

<sup>59</sup> <http://haiti.ushahidi.com/>

<sup>60</sup> From Wikipedia English: “The Global Positioning System (GPS) is a space-based [global navigation satellite system](#) (GNSS) that provides reliable [location](#) and time information in all weather and at all times and anywhere on or near the Earth when and where there is an unobstructed line of sight to four or more GPS satellites.” -  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global\\_navigation\\_satellite\\_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_navigation_satellite_system)

The Ushahidi Haiti Project also experimented with real-time translation: most SMS and other messages from Haiti were originally posted in Creole, and each report was translated into English by over 1,000 volunteers of the Haitian diaspora. At the end of the project, about 25,186 SMS and other messages were translated into English. Also, the geographic position of 3,596 reports was integrated in the Haiti dynamic map. In one of the first independent research studies on the impact of the Ushahidi Haiti Project<sup>61</sup>, Jessica Heinzelman and Carol Waters explained:

“The majority of reports received included requests for what were being categorized as ‘vital lines’ - food, water, and shelter. During the first week, the next most common reports were of services available, such as locations of field hospitals and distribution points, and of emergencies, such as reports of trapped persons and urgent medical needs. These tailed off as the growth of new services slowed and the situation on the ground stabilized”.

These reports were used mostly by governmental agencies and NGOs to help manage their humanitarian aid operations on the ground: “Unlike the individual phone calls, letters, e-mails, and visits from Haitians directed to the United Nations that failed to affect the response community’s decision-making process, Ushahidi managed to organize communication in a way that allowed its integration into the process by providing organizations with the technical ability to automatically pull the stream of reports into their response systems”, as Jessica Heinzelman e Carol Waters point out.

Craig Fugate, an officer of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), added that “the crisis map of Haiti represents the most comprehensive and up-to-date map available to the humanitarian community”. The U.S. Coast Guard also developed a specific RSS feed in order to quickly isolate the emergency information that required immediate attention with the large amount of data pouring in.

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<sup>61</sup> Jessica Heinzelman and Carol Waters, “Crowdsourcing Crisis Information in Disaster-Affected Haiti”, *Special Report by United States Institute of Peace*, September 2010 (<http://www.usip.org/publications/crowdsourcing-crisis-information-in-disaster-affected-haiti>).

As detailed in a Knight Foundation report titled “Lessons from Haiti”<sup>62</sup>, an officer of the U.S. Coast Guard credited “Ushahidi data with helping Marines deliver assistance to those in need. One example involved reports from a displaced persons camp at Carrefour that safe drinking water was in short supply. Once they received the information, the Marines delivered water to the camp and distributed devices to sanitize drinking water. In another area, the platform informed the Marines of locations of violence and roadblocks. They policed the areas and made sure that barricades were not blocking aid from reaching victims”.

One of the most interesting features of the Ushahidi software is the possibility to verify and mark the reports that have been authenticated. This functionality becomes highly necessary in a crisis, particularly in a conflict situation where both sides could take advantage of the system’s openness to easily disseminate rumours or inaccurate information. However, despite this Ushahidi verification feature, it must be noted that the verification process was not so effective<sup>63</sup>:

“Of the more than 3,500 messages published on the Ushahidi Haiti crisis map, only 202 messages were tagged as ‘verified’, mostly from early Web submissions that had been based on media reports. Without the time or ability to check the accuracy of incoming reports, the 4636 team hoped that time lost responding to inaccurate reports would be outweighed by the overall net benefit of the system. However, in order for crowdsourced reports to be permanently integrated as legitimate and actionable sources of information, a system must be created to rapidly identify inaccurate information, whether intentional, exaggerated, or accidental”.

Overall, if it is true (at least partially) that social media provided a “first rough draft of history”, the reaction from major news organizations still needs to be researched. Did

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Nelson and Ivan Sigal with Dean Zambrano, “Media, Information Systems and Communities: Lessons from Haiti”, Knight Foundation ([http://www.knightfoundation.org/news/press\\_room/knight\\_press\\_releases/detail.dot?id=377001](http://www.knightfoundation.org/news/press_room/knight_press_releases/detail.dot?id=377001)).

<sup>63</sup> Jessica Heinzelman and Carol Waters, “Crowdsourcing Crisis Information in Disaster-Affected Haiti”, *Special Report by United States Institute of Peace*, September 2010.

they jump on the wagon of social media too, or did they actually choose to just watch and wait? This is the topic of chapter 3.

### 3. THE TWITTER EFFECT IN THE NEWSROOM

#### 3.1 How The Guardian, BBC and CNN incorporated social media contributions into their online coverage

According to Anne Nelson and Ivan Sigal<sup>64</sup> “every modern disaster has required modes of communication, but in Haiti the importance of this combination rose to a new level: Haiti became the first real-world crisis laboratory for several media platforms that had only recently emerged”. If this holds true, how did mainstream news organizations deal with the massive amount of real-time information coming from Haiti? Did they manage to actually incorporate user-generated witnesses into their breaking news and stories on the earthquake? And, more importantly, were they able to verify and authenticate this continuous flow of grassroots, first-hand reporting?

This chapter analyses the coverage provided by three major news organizations in the initial 24 hours after the earthquake hit Haiti. These media outlets are the BBC, The Guardian and CNN -- not only because they were among the first to host User-Generated Content (UGC) on their websites, but also due to their innovative approach to news-gathering in general and to fact-checking of social media news. For some time all three outlets have been using the Live Blog format, which can be defined as an interactive and multimedia version of the all-news TV networks. Live Blog integrates, rather than substitutes, more traditional formats of online news (report, stories, analysis, foto-galleries, videos) and seems to gain great success among web users. Nic Newman defines this format as one of the “emerging innovations of 2010”, an approach able to expose journalism’s social function and to refocus the central role of editorial skills:

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<sup>64</sup> Anne Nelson and Ivan Sigal with Dean Zambrano, “Media, Information Systems and Communities: Lessons from Haiti”, Knight Foundation ([http://www.knightfoundation.org/news/press\\_room/knight\\_press\\_releases/detail.dot?id=377001](http://www.knightfoundation.org/news/press_room/knight_press_releases/detail.dot?id=377001)).

“In 2010, we saw social content get weaved into storytelling through the ‘live blog’, which has been widely adopted by mainstream news publications. Specialist functions are beginning to emerge for multi-media writers and curators, who can synthesise events in real time with the best of the backchannel from social media”<sup>65</sup>.

At the same time, the BBC, The Guardian and CNN constitute an interesting case-study because of their clear differences in editorial strategies about user-generated content related to the Haiti earthquake. The BBC revealed a somewhat centralized approach, while The Guardian opted for more decentralization and CNN chose an open and community-oriented method.

These differences reflect not only similar differences in their organizational line-up but also clear divergences in their editorial strategies at large. The BBC, The Guardian and CNN decided to access and use social media as reliable sources for the coverage of crisis events, but their technology platform and editorial structures were developed based on very diverse models. As I will illustrate in detail in the following sections, these different models had different consequences on the quantity, quality and reliability of UGC employed in their coverage of crisis events.

### **3.2 BBC: a centralized approach to social media**

In June 2005 a team of BBC journalists started to sow the seeds of what would soon become their “UGC Hub”, a desk at the core of the BBC newsroom in charge of searching, verifying, and distributing material produced directly by citizens on the various channels of the state-owned public service broadcaster in the United Kingdom.

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<sup>65</sup> Nic Newman, *Journalism and Technology Predictions 2011* (available online here: <http://www.themediabriefing.com/resource/media-market-journalism-and-technology-predictions-2011-by-nic-newman>).

“What our team does is interact with communities around the Internet”, explained Silvia Costeloe, a broadcast journalist at the UGC Hub<sup>66</sup>. “We do a lot of news gathering, and we get a lot of reaction from users to feed back into our stories, to get human stories, and elements, and do some news gathering on breaking stories as well”.

This team’s responsibility is to look for videos, images and first-hand accounts suitable for deepening the coverage of BBC Online, as well as to locate reliable sources that could also be used in various BBC radio and TV programs.

According to UGC Hub editor Matthew Eltringham<sup>67</sup>, initially,

“We were a small team set up to test the idea that there might be some value in tapping into the audience's growing ability to use their mobile phones to send us pictures and texts of potentially significant news events - and then find ways to incorporate them into the BBC's own journalism. The idea for the project had come from our experience of the tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, when the BBC had received thousands of - largely unsolicited - emails, pictures and videos that were testimony to a dramatic and tragic story. The proposition to set up a User Generated Content (UGC) Hub had been met with some scepticism from senior quarters in BBC News and very nearly didn't happen”.

However, the London Underground attacks of 7 July 2005 gave the project an unexpected acceleration, as Matthew Eltringham pointed out<sup>68</sup>:

“We were experienced enough to know that we should start asking the audience if they were caught up in it and, if so, to tell us what they knew. So we 'stuck a postform' on the first take of the News website's story and waited to see what would come in.

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<sup>66</sup> “Drawing out the audience: Inside BBC’s User-Generated Content Hub”, *Nieman Lab*, 5 May 2010 (<http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/05/drawing-out-the-audience-inside-bbc%E2%80%99s-user-generated-content-hub/>).

<sup>67</sup> “UGC five years on”, *Discussion on CoJO - College of Journalism*, BBC.com, 6 July 2010, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2010/07/ugc-five-years-on.shtml>).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*

Within minutes our email inbox was out of control - it was clear that something was happening, but we had no idea how to manage the huge number of emails we were receiving and the information they were giving us. Then, slowly, pictures also started to come in. I remember opening one email, late morning, with a picture that was to become one of the iconic images of the day - the picture of the passengers walking down a dark tunnel towards the light (below).



(...) By the end of the day we had received several hundred images and videos along with several thousand emails. It was only with hindsight that we were able to make sense of them and the impact they were likely to have on our journalism. Later, when I analysed what the audience had told us about the momentous events of that day, I discovered we had credible intelligence of every single one of the four bombs by 9:58am - including one that told us of the Tavistock Square bomb by 9:55am; just ten minutes after it had happened”.

