

Defining a News Ombudsman in a Digital World: Differentiating the news from the rumour mill and learning to sing about it.

Introduction

In circa 17BCE, Virgil in the Aeneid, characterised the nature rumour as a hundred tongues

...clinging to the false and the wrong....yet heralding truth. Now exulting in manifold gossip, she filled the nations and sang alike of fact and falsehood¹

More than 21 centuries later – Vigil’s description aptly describes the global backyard gossip network, which consists of the social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and their raft of imitations. This so called “fifth estate” acts as unruly colossus. Sociologist William Dutton who coined the term described these people as:

Highly ‘Networked individuals’ (helped by new platforms like social networking and messaging) can move across, undermine and go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions. This provides the basis for the pro-social networks that compose what I am calling the Fifth Estate.²

On the other hand, the fourth estate, Journalism, operates in both the virtual world and the physical world as a self-regulated profession. It is made up of relatively few people working for a specific purpose: which is to sort out the rumour and rubbish so as to craft and circulate information about political, economic and social matters on which the news audiences can rely.

It is the news media’s capacity to do this consistently and credibility that creates a distinctive place for news journalism within the avalanches of information that ebb, flow and cluster around cyberspace. If the news industry fails to maintain its credibility than the increasingly literate newsmedia audience is likely to consider, for good reason, that journalism is redundant. In the past, news organisations concentrated on the big scoops, the exclusives, and while this aspect of the business will remain important, arguably now, in this information era, the maintenance of credibility and trust is more important to securing the longevity of the news business.

This paper looks at the role of the news ombudsman in a maturing digital news industry. It outlines some of the challenges facing us and our organisations as we become increasingly connected to our various audiences, and tries to conceptualise how news ombudsmanship and the ONO may develop to respond effectively to the new forms of production and content which are fundamentally changing how journalism is practised and received.

The role of the news ombudsman

And as news organisations become increasingly connected to their audiences, and those audiences equally become increasingly networked, the capacity for the news organisation to be held accountable by their audiences can only intensify. As we know, news organisations hold themselves accountable to their audiences through the application of a commonly held set of journalistic principles.

It is the task of news ombudsmen to assess whether their particular organisations have met those principles. The precise scope of the news ombudsman’s role reflects

¹ <http://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilAeneid4.html> (173)

² William H. Dutton, *Through the Network of Networks: The Fifth Estate* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2007).

the legal and regulatory environment in which particular news organisations operate. If we look at the present membership of the ONO, we see there are various types of news ombudsman:

- in-house ombudsman, eg US model - an independent but internal critic of the news media and specifically of the news produced by the employer;
- internal codes ombudsman - who assess complaints formally against a Code of Practice and represent the organization before the media regulator; and whom may or may not be involved in broader discussions about editorial standards;
- media performance based ombudsman – commonly journalists who have television or radio programs through which they comment publicly on viewers' complaints or provide media criticism; and
- television editorial standards executives, who have a role in complaints handling and also are involved in the processes of setting editorial standards

News ombudsman and regulatory regimes

News ombudsmen also operate within the different regulatory regimes which apply to various types of newsmedia around the world. Typically, these bodies act as an appeal process, should the news consumer be dissatisfied with the response they have received from the news organisation itself, through its news ombudsman.

The Australian system is indicative of most media regulatory regimes operating in western countries, other than the US which places fewer restrictions on its newsmedia. In Australia, there is a Press Council, which is an industry self regulatory body, and independently reviews complaints concerning newspapers and magazines. There is also the government regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, which investigates complaints related to the standard of journalism on commercial and public broadcasters. Online journalism, on the other hand, falls between the two regimes. I expect that this will be sorted out over time.

So: what is the way forward for news ombudsmen, as they communicate with a more media literate and connected audience, whilst working within news organisations whose credibility is being increasingly tested by the fifth estaters?

Institutional Media

The good news is that there is no escaping the news. It is everywhere: twenty-four hours a day - online, on television, on our hand held devices. The news has never been more available. It is as if it has become the permanent anchor of the global information domain, a place of stability in an unstable world.

And news organisations, probably because they are staffed by news professionals, are still leading the blogosphere in terms of getting the news out first. Research by Cornell University's computer science department found that, during the US election campaign, news normally first appeared in mainstream news organizations, and not in the blogosphere. This may reflect the nature of political news coverage. But it also may not.

