

From traditional gatekeeper to professional verifier: how local newspaper journalists are adapting to change

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FROM TRADITIONAL GATEKEEPER TO PROFESSIONAL VERIFIER

How local newspaper journalists are adapting to change

Dr Lily Canter

The traditional role of the journalist as gatekeeper is being undermined and challenged in the online world where anyone with an internet connection can publish to a global audience. As a consequence the role of the journalist is being constantly redefined as the 'profession' no longer hold exclusive rights to the dissemination of news to the masses. This study seeks to explore how local British journalists perceive their role in the era of Web 2.0 and how willing they are to adapt. Through interviews and observation at two local British newspapers it was possible to gain a greater understanding of the modern role of the local journalist and their professional distinctions from the public. These NCTJ qualified journalists increasingly view themselves as verifiers of news who use their training and expertise to amplify news to the wider public. Despite some initial reluctance they are largely enthusiastic about technological and cultural adaptations to their role although some are still resisting this change. There is also evidence to suggest audiences play a role in secondary gatekeeping by influencing the selection and prominence of stories on newspaper websites. Furthermore the findings seek to inform educators of the continued relevance of the professional accreditation body, the NCTJ, to an industry persistently challenged by citizen journalism.

KEYWORDS: gatekeeping, verifying, professional identity, training, NCTJ, citizen journalism

Introduction

With the daily expansion of Web 2.0, a term coined by online innovators O'Reilly and Battelle (2009), newspapers are facing an ever increasing barrage of challenges, as they are continually forced to compete against digital journalism. Within this online world the gatekeeping authority of journalists is being contested as readers have gained the ability to publish direct to the web and learn from their peers as much as from traditional sources of authority (Rusbridger, 2010). Furthermore, technological and cultural shifts are enabling news organisations and audiences to converge resulting in the blurring of the lines between professional authority and amateur citizen. In the online world where anyone can publish directly to the web, what sets journalists apart from anyone else with an internet connection? As Donsbach (2010) suggests "the very definition of journalism and what it means to be a journalist is no longer as clearly defined as in the past", (43). This context informs this paper which seeks to examine the modern role of local British journalists and whether their traditionally authoritarian perception as the gatekeepers of community information and news still exists within the age of the internet. Local newspaper journalists in Britain are of particular interest in this field due to the formal nature of their sector compared to their national or international peers. Journalists working in local and regional newspapers are expected to achieve qualifications from the National

Council for the Training of Journalists (commonly abbreviated to NCTJ) as a prerequisite to working in the industry. Although these qualifications are not a legal requirement they are an unofficial one and today almost all job specifications in the local and regional press require job applicants to have achieved their preliminary NCTJ qualifications (Hold the Front Page, 2013). However these requirements are not mirrored in the national press, where many newspaper companies have their own in-house training schemes (The Times, 2014) and do not rely so heavily on the NCTJ for formal training. Local newspaper journalists therefore have a more formalised professional identity re-enforced by their NCTJ qualifications and as such are an appropriate sub culture to explore in the context of gatekeeping roles. They are also particularly relevant to journalism educators as trainee posts in the regional press are often the employment starting point for journalism graduates, from which local and national television and radio take their cues, in the so called “news pyramid” structure (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2009, 11).

Gatekeepers redefined

As journalism steps somewhat tentatively into the digital era there are many who argue the journalist-as-gatekeeper role has not diminished but it is simply being redefined. Journalists are now the verifiers of mass information as other individuals and organisations have also taken on the role of information gatherers and distributors in the online environment. Singer (2001; 1997) and Hermida (2009) describe journalists as sense makers, who filter the glut of information online, whilst Charman (2007) refers to journalists as human algorithms sifting through volumes of data, communicating what they believe to be important to the public. Meanwhile Gillmor (2006) argues that it is the modern journalist’s role to shape larger conversations and provide context alongside the traditional role of newsgathering. Indeed, in his more contemporaneous research, Bruno (2011) sees verification as the only added value of professional journalism in the future. In order to clarify which perspective has the most pertinence to contemporary journalism at a local level this paper seeks to explore whether local journalists believe their professional role is changing, and if so what their modern role is.

It must be acknowledged that some journalists are reluctant to adapt and accept that their role is changing. As previous research suggests journalists’ attitudes tend to fall into opposing camps, those ready to embrace change and those clinging onto their traditional role (Robinson, 2010; Chung, 2007). Robinson describes these camps as the convergers – those who are younger and hired more recently - and the traditionalists – those who are over 40 and have been at the newspaper for a number of years. Furthermore Singer *et al*’s 2011 international research reveals that although some journalists stress the democratic benefit of including reader participation and user generated content, others fear doing so undermines the very basis of journalism. The research also found that polarised views existed, with the spectrum of viewpoints divided into the three camps. These were the conventional journalist (traditional gatekeeping role), dialogical journalist (collaboration between users and journalists) and the ambivalent journalist which was the biggest camp and included those who saw merits in both the conventional and dialogical approach. This paper therefore seeks to explore to what extent local journalists are willing to change and accept that their gatekeeping role has evolved.

Part of the reason local British newspaper journalists remain reluctant to accept changes in their gatekeeping role is due to worries about the accuracy, credibility and quality of user generated content (Singer, 2009). Similar concerns have also been identified by Chung (2007) and Robinson (2010) in their news room studies. As McQuail suggests the professional ideology of journalism contains “unwritten obligations” (2005, 162), something which Deuze (2005) more explicitly outlines as the five traits of public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. It is therefore important to understand how local journalists respond to citizen journalists and how they distinguish themselves from them.

