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Online news and changing models of journalism

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The move to Internet news publishing is the latest in a series of technological shifts which have required journalists not merely to adapt their daily practice but which have also – at least in the view of some – recast their role in society. For over a decade, proponents of the networked society as a new way of life have argued that responsibility for news selection and production will shift from publishers, editors and reporters to individual consumers, as in the scenario offered by Nicholas Negroponte:

Instead of reading what other people think is news and what other people justify as worthy of the space it takes, being digital will change the economic model of news selections, make your interests play a bigger role ... Imagine a future in which your interface agent can read every newswire and newspaper and catch every TV and radio broadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary. This kind of newspaper is printed in an edition of one (Negroponte, 1995).

New media commentator Jon Katz has been asking insistently if old media can, and deserve to, survive. In a deliberately provocative posting to the discussion-based 'community' Web site, slashdot.com, Katz asked, *Would You Ever Read A Newspaper Again?* and painted this picture of the obsolescence of old media:

All over the information spectrum, media audiences are fragmented, drawn to the timeliness, convenience and immediacy of cable news, and the Net and the Web. As the Net and Web spawn ferocious and idiosyncratic commentary, democratizing opinion all over the country, newspapers cling to stuffy and elitist op-ed pages, where opinion is generally confined to a "left" and "right" and voice usually given to elite cliques of pundits, academics, authors and CEO's (Katz, 2000).

Among established journalists, those who have crossed over into new media frequently castigate their erstwhile colleagues for being blinkered. At the extreme, journalism is seen as redundant, because "everyone becomes a journalist" (M.F.Wilson, executive editor of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, quoted in Bardoel, 1996). Steve Yelvington, of Cox Interactive Media, criticises journalists for failing to see that they are no longer the gatekeepers. He insists that the content of sites like slashdot.com that are based on users' contributions should be seen as news: "If Slashdot were a mammal, most of our news sites would be the dinosaurs. Many journalists don't understand this and don't think it's journalism" (Yelvington, 1999).

In more grounded analyses, online journalism is widely taken to represent a new model of journalism. In this view, a challenge to the 'vertical' model of journalism arises from the development of 'horizontal' means of mass communication (Bardoel, 1996). But journalism is redefined rather than replaced:

More than ever, the task of journalism will be in filtering relevant issues from an increasing supply of information in a crowded public domain and its fragmented segments...On the one hand, there is a need for information brokers, on the other, for directors and conductors of the public debate (Bardoel, 1996).



Similarly, Schudson has suggested that people would seek help to identify which sources were legitimate and would do so from news professionals who were thus required to “conceive their tasks” differently from previously, as interpreters and guides rather than as gatherers and disseminators (Schudson, 1995). Even a new media enthusiast like Jon Katz insisted: “We need journalism probably more than we’ve ever needed it.” But he went on: “Journalism has been asleep at the switches ... young people see it as irrelevant, they see it as clueless, and they see it as fundamentally dishonest” (Kees, 1999).

In one of the few books attempting to synthesise the experiences and implications of online journalism, Jim Hall addresses the change of journalism’s role as “disintermediation”, arguing that “the web itself has taken over the role of mediating those [primary news] sources for audiences”. As a result, “journalists add cartographer to the role of news-worker but, in the universal library that is the web, they also become authenticators and designers for those who follow the maps they draw” (Hall, 2001).

This may be part of an answer to the question posed by John Pavlik, of Columbia University’s New Media Center, who, in a discussion of the research agenda relating to online journalism, asks: What are the most effective roles for journalists in an age where citizens can increasingly go directly to the source of news? (Pavlik, 2000). Pavlik has been developing a view of a new journalism that “will allow news consumers to understand the meaning of the day’s events in a personalised context that makes better sense to them than traditional media do now” (Pavlik, 1997). He has argued that journalism should embrace the new media “since [they] can build new communities based on shared interests and concerns; and since [they have] the almost unlimited space to offer levels of reportorial depth, texture, and context that are impossible in any other medium ... new media can transform journalism”.

Through selected Irish case studies, we shall later examine the forms of journalism growing up in the new media. In the following section, however, we consider some aspects of the online environment that have the potential to influence, and may already be influencing, the practice and profession of journalism.

The Internet as news medium

The Internet offers itself as a vehicle for news not just in the form of network technologies, or as a storehouse of information, or as a means of diverse forms of communication, but also as a cultural space with its own rituals and norms. It presents itself with a diversity of cultural practices and values inscribed into it. The strongest of those practices and values resist the kind of paternalistic, top-down communication that has defined the professional culture of journalism.