The researchers tracked 1.6 million online news sites, including 20,000 mainstream media sites and a vast array of blogs, over the three-month period leading up to the 2008 presidential election - a total of 90 million articles, They found that:

*Almost all stories started in the mainstream. Only 3.5 percent of the stories tracked appeared first dominantly in the blogosphere and then moved to the mainstream.*³

Expectations of the news audience

However, the pressure of news organisations to still be first with information has become increasingly fraught. When the BBC republished an unsubstantiated piece of information circulating on Twitter during the Mumbai attacks of 2008, the audience reaction on the editor's blog site can be summed up in three ways:

- a) Don't use Twitter and other informal sources – you are the BBC – we want solid facts and nothing else.
- b) Use social networks; it's intelligent to see what other know.
- c) Use both, but LABEL clearly, signpost, even keep them separate.⁴

So the audience want news that they can rely upon; and they want the newsmedia to stop treating them like fools. The design guru and FT columnist Tyler Brule wrote of his alarm at watching a CNN news special for Haiti:

I was frozen in the TV's glow as a full segment was devoted to Cooper becoming an active participant in the news as he tried to seek help for a Haitian youth and Dr Gupta told Larry how he'd stepped out of his role as a journalist to perform brain surgery earlier in the day.

*Somewhere in a control room at CNN Centre in Atlanta, I imagined an over-eager news director was punching the air, thinking they were making broadcast history. Perhaps he or she "high fived" their colleagues and shouted something like, "Yes! CNN doesn't just report the news, it is the news."*⁵

Brule, like the BBC bloggers, represents an increasingly educated news audience. Today news organizations cannot stage credibility. They must be credible. That means being clear about editorial standards and being willing to publicly hold themselves accountable to those standards.

Limitations

In March, the British Press Council reminded their members about those standards, when it found against The Spectator for inaccuracy on a blog site, written by one of their journalists, which was published on their masthead. The high profile journalist Rod Liddle had written that:

*The overwhelming majority of street crime, knife crime, robbery and crimes of sexual violence in London is carried out by young men from the African Caribbean community.*⁶

³ B Steele. Tracking the life and death of news. 13 July 2009
<http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/July09/NewsTracking.html>

⁴ N Newman The rise of social media and its impact on mainstream journalism. RISJ working Paper Sept 2009. p 9.

⁵ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/0ee17338-06e1-11df-b058-00144feabdc0.html>

T Brule. Have they Got the News for us? Financial Times. 22nd January 2010.

⁶ PCC adjudication on Rod Liddle's blog-post 'Benefits of a multi-cutrla Britain' The Spectator, 29 March 2010.

The PCC said “it is difficult to argue that the sentence in question represented purely the columnist’s opinion, which might be challenged. Instead, it was a statement of fact”.

Roy Greenslade in his blog on the Guardian wrote that:

In an apparently anarchic online world, with a seemingly infinite number of people prepared to peddle lies and distortions, it is of overriding importance to win the trust of the audience. Serious newspapers and magazines will secure a following if they have credibility, integrity and authority. So their journalistic content needs to be accurate, fair and balanced. By showing that a magazine website cannot get away with publishing an inaccurate statement, the PCC has reinforced the public perception that British online journalists cannot put up any old rubbish online.⁷

The Liddle lesson is clear; news organizations cannot use technology to side-step their editorial standards. A blog site does not give you free rein. If it is on your masthead, it must meet your editorial standards.

Megan Garber writing in the Columbia Journalism Review on 4 March 2010 urged journalism to come together as a profession and as a culture, to embrace the institutional voice, the discursive voice. She wrote:

... as technology enables increasingly individualistic content-distribution strategies, institutional journalism is becoming increasingly rare. Which means, I’d argue, that it’s also becoming increasingly valuable. And that is a point that news organizations need to embrace—and, significantly, publicize.⁸

The first expression of that institutional voice is through our various Codes of Practice or Editorial Guidelines which are, not surprisingly, remarkably similar,

The British Press Council

- i) *The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.*
- ii) *A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published.*
- iii) *The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.*
- iv) *A publication must report fairly and accurately the outcome of an action for defamation to which it has been a party, unless an agreed settlement states otherwise, or an agreed statement is published.⁹*

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

- **Accuracy:** *The information conforms with reality and is not in any way misleading or false. This demands not only careful and thorough research but a disciplined use of language and production techniques, including visuals.*
- **Integrity:** *The information is truthful, not distorted to justify a conclusion. Broadcasters do not take advantage of their power to present a personal bias.*

⁷ Greenslade Blog. guardian.co.uk 30 March 2010 Liddle censure a plus for serious newspaper and magazine websites.