A final area for consideration is the impact of secondary audience gatekeeping in response to the news (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) and the growing role of web analytics, also known as the clickstream, central to this (Anderson, 2011; Dickinson, 2011). Shoemaker and Vos make a convincing case for audiences as “secondary gatekeepers” who become active once the mass media process stops (2009, 7). Audiences share stories on traditional news media websites by emailing them to friends or posting them to their open social network profiles and in doing so tell journalists which stories are popular. Furthermore research by Shoemaker *et al* (2008) indicates that readers use different criteria for gatekeeping decisions than journalists do for news selection. News items about unusual events and public welfare play a much bigger role when readers decide to send news items than when journalists select events for news items. The increase in the use of web metrics or analytics to measure most-read stories, most-commented stories and most-shared stories is beginning to shape journalistic decision. This is supported by research into the *Leicester Mercury* newspaper website (Dickinson, 2011) and a study of news rooms in Philadelphia (Anderson, 2011). Both studies conclude that audiences are not impacting on the gatekeeping process via user generated content but are influencing news selection via web metrics. According to Örnebring (2010) this influence can lead to a change in news values to soft over hard news, quirky over substantial, visual over non-visual and an overall preference for sensationalism. This paper therefore seeks to understand to what extent secondary audience gatekeeping is occurring in British local newspapers.

Methods

In depth interviews have been called “one of the most powerful methods” in qualitative research because they allow investigators to “step into the mind of another person, see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988, p.9). For this study interviews were conducted with editorial staff at two local British newspapers and these results were triangulated with news room observation to ensure validity. The advantage of the qualitative interview as a research methodology is that it is more adaptive and responsive to people’s individualistic perceptions of the world and can explore beliefs in sub-cultures such as print journalists or newspaper readers. Interviews can also explore “areas of broad cultural consensus and people’s more personal, private and special understandings”, (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.4). Furthermore as participants enter new situations (such as Web 2.0 and its impact on gatekeeping roles) the understandings constructed are less governed by social rules, norms and conventions and more likely to be individualistic (Arksey and Knight, 1999), therefore more qualitative

approaches are needed to understand these meanings. It was therefore felt that the sub-culture of local journalists lent itself to a more individualist and subjective approach such as the interview, rather than a broader, less nuanced quantitative approach such as a questionnaire.

Snowball, convenience and strategic sampling is prevalent in journalism studies research (Birks, 2010; Vujonic *et al*, 2010; Thurman and Lupton, 2008) particularly when interviewing journalists within a news organisation and therefore a combination of these methods were identified as appropriate for this study. This type of purposive sampling allows units to be selected due to their theoretical significance rather than being statistically determined due to their representativeness (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). In this study, prior to the journalist interviews at each of the two newspapers, the researcher spent a one week observing the news room and editorial staff. At both sites the researcher observed the news desk, web desk, reporters and attended daily conferences and editorial planning meetings. All areas were observed at varying times of day including early and late shifts, from 7am through to 10pm, Monday to Saturday. Since interviews are about what people say rather than what they do (Arksey and Knight, 1999) observation is a useful and complementary method which can record what people actually do and allow the observer “to see what participants cannot”, (Sapsford and Judd, 1996, 59). The use of observation and interview is a common practice to understand the complexities of particular phenomenon within their real life economic, cultural and social contexts and has been used with success to understand newspaper practices (Robinson, 2010; Boczkowski, 2005; Singer, 1997).

A further advantage of conducting observation for this study was that it enabled the researcher to identify appropriate strategic journalists to interview, who had then recommended other journalists to interview. The aim of this sampling technique was to keep interviewing people until saturation was reached which was indicated when all the diverse opinions started to be repeated by different interviewees and the interviewer was not hearing anything new (Kvale, 2007). The benefit of this approach is that “sponsorship encourages cooperation” (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996, 81).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 members of editorial staff at the Northcliffe-owned *Leicester Mercury* and 18 at the Newsquest-owned Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. These ranged from trainee reporters to the newspaper editor and included department heads in news, sport, features and web. All, bar two, of the interviews were conducted face to face in a private room within the newspaper offices. Two interviews at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* were conducted on the telephone due to the journalist involved working from a different location. Journalists who wanted to remain anonymous were given a code. These are indicated in this paper as L for *Leicester Mercury* and B for the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. Those who were willing to be identified are indicated via their name and job title.

The interviews and observation conducted for this paper were part of a wider three-year research project exploring Web 2.0 and the changing relationship between British local newspaper journalists and their audiences (Canter, 2012a) which also incorporated reader surveys and online content analysis. It is recognised that the journalist interview sample was a relatively small one however the research is situated within a field of existing case studies, and can therefore be compared to other studies in order to build a larger pattern with greater generalizability.

The evolution of journalists

In each of the interviews, participants were asked whether the role of the journalist was changing in the Web 2.0 environment and if so what it was changing to and what their role incorporated. The responses were coded into two sections, the first looking at the attitudes towards the current status of journalism. As illustrated in Figure 1 the responses fell into three key attitudes which ranged across a spectrum from a traditional view, to one where journalists felt their role was under threat. The dominant response only was coded for each participant in order to give a clear indication of attitudes, which were then explored in further detail through the use of probing questions. The responses were coded as follows: the role of the journalist is Unchanged, Adapting or Under Threat. Figure 1 displays the results as a percentage of all editorial staff interviewed. Interestingly no participants felt that the role of the journalist was redundant, even when asked this as a direct probing question.

The largest proportion of journalists felt the role of the journalist was adapting, as it has done throughout history.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The results were very similar at both case study sites, with 53 per cent at the *Leicester Mercury* and 54 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, expressing that their job and journalism, was changing to meet the demands and expectations of digital consumers. Even the contemporaneous editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* Neal Butterworth, who described himself as “a traditionalist who likes to think he is forward thinking” acknowledged that the relationship with the audience had changed and the profession was evolving, albeit in a haphazard fashion.