Many years before existing news organisations had seen the potential of the Internet as a publishing and income-generating vehicle, academic and other communities had been using it to distribute and exchange what they called news. By the early 1990s the number of “newsgroups” on the Internet was estimated at over 10,000. These open-access services catered for serious scholars, political activists, hobbyists, rumour-mongers and the idly curious. They developed their own norms for the methods for setting up new groups and for the manner of posting items and responding to those already posted. Through the alt. newsgroups, a new public space, defined by freedom of expression, was established. Most newsgroups were text-only but as the means of digitising images and compressing those digital files became more widely available, many news groups were also used to distribute images. Not for the first or last time, aficionados of pornography were to the fore in extending the scope of the technologies.



“News” is used in two ways in everyday discourse. It can refer to what has happened to individuals, as in the conversational opening, “Any news?” It can also refer to information about significant events on the public stage. On the Internet, in the newsgroups, these two meanings intersected. News of both kinds became the mortar of online “virtual” communities, many of them brought together and sustained by a sense of social solidarity for which the traditional media were not considered a suitable or available channel. Others were driven by prejudice, bigotry and hatred, for which the traditional media quite understandably did not wish to be a channel.

Newsgroups were also used for the rapid dissemination of information that conformed to traditional media criteria of news but which the traditional media, for one reason or another, could not or would not distribute. Matt Drudge – whose muck-raking Drudge Report represents one recognisable type of Internet journalism – began his publishing activities posting news from Hollywood on newsgroups and mailing lists. On the strength of these activities, “the ensuing Web site practically launched itself” (Hiscock, 2000).

The defining characteristic of this news practice, notwithstanding its actual and potential abuse, has been that it represented a mainly “horizontal” communication among peers, whereas traditional news represented an essentially “vertical” communication from authoritative sources, through the media, to the publics.

The information ecology within which news is produced and consumed online is substantially different from that in print and broadcasting and it continues to change within the new media. Many of the sources used in journalism are themselves active as direct publishers. Many individuals within the publics addressed by journalism are active as information-seekers, some too as information-providers. The ‘audience’ may have access to the source material used in generating the news reports published in newspapers, magazines, and broadcast on television and radio.

“Journalism has serious competition with other sources of information” (Houston, 2000). More than that, it faces the possibility of being exposed. Many government and commercial organisations who are among the most-used sources of news publish their statements on the Internet at the same time as they release them to the media. Net users can not only view material released to the media and, if they wish, compare the published news stories with them, they can, and do, also redistribute the original material and the resulting reports, inviting comment and discussion. More active Net users can work their way through official documentation, parliamentary reports, and ministers’ speeches to construct their own versions of the story. In this way, according to Hall, “the relationship between reader and author undergoes a shift that inverts traditional understandings of the construction of meaning and reshapes some of the values that underpin it” (Hall, 2001). He argues that an “impossible objectivity” is replaced by “reasoned subjectivity”, within which “readers will be able to make up their minds for themselves” (ibid.).

The space for producers to add context and explanation is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. The hyperlinking capability of the Web provides the means to provide additional information alongside a “best-available” version of the latest development. Arguably, the Web removes or relaxes the constraint of audience ability or expectation frequently cited by news professionals in defence of established practices. It is possible to present material in a manner that allows users to work different routes through it, according to their own previous knowledge of the topic.

Even if not all of these facilities are used in any given example of online news publishing, it is apparent that the received notion of a bounded relationship between author or producer, at one pole, and reader, consumer, audience or user, at the other pole, is no longer very helpful. That relationship also shifts due to the possibilities the Web offers for users to contact authors or publishers of the displayed material, to post queries or comments to the originators of the information on which it is based, or raise issues for other users to respond to.



Empirical studies of interactivity as applied by Web news publishers indicate that only a minority implement these possibilities (see, for example, Schultz, 1999, and Schultz, 2000). Reflections on the application of interactivity suggest its social value has been over-rated (see, for example, King, 1998). But the mere fact that these opportunities arise to present news material in new ways and to engage differently with the users, and that publishers, editors and writers have to decide whether or not to take up these opportunities has implications for professional values. Jay Black has suggested that a new model of journalism may be emerging in which journalists' conclusions should be "publicly verifiable and replicable", journalists should be more willing to accept feedback, give expression to more voices and, overall, be more accountable in their work practices (Black, 1998).

