5

Open-Endedness in Story Development

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Journalists can never fully predict how stories will develop. Events take unexpected turns, and people who seem to be insignificant figures create turning points in history. Still, the patterns of story development show similarity over time: Stories filled with conflict, compelling people, or high impact on audiences endure and carry continuing interest. But as the practice of journalism has grown and changed thanks to online journalism, the way stories develop has become more complex and more dependent on the participation of members of the public.

This chapter will:

- Examine features of excellence through which journalists are making the most of the open-ended possibilities in online story development. Examples from online news organizations will show what strong work looks like as it develops over the life span of the story, often with contributions from the public.

- Consider the importance of both critical judgment by journalists about user-generated content (UGC) and openness to what the

public can bring to light with cell phone cameras and social media like Twitter.

- Look at personal qualities of journalists needed to do excellent work in this fast-changing environment.

- Profile a social media editor on the job to show how he dealt with a major developing story.

- Again use MacIntyre's (2007) theory of a practice to help shed light on the dynamic of excellence and the challenges to excellence.

The issues in this chapter overlap with the ones in the previous two chapters, but the focus here is on what happens to stories over their full life span, not just as they are breaking or at a snapshot in time, and on how contributions of users become an integral part of the story.

❖ EXCELLENCE IN STORY DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

The continuing story is a well-developed tradition in old media. The story might be the aftermath of a jet crash with rescue, grieving, and investigation or a landmark election with anniversaries as natural points to keep reflecting back on its meaning. Or it might be a victory or tragedy in sports. But in online journalism, stories can develop in a more open-ended manner than they did in old media. It is much easier to add and modify pieces over the life of the story. The pieces can come in all of the forms of old media (text stories, photos, video, audio) plus some new or modified ones (interactive graphics, blogs, tweets). Journalists can mix and match those forms in a huge number of combinations. It is also much easier to draw in the public's accounts, opinions, and images in large numbers—and public contributions have become a normal part of online stories. Public contributions may provide a lot of new information that sends the story in new directions as reporters or other people dig deeper. Or the public may offer opinions and reaction rather than facts, or may react little and bring the story to a close. Journalists may keep gathering news aggressively themselves, or they may write only the first chapter and leave the public with unanswered questions. In both form and content, how a story will evolve and for how long are less predictable than they were in old media.

The difference between old and new media in this area is partly a matter of degree rather than substance because new communication technologies—such as texting, cell phone video, and Twitter—are sources of content that can also feed old media. For example, still images from

citizen video can be used in print or on television. But the combination of the qualities of the medium and the online culture's openness to public contributions makes for a substantive difference in how central the role of content from the public is.

Although the online medium is conducive to this open-ended development, this aspect of journalistic practice means not just recognizing the possibilities but also harnessing them to their full potential with careful scrutiny. The interviews with journalists point to three features of excellent work related to this aspect of online journalism:

- Pursuing story development in multiple stages that are in line with the life span of a story.

- Treating public contributions as integral, not peripheral, to the storytelling.

- Keeping a critical eye on user contributions while at the same time respecting the public's sophistication and ability.

This section will look at these three features, with thoughts from journalists and examples.

Multiple Stages in Line With Life Span

Some events merit attention for only a short time; others justify longer-term work. Paul Compton, creative director for washingtonpost.com, calls the difference a matter of "life span" and says online journalists need to develop stories in stages accordingly.

> On the web we think in terms of things in stages, and when you do that you have to think about: What's the life span of this story? Is this something that's going to come and go and then people are going to forget about tomorrow? Or . . . this is going to be most likely a major event that's going to be followed for weeks or months?

If the story is likely to draw long-term interest, he says, "You start to think of things at more incremental levels and how you're going to build it deeper and deeper." So depending on the life span of the story, online journalists may produce a quick, simple presentation in a stage or two, or keep building out to more. Part of excellent work online is discerning the number of stages appropriate to each story. It also means timing the stages in a way that serves the audience in both the short term and the long term—neither putting off the initial reporting too long nor dropping the longer-term development.

The judgments needed are different from what they are in the world of print journalism. As Compton notes, print journalism often means presenting things in one shot. There might be several elements in the presentation—such as a text story, photos, and graphics—but what might make up multiple stages online may appear together in print. Big stories in newspapers may also roll out in stages—with a "first day" treatment focusing on the event and subsequent days' reports focusing on reaction or investigation (as with a plane crash, for example). But online journalism is more conducive to numerous stages timed more closely to the story and the needs of the audience.

For *The Washington Post,* the inauguration of Barack Obama was a major story appropriately covered in several stages online because of its historical importance and its location in Washington, D.C. (see Inauguration Central, 2009).

Compton says it was important to get a gateway page for inauguration material up early to help drive search traffic to the site. The focus of content in the early stage was logistical details such as road closings and what events would occur when.

Pre-designing elements of web presentation helped to smooth out preparation for Inauguration Day itself. That day alone was broken into several stages including the swearing in, the parade, and the evening activities. For Inauguration Day coverage, the organization drew on the resources not only of its staff but also of members of the public. The *Post* enabled people to submit content such as photos from the Mall, where the inauguration took place—trying to make the most of the vantage points of people who were there.