I still think we're kind of growing. Life-cycle-wise we are wide eyed teenagers a little bit, we've not become totally au fait with how to do it, what the best thing to do is. And that's not just here but within the industry. There is no perfect solution to running a print media and running simultaneously a 24-7 digital media offering as well, so we are learning all the time...I think it's that whole cliché of how it used to be us and them and now it's just a massive us. It used to be that we could decide what people read about and when they read about it and there was much more of a we'll tell you what the story is and we'll do that because we have chosen to write about this part of it and chosen to include these quotes (Butterworth, interview, January 2011).

The idea that newspapers could no longer dictate the news agenda and act as authoritarian gatekeepers of information was echoed by some journalists at the *Leicester Mercury*. One reporter commented:

As I keep saying you have to be relevant to their lives and the issues important to them, rather than trying to dictate to them what is perceived to be the issue of the day or what is important (L17, interview, October 2010).

However despite 50 per cent of staff accepting that journalism was adapting, a significant number from various age groups remained obstinate, expressing that their role had not changed and it was simply the tools and technology that was different. A reporter at the *Leicester Mercury* in their mid-thirties, commented: “Whether it came

through carrier pigeon or whether it comes by a message saying check this out, the internet is just a different way of doing that” (L1, interview, October 2010). Furthermore a reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in their fifties retorted: “The basic job hasn’t changed much at all except it’s more intense. The actual business of going out and talking to people and getting a story out of them is the same” (B2, interview, January 2011).

Threats from non-‘professionals’

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* journalists identified a number of different threats to their role including citizen journalists, bloggers, sports stars or sports fans. One editorial staff member was particularly anxious about their job and was concerned that they might be replaced by members of the public willing to provide content for free.

In the past three years there have been redundancies. Every Christmas has been truly terrifying. You don’t know what they are going to cut and why. They are trying to keep shareholders happy. It is really, really scary (B18, interview, January 2011).

Meanwhile one sub-editor shared similar concerns about reporters being replaced by citizen journalists.

Whether we go down the route of not being journalists, I can see it happening and being filled with unpaid people writing stories. We will be run out of jobs. The quality would be much poorer I would imagine. They might be able to write well but a journalist is a journalist (B4, interview, January 2011).

The sports journalists at Bournemouth *Daily Echo* raised concerns about former sports stars replacing journalists as match commentators and competition from fans on reporting news stories.

At the ground the other week when the managerial situation was blowing there was supporters down there with iPhones and BlackBerrys, iPads and everything else and they were all posting on internet forums and their own blogs and all that, so we are down there competing with them on our blog and own website, trying to get it out first... So there was 50 supporters down there with equipment and it’s competing with them as well as the other media - social journalism, doesn’t make it easy for us anymore, everyone’s a journalist now (B14, interview, January 2011).

The issue was also a concern to department heads, with problematic instances already occurring. The head of content and multimedia (Andy Martin, interview, January 2011) gave an example of a councillor scooping the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*.

We had an issue the other day about a local councillor who has her own local blog/local news website in Boscombe. And she gets access to all press releases put out by the council. We made an enquiry about FibreCity which has been digging up the roads and work has stopped for the last four months because they haven’t got any money and there is an issue with the payment of contractors. We rang the council and said we wanted a statement on what you are doing about FibreCity. The council then put out a statement but they

put it out to all the councillors as well in the form of a press release and to us. And one of those councillors put it on her website.

Spectrum of roles

Although Figure 1 shows three distinct attitudes towards the broad role of the 21st century journalist for those who believe the role is changing it is less clear what it is changing to. As Neal Butterworth, editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, expresses above, journalists are still “learning all the time” (Butterworth, interview, January 2011) and working out what to do in the digital age.

Figure 2 indicates the responses given by interviewees about the role of the journalist within the content of Web 2.0. The results are displayed as a percentage of all the answers given and every response given by each interviewee was coded, rather than a dominant coding system being used. For *Leicester Mercury* journalists the biggest role was that of verification (44%) and “sorting the wheat from the chaff” (L16, interview, October 2010) in an environment where anyone can publish online and where there is information overload.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The second largest response (28%) was a mixture of different views which did not fall into one single category, therefore they were categorised as Other. These responses included the role of a journalist as a watchdog, analyser, filterer and quality controller. These could be interpreted as the traditional roles of a journalist being adapted to an online environment. A quarter (22%) of the responses from *Leicester Mercury* journalists included that the role of the journalist was to amplify information and spread it to a wider audience, having already built up a reputation for reliability over time.

The perception of the amplification role of journalists was much higher at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* making up 50 per cent of responses. This might have been due to the multiple social media platforms that the company utilised and its drive to build new audiences on new platforms via the appointment of a digital projects co-ordinator. Verification was also a fairly frequent response (30%) at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* along with Other (20%) which at this case study site was made up of the view that the modern role of a journalist was to be a digital storyteller.

Prior to the internet the role of the journalist was to let information through the gates and be a voice of authority. However the results of this paper indicate that in their modern guise local journalists recognise that they no longer hold the keys to the gate. Instead they believe that their role as verifiers of information who can spread quality, analytical content to a wide audience has actually been heightened.