Techno-culturalists remain sceptical about journalists' capacity to change in this direction but some see that journalists could recover lost ground in credibility and trust by responding to the expectations of 'netizens':

Reporters should be required to disclose their hidden incomes ...
Reporters should be required to put e-mail addresses on their work,
and should be taught how to converse once again with the people
who read them (Katz, 1997).

Those who have developed this capacity for conversation see it as a bonus for journalism rather than a workload burden. A BBC News Online executive noted that "the people in the story itself" were more involved in its telling. "This makes for better reporting and a better relationship between the news organization and its readers. Right now there are four people just sorting through readers' e-mails, so every day we have this immense interaction with our readers. This is fundamentally changing journalism" (International Labour Organisation, 2000). The editor-in-chief of the magazine, *The Onion*, said "we do feel more in touch with our readers on the Web, just because we get feedback from them, whereas our print version readers don't really write" (Mackintosh, 2000). David Talbot, pioneer Web magazine editor, described his publication *Salon* as part of a constant feedback loop. "We receive e-mails from around the world that challenge us and provide us with corrections and criticisms. It keeps us honest" (Power, 2000).

The practice of Web news has not been quite what the optimists would have wished. Many Web publications that began with a commitment to explore new forms of storytelling, and to produce multi-layered features using multiple formats and sources have retreated from that commitment (Houston, 1999). Under the pressure of economic constraints, but also in response to the purported preferences of Web site users, information is increasingly published in conventional news-story formats, notably as 'breaking news'. One of the paradoxical effects of the drift in this direction is the reinforcement of the historically pre-eminent role of the news agencies. According to former Guardian editor, Peter Preston, the "biggest remaining Net smile in town" belongs to the head of the Press Association's online services (Preston, 2001).

Case studies of online news

As part of the EU-funded project, MUDIA (Multimedia Content in the Digital Age, 2001-2002), media industry organisations and academic researchers aimed to construct a more detailed picture of news producers' strategies and views of consumers within the news process, and of users' expectations and uses of Web news. Among the points of departure of this study were the assumptions that "professional information providers will have to come to terms with changing consumer demands" and that "the public's assessment of what constitutes news is changing profoundly". (For more details on MUDIA and for the final report of the authors' input to the project, see www.mudia.org.)



The contribution of the Centre for Society Technology and Media (STeM) at Dublin City University to MUDIA was based on case studies of 24 online news organizations in four EU member states, Denmark, France, Ireland and United Kingdom, that included in-depth interviews with editors or content managers in each of those enterprises. The sample included 5-7 case studies in each of the four countries. The 24 case studies included both Net-native and existing media players, services with identifiable user groups such as health, sports and technology news services, and with at least three prominent interactive features such as discussion boards, e-mail alerts, or breaking news services. For the purposes of this research non-professional information services such as community sites and individual hobbyists' "weblogs" were not included.

The semi-structured interviews with senior editorial staff at the sampled sites focused on the way in which the site developed, the relationship it had with its users and the manner in which user demand shaped the content of the site. Here we present some of the main findings from the seven Irish case studies. The interviews were conducted in November-December 2001; the interviewees and their responsibilities in the enterprises are made clear in the reports of the respective interviews. In the months after the interviews were conducted, that is, in the first half of 2002, the two largest of these services went through significant changes. Ireland.com cut back staff and introduced charges in two phases, first for e-mail services, then for access to much of its primary news content and archives. RTE.ie also reduced its online editorial staff as part of a wider rationalization within the national broadcaster. In this context, we should emphasise that business strategies were not directly discussed in the interviews.

ElectricNews.net

ElectricNews.net (ENN) was established in 1999 by technology journalist Sheila McDonald and publishes up to a dozen news stories daily, generally without hyperlinks. Content includes reviews of Web sites, notice of information technology (IT) industry events, directories of IT-related services, and features on new products. Biographical notes on the main ENN writers are posted on the site, with direct email contact. Email alerts are available free of charge, and with a personalisation option. As McDonald explained, "most of our readers are getting more e-mail than they want to read but our e-mail is a premium one in their inbox because they requested it. It matches their needs. They can rely on us to filter a lot of the noise out." Electric News does not host discussion boards, a decision based primarily on considerations of manpower but also on the editor's experience of discussion boards: "Rumour, foundless (sic) accusation and slurs reign supreme. Bullies take over the discussion and frighten other people away. I think it is the opposite of what journalism should be." In this way, a 'traditional' view of journalist responsibility holds sway: "I would rather keep it [the ENN news content] pure for the journalists only and if you want us to cover something we're good enough to see the news value in that."