The next day was a kind of stage of its own, with the launch of what Compton calls some of the best material that took time to assemble, such as video that was carefully edited.

The site continued running related news stories in the days after the event. But once the media coverage of the day was past, Compton says, the focus turned to archiving material so users could find it easily in the future. He draws a parallel to the site's treatment of the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration, in which the *Post*'s newspaper coverage had been crucial, and the more recent development when the identity of the anonymous source Deep Throat was made public.

> Some content that we have kind of lives on our site. Like we have a Watergate section, and that's something that will live forever on the *Post* site, because there are always going to be people who want to see what we have on Watergate, but not much is happening with it anymore. When Deep Throat was revealed, that kind of came back up

in the news again. The inauguration will be continuously on our site and will be available, but we probably won't put too much effort into it anymore.

The inauguration coverage, then, played out in the days leading up to Inauguration Day itself, intensified on the day of it and the following, and lived on long-term as a historic event for which the *Post* had a close-up view. The multiple stages were appropriate to the story and its significance to the site's local and national audiences. The timing of the stages served both the short-term and long-term interests of the audience because early reporting of practical details helped people leading up to the event and long-term life for the coverage satisfied later, more historical interest.

Stories that deserve shorter life spans are more numerous than ones with great long-term historical value, though many stories in particular communities retain that kind of importance for those local areas. Pieces on a huge range of topics, from thunderstorm damage reports to restaurant reviews, may go out of date quickly but not be major enough to deserve updating or a new story.

Public Contributions Are Integral

A second aspect of excellence in story development involves valuing contributions from the public as central to storytelling, not secondary. Journalists have long relied on eyewitness accounts and public reaction as they have told stories, but in online journalism public accounts and reaction often take a larger place—alongside the contributions of journalists or even sometimes in place of them.

Photo 5.1   Elizabeth Chuck, social media and breaking news editor for msnbc.com, points out that public contributions can expand the reach of news organizations' coverage.

Elizabeth Chuck, social media and breaking news editor for msnbc.com, points to the value that UGC can add to news coverage.

After singer Michael Jackson died, she spent part of her time updating a gallery of photos that users had sent from memorials around the world. (The gallery is no longer on the site.) Reflecting on what the photos as UGC contributed to the storytelling, Chuck says:

> The advantage to showing UGC is that our audience is always places that we're not going to be. We have correspondents and journalists around the world, but they're not necessarily taking pictures of those Michael Jackson memorials. They're not necessarily there, and they're not able to give these first-person accounts of what it's like to be there. So, I think that, just in terms of being able to offer a wider range of coverage—even if it's with the understanding that it's not coming from a professional, that it's coming from someone who's experiencing it as a real, normal person—it expands the reach of where our coverage is coming from.

Sometimes, then, members of the public who are present can provide images that journalists cannot and advance knowledge of the story. Excellence in journalistic practice online means making the most of what members of the public know.

Public contributions have gained a great deal of attention in the past several years in coverage of a number of other high-profile stories. A look at several of these shows the evolution of news organizations' interest in them and use of them, as well as the evolution of the tools that power them including camera phones and social media.

London terrorist bombings, 2005

On July 7, 2005, four suicide bombers launched attacks that killed 52 people and injured hundreds more in London, England. The day of the attacks, cell phones "turned members of the public into reporters and camera crews," as a BBC story put it (Douglas, 2005). Gripping images, both still photos and video, showed blurry scenes from inside the subway. ("Video of Survivors' Accounts," 2008, includes both still and video images.) One photo from the phone of a trapped passenger (BBC News, n.d.) showed the door of the crowded subway car pried open to help clear smoky air (Noguchi, 2005).

Within an hour of the first bomb, the BBC received 50 pictures from the public. "By the weekend it had 1,000 images and dozens of video clips sent by e-mail and direct from mobile phones" (Douglas, 2005). Images from the public showed up on television and on websites across the world.

Screenshot 5.1   This photo from the phone of a passenger trapped in a subway car, shown on the BBC's website, helped to tell the story of the London bombings in 2005. It is an early example of the power of images from members of the public during a developing story.

The images added greatly to the telling of the story because members of the public could be where journalists could not, unless they happened to be in the subway themselves. They enabled both journalists and others to gain a deeper sense of the atmosphere underground and consequently the impact of the attacks on the people who were in the middle of them. Public contributions also added images to some news organizations' work as the story developed later. When suspects were arrested, members of the public were ready with phones or DV cameras to capture images of the arrests (Douglas, 2005).

Virginia Tech shootings, 2007

On April 16, 2007, a gunman killed 32 students and faculty members before killing himself on the campus of Virginia Tech. This time, cell phone images helped to tell the story again, but social media including Facebook also played a huge role.

Jamal Albarghouti, a Virginia Tech graduate student, captured video on his cell phone with sounds of gunfire and images of police rushing to Norris Hall, site of the second round of shooting. He submitted his video to CNN's iReport site for user-generated contributions ("Student Shot Video," 2007). As with the London subway images from people's

phones, his video captured a dramatic segment of the developing story that journalists were not on hand to see. And cell phone video from others went up on Flickr and YouTube (Stabe, 2007).