⁸ M Garber: Who Says, Columbia Journalism Review 4 March 2010

⁹ <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>

- **Fairness:** *The information reports or reflects equitably the relevant facts and significant points of view; it deals fairly and ethically with persons, institutions, issues and events.*¹⁰

PBS America Editorial Standards

- A) **Fairness** - *...producers also should adhere to the principles of transparency and honesty by providing appropriate labels, disclaimers, updates, or other information so that the public plainly understands what it is seeing.*
- B) **Accuracy** - *Every effort must be made to assure that content is presented accurately and in context. Programs, Web sites, and other content containing editorials, analysis, commentary, and points of view must be held to the same standards of factual accuracy as news reports. A commitment to accuracy includes a willingness to correct the record if persuasive new information that warrants a correction comes to light, and to respond to feedback and questions from audiences.*
- C) **Objectivity** - *Along with fairness and accuracy, objectivity is the third basic standard to which journalists are held. ...Objectivity.. encompasses more than news and information presented in a neutral way..., journalists must enter into any inquiry with an open mind, not with the intent to present a predetermined point of view.*
- D) **Balance** - *PBS seeks to present, over time, content that addresses a broad range of subjects from a variety of viewpoints. PBS may, however, choose to consider not only the extent to which the content contributes to balance overall, but also the extent to which specific content is fairly presented in light of available evidence.*¹¹

Principles of Journalism

During the 1990's, it was precisely these standards which were attacked by academics and by some practitioners as being unsustainable. However, the scandals that rocked the newsmedia during recent years, embroiling even BBC and the New York Times in issues of credibility, suggest that that the newsmedia and news audiences still consider these standards to represent the core of professional journalism.

Julian Baggini in his 2003 paper the Philosophy of Journalism said:

- *The idea that journalists should be striving for objectivity is neither anachronistic nor incoherent. Indeed, objectivity is precisely what they should be aiming for.*
- *Skeptics who retort that such biases can never be fully removed are simply stating a trite truism... But that in no way undermines the idea that maximizing objectivity is an achievable and worthwhile aim.*

He went on to say:

- *The job of the news reporter is not just to tell us a string of true facts, since by what they leave out, for example, they may nonetheless mislead us. They must also be committed to truthfulness, judging what facts need to be brought to our attention in order that we can "see through appearances to the real structure and motives that lie behind them."*
- *This requires judgment and skill and there is more than one truthful account that can be given of any event. But that does not mean some accounts are not more*

¹⁰ <http://cbc-radio-canada.ca/docs/policies/journalistic/journoprincipals.shtml>

¹¹ http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_standards.html

*truthful than others and that a news reporter cannot aspire to be as truthful as possible.*¹²

While news journalism is crafted slightly differently to meet the requirements of the publishing platform be it television, print, radio or online, the same principles apply.

Problems of the fragmenting audience

A complicating factor for the news organisation in the multi-platform environment is increased number of entry points available for the various new audiences to connect to. And it's likely this interactive audience will be less passive than their predecessors.

Further, technology has enabled individual news consumers to customise their own news service. Instead of just taking, for example, the main BBC news of the evening, as the source of news, they may pick and use from all the news sources online and create their own bulletins. The person may choose, for example, the BBC news for European stories, ABC America for US stories, the FT for finance, Sky for Sport and so and so on.

This fracturing of the news audience makes it more likely the news organisations will need to improve their communication with each other about common issues involving editorial standards. This is not to say that the news organisation will relinquish their independence. They will not. But in order to protect the credibility of the news brand which will face increasingly viral campaigns from the fifth estate, the news organisations would benefit from being more collaborative with each other. That alone would be a significant shift in the culture of industry.

ONO could be a forum for industry discussion; such discussion would inform individual news organisations of the common understandings developing between ourselves on editorial and ethical issues surfacing at the time. To some extent, this seems to happen now through some form of cultural osmosis within the news industry. But a clearer and more focused discussion is more likely to produce tangible outcomes.

Ethical issues facing the news media

As unfashionable a view as it may be, it has always concerned me that the news media as a whole did not stand up and support our Danish colleagues when they published the Muhammad cartoons. Instead the western news media largely self-censored and failed to show the cartoons. In so doing, the western news media put the sensitivities of the protestors above the rights of the news audience, who were, in this instance, the overwhelming majority.