Initially only three journalists were assigned to the Hub, but after the 2009 Iranian revolt the BBC decided to invest more heavily in the project. Today about 23 journalists work

full-time at the UGC Hub, providing 24/7 coverage of material circulating in the social media environments. According to BBC data, every day they process something like 10,000 user contributions of various types. “We have developed an incredibly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the 'who, what, when, where and whys' of 'social newsgathering' or, put another way, 'finding good stuff on the web'” said Eltringham, pointing out that the Hub is able to “establish some key principles that guide our decision-making when using UGC and working with our audience”.

Contrary to other news organizations, the BBC considers as paramount the principle of verification and fact-checking of each and every online resource. Before informing the other BBC reporters at the World Desk or BBC World about a potentially interesting online source,

“We always check out each and every image, video or key contact before we broadcast them, to make sure they are genuine and to resolve any copyright issues. When it's impossible to do that - such as with content sent from Iran or Burma - when contacting the contributors is very hard to do or might put them in danger, we interrogate the images, using BBC colleagues who know the area and the story to help identify them”.

At its launch, the UGC Hub planned only to encourage users with a mobile device to post first-hand material in the ‘Have Your Say’ section. However, soon the Hub team started to browse Twitter, Facebook and YouTube directly, looking for possible good leads in their news-gathering process. And during many recent crises, Twitter in particular gained a central role in this context. According to Eltringham, “Today (...) Twitter is an essential tool for breaking and researching stories. Frequently, a story will break on Twitter before appearing a few minutes later on the 'traditional' agency wires”.

Those waves of real-time tweets have proven to be crucial not just in the Iran protests, but also during the tragic Haiti earthquake, as Eltringham explained:<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “Has Twitter grown up?”, *Discussion on CoJO - College of Journalism*, BBC.com, 28 May 2010 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/blog/2010/05/has-twitter-grown-up.shtml>).

“Twitter provided an absolutely essential gateway for reporting the Haiti earthquake. Tweeters and the information they Tweeted proved reliable and, as the Web was the only means of communication that survived the disaster, crucial in sustaining coverage of the story until conventional journalism was able to mobilise 24 hours or more later. Within a few hours of the earthquake, the UGC Hub sourced key - and unique - testimony from Tweeters in Haiti, like @carelpedre and @troylivesay. These two in particular used Twitter to report rapidly and accurately about the situation on the ground in the earthquake zone and became significant voices throughout the course of the story”.

### *3.2.1 Verifying UGC at the BBC. Interview with James Morgan*

On the morning of 13 January 2010, James Morgan, a broadcast journalist at BBC, was working at the UGC Hub. Morgan confirmed Matthew Eltringham’s point of view on the role of social media during the BBC coverage of that event:

“I remember it was an important day for social media because Haiti is a small place and obviously we didn't have any reporters there. More than usual the news desk was coming to us and saying: is there anything on Twitter, Facebook? Can you give me any telephone numbers?

I definitely remember we didn't have much information and we were on Twitter looking for news coming from Haiti. I remember we found someone who was tweeting from Haiti and was available to talk, telling us something we could transcribe for our website”.

The Twitter user Morgan refers to was Carel Pedre, the Haitian radio host who was one of the most active Haitian users on social media during the aftermath of the quake.

“Pedre became like an almost de facto correspondent for news channels around the world, because he was the only contactable broadcaster who was

there. I think he was also a blogger and a radio journalist doing a lot of things. As I recall in the aftermath of the quake there were power cuts and possibly also Internet was affected. The only people who had access to things like satellite or mobile Internet or who had individual special Internet access were able to tweet. And I remember he was one of the few tweeting from Haiti”.

James started to follow Carel Pedre on Twitter, and after few minutes sent him a public message: “Hi, it's James here, the BBC News. We saw your tweets in Haiti and we'd like to talk to you. Please can you send us a message back?”. Pedre replied quickly, saying to James Morgan he was available to be interviewed:

“When we find a source on Twitter, we need first to authenticate that person. We ask him: ‘What can you see around you?’ And we write down what they describe to us. Just a short conversation. If that person looks genuine, we ask him if he is happy to talk to our News Channels and radio, if can he send us photos, videos. If he agrees, we may circulate the contact among the different BBC News Channels, Radio 5 Live, Language Service, etc. Some people are happy to do that, some people not”.

The authentication process often requires different verification procedures, depending on the typology of the submitted materials:

“We can start from the mobile number prefix, but we can also check the IP address from where they send us an email. It depends on the instances. The best way to authenticate is to talk with the people and if they are not legitimate they very quickly stumble. You ask a combination of factual things that we can corroborate and then more open questions. So you can have answers like: ‘There's a supermarket in front of me which collapsed, people are leaving the buildings’. As soon as we feel this guy is for real, the first thing we do is, we have a network system here, a kind of intranet, it's called

the NPS, we use it to flash a message, very short, just say: Haiti, eyewitness, the name of the person and some other details. But we don't publish his number, just flash it. And when the colleagues on radio, TV and web operations see this, they phone us and ask: 'Can we have his telephone number please?'".

Journalists working at UGC Hub prefer not to pass the telephone number directly to other BBC people to protect their source:

"We have the responsibility to find people, but also to be sure we don't overburden these persons. That's why we don't publish the telephone numbers in our internal system. Then, we also take care not to put people in trouble, especially if a person is having a shocking experience. I think we all have to be aware that we have to be sensitive".

As for authenticating Twitter accounts, continues James Morgan, "We can check how many followers a person has, what kind of things does he usually say. If a guy has never talked about anything related to Port-au-Prince you become suspicious and so you look at the location, you can Google him and see what comes up".

As for pictures the verification process can be even tougher, but during the last years the UGC HUB has developed a very sophisticated process for checking images:

"When someone sends us a photo or we find it online we call that person back and we ask: 'At what time exactly did you take this? Where were you exactly?' If we are feeling suspicious then the first thing we can do is go into Photoshop and use some EXIF<sup>70</sup> data. Most of the JPG pictures you get

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<sup>70</sup> From Wikipedia English: "Exchangeable image file format (Exif) is a specification for the image file format used by digital cameras (...) The metadata tags defined in the Exif standard cover a broad spectrum:

- Date and time information. Digital cameras will record the current date and time and save this in the metadata.

come from a camera. On Photoshop you can see what time it has been taken, what date, who is the copyright holder. If it was taken years earlier you can discover it. Sometimes information is imprecise. If a photo looks too good to be true, then you can do a search on Tineye<sup>71</sup>. It's a 'reverse image search' web-application that scans the image, just the visual image, and then compares it to all the other images that it can find on the Internet. It matches any image. It's not fool-proof, but it's helpful.

Thanks to our verification process, a picture selected by the UGC Hub has never been revealed to be false”.

All resources verified and authenticated by BBC Hub team are available for all the BBC departments. During the Haiti Earthquake, for example, the video-interview recorded on Skype with Carel Pedre was aired by World Service Radio and TV operations; Pedre's pictures from Haiti were published online, as were his tweets and Facebook posts. At the same time, James Morgan underlined that the BBC UGC Hub does not follow the same authentication process for all the types of UGC they use on BBC:

“As for the Live Pages on BBC.com, we don't need to talk with the user if we are just publishing a tweet that is an opinion or adds just a little bit of colour. We don't talk to every single person whose tweet got published on our website. If that person is going to talk live on air, be interviewed or be quoted in a news story as a source of our news coverage, then we attempt to speak with that person for authentication. Sometimes in another situation, when you just have someone who is providing some less critical information, just a description, some background, it's not pivotal that we speak with every single

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- Camera settings. This includes static information such as the camera model and make, and information that varies with each image such as orientation (rotation), aperture, shutter speed, focal length, metering mode, and ISO speed information.

- A thumbnail for previewing the picture on the camera's LCD screen, in file managers, or in photo manipulation software.

- Descriptions and copyright information.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exchangeable\\_image\\_file\\_format](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exchangeable_image_file_format)).

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.tineye.com/>

person. But if we want to use that person as a source, we always need to qualify this person”.

All the resources found and made available by the UGC Hub team are widely used by journalists at the BBC News website World Desk, especially for the live-blogging. As Nathalie Malinarich, World Editor at the BBC News website, explained<sup>72</sup>:

“At the World Desk we usually incorporate some UGC content in our stories. We also have internal software that allows correspondents on the ground to send Sms or emails straight into the system. Whoever is compiling the Live Page, can visualize all the approved contents and decide to publish them”.

In this way, during major crisis events, the BBC news website can aggregate different kinds of sources: correspondents’ reports, user generated content, NGO officials’ witnesses and other primary sources.

What doesn’t change so much is the process of verification: “Labelling is very important for us,” continues Nathalie Malinarich, “It’s very important to tell people where stories come from. You have to be very clear if it’s a BBC person or Twitter or YouTube. It’s good to remind people of the context. You always have to be honest with the readers. When you cannot verify something that seems true, you always have to label it as unverified”.

During the coverage of the aftermath of Haiti Earthquake, only a few resources published on the BBC website were labelled as unverified. It was the case of some tweets published at the end of a main story on the effect of the quake (with the disclaimer: “Reports on the Twitter message site, which cannot yet be verified by the BBC, expressed the chaos in the wake of the quake”) and of a video published on the Live Page with the description “Mobile phone footage of quake’s immediate aftermath” and no disclaimer on the verification process.

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with the author, 8 December 2010.