Some students posted on blogs, but they also took advantage of newer means to share information including MySpace and Facebook (Stabe, 2007). A blog tracking the use of social media and searching had this to say later in the day of the shootings:

> Students are using Facebook as a way to share information about students hit, the delayed response of campus officials, misinformation reported by FOX news, and the identity of the shooter. As such, social media sites have become a visible first source of information for journalists. You can see journalists from CBC, NPR, NBC, and more reaching out to students in the comments fields of posts and in Facebook forums. (Zimmermann, 2007)

Thanks to social media, students were able to bypass mainstream media coverage and find out from one another what was happening—and to mourn. But journalists' efforts to work through them on Facebook to develop stories created some resentment (Stabe, 2007). Journalists' experiences trying to develop stories through sensitive students via social media highlighted the need to exercise care in making connections for stories that way.

Iranian election protests, 2009

In June 2009, a disputed presidential election in Iran brought protesters into the streets in a bold challenge to the Islamic Shiite regime (Iran, 2009). The world saw and heard much of this story through text and video communicated first through social media—Facebook and YouTube but particularly this time Twitter. As an article on NYTimes.com put it a few days after the election:

> On Twitter, reports and links to photos from a peaceful mass march through Tehran on Monday, along with accounts of street fighting and casualties around the country, have become the most popular topic on the service worldwide, according to Twitter's published statistics. (Stone & Cohen, 2009)

The number of journalists who could report independently inside Iran was small, and the government was determined to suppress reports from witnesses. Twitter proved to be an ideal tool for protesters because they could push out messages quickly in the 140-character format.

As with the Virginia Tech shootings, many people learned details directly from witnesses or others nearby using social media and bypassing professional journalists. But while the situation in Blacksburg, Virginia, became clearer as journalists did their own reporting, the situation in Tehran remained murky because so few journalists could be on the scene. As a result, fragments of information from social media remained central as journalists tried to develop the story and present it to their readers. (The boxed feature "Striking a Balance" later in this chapter looks at how the *Times* news blog The Lede handled public contributions from Iran in this situation, in which verification was extremely difficult.)

It was clear by 2009 that technology such as cell phone cameras and social media in the hands of citizens could bring powerful added perspective to stories developing both in the United States and internationally. Thoughtful journalists showed excellence in using public contributions to flesh out details, angles, and reactions in reporting. At their best, these contributions multiply the opportunities for eyewitness accounts. That reality was also evident in the coverage of the crash landing of the jet in the Hudson River, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Critical Eye, Respect for the Public

In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) placed "the discipline of verification" at the heart of journalism. It is, they argued, "what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction, or art" (p. 79). Developing stories from London, Blacksburg, and Tehran—and thousands of other stories across the world—are filled with complexities and uncertainty. It is hard for journalists to verify conflicting accounts and details, and speculation is difficult to sort through. Even beyond the breaking news phase, events and their causes can prove hard to understand. Now that journalists have access to a much larger number of public contributions, they have more sources to learn from or share as independent perspectives. But the need to verify does not go away because important stories still create a need for reliable information. The need to verify, combined with the potential benefit of public contributions, points to a third element of excellence in online story development: maintaining a critical eye on user contributions while also respecting the sophistication of the public. In the common terminology of journalistic tradition, that critical eye is editorial judgment.

Apart from the normal difficulties in verification, content submitted electronically poses problems because it is so easy for people to copy and digitally manipulate images and hard to track sources of words and images clearly. Failure to critically evaluate user contributions can have

high stakes, apart from the cost in credibility to news organizations. CNN's iReport site, the same place where a worldwide audience saw cell phone video from the scene of Virginia Tech in 2007, distributed a false report in October 2008:

> Steve Jobs was rushed to the ER just a few hours ago after suffering a major heart attack. I have an insider who tells me that paramedics were called after Steve claimed to be suffering from severe chest pains and shortness of breath. My source has opted to remain anonymous, but he is quite reliable. I haven't seen anything about this anywhere else yet, and as of right now, I have no further information, so I thought this would be a good place to start. If anyone else has more information, please share it. (Quoted in Krazit, 2008)

Apple, which confirmed that the report was false, saw its stock drop as much as 5.4% on the day of the posting. Losses in the first hour of trading reduced the company's market value by at least $4.8 billion, though the denial helped shares to recover ("Steve Jobs Suffering Nutritional Ailment," 2009). The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission took the matter seriously enough to investigate.

CNN said this on the site:

> iReport.com is an entirely user-generated site where the content is determined by the community. Content that does not comply with Community Guidelines will be removed. After the content in question was uploaded to iReport.com, the community brought it to our attention. Based on our Terms of Use that govern user behavior on iReport.com, the fraudulent content was removed from the site and the user's account was disabled. (Quoted in Kafka, 2008)

CNN made clear that this site operated differently from CNN proper, but this embarrassing mistake on something that could have been checked highlights the tension between welcoming user content as a news organization and questioning it. The long-held standards of journalism would call for checking, but that stands in tension with letting users freely contribute. CNN now flags content on the site that it has vetted to distinguish it from what it has not.

For some stories, numerous public contributions may be available but may be difficult or impossible to verify. The shootings in November 2009 at Fort Hood, Texas, that killed 13 people are an example because in the early stage of the story, the fort was locked down. In that case, social media added to reporting, but the focus in news organizations'

best early use of social media was on material from journalists and official sources. (The on-the-job profile at the end of this chapter shows how the social media editor at the web operation of the *Austin American-Statesman* used a Twitter feed to help tell the story both as it broke and in the following days.)