The age of adaptation

As outlined above there is some reluctance amongst journalists to adapt to the changes brought about by Web 2.0. However the dominant responses given by journalists in interviews at the two case study websites indicate that the majority are willing to adapt (Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 80%, *Leicester Mercury* 67%) and it is the minority who are reluctant to change (Bournemouth *Daily Echo* 20%, *Leicester Mercury* 33%). Figures 3 and 4 display the percentage of journalists who fall into each viewpoint at each case study site.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Age did not appear to be a distinguishing factor which contradicted Robinson's 2010 research, as journalists in their fifties were eager to use new technology and open up audience participation and journalists in their twenties were reluctant to move beyond traditional norms and practices. Indeed many journalists recognised that although they had been reluctant to change in the beginning they were now changing their attitudes.

One reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in their early 30s admitted they had "come round full circle" (B14, interview, January 2010) and now liked interaction and were accepting of audience participation, viewing it as a "worthwhile thing". Furthermore a reporter in their thirties at the *Leicester Mercury* (L16) said they recognised that they were "not solely a print journalist" (L16, interview, October 2010). At both case study sites there was a sense that journalists were embracing and even relishing the changes to their roles. Richard Bettsworth, aged 45, deputy editor of the *Leicester Mercury* at the time of the study said it was important to embrace changes brought about by the internet.

I think there has been very much a culture historically in newspapers of we are the journalists...What I don't think is possible is to stick to the traditional newspaper model, it has changed already, (the model of) we are the guardians of all news. I don't think that is possible, I don't think that is a good thing. I think you have to embrace the things that develop and you have to provide the needs to allow people to have a say and participate and that is in general a good thing, I think it is a positive thing. I see the newspaper's role in facilitating it as providing space whether that is on the internet, whether that's in the newspaper (Bettsworth, interview, October 2010).

A reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in their forties said they had absolutely "revelled since the website came along" (B12, interview, January 2011) and enjoyed greater interaction with readers and instant feedback on stories. But despite the overall optimism there were still some staff members reluctant to change, particularly at the *Leicester Mercury*. At this case study site a third of editorial staff showed a reluctance to change, ranging from those in their twenties up to journalists in their fifties. One young reporter (L11) in their mid twenties was adamant that their job was writing for the newspaper and not creating content for the website, whilst an older member of staff made it clear that they were unhappy with recent changes brought about by online technology.

A newspaper is not a forum for anyone to write something down, it's not a website, it's a matter of record, a good one is well put together, well made, well thought through, legally correct, full of useful information, of course we make mistakes, of course we leave things out we shouldn't do but it isn't just a haphazard collection of thoughts from members of the public put into some sort of order... I don't think journalists are in such a hurry to rush to the public (L6, interview, October 2010).

Difficulty in changing mindsets

The reluctance to change amongst some staff was a source of frustration for other journalists as one rugby correspondent explained:

I get the piss taken out of me for being on Twitter by a lot of my colleagues. 'What are you doing wasting time on that thing again? What you tweeting about now?' And that's just one department, so there's a reluctance there because people don't understand it and it's not like it was in the old days and things have changed for the worse (L9, interview, October 2010).

This issue was also evident at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, particularly amongst more senior members of staff. The editor said the biggest obstacle to change was "changing people's mindsets" and making staff realise "just how important the digital offering is to the future of our business" (Butterworth, interview, January 2011). In particular it was an obstacle for the digital projects co-ordinator Sam Shepherd who was trying to promote audience participation and journalist interaction.

So there are some people who are always going to think that the internet is a pain in the neck and there are some people who are always going to think that because someone has contacted them on Facebook and said 'can you do a story about this' that they don't have to respond (Shepherd, interview, January 2011).

Even though, overall there was a sense that journalism was adapting and journalists were willing to make this transition, there was still a strong attitude at both sites that journalists needed to maintain a certain level of editorial control. At both newspapers 100 per cent of interviewees agreed that user generated content such as information, stories, photographs and videos should be moderated. It should be noted that comments were seen as a separate entity to user generated content being viewed by journalists as opinion rather than fact and the issues over moderation were complex. Some journalists held the rigid view that "if it is not moderated it's not a newspaper" (B10, interview, January 2011) and readers should not be "dictating what you put in your paper" (B15, January 2011). Another argued that the journalist always remained the authority on a subject.

We are finding this information out for their benefit on their behalf so we are wiser about issues than they are. So they are right to say to us you should be asking this question and we have the right to say I don't think that question is relevant. And they might not like that but it comes down to us at the end of the day, and down to the editor's choice (L1, interview, October 2010).

Despite a reluctance from some journalists to enable the public to set the agenda it was apparent during the observation period that on the case study websites this was happening to a certain extent. The news desk and web teams were aware of what stories were popular due to the number of views they received or the number of comments they attracted. Stories that scored highly in one or both of these areas were likely to be developed into follow up stories. A frequent remark from interviewees was that comments on stories were good feedback for indicating which stories were popular and for measuring public opinion on a subject, which in turn was a strong basis for more stories. One of the values of audience participation to journalists was the possibility of receiving instant feedback and creating follow-up content which had an in-built audience.

At the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* the digital projects co-ordinator, Sam Shepherd, responded directly to web analytics and would move stories around on the homepage accordingly. She would also constantly check the web statistics and was aware that internet readers were interested in different stories to newspaper readers, preferring hard news stories over human interest news. Popular online stories included those on the topic of cyclists, speed cameras and council spending. Sam Shepherd admitted that she also changed headlines in response to web analytics.

Sometimes the story will go up and it will have a certain headline on it and I'll notice that later in the day the subs have put a headline on it that doesn't really work and I change it to something else. And the difference between the number of people who look at it with the original headline and the people who look at it with the changed headline can be massive. So sometimes it's good for we know this is the angle that people are interested in, this is the angle on the headline they clicked on, whereas they're not interested in this angle because they didn't click on that, so it can be a good way of gauging interest (Shepherd, interview, January 2011).