### 3.3 The Guardian: a de-centralized approach to social media

With almost 34.6 million unique users monthly, Guardian.co.uk is the second-most popular UK newspaper website after dailymail.co.uk (as of August 2010). Alan Rusbridger, editor of The Guardian, has been promoting the concept of “mutualisation of the newspaper”<sup>73</sup> for a long time. This means a radical openness and collaboration between the newsroom and the readers: “Our readers have become part of what we do”, pointed out Rusbridger in an op-ed published on the *American Journalism Review*<sup>74</sup>. “We have done things that would have been impossible without them. In return we give them a more diverse form of journalism and the visibility that comes from a platform that reaches some 30 million unique users a month—two thirds of them outside the UK”.

The most recent editorial guidelines<sup>75</sup> reinforced Rusbridger’s concept of “mutualization of the newspaper”, asking to The Guardian’s journalists to:

- “1. Participate in conversations about our content, and take responsibility for the conversations you start.
2. Focus on the constructive by recognising and rewarding intelligent contributions.
3. Don't reward disruptive behaviour with attention, but report it when you find it.
4. Link to sources for facts or statements you reference, and encourage others to do likewise.

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<sup>73</sup> “The Guardian embraces social media”, *IFRA blog*, 09 September 2010

(<http://www.ifra.net/blogs/posts/2010/09/16/the-guardian-embraces-social-media>).

<sup>74</sup> “First Read: The Mutualized Future is Bright”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 19 October 2009  
([http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the\\_mutualized\\_future\\_is\\_brigh.php](http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_mutualized_future_is_brigh.php)).

<sup>75</sup> “Journalist blogging and commenting guidelines”, *The Guardian*, October 19 2010  
(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/info/2010/oct/19/journalist-blogging-commenting-guidelines>).

5. Declare personal interest when applicable. Be transparent about your affiliations, perspectives or previous coverage of a particular topic or individual.
6. Be careful about blurring fact and opinion and consider carefully how your words could be (mis)interpreted or (mis)represented.
7. Encourage readers to contribute perspective, additional knowledge and expertise. Acknowledge their additions.
8. Exemplify our community standards in your contributions above and below the line”.

In an essay recently published on Poynter.com<sup>76</sup>, Alan Rusbridger listed several examples of the newspaper projects that have been improved due to the collaboration with its readers, including: an investigation into corporate tax avoidance<sup>77</sup>, the death of Ian Tomlinson during the G20 summit in London<sup>78</sup>, the Trafigura super-injunction<sup>79</sup>, and a MPs expenses crowdsourcing investigation<sup>80</sup>.

### *3.3.1 Embedded Community Coordinators. Interview with Meg Pickard*

To achieve these results, several years ago The Guardian started promoting a distributed approach to social media. Meg Pickard, current Head of Digital Engagement at Guardian.co.uk, has worked during the last few years to create a brand new role within the organization, called the “community coordinator”.

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<sup>76</sup> “Openness, Collaboration Key to New Information Ecosystem”, *Poynter.com*, October 19 2010 (<http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/106389/rusbridger-openness-collaboration-key-to-new-information-ecosystem/>).

<sup>77</sup> “Readers saved us a lot of time, trouble and expense by advising us on the meaning of documents and transactions”, *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> “Traditional reporting completely failed to uncover the true story behind the death of an innocent man at the G20 conference in London in 2009. It took one reporter, Twitter, and the collaboration of thousands of readers to find the digital record of the moment a policeman struck Tomlinson. Conventional reporting would not have revealed the truth as quickly if at all”, *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> “The use of Twitter led to thousands of people ferreting out the suppressed information and to the company backing down from legal action. The collaboration of thousands of strangers achieved something a newspaper on its own would have struggled with — but it needed a newspaper’s investigative skills to get the information in the first place”, *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> “Reviewing 400,000 documents released by parliament posed an impossible task for a conventional newsroom to handle. We built a widget that allowed 23,000 Guardian readers to help us identify the important documents”, *ibid.*

“Now we have several of them. There are two in News, one in Comment is Free, one in Books, etc. These community coordinators act as a bridge between users and editors/journalists”<sup>81</sup>, Pickard explains. Their job is to read all comments and make sure that the conversations on the Guardian website and around the web are reflected by the editorial department. They are also invited to go the other way: “When a reader writes to us asking: why you haven't published any stories about the legal definition of rape in Sweden? The community coordinator can go to the editorial department and ask for a story about this. It's not just about tips, it's something more”.

Meg Pickard was the former Head of Social Media at the Guardian.co.uk. She is convinced that news organizations don't need this position anymore: “My definition of a good social media editor is: if you are doing it right, you will make yourself redundant within three years. We don't need to develop social media anymore, it is part of your business as usual, it's everybody's job”.

This idea led Pickard to develop a more distributed approach to social media at Guardian.co.uk:

“As in every newspaper, also The Guardian is very desk-based (there's News desk, Feature desk, Culture desk, etc.). Having a remote hub makes it very difficult for them to collaborate. We realized that it was much more natural to embed people within these teams. And that would mean that they have a good domain knowledge and expertise in a subject area. For example, in the Books area, we have a Books Community Coordinator. That person really needs to know about literature, the publishing world, he needs to speak the same language his community speaks”.

The presence of community coordinators does not mean that the social media strategy of the Guardian is left only up to them. Every journalist/editor has to work from the perspective of producing some ‘social content’, as Meg Pickard puts it:

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with the author, 8 February 2011.

“How do we remain relevant in a world where people consume information in an atomized way? How to attract people who are not on the Guardian website? There is a variety of ways: not only Search Engine Optimization (Seo), but also to be present on different websites (Flickr, Facebook), making sure that we are easily available and reachable. We can also use our open platform, building networks around particular ideas, as it is happening around the Environment Network”.

As for reporting, several Guardian journalists have a personal Twitter account. Often they use mobile phones for submitting short news items from the ground, as in the case of the Haiti Earthquake coverage, when the Guardian correspondent Ed Pilkington tweeted from the ground. “I had a hunch that it could be a powerful reporting tool but I’d never really tested it out”, explains Pilkington<sup>82</sup>. “Twitter unleashed it all and put it out there as I was seeing it. It allows you to do the immediate description, the instant thought, the undigested gut reaction to awful sights that were in front of me”. According to Meg Pickard, “All news organizations need to make friends with the fact that some news is commoditized, it's easily available everywhere”. Therefore, today any digital news organizations must offer both speed and analysis, real-time coverage and more in-depth analysis.

This framework is the reason why the Guardian is promoting different kinds of storytelling formats: the traditional news story is placed side by side next to compelling interactive visualizations and live-blogging: “There will never be one shape of journalism that fits everybody's needs or sensibilities”, Pickard adds. “The thing we can do as a media organization is to make sure that we are not abandoning one form of journalism in favour of any other. Live Blog is a good way to tell some kinds of stories, but we will never leave other kinds of formats”.

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<sup>82</sup> “In Haiti, social networking ecosystem links victims, reporters and aid agencies”, *European Journalism Centre Magazine*, 7 February 2010 ([http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/in\\_haiti\\_social\\_networking\\_ecosystem\\_links\\_victims\\_reporters\\_and\\_aid\\_agenci/](http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/in_haiti_social_networking_ecosystem_links_victims_reporters_and_aid_agenci/)).

At least on the abstract level, the deployment of these different formats is not going to change the general Guardian editorial guidelines much:

“Good journalism must always apply. If we heard that someone has set off a bomb on Oxford Street, we would not take that information and just publish as a fact on our website, in the same way if someone is phoning to give you an anonymous tip, you have to apply journalism to it: that means fact-checking, doing source verification”.

What can differ is the approach toward the readers, especially in the live-blogging format:

“Context is everything. In something like a Live Blog, immediacy is the essence. And this is something that will be constantly reflected in the value of the information that is coming in. People will be considering it through certain lenses: this is breaking news, this is the latest information that we have”.

In this general context, the Guardian reporters strive for using raw and potentially unverified reports:

“We always put up a disclosure: ‘We are hearing reports or rumours that...’ Because people feel like, actually this is the way you are going to see the story unfolding in real-time. On the Live Blog you can be more discursive, there's more potential to say there are things we don't know, we are still not sure about this. That same piece of information that someone set off a bomb on Oxford Street, it might be that we could use in the Live Blog, it may even be that we tweet about this: ‘Has anybody heard anything about this?’, in order to find extra information. But probably it wouldn't make its way to becoming a headline on a story. And it will never be published on the paper”.

### 3.3.2 *Covering Haiti on the Guardian Live Blog. Interview with Matthew Weaver*

Matthew Weaver has been a journalist for 15 years, currently live-blogging on Guardian.co.uk “for 99% of my time”<sup>83</sup>. He started live-blogging in 2007, during the Burma protests and on 13 January 2010 he was at the desk of the Guardian website in charge of the Haiti Earthquake live coverage. In his own words:

“Haiti was a very good example of how social media can be useful in reporting. Usually when you are looking for a source in crisis events you can go to the government, to the UN, or to NGOs. But that was not the case of Haiti: nobody was available. And there were no journalists based there. Our correspondent was able to arrive there only by Friday, January 15, three days after the quake. What do you do? You wait for the journalists to arrive? No, you have to cover this major earthquake, a lot of people died, you want to get as many sources of information as possible”.

Weaver explained that one of the first sources he found online was Troy Livesay, a Christian missionary based in Haiti:

“I found this guy on a Twitter list. What was good about him is that he was updating his account, he was taking videos, he was blogging regularly, he had some really interesting first-hand stuff. He was Christian, so there was something a bit honest about him, he was very authentic”.

Weaver also published YouTube footage taken from a hill and some pictures from Twitpic. Most material posted during his live-blogging period was unverified:

“The premise is, here we are concerned about speed, rather than on verification. I would say in the blog: ‘It appears to...’ If it turns out that this was rubbish, a Photoshop picture, I would just say: ‘Look, that picture that we linked back there turn out to be rubbish, just be careful’”.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with the author, 8 February 2010.