Despite this, ENN reported that users provide a lot of news leads and appear keen to contact the site although there is no direct invitation to do so. According to McDonald, as an Internet-native news service, its greatest challenge is to find the resources to respond to user demand. User interaction would play a much greater role if ENN could devote the necessary resources to implement the changes users demand.

Ireland.com

Ireland.com is the portal site of The Irish Times, which established its Web edition in 1994, and 'rebranded' the site as Ireland.com in 2000, introducing a wider range of information sources. Ireland.com and its predecessor have been for several years the most used of Irish-based information sites. The management at Ireland.com reported that the overwhelming factor in the success and development of the site has been brand



loyalty to the printed newspaper, *The Irish Times*, and consequently to Ireland.com. A traditional model of journalism is employed on the site. As Deirdre Veldon, Editor of Ireland.com, explained, "people know what the Irish Times is. There's no point in us changing that."

When the site started it hosted a discussion forum but this was discontinued. One of the relatively few interactive features on the site is a daily news poll which allows users to vote on a topical question posed by the news service. Users may also contribute to discussion on this topic. Veldon reported that the quality of contributions was high and that this feature has generated traffic to the site, with about 3,000 votes per day cast on average. News leads are rarely taken from the discussion boards other than perhaps as an indicator of what users are interested in. Occasionally content from the news poll will be published in the offline publications such as the Readers' Representative column of the newspaper or in the business pages. Other aspects of Ireland.com's service which were considered to be interactive included news delivery in SMS (short message system) format to mobile phones and a reported strong e-mail contact between the user and the editor. Although user feedback is considered to have played an important role in Ireland.com's development, it has not been a primary factor in shaping it. Ireland.com would like to have better information about their users' profile, enabling them to create services more targeted towards users. "What we are trying to do is change the user into a customer. [If this is successful] the relationship changes, they expect more, they expect better customer service. If we are charging for the archive or the newspaper the customer has to call the shots." (Note: The Ireland.com interview was conducted prior to the introduction of paid subscriptions for parts of the service.)

Irishabroad.com

Irishabroad.com is a part of Online.ie which was established in 1999 as a rival to Ireland.com. It shares some services with Online.ie but has additional features to appeal to the diaspora, particularly in the United States. Fiachra O'Marcaigh, Editor of Irishabroad, explained that the site was based on three key elements - content, community and commerce - and these three elements were central to the creation and ongoing development of the site. The site has limited information on its users' profile: "It's deliberately limited in order not to intimidate people because what we are not about is bombarding people with information or selling their information. The information we do collect is simply to help us know who we are talking to."

The site has a very active discussion board that is monitored by staff but also relies on 'peer reviewing' of content which is considered to be a strong measure of the strength of the community on the site. The user's role is considered to be focused primarily on news consumption and then on interaction between users. This is reflected in the usage of the site. Registered users receive a weekly e-mail which is reported to be an important strategy for bringing users back to the site and building loyalty; 80 per cent of registered users sign up for this e-mail service. If a registered user requests to be removed from the service Irishabroad.com complies but follows this with an e-mail asking for feedback. One in three respond to this information request. "Feedback from dissatisfied customers is an important thing to have if you aren't meeting people's needs," O'Marcaigh said.

Because the majority of users are based in the United States or similar economies where broadband communications are available, Irishabroad.com receives demands for broadband content. O'Marcaigh reported that the delay in introducing broadband services in Ireland has pushed back implementation of many of the services which had been planned for Irishabroad.com. Irishabroad enters into local partnerships in important regions for the Irish diaspora. It provides online versions of the *Irish Voice*, and the *Irish Echo*, both based in New York, and of the *Irish Post* in London. The site has correspondents in a dozen countries around the world.