Covering the Iranian election protests presented days' worth of challenges to reporters and editors trying to verify what was happening and piece together the bigger picture. The *Times* reflected the difficulty in a story of its own about the decision by it and other news organizations including *The Huffington Post* and *The Guardian* in London to use blogs to present outside contributions including videos and tweets (Stelter, 2009). The headline: "Journalism Rules Are Bent in News Coverage From Iran."

STRIKING A BALANCE: SIFTING ACCOUNTS OF IRANIAN PROTESTS

The coverage of the Iranian election protests on the *Times*' news blog The Lede offers an interesting window on the ethical dilemma of how to use potentially powerful public contributions in a story where it may be difficult or impossible to follow conventional journalistic standards of verification.

The blog tracks top stories on a given day using a combination of material from *Times* journalists, other media sources, and readers as presented by reporter Robert Mackey. On June 22, 2009, 10 days after the election, the blog was filled with posts about the protests and related news as the story continued to develop. The top of the blog said the purpose was to "supplement reporting by *New York Times* journalists inside Iran" (Mackey, 2009).

Much of that supplementing came through social media. For example, this post introduces a video:

Update | 2:06 p.m. A reader sends us a link to this video, which was uploaded to YouTube today, and is said to show Iranian security forces near Haft-e-Tehran Square massing and then confronting protesters on Monday.

The wording makes clear how the *Times* blog got the video, and it hedges the description of its content by saying it "is said to show" security forces facing off against protesters.

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Another post drew on an Iranian blogger as a source, a blogger who had in turn used a Twitter-related site to post a photo. Again the wording is hedged to say "what he says" the photo shows.

Update | 11:10 a.m. An Iranian blogger has uploaded to TwitPic what he says is a photograph of the grave of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was shot and killed on Saturday in Tehran. As we've reported over the past two days, the graphic video of the woman identified as Ms. Agha-Soltan, bleeding and in agony after being shot, has circulated widely online in the past 48 hours.

The photograph carries the caption: "NEDA sleep here."

Another post to The Lede included details from a Twitter feed but also from reporting attributed to news agencies.

Update | 10:58 a.m. A Twitter feed attributed to Mojtaba Samienejad, an Iranian blogger who has been detained in the past, reported about 20 minutes ago that a memorial for those killed on Saturday, including Neda Agha-Soltan, did take place on Monday in Tehran:

Conflict in Hafte Tir Sq between people and Basij and police

People are gathered for Neda Agha Soltan's mourning / in Hftetir SQ

in all buildings in Hafte Tir , Poice with gun are staying

Reuters reported earlier that about 1,000 people had gathered in Tehran, possibly for this memorial. According to a later brief report from A.P., police used tear gas and shots fired in the air to disperse protesters.

In this case, then, the blog used wire coverage to corroborate the tweets attributed to an Iranian source. For another piece of the day's news, Mackey directly solicited help from readers, then used it to confirm a detail of geography.

Update | 3:25 p.m. Thanks to all the other readers who wrote in to help us understand where in Tehran the video we embedded in our 2:06 p.m. update was shot. It is clear that the Sharoudi Sports

Complex, shown in the video, is very close to Haf-e-Tir Square, where an opposition rally was broken up on Monday. We have added a Google map to the 2:06 p.m. update below to give a better sense of the geography.

With this interaction, the *Times* was also able to add a map—again, not its own—showing the proper location.

By another assessment on the *Times'* own site, this kind of reporting "bent" the rules of journalism (Stelter, 2009). Did it bend them too far?

From the standpoint of deontological, or duty-based, ethics, the decision involves considering ethical responsibilities that may be relevant, such as the four from the Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics: seeking truth, minimizing harm, acting independently, and being accountable (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

- The blog went farther out on a limb with truth than normal reporting by posting material that is unconfirmed, so it is possible that some of the video or tweets were not true. But Mackey used attribution and qualified wording to make clear to readers when they were not verified. He also sought truth by asking readers to help confirm the location of the video posted at 2:06.

- Minimizing harm is difficult to sort out in this case. It is possible that by helping to alert the world further with the carefully presented information about the plight of protesters, the blog may have helped rally public and government opposition in countries outside Iran. But that is difficult to determine because so much of the story was spreading by social media independent of news organizations.

- The *Times* was acting independently by not simply taking video and text from contributors uncritically but trying to make clear what was confirmed and unconfirmed and using multiple sources to try to corroborate the facts.

- The Lede showed accountability to the public by acknowledging clearly where information was coming from.

From the perspective of virtue ethics:

- The details of this coverage on The Lede show initiative to go beyond traditional journalistic sources but not to go too far and

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embrace them without questioning. The kind of initiative shown represents a mean, in Aristotle's thinking, between deficiency and excess.[1] The appeal to readers for verification shows initiative to try to make sure things are right.

- The honesty that Mackey showed about what is known and unknown also supports this decision from a virtue perspective.

- And on a story that played out over many days, with many fragments of unconfirmed information, sticking to a careful presentation and dialogue with the audience showed perseverance.