According to Weaver, Haiti was also a good example of how charities and NGOs have drastically changed their communication strategies during crisis events:

“I remember that I could find a lot of good-quality material published by Save the Children and the Red Cross. These resources were available directly online, for example on Audioboo (an audio-sharing platform) and Flickr. It has changed a lot during the last year. Now they act like a media company. That’s good for the live coverage, because they are trusted sources. But as a journalist you have always to be careful: NGOs compete against each other for visibility in a situation like that. They can publish materials were it looks that the situation is worse than it really is. And then you also get a lot of videos showing work they are doing, rather than reporting on the disaster”.

Weaver added that the different verification process adopted by Guardian.co.uk (a.k.a.: ‘first publish then verify’) is a consequence of a different kind of ‘*contract*’ with the readers: “On a live-blog you are letting the reader in on what’s up there, and say: look, we’re letting you in on the process of news-gathering. There’s a more fluid sense of what’s happening”.

During the interview, Weaver confirmed his quote published on the New York Times<sup>84</sup>: when rallies and conflicts occur, “first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the video and then the wires”.

“That was the pattern of the way information came out in Iran, during the Green uprising. On the day Neda was killed, the government had set up a huge media crackdown. The information from Tehran came out first on Twitter, then on Twitpic, YouTube and, eventually, on the wires”.

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<sup>84</sup> “Journalism Rules Are Bent in News Coverage From Iran”, *New York Times*, 28 June 2009 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>).

If the “tyranny of real-time” imposes the standard that speed comes before verification, a mistake can always happen, as was the case in the coverage of the Egypt uprising:

“I remember those reports on Twitter that the Google executive had just been released. During the morning I had read some reports on the WSJ and the NYT saying that he was going to be released. So it made sense. He was ‘due to be released,’ but posts on Twitter said: ‘He has been released.’ Anyway, when I published that information it was misleading. So I deleted it and posted a new entry: ‘Sorry for the earlier post. That report we posted earlier turned out to be unfounded’”.

### **3.4 CNN: a community-centred approach to social media**

In 2006 CNN launched the iReport brand in order to collect user-generated content for breaking news stories. The program invited people to send pictures and mobile footage through the website CNN.com. After being reviewed by CNN’s editors, the best content could be aired on the broadcasting channel. According to Jonathan Dube<sup>85</sup>, in the first two years “the network has received nearly 100,000 news-related photos and videos from viewers, but only published or aired about 10% of them”.

After the positive feedback received during the first phase of its experimentation, in 2008 CNN decided to transform the program into an online community, where people could submit text, pictures and video footage. From its inception, CNN wanted to be very clear about the differences between content published on CNN.com and material posted on iReport:

“This content is not pre-vetted or pre-read by CNN. This is your platform. In some journalistic circles, this is considered disruptive, even controversial! But we know the news universe is changing. We know that even here, at CNN,

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<sup>85</sup> “Behind CNN’s New Citizen Media Site”, *Poynter*, 24 February 2010 (<http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/digital-strategies/web-tips/87212/behind-cnns-new-citizen-media-site/>).

we can't be everywhere, all the time following all the stories you care about. So, we give you iReport.com. You will program it, you will police it; you will decide what's important, what's interesting, what's news"<sup>86</sup>.

To a large extent iReport is un-moderated: it is closer to a 'Web 2.0' website (as YouTube and Flickr) than to a traditional media outlet<sup>87</sup>. Most contributions are not verified, but readers can locate the verified stories thanks to a badge posted on each published content: "Stories submitted to CNN iReport are not edited, fact-checked or screened before they post. Only stories marked 'CNN iReport' have been vetted and cleared by CNN".

Stories marked with the "CNN iReport" badge are usually used on-air and on CNN.com, as explained by Susan Grant, executive vice president of CNN News Services<sup>88</sup>:

"Before an iReport is used on-air or on CNN.com, the content undergoes the same extensive vetting process as all of CNN reporting does. Our own journalists, who are well trained at verifying the authenticity of news reports and events, follow certain steps to verify the events placed on iReports that are then used on CNN and on CNN.com".

Currently, a team of 20 people (including editors, journalists, community managers, producers and developers) are in charge of authenticating content and building up new tools for engaging the community.

iReport has proved to be useful for CNN coverage during several breaking news events from around the United States and the world (the Virginia Tech Massacre, the U.S. airliner ditched into the Hudson river, etc.). During the first days of the Green Movement protests in Iran in 2009, iReport received 5,200 contributions and approved about 180 of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> As pointed out by *Poynter* (ibid): "CNN makes no guarantees about the content or the coverage on iReport.com" — quite a bold statement from a reputable news organization, not to mention one that brands itself as the "Most Trusted Name in News".

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

them to be used on the CNN TV channel<sup>89</sup>. Lila King, iReport executive director, explained to the NewYorkTimes.com, that in the days of the Iran uprising she was asking the “staff members to try to ‘triangulate the details’ of an event by corroborating stories with multiple iReport contributors in a given area. Farsi speakers at CNN sometimes listened intently to sounds from protest videos, discerning the accents of Iranian cities and transcribing chants and screams. (...) Without professionals at the scene — CNN remaining correspondent was pulled out last week after the government imposed prohibitive restrictions — they provide the all-important pictures to tell the story”.

Despite all the disclaimers on the verifying process, the iReport program has received quite critical reviews, particularly because of some notable hoaxes -- as in the case of the 2008 report that Apple CEO Steve Jobs had suffered a heart attack. Published on iReport and never broadcast on-air by CNN, the rumour caused the Apple stock to fall 10% in 10 minutes<sup>90</sup> and the launch of a SEC investigation. As ComputerWorld puts in: “Though CNN quickly yanked the story from the Web, the citizen journalist posting that phony report had already done the damage”<sup>91</sup>.

In 2010 more than 10,000 iReports items were published monthly on CNN.com. As acknowledged by several media experts, “iReport clearly enriched CNN coverage of the Haiti earthquake, since CNN had seven reporters on the ground who significantly enhanced their work with social media content”<sup>92</sup>.

During the first 24-hour in the quake aftermath, 68 contributions from Haiti were available on iReport. Most of them (44) were not vetted by CNN, but the 14 verified

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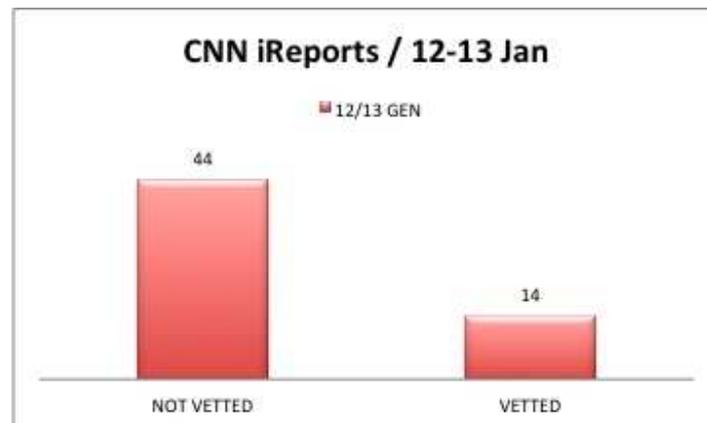
<sup>89</sup> “Journalism Rules Are Bent in News Coverage From Iran”, *New York Times*, 28 June 2009, (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>).

<sup>90</sup> “Apple’s stock hit by Web rumor”, CNN Money, 03 October 2008 (<http://money.cnn.com/2008/10/03/technology/apple/index.htm>).

<sup>91</sup> “False Jobs heart attack post highlights perils of citizen journalism”, *Computer World*, 03 October 2010 ([http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9116187/False\\_Jobs\\_heart\\_attack\\_post\\_highlights\\_perils\\_of\\_citizen\\_journalism](http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9116187/False_Jobs_heart_attack_post_highlights_perils_of_citizen_journalism)).

<sup>92</sup> “Time for a press award for crowdsourced journalism?”, *The Guardian.co.uk*, 29 March 2010 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/mar/30/digital-media-crowdsourcing-crowd-sourced-journalism>).

revealed to be crucial for the coverage of the Haiti Earthquake. After being carefully vetted, pictures and videos sent by iReporters were the only images available on the TV news channel.



In order to understand how BBC, The Guardian and CNN's different approaches to social media impacted the news-gathering and the reporting of a big crisis event like the Haiti Earthquake, in the next chapter we will present the results of the content analysis conducted on all the stories published online by these news organizations during the aftermath of the quake.

## 4. CONTENT ANALYSIS

The media coverage in the 24 hour aftermath of the Haiti earthquake resulted in a different outcome for the three online news outlets analysed in this research paper. These divergences are due to the different organizational structures (all-news broadcasting channels for the BBC and CNN, a daily newspaper for The Guardian), but also to some typical features of social media – openness/closure dynamics and source verification issues – as argued in chapter 3. However, it is also true that first-hand accounts posted on Twitter, YouTube and other social media helped to fill in the news gaps caused by lack of media correspondents on the ground. In order to properly address this complex scenario, along with quality and quantity differences between the BBC, CNN and The Guardian, our analysis will take advantage of various sources and methods – as detailed below in this chapter.

### 4.1 A note on methodology

To analyse the social media impact on the overall coverage produced by the BBC, The Guardian and CNN, we selected the stories (including text, video, gallery, live-blogging formats) published online by the three media outlets after the Haiti earthquake, particularly on Tuesday 12 and Wednesday 13 January and a week later, on Wednesday 20 January 2010. The different time zones of Haiti, United States and UK have been conformed to *Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)*. The stories analysed here were published between 12 January 2010, 21:53 GMT and 13 January 2010 23:59 GMT, while for the following week we chose the day of 20 January 2010, from 00:00 GMT to 23:59 GMT. Only stories indexed by search engines for each media outlet have been taken into consideration, and each story has been analysed according to the “content analysis” method based on two classification criteria:

1) Source origin:

- Source or account from the ground in Haiti (FH - From Haiti);

- Source or account outside Haiti (OH - Outside Haiti).