IrishHealth.ie

IrishHealth.ie was founded in 2000 by an established medical trade publisher, Medmedia, to be “Ireland’s independent health portal, designed to offer users a comprehensive yet easy to use online source of medical and healthcare information and up-to-the-minute health news”. The site includes packages on specific health issues, available only to registered users and it proclaims its credibility as a source of health information through the presence of a medical advisory panel and editorial direction by the well-established medical journalist Fergal Bowers. However, the ‘editor’ to whom site users can send direct feedback is unnamed. The site editors provide hard news and frequently break news stories that find their way to other Irish media but they also ensure that the user contribution remains an integral part of what they do. All stories are published with a request for user comment and feedback and all of this is published online. Online polls are also used to generate user involvement. User contributions determine the way in which future stories are dealt with and facilitate the creation of richer, more detailed content. According to Fergal Bowers, “in a sense they [the users] are tailoring the site, the site is being tailored to what people want. They are doing that, we’re not controlling it, we’re simply allowing them a forum for it to happen.” Irishhealth is strongly committed to developing interactive functions on the site and some interactive features have been developed through user interaction. “You have to offer something very interactive where people feel they have an input and they can get immediate information. And they want it quickly.”

iVenus.com

iVenus.com is a magazine-format online service aimed at women, carrying a diverse range of fashion, music and travel-related articles supplemented by moderated discussion boards. The site is published in partnership with the printed magazine, *Irish Tatler*, and the two publications cross-promote each other. However, the audiences for the two publication are not considered to be the same. iVenus was started as a portal with plans to launch internationally under licence. Soon after its launch, and in response to the global downturn in online publishing activity, the site’s plans were consolidated. Vanessa Harris, Editor, considered its active discussion boards as its strongest feature. “The most noticeable side of the Web site is the discussion board which is a whole culture, we don’t police them, we don’t interfere in them at all. And they have built this astonishing community amongst themselves,” Harris said. She cited examples of iVenus users meeting socially as an example of the strong sense of community that developed among users through the discussion boards. There is no mechanism for encouraging users to contribute to content carried on the site although story leads are sometimes taken from the discussion boards. “It doesn’t seem to have occurred to people that they might [contribute content]. Maybe they think we’re as authoritative as God or something.”

Harris explained that the site was shaped by the organisation’s strategy rather than user interaction but each is considered to feed into the other. She reported that when demands can be met the site will change to meet that particular demand and, if not, the editor strives to communicate to users why a popular feature cannot be implemented or has to be removed.

P45.net

P45.net was started in 1999 as “a bit of fun” by Web consultant, Volta Digital Media, and its sister company, Desire Publishing. It is “an irreverent entertainment website for disgruntled office workers in Ireland and further afield”, part of it a “newspaper”, Ballyhoo Examiner, complete with ink-on-paper look that publishes several satirical, plainly fictitious or just about believable reports daily and a weekly newsletter called The



Five O'Clock Shadow. The editorial team on P45 come from a traditional media background but this does not necessarily determine the way in which the site has developed. Mick Cunningham, Editor of P45, explained that, "the only fragments of the traditional model that we hang onto are in terms of design and making sure the content is tight, that it's accurate. But in general, it's a very different way of hunting and gathering for information."

The site includes active Rant discussion forums that have allowed the site to develop in response to user interaction. Initially the discussion forums played a secondary role to the traditional fixed content on the site, but as the site grew, it became evident that diversified services were required to meet user demand. Apart from the titles mentioned above, the site creators also developed P45rant.net, an alternative interface for the site built around the discussion forums. Users logging into P45rant.net are presented immediately with links to the discussion boards with the traditional fixed content a secondary resource to stimulate discussion - in other words, a bottom-up publishing model.

The sense of community on P45 is considered strong. Users meet socially each month in Dublin and meetings of users have been organised in New York, New Orleans and London. The discussion boards are moderated but also 'a sense of responsibility' is promoted among users to encourage 'peer review'.

RTE.ie

RTE.ie is the online service of the national broadcaster, RTE (Radio Telefis Eireann), established in 1997. Having for some time used its site mainly as a means to promote radio and television programmes, with a news feed from its teletext service, RTE revamped its presentation of news on the Web from 1999 and has developed original content areas, notably Ace, an entertainment e-zine with multimedia content. Luke McManus, a producer with RTE Interactive and head of News Online, explained that the service grew as a result of strategies developed in-house rather than through user interaction. Features of the site were streamlined to facilitate perceived user demand but user demand did not dictate the site content, McManus said.

The site is now dominated by content emerging directly from the broadcast newsroom. The broadcast journalists are expected to file their stories to the Web as well as to their normal working medium - TV or radio - although this does not always happen. Breaking news stories still appear on TV or radio first. Because it was a young department within an established high-profile media company, RTE Interactive considered it important to build relationships in the traditional newsroom. "We decided early on that someone [from the online division] had to attend the news conferences. There is a much better relationship now between news online and the main RTE newsroom just because of relationships building up between our journalists and the main newsroom journalists."