Audiences were not permitted to see the images at the centre of a serious fight over freedom of expression. There was a clash over western liberal values; and the news industry effectively said "trust us; it is better if we don't show this". It was self serving and shameful act of censorship, the likes of which the news industry does not tolerate from others. Journalism failed its pact with the audience to bring them the balanced story.

¹² J Baggini The Philosophy of Journalism 14 May 2003
http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-journalismwar/article_1218.jsp

Perhaps if the ONO had established a faster and deeper network of interconnected news ombudsmen this contentious issue could have been discussed in timely fashion. The outcome of those discussions would have fed back into the various news organisations. Perhaps if this had occurred we may have shown more courage.

There is no shortage of ethical issues to discuss:

- Just how much of a kidnap video should a news organisation show without inadvertently becoming a pedlar of propaganda for a terrorist organisation?
- Likewise how much martyrdom video material should be shown while the aim is to both glorify the murderer and to intimidate people in the intended target areas?
- When you look at the copycat style of video sent by the Virginia Tech murder to NBC, and then the You Tube photos posted by the Finnish high school killer, it is hard not to be reminded of the need to have clear guidelines about the re-publication of this material.

Is it really just a matter of saying that everyone can get to stuff on You Tube, so why worry? Maybe that is the case, but these are topics which are in need of fleshing out. ONO is ideally placed to lead these conversations from an industry perspective.

In a mediated world, news bulletins became contested sites of ideological battles. Increasingly news organisations need a more collective approach to managing these forces, and an interconnected network of news ombudsman can act as a reasonable defence strategy. For news organisations, their news ombudsman is the independent and fair arbiter in times when the meaning of words and images become politically charged.

Sources

The internet is a big plus for journalism. Social media sites aggregate their hot topics and these are potentially of interest to news organisations looking for subjects people are interested in. Google makes it infinitely easier to find people, organizations and source documents. As a general principle we are living in a world where it is harder to hide and for journalism that is plus.

On the other side, there has never been a more active and connected news readership on the internet, which means that there is also no place for journalism to hide. We are increasingly open to sources who mask their identity online, or to the interests of interconnected lobby groups who use the internet to publish their views and to seduce others to fall for them.

In 2004, when CBS was embroiled in the Killian document controversy, which purportedly showed President Bush's service record, the news producer, as I understand it, had direct contact with the source of the story. Even then, when the chips were down, the source was unable to produce the original document, forcing an embarrassing public apology from then the CBS News President Andrew Heyward who said:

*...CBS News cannot prove that the documents are authentic, which is the only acceptable journalistic standard to justify using them in the report. We should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we deeply regret.*¹³

¹³ CBS News. September 22, 2004. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/06/politics/main641481.shtml>

Today, news organisations face the added difficulty, that the internet has proved a very effective place to hide and to play dress-ups. There are few guarantees that people actually are who they say they are, and there's every chance that even if you think you know them, it might just be something impersonating them. It can be an endless hall of mirrors.

In the past, a news organisation knew the identity of the anonymous source. They in effect made a decision to publish in the public interest. Today, sites like Wikileaks, which has released a range of material, some of which has been accepted as genuine and some not, prides itself on being able to protect the identity of the source of material it uploads. The disclaimer on the Wikileaks site says:

- *The information you submit will be cleaned by us to not be technically traceable to your PDF printing program, your word installation, scanner, printer.*
- *We also anonymize any information on you at a very early stage of the WikiLeaks network, and our services neither know who you are nor do they keep any information about your visit.*
- *We will never cooperate with anyone trying to identify you as our source. In fact we are legally bound not to do so, and any investigation into you as our source is a crime in various countries and will be prosecuted.*¹⁴

While this is a neat way to side-step whistleblower legislation, which is increasingly being used to stop civil servants from providing government material secretly to the newsmedia, the Wikileaks disclaimer is a problem for news organisations wanting to run the sensitive material, should the authenticity of that material come into question, at a later stage. At least CBS started out with a tangible connection with its source.

Being the Loud Hailer of Interest Groups

The internet puts news organisations at a greater risk of being used as the loud hailer of outside interests groups, or equally the loud hailer of just some clever kid who have mocked up a story. The 24-hour news production environment exacerbates the problem, as the story is likely to have been published and circulated before any fraud has been detected.