2) Source typology:

- GOVs and NGOs (GN): Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, public officials, scientific community experts;

- Traditional Media (TM): National and International media outlets when quoted as reporting sources;

- Social Media (SM): Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Twitpic, Flickr, blogs, and CNN's iReport.

The exact source typology attribution has sometimes proven difficult. For instance, when two different sources are involved ("The French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, told RTL Radio: "It would appear that everyone who was in the building, including my friend Hedi Annabi, are dead"), we decided to assign the source to both categories: a public official, GN, and a local radio station, RTL Radio).

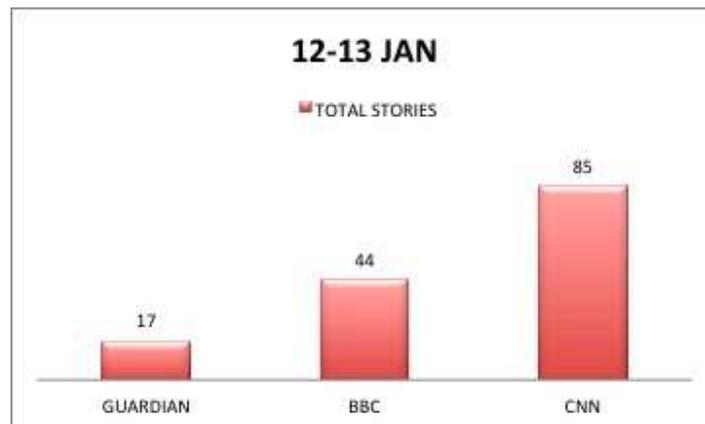
We also included only those sources explicitly credited, and when a source gets quoted several times in a single story, it has been counted only once (the same rule applies to authors of photo-gallery images). However, the same source gets counted several times if it is being quoted several times in different stories.

For quality and quantity purposes regarding content analysis, however, the final outcome of our paper mostly reflects the author's position. Accordingly, a margin of 10% error should therefore be considered likely.

#### **4.2 Global analysis of 12-13 January 2010 coverage**

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the BBC, CNN and The Guardian each provided different coverage in relation to their quantity of news items. The CNN website published 85 stories, while the BBC published about half that amount (44 stories) and The Guardian published just one fifth (17 stories). These divergences are mostly due to their intrinsic structure: given their strong TV presence, both CNN and the BBC normally can count on many video resources that are often reposted online as single units. On

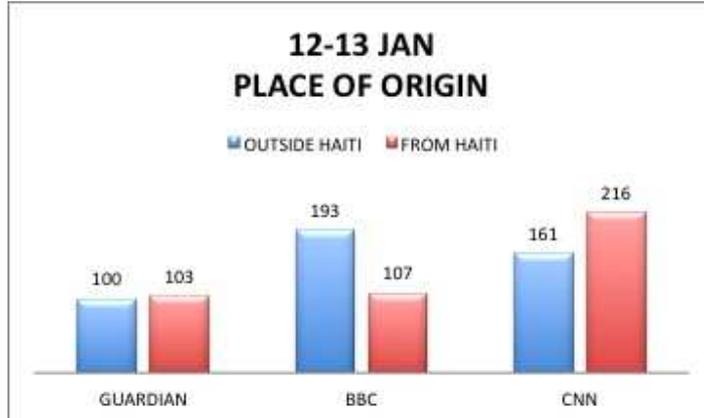
the other hand, the Guardian could rely only on photo-galleries and videos provided by international news agencies. Other factors pushing CNN to provide wider coverage was its geographic closeness to Haiti (CNN headquarters are in Atlanta, U.S.A.) and a strong Haitian community living in the U.S.A.



The differences in the quantity of stories produced are only partially reflected in the total amount of sources used during the newsgathering process. CNN still comes in first place, with over 377 sources, followed by the BBC with 300 and The Guardian with 203.

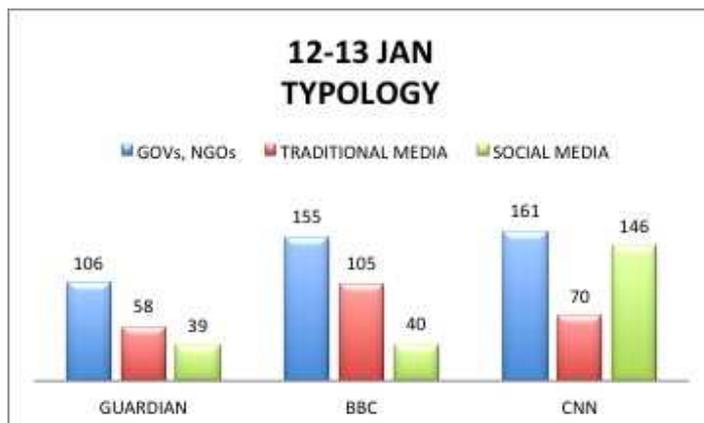
Another interesting issue to take into account is the broad diversity of sources available. As for any other media event, the Haiti earthquake produced many political and economic consequences at the international level. However, frequent and broad references to OH (Outside Haiti) sources reflect the lack of correspondents on the ground; a mandatory strategy to fill up the “news-vacuum” that characterized this coverage of this event.

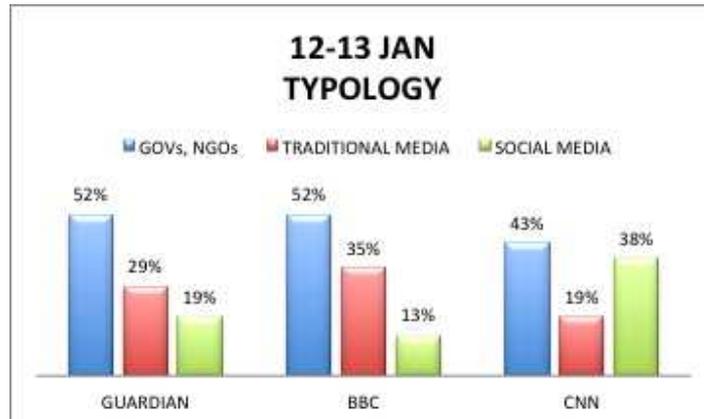
The following table illustrates the percentage of sources directly from Haiti (FH) compared to those from outside Haiti (OH).



In the case of the Guardian those sources are almost equivalent (49% vs. 51%), while the BBC used mostly OH sources (64% vs. 36%) and the CNN did just the opposite: FH sources (57%) greatly overcome the OH sources (43%). As detailed later on, this divergence is directly proportionate to a larger (for CNN and The Guardian) or smaller (in the BBC case) use of social media as the main reporting tool from Haiti.

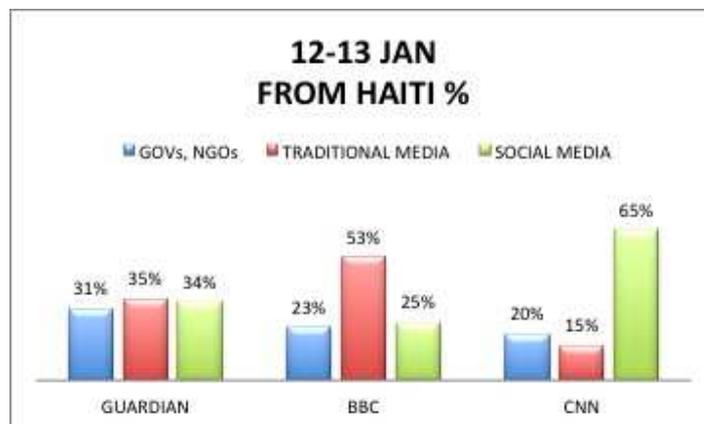
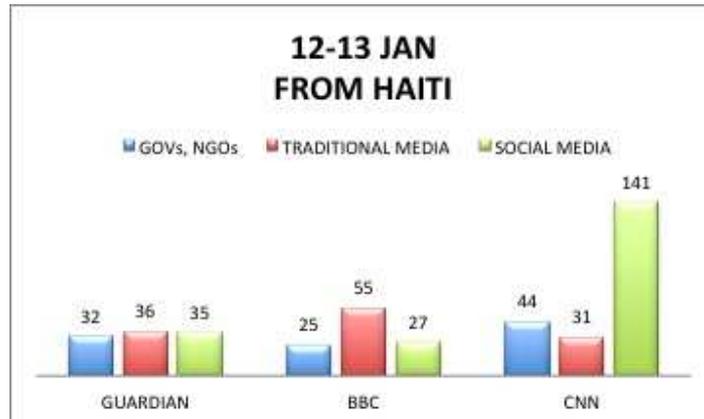
Indeed, when analysing the second variable, the source typology, similarly meaningful differences emerge.





All three news organizations under consideration relied on institutional sources, quickly publishing official statements from various Heads of State, the UN and other humanitarian aid agencies. In particular, the BBC used news from these agencies, eager to put a foot in Haiti. In regards to TM sources, the BBC appears to be more consistent in accordance with its editorial policy, which requires it to mention all its sources (as opposed to the other two media organizations). Overall CNN revealed the most consistent use of social media content, with 146 sources (38%), almost as much as the GN sources (43%).

These variations in the use of social media content are similarly reflected in the first-hand accounts from the ground (FH). Given that in tragic events such as the Haiti earthquake the victim first-hand accounts get most relevance (as news-worthy content), it is clear that CNN won hands down in this respect – as illustrated by the following table covering only sources from the ground in Haiti (FH).



#### 4.2.1 The Guardian

The Guardian appears to provide the most evenly-balanced coverage between sources from the ground (103 out of a total of 203) and from outside Haiti. The social media (SM) data is only partially inflated from the online re-posting of many tweets and blog excerpts, without editorial filtering or the verification process. The same SM sources are also consistently used in The Guardian Live Blog section, along with many institutional reactions (mostly from outside Haiti) and news items provided by NGOs and charities. In fact, this latter content seems to gain particular relevance, as in the case of “some footage uploaded to Vimeo which appears to show people trapped in rubble. It was apparently taken by an aid agency in the south of Haiti, ‘a long way from ground

zero”<sup>93</sup>. The same is true for the photo-galleries posted on Flickr by the British Red Cross (“mainly, it would seem, taken on mobile phones”) and by Evangelical Church’s Salvation Army. In other instances, The Guardian website published some e-mail messages sent by aid-workers on the ground in Haiti (“Here’s some rare and vivid first-hand testimony from outside Port-au-Prince. Emmet Murphy from a US charity called ACDI/VOCA sent this email”).