This practice indicates that the public is influencing gatekeeping online and as Shoemaker and Vos (2009) propose audiences are acting as secondary gatekeepers, telling journalists via web analytics what stories are popular and in turn shaping journalistic decisions.

Distinguishing professional standards

During the semi-structured interview process it became apparent that a high proportion of journalists saw their role as being different from that of the work of citizen journalists. The researcher therefore asked each interviewee what distinguished them from a citizen journalist. Eight factors were identified by the interviewees and each factor was coded individually. Figure 5 shows the popularity of each factor as a percentage.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

At both case study sites the most frequent distinguishing factor identified was that of NCTJ training. This made up for a fifth of the responses at the *Leicester Mercury* (19%) and a third of responses at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (28%). Although journalism is not a profession requiring legal qualifications, journalists working in the local and regional press are expected to have passed the preliminary NCTJ exams. Therefore it is understandable that journalists working at the two case study sites would cite their NCTJ qualifications as a factor which One senior reporter at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* explained:

You have to go through a lot of training to become a journalist, you have to know a lot of law and ethics, it's not just about being able to point a camera at something or write something down (B9, interview, January 2011).

However should the same question have been asked of journalists working in the national press or within broadcast journalism the number one factor may have been different due to a different set of entry requirements and the lesser importance of NCTJ qualifications particularly to journalists employed more than 20 years ago when journalism training in further and higher education was less prevalent.

Other factors deemed significant to journalists at both case study sites included a robust understanding of media law. Indeed if Media Law as a factor was included within the Training category (as essential media law is one of the core NCTJ exams) this would make a total of 31 per cent of responses at the *Leicester Mercury* and 44 per cent at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. A further factor was the ability for journalists to report objectively. A comment made by journalists at both case study sites was that citizen journalists may have an axe to grind and therefore could not remain impartial.

The ability to produce quality content was also a prominent factor, particularly at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*. One reporter said “there is a perception that citizen journalist pictures are just as good but they are not” (B18, interview, January 2011), whilst a feature writer (B11) commented “everyone has a story to tell but I wouldn’t necessarily say that the lady next door will tell it in the best way” (B11, interview, January 2011). Criticisms were made about the way in which reader content was written and it was countered that it was a journalist’s job to turn such information into a structured news story.

Most of the time when it comes to the reporting of news events if they (the public) try and do the same (as journalists) they lack ages, they lack addresses. You will be confused about exactly what’s happened, there won’t be the context in it that we would be expected to provide in a news story, which is fair enough, I don’t expect people to write news reports for us (B10, interview, January 2011).

These opinions were reflected at the *Leicester Mercury* with journalists criticising citizen journalism as being of inferior quality whether it be text or photographic content. One senior reporter said: “The one thing I am not so keen on is if people think now they have got digital cameras anybody can take a picture, and they so can’t” (L12, interview, October 2010), whilst a department head insisted that the average reader “cannot write a piece for the paper, nor should they try” (L6, interview, October 2010). A comparison made by a number of journalists at the *Leicester Mercury* was that of the difference between a doctor and a journalist. The journalists argued that you would not want a citizen doctor to operate on you so why would you want a citizen journalist to report the news. The case was also made by some *Leicester Mercury* journalists that citizen journalists actually undermined democracy as they did not have the skills to hold public bodies to account. One department head lamented:

We might get to the point where the local newspaper closes down and the only people covering the local council might be a pair of twittery nutters...there will be no journalists and the council can get away with doing what they want without public scrutiny...democracy will be less effective (L6, interview, October 2010).

The fact that journalists themselves can be held accountable was also seen as a vital part of their role particularly at the *Leicester Mercury*. One reporter commented:

If I make a mistake 60,000 people will read about it and we will probably have a letter published about it in the paper and I might get a letter from a lawyer - I’m accountable. But I also think it’s about, that my job is to make sure other people are accountable and citizen journalists follow what stories they want

and although they might be accountable to the people who read their blog they are not accountable in the same way (L11, interview, October 2010).

The journalists at both case study sites held the view that this accountability also enabled them to have access to people and events, closed to the public due to the credibility that came with working for a traditional news organisations. Sports reporters had access to club players, managers and chairmen and general reporters had access to chief executives, spokespeople and public officials. One *Leicester Mercury* reporter explained:

The *Leicester Mercury* does carry a bit of weight with it with regard to trying to follow an issue whether it be through an MP, or a matter with the police or the health authority or the local education authority. And I think also it works, this may only be my perception, I think these organizations I think they are more likely to respond to dialogue with the *Leicester Mercury* than say somebody who is doing a blog or something like that. As an accredited newspaper and accredited journalists, I think it is incumbent on them to reply but I don't think it would be as much with a blogger or somebody trying to do their own thing, I think they could be fobbed off (L17, interview, October 2010).

These distinguishing factors may provide some explanation why 80 per cent of journalists at both case study sites did not feel their role was under threat. There was a sense that professional journalists and citizen journalists played different roles. A Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reporter said: "I don't think things like citizen journalism, blogs, whatever you like to call them, I don't think they are true competition as they are not in the same game at all" (B2, interview, January 2011). Meanwhile the picture editor at the *Leicester Mercury* described the two types of journalists as catering for different markets:

There is always going to be more than one market for more than one product and we're the John Lewis. And I would always expect my photographers to be producing the John Lewis picture and not the Poundland picture. If it's a Poundland picture it gets rejected and it doesn't go in (L2, interview, October 2010).