During the Sri Lankan conflict particularly in the intense period of fighting in 2008-2009, a range of video material that was released by Tamil supporters onto the web. If genuine, the material was newsworthy, some video showed a hospital being bomb, another video showed the corpses of the female Tamil Tigers being defiled purportedly by Sri Lankan soldiers, while the most high profile video of this type showed naked people with their hands bound being executed by Sri Lankan soldiers. However, none of this material could be verified independently. It was undated; and little, if anything, was known about the location involved.

In Australia, some of the footage was broadcast. It produced a raft of complaints from supporters of the Sri Lankan government. In August 2009, British television showed footage of Sri Lankan soldiers killing Tamils. That material became the subject of a United Nations enquiry by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions. The report announced in January that "the conclusion is that the video is authentic"¹⁵. The Sri Lankan Spokesman for the UN, Palitha Kohona, refuted this, saying the Sri Lankan government has experts on its side who categorically consider the video was fabricated.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://secure.wikileaks.org/>

¹⁵ UN News Service Deeming Sri Lanka video authentic, UN expert calls for war crimes probe 7 January 2010

¹⁶ SBS Dateline War Stories, broadcast the 28th February interview Palitha Kohona.

The Tamil community and the Sri Lankan Government are each adept at getting their message out via the newsmedia. During 2009 it became clear that the Tamil supporters were circulating material online just prior to visits by Sri Lankan government officials to Australia. I expect that the same was being repeated in other countries. In some cases this material could be traced to a Tamil community television station in Canada, who, in turn, seemed to upload the material from Tamil websites. While again there is nothing new in interest groups attempting to get the news media to run stories, it does become harder for a news organisation to say no to visual material which appears authentic.

However, in an era of digital manipulation, the images are increasingly contested.

Jay Rosen in a blog piece *Audience Atomization Overcome* considered that the internet has weakened the Authority of Press:

*... today one of the biggest factors changing our world is the falling cost for like-minded people to locate each other, share information, trade impressions and realize their number. Among the first things they may do is establish that the "sphere of legitimate debate" as defined by journalists doesn't match up with their own definition. In the past there was nowhere for this kind of sentiment to go. Now it collects, solidifies and expresses itself online.*¹⁷

It will take time to see whether these groups do weaken the authority of the press. They may in the end actually strengthen the authority of the newsmedia. What happens will rely on how well news organisations interact with the social media. It could be that these sites of online activity around a particular issue, simply expand the range of issues the newsmedia cover. It's easy to get carried away with the capacity of the web itself, and not the issue.

Activism is not new. The G8 protestors; the anti-whalers; the environmentalists, all became news stories when they staged some public activities which caught the attention of the newsmedia. All that happens in an online environment is that the newsmedia might get to see the protestors amassing online before they hit the streets, and therefore if their cause has news value, it might surface in the mainstream media earlier than it may have done in the pre-digital age. In this sense things have just speeded up.

Mimicry

Where it does get harder for journalists and news ombudsmen, is where groups who are net savvy, try to mimic the websites of recognisable institutions to give themselves some *de facto* credibility.

If a journalist wants to find a copy of the Goldstone report, it is easy to google <http://www.goldstonereport.org>. To an untrained eye looking quickly at this site, it may look like you are at the correct place. The opening page says it was commissioned by, presented to and endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council. It displays the visual material which is recognisably related to the United Nations. Yet if you open the *about us* link you see that first indication that this site is not an official UN site. It says:

This site has been established by a group of bloggers who have followed the news stories and NGO reports from Israel's Operation Cast Lead, and the history of the Goldstone Commission. We have come together to offer a site that will put together the

¹⁷ <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2009/01/12/atomization.html>

*most cogent, empirically based, and logically argued critique of the Goldstone Commission.*¹⁸

Goldstonereport.org is a useful lead for journalists looking for sources, but it is not the home of the Goldstone report. The actual report is on the UN web site - <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf>.

The slippage is very easy to make.

Today journalists and news ombudsmen need internet literacy skills as well as standard research skills. Further, the community of news ombudsmen would benefit from sharing their knowledge of the potentially problematic sites they come across. This could be simply done with a webpage devoted to believable aliases.