The Guardian did also use excerpts from first-hand accounts produced by traditional media outlets, including dispatches from Joseph Guyler Delva (a Reuters stringer based in Port-au-Prince) and from the AP correspondents, e-mail messages sent to the BBC (“Susan Westwood, a nurse from Stirling working in an orphanage just outside Port-au-Prince, emailed the BBC”), interviews by U.S. newspapers (“The Miami Herald has the first words from Haiti’s president, René Préval, since the quake”), videos available on other all-news websites (“Here’s some CBS-aired footage of someone being rescued from the wreckage of what I believe is the UN headquarters in Port-au-Prince”).

The Guardian’s live blog did not hesitate to repost content from many unverified sources from Haiti, obviously included in the social media category. Matthew Weaver, the live blog editor, immediately posted a YouTube video (“This footage *which appears to show* a dust cloud from a destroyed urban area appeared on YouTube”) and an embedded image from Twitpic, both without proper verification. He also reported about people trapped somewhere (“Karen Ashmore, sent out this plea: “Needs to be rescued. Please go help. Trapped in her collapsed house: Jillian Thorpe, Rue Charles Perrault #36, Morne Hercule, Petionville), pointed to the continuous flow of content produced on the ground by the Christian missionary Troy Livesay: “Church groups are singing throughout the city all through the night in prayer. It is a beautiful sound in the middle of a horrible tragedy”, he tweets”; “Countless countless - countless houses, churches, hospitals, schools, and businesses have collapsed”, the Christian blogger Troy Livesay writes in a harrowing update”).

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<sup>93</sup> Given the unfeasibility of any verification, the journalist resorted to some generic statement: “it was apparently taken by...”.

Late that evening, The Guardian website also published some excerpts from Livesay's blog as a stand-alone story ("Haiti survivor's story: 'I fear for them. The horror has only just begun') and, similar to CNN, an article made only by 18 tweets with no verification whatsoever.

Along with those "open" formats, the UK newspaper website also featured more traditional reporting: the initial breaking news is an original AP dispatch and most updates provided during the day are based on GN and TM reports, with SM content pushed in the background ("This Twitter image shows Haitians standing amid the rubble in Port-au-Prince"). Most images are from major International photo agencies (AFP, Getty, Reuters), with just one picture from a social media source (by Frederic Dupoux) and another image provided by a UN source. Similarly, a final recap story, published late on the evening of Tuesday 12 January ("Just the end of a busy, humid day in Haiti - then everything changed" by Rory Carroll) is largely based on institutional sources (9), with 4 TM and 2 SM references. And plenty of room is reserved for mobilisation appeals from humanitarian aid agencies, with both original stories produced by the local newsroom and first-hand comments from NGO representatives.

In conclusion, despite a small presence of FH sources (103), The Guardian revealed a more balanced approach to integrating GN, TM and SM material. This suggests a networked journalism approach<sup>94</sup>, with different typologies of sources – institutional content, traditional and social media – being incorporated within the overall framework.

#### **4.2.2 BBC**

Despite a larger amount of stories (44) and sources (300) covering Haiti in the aftermath of earthquake, the BBC reported only 107 sources from Haiti (FH) and almost double the amount of sources outside Haiti (OH). This is mostly due to the fact that the BBC usually relies on traditional media organizations (53%), which, as explained earlier, had

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<sup>94</sup> "Networked Journalism", *The Guardian - Comment is Free*, 03 May 2008 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/03/networkedjournalism>).

no correspondents on the ground when the earthquake hit in the afternoon on 12 January and the immediate aftermath (the night of 13 January in GMT).

Many FH articles in the TM category were actually from the same BBC: its large network produces plenty of original content that is regularly distributed on its own radio, TV and website. That was the case with the first personal audio account from Haiti (“Valerie Moliere, 15, describes the scene in Haiti in the wake of an earthquake”) and even more with the subsequent stories by radio-host Carel Pedre, who on that day became the “*de facto* BBC correspondent in Haiti” along with the missionary priest Troy Livesay – as pointed out by UGC Hub’s James Morgan in the previous chapter.

In addition to reposting tweets and images by Carel Pedre, the BBC website published his interview with Radio 4 (“Carel Pedre, a radio journalist near the capital describes the scene as the earthquake struck. ‘I saw a lot of sad things,’ he said”). During the entire day of 13 January the website reposted audio contributions from NGOs, in various formats and contexts – a clear sign that the BBC considered these sources more reliable and valuable. In fact, more than half of the reporting that day (52%) was based on GN sources. Among the initial first-hand stories from Port-au-Prince there were, for example, an audio account by nurse Susan Westwood (one of the many users that posted a comment in the “Have Your Say” section and had been contacted by the UGH Hub desk) and other aid-workers on the ground (“Dixie, who runs an orphanage in Haiti speaks to Radio 4’s” - “Maggie Boyer, of the relief agency World Vision, tells the BBC she witnessed the devastation in Port-au-Prince minutes after the quake”). Given the lack of communication lines with the Caribbean island, though, these statements are gathered from outside Haiti, particularly those from UK NGOs getting ready to activate their donation programs.

Only 13% (40 items) was reserved to UGC – as mentioned earlier, mostly Carel Pedre’s material and several tweets by Troy Livesay (“Tweets from troylivesay spoke of the worst damage being in the Carrefour district, where “many two and three storey buildings did not make it”). In very few instances, the BBC website published his tweets

with a disclaimer note at the bottom of its more general stories: “Reports on the Twitter message site, which cannot yet be verified by the BBC, expressed the chaos in the wake of the quake”. This scarce attention to SM sources undoubtedly reflects the BBC policy requiring a clear verification of any user-generated content. Only one exception to this strict policy seems to be an amateur video-footage published on its website early in the morning of 13 January with no attribution or verification: “Mobile phone footage of quake's immediate aftermath”.

In conclusion, the BBC website coverage showed a more ‘institutional’ approach: many official sources were used in its live-blog posts and multimedia section as well (“Aerial footage of the destruction in Haiti filmed by the US Coast Guard” - “The British Red Cross in Haiti has set up a Flickr picture gallery, showing pictures taken around Haiti”). Also prominent were excerpts from traditional media outlets with proper mention (CNN, Miami Herald, etc), even if this time along with comments posted by users in the “Have your say” section – an exclusive collection of first-hand accounts from the ground.

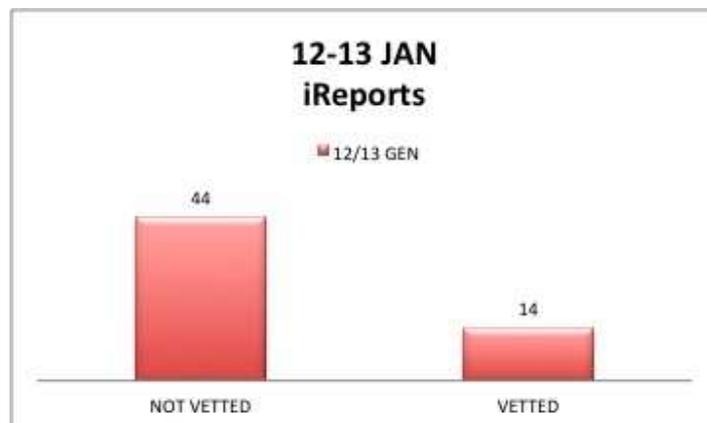
#### **4.2.3 CNN**

CNN provided the most comprehensive coverage of the Haiti earthquake on both days, 12 and 13 January 2010: 85 stories and 377 sources (65% of them coming directly from Haiti) were counted on its website. The all-news U.S. network had a double advantage on its competitors: a geographic (not to mention political and economic) closeness to Haiti and a timing factor (the first shock hit Haiti at 16:53 local time, that is 21:53 GMT, thus enabling CNN to effectively jump start its coverage). CNN also employed a very aggressive multimedia strategy: more than half of stories published on CNN.com were excerpts of video reports already broadcast on its TV channel.

Besides these competitive advantages, CNN was also quickly able to overcome the same problem of the other media networks concerning the lack of local correspondents: more than half (58%) of its 377 total sources came directly from Haiti (FH). This is mostly due to a prompt exploitation of social media: out of 216 FH sources, 141 (38%)

were user-generated content. Unlike The Guardian, these are not resources randomly found on the Internet nor, as in the BBC case, are a handful of items verified by a central Hub. Instead, the vast majority of this SM FH content has been posted by the same users through the CNN proprietary platform known as iReport.

In fact, just a few minutes after the first shock, iReport already hosted a dozen first-hand accounts in text, photo and video formats. Although only 14 out of 68 iReports published on the website on 12 and 13 January had been verified, they proved themselves crucial for the aftermath coverage. These reports comprised of images by Carel Pedre and other material produced by local 'iReporters', including Jonathan de la Durantaye, Jonathan Lusma, Richard Morse and Phyllis Bass. Once verified by the iReport team, their images and videos were also broadcast on the CNN TV channel for the entire day – in contrast, the other TV networks still did not have many visual accounts about the unfolding tragedy.



The news desk contacted several 'iReporters' via Skype to have video-interviews and then broadcast both on the website and the TV channel. They also published many un-verified tweets, videos and images posted by users on iReport, applying the same Guardian policy (tweet first, verify later) and posting a similar disclaimer: "CNN is monitoring tweets and other messages from people in Haiti and reports from those who said they have been in touch with friends and family. CNN has not been able to able to verify this material".