User contributions can create a number of pitfalls for online operations, legal as well as ethical. So editorial judgment is essential not only to maintaining journalistic quality but also to avoiding legal fallout. (This discussion does not provide a complete legal overview but touches on two key issues for online journalists. For more information, see the Citizen Media Law Project website, www.citmedialaw.org.)

Online journalists are subject to legal action for libel if they make false and damaging statements in their own work on the sites. But when it comes to contributions from users, they have greater legal protection. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (1996) provides broad immunity from liability for third-party material. The immunity remains even if someone at an online site, including a blog or forum, edits this content as long as the editing does not substantially change the meaning. Editing that makes the content defamatory does make the editor responsible, and the legal protection does not apply to any commentary the editor adds to the UGC ("Publishing the Statements and Content of Others," 2009).

UGC can also create problems with copyright for online news sites. But again, federal law provides some protection. Section 512 of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998) provides "safe harbor" provisions against copyright infringement, one of which involves user-contributed creative materials such as photos or audio files. The law provides for protection from liability if the site has effective "notice-and-takedown" procedures, did not know the material was infringing,

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[1]See Patterson & Wilkins (2008), for a discussion of Aristotle's Golden Mean and its relationship to journalism.

and removes it quickly when a copyright owner gives notice of the infringement ("Protecting Yourself Against Copyright Claims Based on User Content," 2009).

Online journalists have to stay alert to the possibility that users may have lifted content from other sites simply because it is so easy to do. Elizabeth Chuck described an incident at msnbc.com that points up this danger:

> We did have a situation where we got a photo sent in that turned out to be a blatant rip-off from another site, and the user had literally cropped out the copyright from the bottom of the photo, and I think that this is something that sites across the country that are getting user-generated content will have to check for.

Apart from legal concerns, there may be other concerns to think about related to the motives of the person posting the material. Chuck recalled another photo she encountered during the Democratic presidential primary campaign in 2007. Her organization had asked users to send in photos they had taken of candidates. They received one beautiful photo from an Obama campaign event.

> It was Obama, you could see his head and he was smiling and he was reaching out to a crowd of supporters, and there were all these hands— white hands, African American hands—all these arms reaching out to him, and somewhere in the back of the photo in the background there was a supporter holding up a sign that said "Hope."

The photo was so good that she looked up the contributor online and found a site about his work as a freelance journalist. She said that created an ethical dilemma for her. Her questioning led to managers' decision not to use the photo to avoid providing a platform for advertising.

For large sites, the sheer volume of contributions related to news events can be difficult to manage. Tom Brew, deputy editor for distribution at msnbc.com, said one solicitation of user contributions during the presidential election campaign brought about 6,000 responses.

Given all of these difficulties, it is impossible to maintain a standard of excellence in online story development without a critical perspective on user contributions. But at the same time, making the most of what the public can contribute implies an attitude of respect for people's sophistication and ability. Rex Sorgatz, who was executive producer for msnbc.com before leaving to work independently, put his perspective bluntly:

> The public isn't as dumb as we think, as ethics people like to think they are. When I click on a link on a news site and I go to something that has a purple and green header and has 80-point type and is screaming at you, people are knowledgeable enough and have enough media savvy. . . . They understand that I'm now in a different environment—that the information is disputable, too. . . . People who like to point at Wikipedia and say that information is invalid or is potentially invalid are people who are implicitly being condescending to the public, who also understand the same thing that they do. When you're reading those kinds of things you go into it understanding where it's coming from, and so I think that the public is more smart about how this works than people think they are.

Making the most of the open-ended capacity of online storytelling fundamentally means regarding what the public can contribute as valuable. Underlying this perspective is the kind of attitude Sorgatz argues for, respecting the ability of members of the public themselves to maintain an appropriately skeptical stance toward information that comes to them from nonjournalists. This perspective doesn't fit comfortably with traditional views of journalistic practice that expect journalists to be more skeptical than the general public and that call the work of nonjournalists into question.

❖ THE DYNAMIC OF EXCELLENCE

MacIntyre's (2007) theory of a practice again offers a way to step back and look at the impact, real and potential, of developing standards of excellence. The elements of open-ended journalism described in this chapter promise to achieve internal goods and reshape the standard of excellence in the practice of journalism. But it is important to consider this potential with a careful understanding of the place of the public in this view of journalistic excellence. In the pursuit of a standard of excellence that acknowledges the open-endedness of online story development, the maximum potential for achieving excellence comes only if both a critical eye and respect for the public are maintained.

That is a hard balance to achieve. Lurking in the background of online journalism is an ongoing tension between traditional views of reporting information that put the journalist at the center and a fully "open-source" perspective followed by sites such as Wikipedia and its journalistic offshoot, Wikinews. Wiki approaches put users at the center and rely on them to produce and edit content. Many journalists are

highly skeptical of the accuracy of information reported on Wikipedia (Shaw, 2008). Wikipedia itself acknowledges the limitations of its accuracy: "It is in the nature of an ever-changing work like Wikipedia that, while some articles are of the highest quality of scholarship, others are admittedly complete rubbish" ("Wikipedia: Ten Things You May Not Know," 2010).