However there was one lone voice from a single reporter at each of the case study sites. A *Leicester Mercury* reporter disputed that there was any difference between a professional journalist and a citizen journalist other than one was paid and one was a volunteer:

In terms of skills if they have picked up shorthand and have a copy of McNaes (media law book) and they can write alright there is no kind of difference between the two...I think we are very similar (L10, interview, October 2010).

Meanwhile a Bournemouth *Daily Echo* reporter (B3) appeared to be unable to decide whether there was a difference between herself and a citizen journalist:

I don't know really. Do they get paid? They might be qualified so I guess there is no difference. And is there a difference even if they aren't qualified? I don't know (B3, interview, January 2011).

The results would indicate that the vast majority of journalists at these two newspaper perceive themselves as having a distinct set of practices which distinguish them from others, including those referred to as citizen journalists.

Discussion

As the literature indicates the role of the journalist is changing and this is reflected in data collected via interviews and observation in this study. Web 2.0 is impacting on journalists by forcing them to adapt in order to survive, compete economically, and to reconsider how to best maintain a relevant, reliable service for the public. Singer (2001, 1997) refers to contemporary journalists as information sensemakers and Charman (2007) talks of information curators, whilst Bruno (2011) points towards the role of verification. All of these interpretations acknowledge that journalists are no longer solely the gatekeepers of information but have a role in sifting through an increasing amount of information which is often already in the public domain, reshaping it into accurate, objective accounts and publishing or broadcasting it to a wider audience. This paper indicates that within local British newspapers the two key functions of a modern journalist are to act as verifiers and amplifiers of information. In doing this, journalists are able to fulfil their traditional roles of acting as watchdogs, quality controllers, analysers and storytellers, while using the tools of modern technology. There is less evidence to suggest that the role of the journalist within Web 2.0 is to shape larger conversations as suggested by Gillmor (2006) and this may be due to journalists concentrating instead on striving to maintain some editorial control and act as gatekeepers of accurate, quality information.

The research also suggests that journalists do have differing opinions and tend to fall into three camps which are positive, neutral and negative. As Singer *et al* (2011), Robinson (2010) and Chung (2007) suggest there are those journalists who are willing to embrace change and those clinging onto their traditional role. Singer *et al* also suggests a third group which sits somewhere between the two and make up the largest proportion of journalists. However within this study the largest camp is the embracers who accept that their role is adapting (positive camp); followed by the traditionalists (neutral camp). The third party is made up of those who feel their role is under threat and may become redundant in the future (negative camp). Although this makes up less than a fifth of journalists it is a significant finding since it is not in evidence in other empirical research. This may be due to the fact that local journalism in Britain is facing more severe financial problems and job losses than its national and international counterparts on which much other research is based. Another noteworthy finding is that contrary to Robinson's (2010) research of American newspapers which found age to be a factor, this research found that age and time in the industry did not correlate to attitude. Traditionalists were found amongst all age groups, as were adapters, whether they had worked in the industry for a year or 30 years. The data also suggests that the level of reluctance to change was minimal and at least two thirds of staff were willing to adapt and indeed many were excited by the potential to open up audience participation.

The results indicate that the majority of journalists at the two case study sites portrayed themselves as embracing changes to their role and that they welcomed audience participation. Yet most journalists viewed this participation as something

which should happen within the confines of editorial control, with the newspaper verifying and selecting purposeful content. Therefore although journalists in theory were accepting of the changing nature of their gatekeeping role, in practice they tended to hold onto traditional claims of authority. This position was based on the belief that the role of the journalist contained professional traits and procedures which were not adhered to by the public acting as citizen journalists. However rather than these factors implying they were unable to accept changes to their gatekeeping role as suggested by Robinson (2010), Singer (2009) and Chung (2007), it appeared that they heightened their modern, adapted role as verifiers and amplifiers of information within the Web 2.0 environment. The journalists in this research distinguished themselves from citizen journalists by holding claim to a range of skills and standards that in their view identified them as professionals. The eight professional traits were: training, media law, quality, objectivity, trust, accountability, accuracy and access. In particular accountability, accuracy and objectivity mirror the traits of scrutiny (McQuail, 2005), truth seeking (Donsbach, 2010) and objectivity (Deuze, 2005). Furthermore access, quality, media law and training correspond with Örnebring's (2010) notion of journalism as a profession with a special body of knowledge, skills and expertise. Meanwhile trust could be understood to fall under Örnebring's (2010) category of autonomy which requires minimal external influence. However the most important factor identified by journalists was training which is unique to the culture of local British newspapers because it relies heavily on NCTJ qualifications as an entry requirement and these qualifications are now incorporated into many undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. This supports the view of Örnebring (2010) that journalism requires a specialist body of knowledge gained through education and this is increasingly being provided by higher education institutions.

Although in summary it could be said that the impact on the role of journalists as gatekeepers is one of redefinition rather than revolution, more striking changes are happening in the presentation of news on newspaper websites. As some scholars make the case (Anderson, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Örnebring, 2010a; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) the growth of web analytics is influencing news selection online. There was evidence of secondary gatekeeping, as outlined by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), at both of then newspaper websites particularly the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* which was more website orientated than the *Leicester Mercury*. This is likely to increase further in the future particularly in light of the strong economic factors driving online development in newspaper companies. Stories are being selected and placed higher or lower on the agenda according to audience response to those stories, whether it be through passively viewing them, or actively sharing or participating in them. Audience participation could therefore be said to be partially setting the agenda online and disrupting the gatekeepers' selection process. However this does not necessarily lead to an increase in sensationalised or soft news as Örnebring (2010) suggests, as the findings are more in line with those of Shoemaker *et al* (2008) who found that audiences tend to select stories of an unusual nature or those focused on public welfare.