Another issue for news organisation flows from the use of journalists who are operating as freelancers. Sometimes such freelancers are less than impartial or have personal agenda. They are the so called Advocacy Journalists, described in Wikipedia as:

*... a genre of journalism that intentionally and transparently adopts a non-objective viewpoint, usually for some social or political purpose. Because it is intended to be factual, it is distinguished from propaganda. It is also distinct from instances of media bias and failures of objectivity in media outlets, which attempt to be—or which present themselves as—objective or neutral.*¹⁹

I cannot see the difference between an Advocacy Journalist and a smart public relations “journalist” for, say, the coal industry, the oil industry or the tobacco industry. Advocacy Journalism ultimately is a form of public relations for the politically correct. Then there are the Peace Journalists, who describe themselves as using:

*...conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting. The Peace Journalism approach provides a new road map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their reporting - the ethics of journalistic intervention.*²⁰

There is a difference between reporting and intervention. And there is a difference between balanced reporting and one-sided reporting; no matter how transparently one sided it is. It is not the role of professional journalism to decide who are the goodies and baddies or to go into bat for the ones they like.

A Guiding Principle

Professional news reporting is not about censoring out points of view with which we might be uncomfortable. It is about providing the audience with a range of perspectives on which they may form their own views.

The philosopher and ethicist, Onora O'Neill, in her lecture *License to Deceive* said that a free press can and should be an accountable press:

Accountability does not mean censorship: it precludes censorship. Nobody should dictate what may be published, beyond narrowly drawn requirements to protect public safety, decency and perhaps personal privacy. But freedom of the press does not also require a licence to deceive. Like Mill we want the press to be free to seek truth and to challenge accepted views. But writing that seeks truth, or (more modestly) tries not to

¹⁸ <http://www.goldstonereport.org/about-us>

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advocacy_journalism

²⁰ http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/peace_conflict/research/peace_journalism.shtml

*mislead needs internal disciplines and standards to make it assessable and criticisable by its readers.*²¹ -

If ONO wants a guiding principle, it's hard to go past that one.

The Risks of Speed

Apart from issues of identification, the speed of the digital news domain has turned the news business up side down; we are now in the *publish first fix it up later* business.

Increasingly news organisations incorporate material from social media sites as a way of bridging time which has effectively evaporated. CNNI did this in the early stages of the coverage of the Qinghai earthquake in western China. As their reporters tried to get to the scene, their news anchors were reading out material being posted on Twitter. As they did so they were careful to say, that they “were unable to verify this information”. This material had the ring of truth about it, and it's easy to see why news organisations may justifiably decide to run this material. However, it has its limits.

If news organisations routinely run stories that they are “unable to verify”, they risk that over time they will be perceived as less independent and more like the fifth estate. If credibility is journalism's calling card then the inability to verify material becomes a slippery slope.

If the breaking situation is different, that is not a natural disaster which the newsmedia is rushing to get to but rather a war zone from which the news media is prohibited from entering, then the likelihood of the social media being reliable is seriously questionable. If the Sri Lankan experience is any guide, both sides in that conflict were using the internet, for their own propaganda purposes, and social media sites where linking to unidentified but apparently newsworthy video.

The obvious danger for the newsmedia is not that everyone with access to a computer or mobile phone potentially can become a global online publisher. The danger is that the news media unwittingly becomes a global loud hailer, sometimes for relatively small and unrepresentative interest groups or people. The internet and the social networks appear as a level playing ground. However, it is easy for a relatively insignificant group to appear much greater than the sum of its parts. This well constructed but dubious equality presents a potential trap for the news media, which may be lured into compromising situations.

As news organisations increase their engagement with the online world they need to improve the risk management systems. It is not hard to imagine that savvy terrorist groups could effectively use the social media as way of herding people to their intended target areas. Should the mainstream media report this, our potential culpability could be devastating to our credibility. There was some suggestion that some form of this occurred in the Mumbai attacks, but I have been unable to verify it.

While news organisations need to be open to the activities of the social media and more open and connected with the various news audiences, news organisations are increasingly vulnerable on many levels. Not only are there significant issues about authentication of sources and verification of material, increasing the actual news gathering processes are exposed as they happen. The news audience now sits with

²¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml>

us at the press conference, the inauguration of a president, even in some cases at the criminal trial. There is no time between a story happening and it being reported.

How a digital news ombudsman operates

A news ombudsman must work separately and independently of the news production team, a news ombudsman should never be responsible for any aspect of a particular story. However, the instantaneous nature of the news production cycle results in an overlap in some aspects of the roles of the editorial standards manager and the news ombudsman. Reviewing material post production remains the news ombudsman's principal role. However, news ombudsman may also assist in formulating credible and defensible editorial procedures, which support time strapped journalists as they navigate the dangers of cyberspace. That would be an effective risk management strategy for their news organisation.