Compared to The Guardian and the BBC, overall, CNN was much more open to user-generated content: the combination of Twitter sources, YouTube, Facebook, blog posts and the iReport material provided a variety of accounts from different areas of Haiti. Only on Wednesday 13 January 2010, CNN.com published two stories with a long list of accounts (18 and 40, respectively) found online and not even verified. This format helped considerably to increase the amount of FH analysed for this research paper.

As for the source typology, CNN seemed mostly to adopt institutional sources (with statements from NGOs and Heads of State) while also giving space to the reactions of the Haitian community based in the U.S.A. Other international news organizations are rarely mentioned, also because – beside Reuters and AP, the only agencies with correspondents on the ground in Haiti – CNN actually had the most productive outlets, also gaining many reference links from both the BBC and The Guardian.

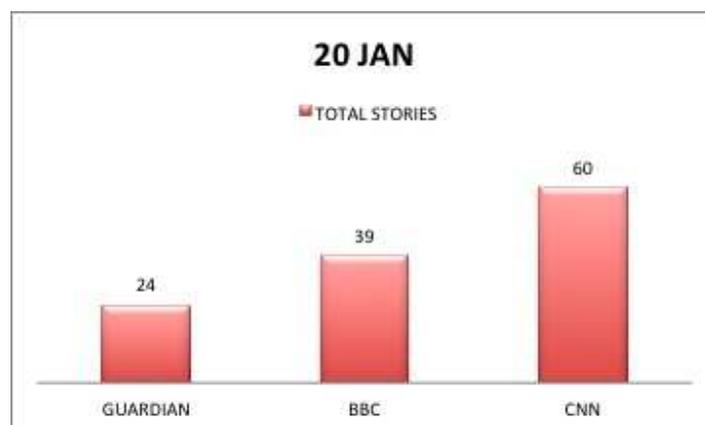
The Atlanta-based network was also quick to acquire broadcasting rights from TV stations in Haiti (such as NOTICIAS SIN/ANTENA LATINA) and locate untapped source online (“The panic that engulfed Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, could be witnessed on an online Haitian entertainment channel called Haitipal, which suddenly became an essential communication tool”).

#### **4.3 Global analysis of 20 January 2010 coverage**

To better analyse the impact of social media and user-generated content for crisis event coverage, we also studied the online coverage provided by The Guardian, the BBC and CNN a week after the first shock hit Haiti. If on 12-13 January none of these news organizations had any local correspondents, on Wednesday 20 January 2010 all three had more than one reporter on the ground. The Guardian sent Ed Pilkington and Rory Carroll to Port-au-Prince, while the BBC had a 10-people team: Matthew Price (News-gathering correspondent) and James Fletcher (World Service Producer) were the first ones to reach Haiti, soon joined by Mark Doyle, Gary Duffy, Orla Guerin, Adam Mynott,

Ben Brown<sup>95</sup> and others. CNN's crew was even larger, including 12 reporters and several technical operators and producers.

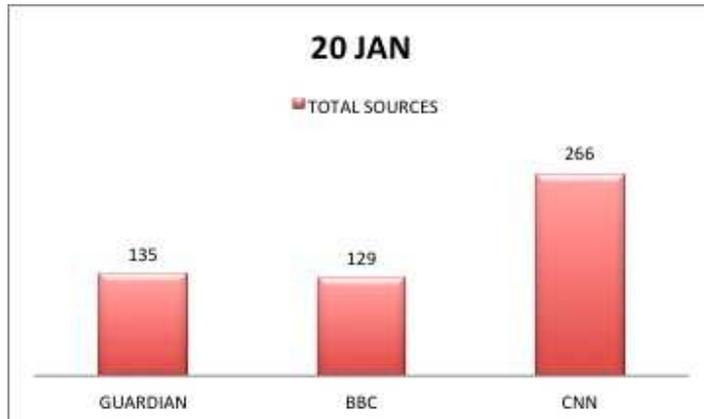
This large group of correspondents on the ground resulted in an obvious increase of the overall coverage, both in quality and quantity content. As illustrated in the table below, CNN.com posted over 60 stories (almost half of them as videos broadcast on the TV channel), the BBC 39 and The Guardian 24 stories.



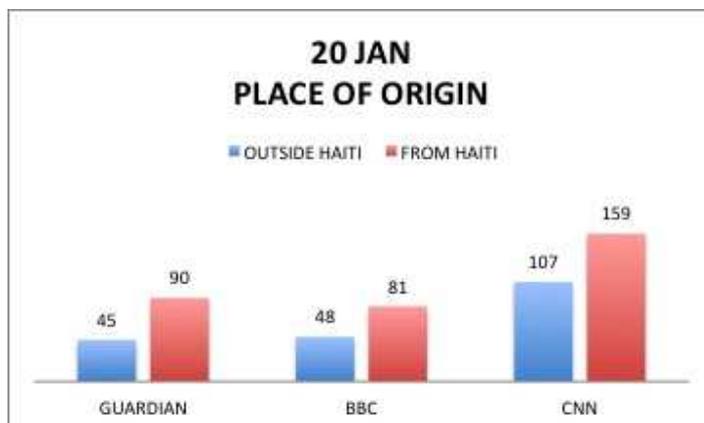
Meaningful differences also emerge in regard to news-gathering sources. Again, CNN coverage revealed a larger diversity of voices (266 sources) with The Guardian (135 sources) and the BBC (129 sources) lagging behind.

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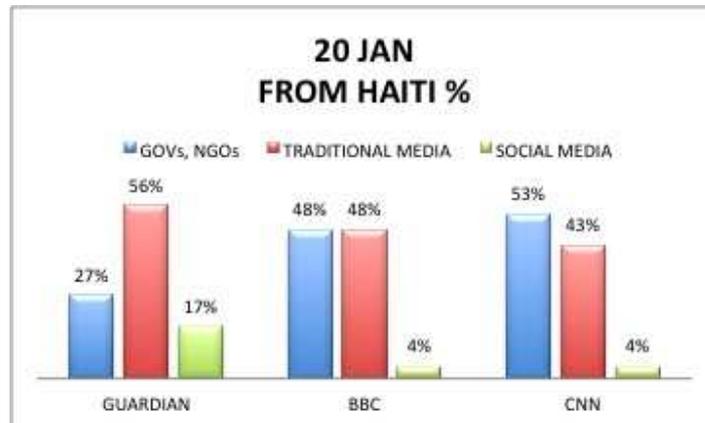
<sup>95</sup> "A full multimedia and multilingual team was assembled to broadcast from the BBC Mundo newsroom in Miami. Koneksyon Ayiti (Connexion Haiti) was available on satellite, online and via social media, as well as being transmitted on FM through Radio France Internationale transmitters in six cities. The BBC's first-ever Creole programme was a key source of information to Haitians, including rescue and aid teams on the ground. BBC Caribbean was the focal point for much of the coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath. It gave background information to many BBC news outlets for UK as well as international audiences. (...) Sharp increases in usage were recorded by online services in the aftermath of the earthquake. On 13 January, BBC Mundo attracted 459,000 unique users, 108% higher than an average day in 2009. Video requests reached more than 300,000 per day. The BBC Caribbean site recorded a 144% increase in page impressions during the first morning" – "Haiti earthquake", *BBC World Service Annual Review 2010*, June 2010 ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2010/06/100626\\_annual\\_review\\_2010\\_haiti.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/institutional/2010/06/100626_annual_review_2010_haiti.shtml)).



In comparison, this time the From Haiti (FH) sources are the top element in all three news outlets, quite the opposite of the situation in the earthquake aftermath, when Outside Haiti (OH) sources were predominant. This change was mostly due to the teams of correspondents and the production of original content on the ground.



Obviously enough, TM sources came in first place -- often they were the same reporters on the ground. The Guardian, with a smaller team in Haiti, reposted many contributions from other online media outlets, while the BBC and CNN gave voice to institutional sources on the Caribbean island, such as NGOs, aid-workers and medical teams. This choice made sense also because on 20 January the core of the agenda-setting was exactly the inability of several NGOs to provide adequate assistance to the population in need due to the poor logistics situation in Haiti.



For the purpose of our research paper, however, the most important feature emerging from the analysis of the coverage a week after the earthquake is undoubtedly the rare and scarce use of social media (SM) for both news-gathering and reporting by all three news organization under consideration.

If on 12-13 January 2010 The Guardian, the BBC and CNN resorted to social media content in their news-gathering (for about 34%, 25% and 65%, respectively), on 20 January these percentage points went drastically down. SM are the less used sources for The Guardian (17%), the only outlet still somehow reposting material from Twitter, Youtube, etc. for their news-gathering. The BBC and CNN decided to almost entirely ignore the voices of Internet users (each of them with 4%): they both gave space to these voices only for breaking news coverage. But as soon as these large news organizations were able to dispatch their own reporters on the ground, they preferred to forget social media content.

This could reveal an ambiguous approach on the part of the BBC and CNN even in the era of the Internet – while The Guardian seems to have embraced an editorial policy more open and consistent with regard to the diversity of online voices.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 Verification and reliability in the age of the “1440-minute news cycle”

During my fellowship at the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* several crisis events (the earthquake in Japan, protests and revolts in the Middle East) gained the spotlight on the international stage. Their outcome confirmed current information trends already emerging in this research paper on the Haiti earthquake. Here below we will try to summarise these trends as possible ‘answers’ to the three ‘questions’ outlined in the introduction.

1) The content circulating in the social media has become an integral part of today’s newsgathering during major events. Real time tweets, amateur videos on YouTube and first-hand accounts on Facebook fill up the “news-vacuum” that until a few years ago characterized the aftermath of major crisis events. This news-vacuum was caused by a variety of localized reasons: places were difficult to reach, the collapse of communication infrastructure (as in the Haiti case) and denied access to foreign journalists (as in the Libya situation), etc.