A careful articulation of standards of online journalism is sensitive to the traditions of the broader practice of journalism but also to the central role of the public. This nuanced perspective means not going all the way to reliance on public contributions, as Wikipedia does, but also embracing the value of public contributions and the intelligence of the public. In MacIntyre's (2007) perspective, though, there remains a distinction between the journalist evaluating and using public contributions and the contributor who may follow journalistic standards but may or may not have fully embraced them. It may sound unduly rigid in the open age of the Internet to say, as he does, that anyone who enters a practice must "accept the authority" of the historically developed standards of a practice (p. 190). But acknowledging and reflecting on those standards is essential to maintaining a foundation on which the practice at its best can advance.

In the dynamic MacIntyre describes, pursuing excellence in open-ended story development should lead to achievement of some of the same internal goods of journalism examined in previous chapters. As discussed before, Sandra Borden (2007) pointed out that journalism as a practice involves several internal goods that are common to other intellectual practices such as science: discovery, knowledge, inquiry, originality, and newness. Her discussion of the civic dimension of journalism implies a further good: fostering community. The previous two chapters focused on newness, knowledge, and inquiry. For breaking news, newness is central. Online journalists at their best move fast enough to turn out multiple stories in a day or less in multiple forms, pursuing accuracy and depth, and so enhance the standard of excellence for immediate reporting. They also provide nuanced knowledge built on careful inquiry. In pursuit of comprehensive storytelling online (particularly in larger projects), journalists have the opportunity to elevate the audience's knowledge because they offer more information and, at their best, it is closer to original sources than in reporting for old media. Individual audience members stand to gain knowledge because forms can be chosen according to the story and audience. Use of primary sources and interactivity fosters inquiry.

In this ideal, work that makes the most of the open-endedness of story development also has the potential to achieve particular internal goods. The potential impact becomes clearer if it is viewed in light of the three elements of excellence examined.

• Developing stories in multiple stages in line with their life span advances audience members' knowledge. They have the opportunity to learn information appropriate to their needs and interests at these stages. Building out a story for its full life span provides knowledge that is more enduring than from short-term coverage.

• Treating public contributions as integral to storytelling, not peripheral, may also enhance knowledge because members of the public may be in places where journalists are not. This enhancement of knowledge also adds to the discovery of new insight and perspective about events, particularly as stories are built out with additional contributions over time. Valuing these contributions also furthers inquiry by engaging the public in planning its own role in inquiry related to the story. This engagement may also help foster a sense of community, an issue that will be discussed more in the next chapter focusing on conversation.

• Maintaining a critical eye combined with respecting the ability of the public helps to ensure that accurate knowledge is actually gained. At the same time, it encourages inquiry and may even foster community through appreciation and connection with the public. A key to achieving the balance between a critical eye and respect for the public may lie with an understanding of the role of originality. Borden referred to originality "in the sense of doing your own investigation and thinking" (2007, p. 63). This understanding of originality implies that a journalist must maintain a critical stance in evaluating all information and think beyond what any one source may contribute, with an effort to search out the truth independently. This kind of original work, which is at the bedrock of the best investigative reporting historically, also means that the journalist should never exchange reporting initiative for reliance on others, members of the public or otherwise. Taken together, this understanding of originality suggests that pursuing excellence in the open-ended world of online storytelling maintains a place for the journalist as a critical evaluator of content.

As journalists strive for these dimensions of excellence in storytelling, they uphold the best historical standards of the practice but reshape ideas about excellent storytelling toward a more multistage

view of a story's life span and a critical but open stance toward public contributions.

❖ CHALLENGES TO EXCELLENCE IN STORY DEVELOPMENT: EXTERNAL GOODS LURKING

The past two chapters looked at challenges to journalists' ability to achieve speed and accuracy with depth in breaking news and, more generally, comprehensiveness in content. Some of those challenges relate to the medium itself. The capacity of the Internet to accommodate numerous changes and updates creates pressures of expectation, whether from management or the audience or journalists themselves. The capacity for using multiple forms of storytelling with multiple paths stretches the ability of journalists to create packages that are coherent for everyone looking at them. Similarly, focusing on the development of a story in its full life span over time, it becomes clear that the nature of the medium creates opportunities to provide numerous stages of content—but that capacity again implies high expectations and difficulties in clarity of presentation.

Again, though, the nature of the medium is not the only source of challenge to journalists trying to do excellent work online. Some of the pressures relate to what MacIntyre (2007) called external goods. These pressures were more implied than stated in the comments of the journalists interviewed, but they are important to examine to provide a broader context for understanding their work.

One pressure involves quality control of UGC. This chapter has looked at some of the difficulties journalists have to watch for: promotion of individuals with possible commercial interests, lifting content directly from other sources, and verifying the truth of information. Then there is, as Tom Brew at msnbc.com points out, the challenge of sheer volume. Part of the difficulty in monitoring the quality of this content is being sensitive to the ethical and legal ramifications. But a key part of the problem is limitations on staffing. No news organization can deploy unlimited resources, especially in the economic climate of the early 21st century, but the pressure of the external good of profit in these profit-making institutions does constrain their ability to maintain high standards in the evaluation of user contributions. It is impossible to provide a magic formula for how organizations can monitor public contributions better with tight staffs. In fact, the core of the answer lies with the choices of journalists to persevere and conscientiously focus on every task they juggle with great

care—to exercise virtue and keep embracing the highest historical standards of the practice.