Conclusion

This paper has identified that the role of the journalist as gatekeeper is being subtly redefined due to the impact of Web 2.0 but the traditional skills of a journalist still remain relevant and perhaps even more important than ever before. Although journalists are no longer gatekeepers of information or even news selection they remain the largest and loudest gatekeepers of credible and verifiable news. Furthermore journalists at the foundation of the news pyramid identify their professionalism as interchangeable with NCTJ qualifications, emphasising the vital role these historic examinations still play in role perceptions.

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Figure 1: Attitudes towards current role of journalists

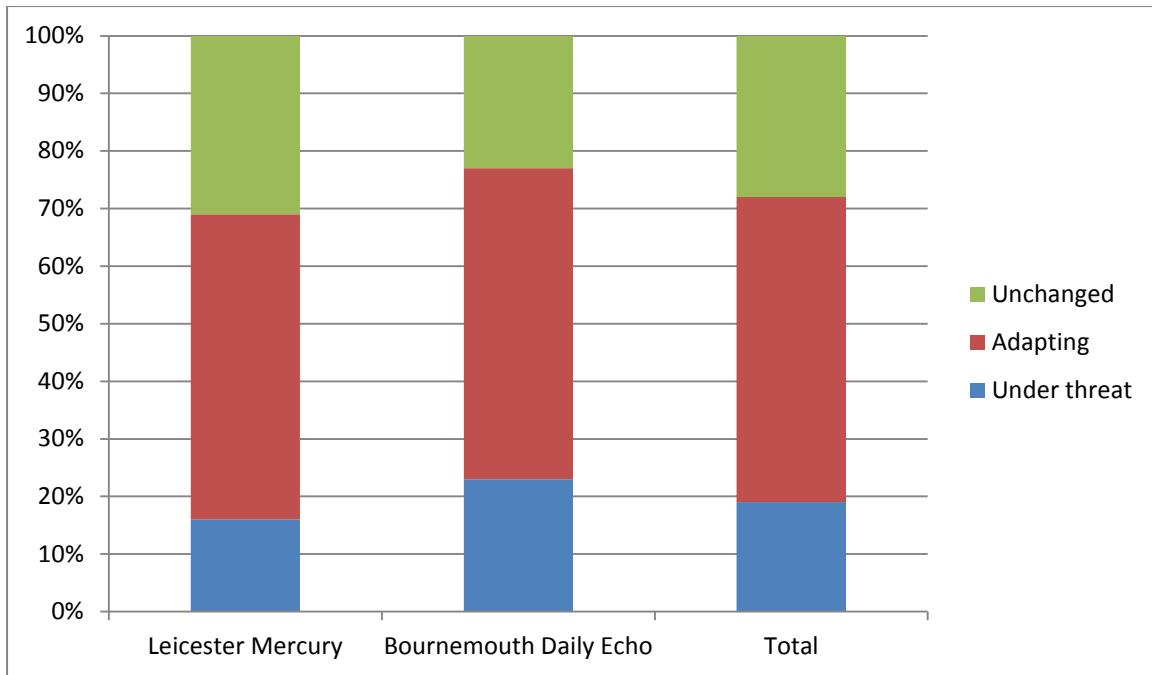


Figure 2: Role of journalists within the context of Web 2.0

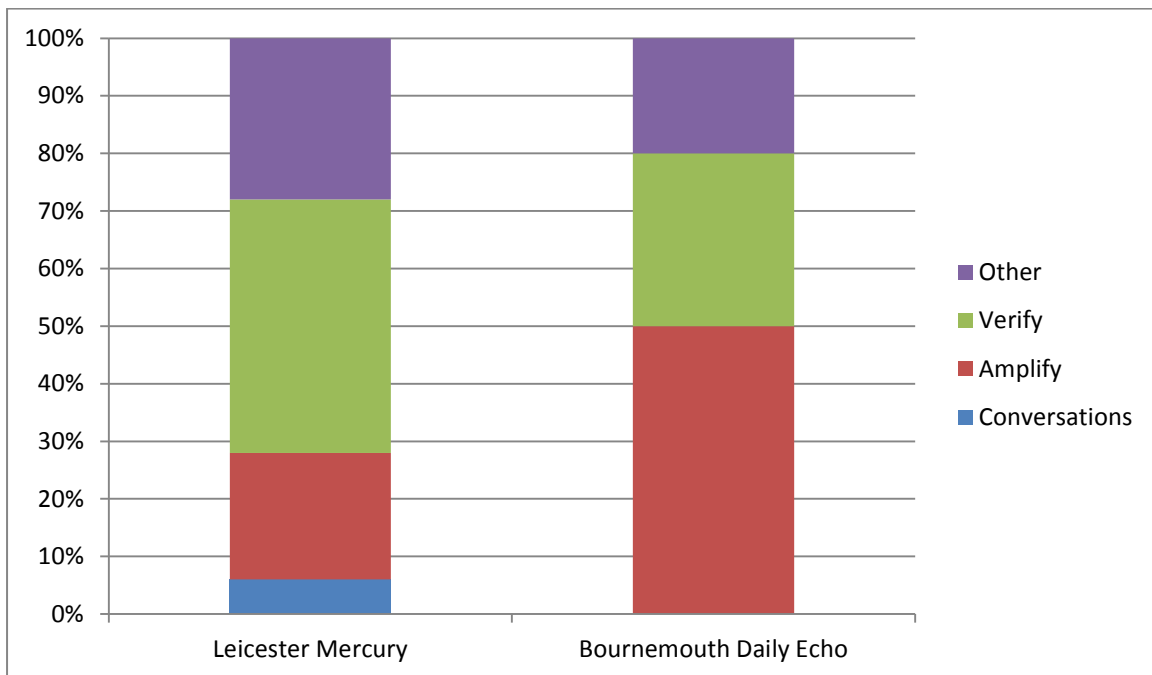


Figure 3: Bournemouth *Daily Echo* willingness or reluctance to change

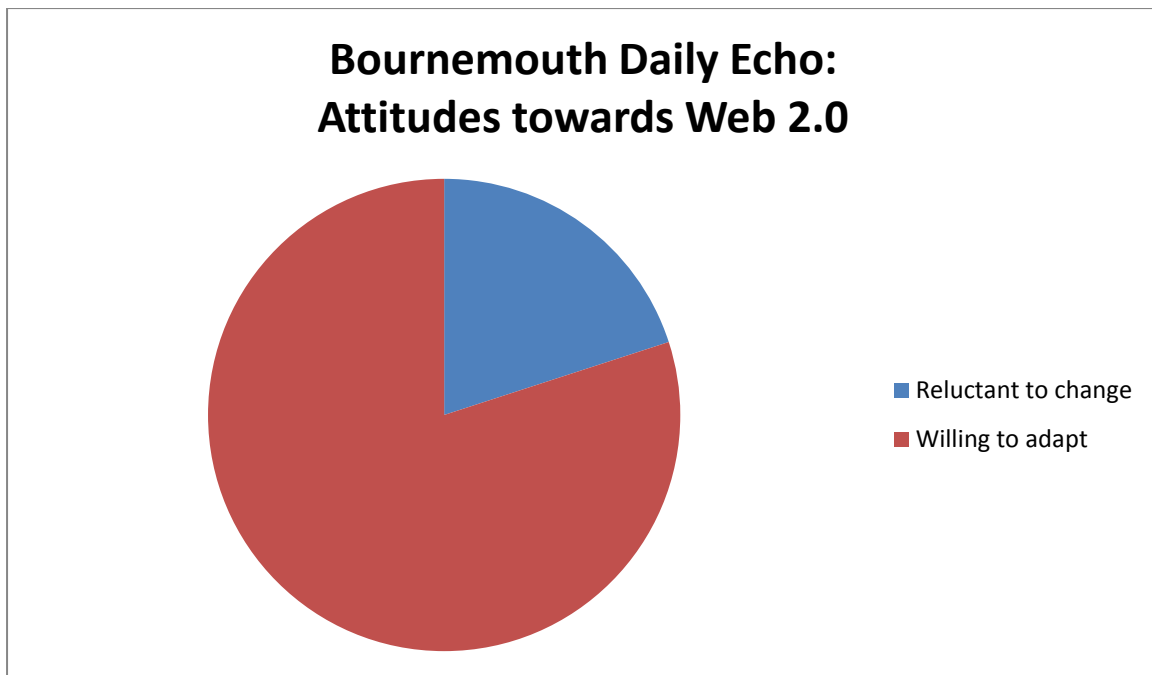


Figure 4: *Leicester Mercury* willingness or reluctance to change

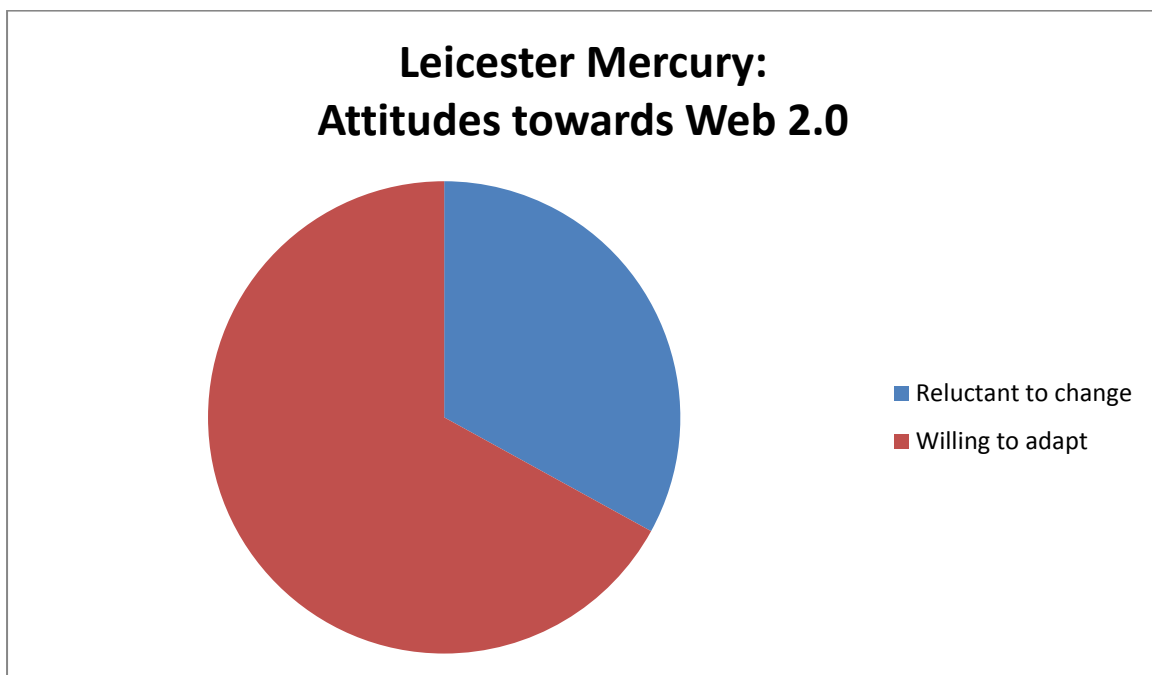


Figure 5: Distinguishing factors between professional journalists and citizen journalists