For example prior to production:

- A news ombudsman could assist in establishing procedures for checking the accuracy of material supplied for outside online sources;
- A news ombudsman could assist in establishing procedures for verifying sources both in the online world and real world;
- A news ombudsman could assist in establishing procedures the news organisation would adopt to alert the viewers or readers to the status of material they are being provided with - "the unable to verify issue;"
- A news ombudsman could assist in establishing procedures about how much potentially disturbing material eg. hostage footage is used.

This list may go on and on, in ways like this. The news ombudsman can work both independently to review particular stories, whilst simultaneously assisting their organisation to follow procedures which are likely to strengthen their editorial standards and to minimise their risk. It is essential that news ombudsmen also maintain their independence within the respective news organisations. To that extent is important, that the ombudsman is not involved in any specific advice on day-to-day stories.

The digital ombudsman needs to be increasingly flexible and multi-skilled. The news ombudsman is an internal and independent reviewer of complaints from the news audience, or as an independent critic and audience mediator. We are flexible and multi-skilled.

News ombudsmen now look both ways.

Traditionally a news ombudsman has had the role of reviewing and commenting on news stories after they have been published. But it is precisely from doing this work, that the news ombudsman sees both the ethical issues that are concerning the audience at particular times, and also the some of many landmines the lie in wait for news organisations in cyberspace. Therefore a digital news ombudsman needs to both:

- look within their news organisation on behalf of the consumer to see whether standards have been met in regards to the practice and publication of that masthead's journalism;
- look outside the news organisation, on behalf of the news organisation, to see what is developing as potential issues for journalism.

In this way, the news ombudsman gets to act as part of an early warning system of risk management for the news organisation. In both roles, the news ombudsman benefits from being connected into a community of other news ombudsmen.

So the ideal skill set for a future news ombudsman would look something like this;

- Understand the principles of journalism;
- Appreciate how those standards can be applied within the industry;
- Understand the capacity and limits of the news production cycle;
- Be capable of analysis of text, video, audio and online material;
- Have some internet literacy and investigative online skills;
- Have capacity to explain journalism to the public in an informative manner;
- Be able to connect and discuss at times confidential and sensitive issues with other news ombudsmen;
- Be capable of conceptualising how to apply ethical considerations within production practises;
- Have the ability to work independently and make sound judgments.

The Future for ONO

The news ombudsman works independently to mediate the relationship between the news organisation and the various audiences, as well as collectively as part of global community of news ombudsmen sharing their knowledge and bringing that knowledge back to their organisation. Likewise the Organisations of News Ombudsman needs to both increase its internal industry work and develop its external profile on behalf of ombudsmen, the news industry and the news audiences.

The ONO should be:

- An industry think tank on the standards and ethics of journalism
- A place where the news audience can learn about professional journalism standards and journalism criticism
- A confidential home for news ombudsmen to share and discuss their issues

Conclusion

Such structures would set up two interconnected spheres of influence which potentially keep on reproducing and connecting with more ombudsmen, more news organisations, more news audiences and more interested public groups and organisations.

The news ombudsman identifies issues of concern (either through complaints or their own perceptions); they then get to work out how something happened; they then can discuss that with other news ombudsmen and, if necessary, they complete the circle by feeding information back into their home organisations and perhaps some news guidelines are developed to assist the news production teams.

On the other hand, the ONO gets to understand through its members the current ethical issues facing the news industry; ONO can start to find ways to discuss those concerns within the public sphere, simultaneously they could educate news audiences about what are reasonable editorial news standards and encourage

audiences to constructively engage within the news media, Finally, ONO could then feed the information they receive from the broader community back to us, the news ombudsmen.

By coming together, ONO can act in a strategic and intelligent manner to become a collective industry voice, an independent spokesperson on news related matters, a public mediator between the news industry and the various news audiences.

Theodore Zeldin in his marvellous book, *The Intimate History of Humanity*, predicted that the leaders of new world will look nothing like the leaders of the old world, who were out the front, leading armies and taking territory. Instead the leaders of the new world will be more transparent, their power will depend on how successfully and productively they connect with people and organisations around them and through those people continue to grow their influence exponentially.

The ONO is ideally placed for this form of inter-connected, pro-active, reactive, individual and collective leadership. For the digital news ombudsman, the world promises to be an even more interesting place.

Thank you.