Another pressure is tied to something else discussed earlier in this chapter: the need to maintain equilibrium between having a critical eye on audience contributions and respecting what the public contributes. The journalists who talked about user contributions showed respect toward the ability of the public to add worthwhile insight to stories. But the more central the place of public contributions becomes, the more it may threaten the distinctive place of journalists. It could prove dangerous to society, no matter how unpopular journalists may be, if news organizations push them aside and rely heavily on public contributions rather than their systematic newsgathering. Unpaid citizens left to fill in the gaps may provide excellent information at times, but there will be a danger of stories not covered or done superficially, or only covered in certain cities. However, if journalists seek to protect their place uncritically, at the expense of careful consideration of what the public can contribute, they may reflect the external good of status rather than internal goods such as knowledge and discovery.

Sorgatz, who left the mainstream outlet of msnbc.com after the interview for this book to pursue independent blogging and consulting, didn't talk in the language of internal and external goods—but, as his comments earlier in this chapter show, he spoke critically about doubting the public's wisdom. ("The public isn't as dumb as we think, as ethics people like to think they are.") His comments are a good reminder that respect for the public takes a central place in the developing practice of journalism in the early 21st century.

❖ ATTITUDE CHECK: VIRTUES FOR 21ST-CENTURY JOURNALISTS

What virtues will help journalists in this environment pursue excellence? Again, the answer lies mostly in the background of the interviews and discussion of what they mean—since journalists don't tend to speak in the language of virtue any more than they dress like virtuous superheroes. Six virtues come to mind:

- **Honesty.** Journalists developing stories in a way that fully integrates public contributions with their own must be honest about the sources of their stories. Part of this involves standard practices of clearly attributing information in articles and accompanying elements that journalists write, just as they do in newspaper or

(ideally) in television. It also means clearly identifying what members of the public have contributed so that the audience itself can critically evaluate those contributions.

- **Humility.** The turn in story presentation toward use of public contributions calls for humble recognition on the part of journalists that their knowledge and vantage point in storytelling are limited. Simply using public contributions in an ongoing story implies humility, but humility involves inward attitude as well as outward activity.

- **Perseverance.** As discussed in the chapter on breaking news, this is a key virtue in pursuing stories in their early stages at a high level of quality. Developing a story in the longer term over its full life span also takes perseverance. The critical eye on public contributions also involves persevering to continue adequate monitoring of them over the life of the story, especially after the initial period of intense focus where these contributions may get higher scrutiny in the newsroom. The fact that content lives on potentially indefinitely online makes perseverance in monitoring it particularly important.

- **Initiative.** This virtue is important for journalists who have to seek out public contributions and also exercise careful judgment as they sift through them during developing stories. Robert Quigley, profiled below, showed this kind of initiative in Fort Hood shootings coverage using Twitter.

- **Flexibility.** This is necessary to handle the unpredictable directions in story development, with a wide range of possible content coming from both reporters and the public.

- **Creativity.** The best story development online means thinking of creative ways to blend public and journalist contributions and the forms in which they may arrive.

The next chapter will look at user contributions as part of a broader discussion of the central place of conversation in online journalism.

❖ **ON-THE-JOB PROFILE: ROBERT QUIGLEY
FACING THE DAILY CHALLENGES**

Robert Quigley's title at the *Austin American-Statesman*, social media editor, is a sign of the times as news organizations rethink the ways they

Photo 5.2   Robert Quigley, social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*, used Twitter aggressively to report on the developing story of shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, but he also exercised careful judgment to separate speculation from fact.

develop and present stories. The importance of his role became clear on November 5, 2009, after a shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, that left 13 people dead and more than two dozen others wounded. His use of Twitter that day and in the following weeks shows how that tool can help news organizations assemble and communicate important pieces of a developing story.

The questions and answers below are compiled from e-mails in February 2010. They offer insight on how he handled the story, the ethical care he took, and the background and qualities he brings to his job.

What are your responsibilities?

As the social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman,* I'm charged with making our newsroom staff more, well, sociable. Up until a few years ago, journalists operated on a one-way street. We told people the news without listening to much feedback, and without responding to the community. Social media has changed that. I look for new ways to facilitate that exchange through staff training, by experimenting with new tools and by helping come up with new strategies. I'm also the voice behind the main *Statesman* Twitter account and our Facebook page.

Please walk me through the sequence of events the day of the Fort Hood shootings as you set up and developed the Twitter feed.

As part of my job, I monitor what others are saying on Twitter, including our competition. That afternoon, I saw a tweet from a local TV station saying there were unconfirmed reports that there was a gunman shooting people at Fort Hood. I retweeted the station's post, with proper attribution, and said, "We are working to confirm." Within a

few minutes, we had confirmation, and the newsroom swung into action. The *Statesman*'s editor, Fred Zipp, suggested to me that we start an account just for the Fort Hood shootings, and I agreed it would be a good idea. In 2008 during Hurricane Ike, we had set up an account just for our hurricane coverage as the storm pushed through Houston, and that account was a huge success. I created the @FTHoodShootings account [http://twitter.com/FtHoodShootings] in a few minutes, put the *Statesman*'s logo on the account and began tweeting the news as it came in. I used the *Statesman*'s main account, which had more than 17,000 followers at the time, to let people know we had created the new account. Within a few hours, we had more than 3,000 followers on the new account, and it had been put into "Twitter lists" by several of the nation's leading media outlets, including *The New York Times, Huffington Post* and CNN. I was getting updates as they were happening from our reporters at Fort Hood (funneled via phone to an assignments editor) and from other sources, including tweets from the Killeen daily paper and wire stories from the AP. I posted everything newsworthy that I could verify on the account, and ended up posting about 130 tweets in about 6 hours. We posted an automatic widget on our home page [http://www.statesman.com] to show off the tweets to the non-Twitter audience.