The use of social media as a reporting source allows users to gather first-hand material from the ground – a crucial element when there are no media correspondents in the field – while also enabling diversity and amplification in the scope of coverage. As outlined in the content analysis of this paper, a more open attitude toward social media enables faster and more accurate news-reporting and highlights geographical diversity by relying less on institutional sources. In other words, social media are not just a resource to be exploited when there are no reporters on the ground but also a tool which can greatly improve the news-reporting process during crisis events. Social media can provide a larger context and with verification of evidence, and thereby prevent the tendency of emphasising “rumours”, or quoting unverified sources.

2) However, we cannot reasonably affirm - as a few techno-enthusiasts of the citizen journalism proclaimed a few years back – that User Generated Content by itself could represent an “independent” information source. Our analysis of the media coverage about the January 2010 Haiti earthquake has shown that the presence of field correspondents still makes a difference. To paraphrase the title of last Richard Sambrook’s recent essay<sup>96</sup>, today’s foreign correspondents are not all “redundant”; and should they disappear, it will not be because an army of citizen journalists will take their place working for free.

At the same time, though, traditional reporting based only on field correspondents is no longer a sustainable model. The sharp news-cycle acceleration, particularly in the online world, is forcing mainstream news outlets to adopt a *networked journalism*<sup>97</sup> strategy, with the on-going integration between traditional reporting and real-time coverage provided by social media.

Online environments like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook are not populated just by *citizen journalists* (whatever this term may actually mean) but also by many institutional sources (NGOs<sup>98</sup>, government agencies, public figures, etc.) willing to communicate in an informal and direct way with their own audience.

While now seems the perfect time to embrace the *networked journalism* paradigm, the quantity and quality analysis outlined in Chapter 4 shows that the major mainstream news organizations are not yet fully convinced about this step. As the following basic example illustrates: in the first 24 hours after the Haiti earthquake, lots of UGC was used by CNN, the BBC and The Guardian; but a week later, when all three news organizations were able to place their own correspondents on the ground, such content

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<sup>96</sup> Richard Sambrook, *Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The changing face of international news*, Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism Challenges, 2010

<sup>97</sup> The term “networked journalism” was first proposed by Jeff Jarvis in order to overcome the rivalry, today largely obsolete, between *mainstream journalism* and *citizen journalism*: “Networked journalism” takes into account the collaborative nature of journalism now: professionals and amateurs working together to get the real story, linking to each other across brands and old boundaries to share facts, questions, answers, ideas, perspectives. It recognizes the complex relationships that will make news. And it focuses on the process more than the product”. - “Networked Journalism”, *Buzzmachine.com*, 5 July 2006 (<http://www.buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/>)

<sup>98</sup> For the NGOs central role in covering crisis events, see Glenda Cooper, *From Their Own Correspondent. New Media and the changes in disaster coverage: lessons to be learnt*’, Working Paper - Reuters Institute For The Study of Journalism, 2011

was virtually non-existent. In other words, social media are a useful resource to fill in some organizational gaps, but once that is fixed, mainstream seem to downplay their importance. In order to go beyond such an “opportunistic” model, traditional media will need to fully redesign their operational structures. And needless to say, this will still require some (perhaps a great deal of) time.

3) In the meantime, we cannot deny that the sort of Twitter-effect as mentioned in our introduction, is clearly affecting newsgathering and reporting of the major online media outlets. Indeed, the BBC, CNN and The Guardian are great examples of mainstream organizations showing consistent openness towards social media.

The online coverage of breaking news no longer relies only on local correspondents’ reporting or news agencies dispatches: new storytelling formats are emerging all around, including interactive maps, multimedia visualisations, live blogs, etc. In particular, the Live Blog format fully embodies what journalist Dan Gillmor defines as the “1440-minute news-cycle”<sup>99</sup>, a web-centred evolution of the old TV-based “24-hour news-cycle”. It is clear that today’s real-time coverage of current events is imposing a stronger acceleration in the traditional process of news-gathering and publication – a landscape where social media content is playing an increasingly crucial role.

However, even if the 1440-minute news-cycle facilitates the integration of citizen journalist contributions (particularly in dynamic formats such as the Live Blog), it is also true that a similar acceleration is eroding the journalistic standards of the reliability and verification of the news. The various interviews and analysis gathered in this research paper illustrates how, at least in a few specific instances, The Guardian and CNN chose speed versus verification for spreading their information. The “tweet first, verify later” approach is a great help for source diversification and leads to richer coverage. But this strategy also seems very dangerous for one of journalism’s golden rules: each news story must be verified first. Among the three news organisations addressed here, the BBC is the only outlet that consistently applies this fundamental principle also in its

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<sup>99</sup> “Arizona shootings: take a slow-news approach”, *Salon*, 8 January 2010  
([http://www.salon.com/technology/dan\\_gillmor/2011/01/08/arizona\\_shootings\\_slow\\_news](http://www.salon.com/technology/dan_gillmor/2011/01/08/arizona_shootings_slow_news))

online version. Most of the work carried out by the BBC UGC hub is indeed to look up and double-check the social media content, before using it during crisis events. As a consequence, this larger attention reserved for reliability of news resulted in a smaller percentage of UGC published on the BBC online venues when compared to the other organisations who opted for the open “tweet first, verify later” strategy.

On the other hand, it could also happen that in the near future the two opposing models (“publish first, verify later” vs. “verify first, publish later”) will meld into a single strategy. The more social media become an integral part of the newsgathering process, the more online outlets need a specific “curator”<sup>100</sup> working alongside commentators and correspondents. This new position will require reporters able to filter, verify and edit the most relevant content circulating online. The “reporter-curator” will take advantage of novel “verification technologies” that will be increasingly faster and more reliable and advanced. It is also reasonable to foresee the emergence of new procedures that quickly measure the overall reliability of social media content, thanks to new digital solutions and smart tool integration.

A practical example of possible outcomes in this context was recently given by the Online Journalism Blog (OJB) which recently published a short guide called: “Content, context and code: verifying information online”<sup>101</sup>. Among some of the interesting tips, it reads: “The apparent ‘facelessness’ of the medium is misleading: every piece of information, and every person, leaves a trail of data that you can use to build a picture of its reliability”. Based on this premise, OJB suggests a three-step verification process including content, context and code analysis.

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<sup>100</sup>For more details, see: “Toward the Google Newsroom, A Revolution For Media”, *Owni*, 28 March 2010 (<http://owni.fr/2010/03/28/towards-the-google-newsroom-a-revolution-for-media/>)

<sup>101</sup>“Content, context and code: verifying information online”, *Online Journalism Blog*, 26 January 2010 (<http://onlinejournalismblog.com/2011/01/26/verifying-information-online-content-context-code/>)

## Content, Context and Code: Verifying Information Online

OnlineJournalismBlog.com

<b>Content</b>	Linkbait? Frequency and recency? Cloning or airbrushing? Style and personality?
<b>Context</b>	Provenance? Following/followers? Links from, to and about? Correlated with other sources?
<b>Code</b>	URL? Whois? Archives and caches Source code

The how-to guide goes further to explain that many of the doubts surrounding today's social media also emerged during the major technology transformations of our journalism's past:

"When the telephone first entered the newsroom, journalists were sceptical. "How can we be sure that the person at the other end is who they say they are?" The question seems odd now, because we have become so used to phone technology that we barely think of it as technology at all – and there are a range of techniques we use, almost unconsciously, to verify what the person on the other end of the phone is saying, from their tone of voice, to the number they are ringing from, and the information they are providing. Dealing with online sources is no different. How do you know the source is telling the truth? You're a journalist, for god's sake: it's your job to find out"<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

This new role for a reporter will gain even more prominence. This is due not only to the fact that more and more people worldwide will look (exclusively or mostly, and more than once) online for their daily “news dose”, but also because the social media transformation is lowering the threshold for a broader dissemination of rumours, unverified news items and blatant scams.

In the era of the 1440-minute news-cycle, where citizens, independent sources and other organizations have the capacity for instant, breaking news event crisis reporting, the expression "line of verification" (coined by Matthew Eltringham, the BBC director for the UGC Hub) is the only true "added value" that independent professionals can guarantee.

In this fast-moving scenario, news media outlets not only need to adopt an open-minded approach to social media, but they also must update their standards and techniques for authenticating information. Because of this, technology will play a more vital role, helping reporters more effectively to validate user-generated content and other online sources.

The standards of good journalism are here to stay throughout the digital millennium as long as news media outlets are willing to jump on the bandwagon of real-time information without forgetting their main mission: filtering fact from fiction, separating signal from noise and offering trusted and relevant content.

## **5.2 Areas of future research**

The research work leading to this paper has been focused on specific aspects of today's media coverage of real-time crisis events. By addressing a limited period of time and narrowing our content analysis to sources used by a few mainstream media, we were able to highlight the crucial role of social media in transforming the newsgathering and reporting in the aftermath of major crisis events.

At the same time, however, our paper could not properly analyse other relevant issues related to such crisis event situations. In particular, we did not tackle the possible long-term consequences in a "storytelling" and communication context encouraged by a different model in the social media advancement. In other words, we could not address such questions as: did the more cautious approach to social media employed by the BBC lead to an overall coverage more "institutional" and more distant from the actual voices coming from Haiti? While openly embracing social media content, did CNN produce an online coverage closer to the needs of Haiti population and to aid workers on the ground?

In order to find an adequate answer to such issues, on the one hand our content analysis should have covered a longer period of time (at least two full weeks), thus enabling the surfacing of more solid trends and practices. On the other hand, our paper should have further enlarged the kind and number of sources involved in the overall process. For instance, the role played by the many NGOs in regards to the coverage of local events deserved a deeper examination. These organizations are increasingly using social media for their real-time communication and therefore their presence is becoming more and more important — including some controversial "collateral effects" such as their specific agendas within the larger picture.

We hope to conduct further analysis in the future to properly examine these issues and expand the scope of our research.

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