There have been a number of subject-specific discussion boards, which are considered to have been very successful, for example, one on the foot and mouth disease that affected Ireland in 2001. McManus reported that these services were very costly to provide to the standard the broadcaster expected. Consequently, they are not a regular part of the site although they proved to be very popular. "It was a really good use of Web technology. It was perfect, there was a huge uptake. But we didn't have the resources to manage it properly. It was really well done but just too expensive."



Conclusions

The case studies indicate the uneven commitment to innovation in Irish online news publishing, particularly as innovation applies to interactivity between producers and consumers. While each of the sites surveyed for the MUDIA case studies included some interactive features, the selection and implementation of these features varied considerably. The model of journalism to which those owning or managing the site subscribed appeared to be the strongest driver of how interactivity developed. Net-native sites responded to user demand for interactivity more explicitly than those whose owners or editors came from a traditional media background. However, the Net-native sites surveyed include one in which the most influential person applied a traditional journalism culture acquired from previous experience.

All the senior editorial representatives interviewed maintained that accuracy and reliability in news - the core features of traditional news reporting, at least as journalists understand it - were still the strongest factors in building user loyalty and meeting user demand. The majority of the sites surveyed implement a traditional news *production* model, reinforcing the role of the editor, sub-editor and other established production roles in online news provision. Most of those implementing a more user-orientated strategy see this strategy as an extension of the model of professional journalism rather than a reinvention. They are not attempting to rewrite the rules of journalism, they are simply allowing the relationship between the user and the producer to become more active and allowing this to inform and reinvigorate the content carried on the site.

Participation in the EU-funded JetPilot project (1998-99) demonstrated how difficult journalist organisations found it to adapt to the new practices and possibilities in the online environment. The lead author of this paper led workshops with journalists in Britain, Germany and Ireland that indicated widespread concern that many of those performing editorial tasks in Web news services lacked appropriate editorial training and, thus, needed guidance from experienced journalists. But they also showed that many established journalists and their representative organisations were weakly aware of the changes taking place and of their implications for professional practice.

The training and education institutions may not be filling that gap adequately. In circumstances of uncertainty in the industry and among the professionals, uncertainty also affects in-service training and pre-entry education, and journalism research. In a review of research about online journalism it was noted that most of it is conducted by media institutions rather than in a university context, and most of it is privately funded. The authors of this review wondered if public institutions were finding it difficult to “react to the pace of changes in mass communication” (Kopper et al, 2000). This may well apply to journalism education as much as, or more than, to research.

The uncertainty affecting the definition of the research agenda is deepened by the serious methodological problems; in research on audiences and content, for example, difficult issues arise about measurement and sampling in the online sector. In relation to content analysis, it has been argued, the issue of representativeness is “greatly complicated” (Stempel, 2000).

There may be good reason, however, to embrace this uncertainty as a source of renewal of journalism studies and of media studies more broadly. It has been claimed that, by the end of the twentieth century, media studies “had entered a middle-aged stodgy period and wasn’t really sure what it could say about things any more. Thank goodness the Web came along ... the area of new media is vibrant, exploding and developing, and nobody is certain of the best way to do things” (Gauntlett, 2000).

The adaptation required to realise the opportunities of the changed, and changing, media scene relates to the depth of prospective change as much as to the pace of current change. One writer has argued that received theoretical models such as gatekeeping and agenda-setting need to be reviewed in order to “synthesise a theoretical approach ... that explores the role of journalism as a community builder” (Singer, 1998).



She concluded that “the issues raised by this new form of communication in general and journalism in particular invite us not only to make better use of what we already know but also to be open to new ways of asking those vital questions”.

Perhaps the most vital of these questions is one that traditional journalism theory has hardly asked: the question of relations between producers and users (and users who become producers). Textbooks of journalism are revealingly reticent on the role of the reader, or audience, presenting journalism as essentially one-way communication with weakly defined target groups. Discussions of the potential of online journalism, and the observable practice of Web news services such as the case studies presented here, throw this reticence into high relief. In this way, the experience of online journalism – including, and specifically, the uneven and uncertain experience to date in Ireland and elsewhere – has lessons for all of journalism.

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