> **What did your job look like as you continued the feed in the days immediately after the shootings? What have you had to do with it since then?**

I continued to post updates pretty steadily for the few days after the shootings. After the breaking news fully subsided, I came back and updated with major events, including the medical status of the suspect, the funerals for the soldiers, developments in the investigation. Naturally, the pace of the updates went down.

> **What were the challenges—technical, practical, ethical if any— in making the feed work initially? And how did you overcome them?**

Technically, it was not a problem. We have been using Twitter regularly and aggressively in our newsroom since June 2008, so we were prepared to use the medium. The main difficulty we ran into was that our reporters who were initially sent to the scene didn't have smart phones, so they couldn't post updates themselves. It was a minor inconvenience, though, as we were able to relay what they

were telling our desk on the phone into blog posts and tweets. Ethically, I'm very careful to avoid posting any speculation. As I scoured the social media sites looking for news, I did see a lot of rumors and speculation floating around. People turn to the *Statesman* to tell them what's really happening, so I work hard to be sure that what I'm telling them is properly attributed and true to the best of our knowledge.

What do you think the feed has contributed to the telling of this story?

I know that a lot of military members and their family were following our Twitter feed so they could find out what was going on in the immediate aftermath of the shootings. Giving them the facts as they were happening was valuable. Obviously, there was interest beyond those immediately affected as well. We're in the business of telling people what is going on. Tools such as Twitter just make us more effective and timely, if used correctly.

What did you get from contributions from the public that you didn't get from professional news organizations (yours or others)?

In general, contributions from the public are important because although we have the largest newsgathering operation in Central Texas, we cannot be everywhere. For many news events, we rely on public input to tell a more-complete story (getting reader reports during an ice storm would be a good example). In this instance, our reporters and the other professional news outlets had the story. There wasn't a lot of information coming out of the public, and Fort Hood was locked down. I saw tweets from people inside the post saying that all they knew about what was going on was based on what they were seeing from the media outlets.
[An exception:

RT @PrettyBoySlimm: Waiting for word that all is clear so we can get the hell off post and get somewhere we can actually place phone calls! 2:23 PM Nov 5th, 2009 from Seesmic

Quigley: It was a tweet that gave information (the lockdown was still ongoing and phone lines were down). It also didn't include speculation of any kind that would require verification on our side. It wasn't the biggest news item tweeted that day, but it provided a quick glimpse inside the Army post.]

What other responsibilities did you have to juggle with this one initially and later?

As always, we have a responsibility to carefully attribute information, no matter the medium. I wanted to be sure that we were not jumping off the diving board into speculation. Later, I had to be sure that we treated the suspect the same way we treat all people suspected of crimes. Journalistic integrity is important, whether you're publishing on Twitter or in print.

Over the longer term, including later developments, what do you think having this feed available contributes to telling the story?

There is an increasing number of people who get their news solely through social media. People who are still following that feed are likely intensely interested in the turns in the investigation, and we should provide what we know.

What background do you have that prepared you for this job?

Running the Twitter feed and our Facebook page sounds like an easy job—until you realize that I'm speaking on behalf of the entire metro daily newspaper without a copy editor or a manager as a safety net. It takes a feel for news judgment, restraint, an understanding of ethics and good headline writing skills (each tweet ought to be a catchy headline if you want to draw people in). I started as a sports writer at the *Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel*, but I've been an editor for most of my career. Since I've been in Austin (now more than 10 years), I've been a copy editor, page designer, the assistant news editor, letters editor, Internet editor and now social media editor. As assistant news editor, I was the "slot" two or three times a week. The slot is basically the person in charge of the entire print product after the upper management goes home for the day. I made thousands of front-page story play calls, headline wording calls, etc. I also actively sought out holes in stories (to plug them, hopefully). Over years of doing that and watching other smart editors do the same, I sharpened my news judgment skills. My copy editing background is just as valuable since I work to make my social media posts interesting, sharp and accurate. As letters editor, I worked with the public every day and had to forge relationships

with op-ed columnists and others who were contributing content to our paper. As Internet editor (which is basically a breaking news editor), I learned the Internet operation inside and out. I've always been a tech-oriented type of guy: I created a website for my parents' book store using html in 1994.

What personal qualities does it take to do the job well?

You have to be an extrovert. I go to Social Media Club meetings, tweetups and lunches and coffee with the big local bloggers. I also speak in public a lot about our efforts to students, nonprofit organizations and more. I want people in the community knowing who I am and understanding what we're trying to do. Just working behind a computer all day only goes part of the way toward achieving that goal.

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