guardian.co.uk: online participation, 'agonism' and 'mutualisation'

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This study is dedicated to the memory of my beautiful little sister Sarah, whose death was

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Literature review

This inter-disciplinary literature review is drawn broadly from critical communications

1. **Independence from government, party, or upper-class largesse... given the high cost**

Encountering difference online

In a 2006 interview Chantal Mouffe is sceptical about agonistic pluralism online: her core complaint is a web made up of political echo-chambers— inhabited by groups of people who agree. But Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz (2009, p42) have highlighted a lack of

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But what is the experience of hosting such agonistic space, and, to connect it to the case at hand, newspaper comments? In her descriptive account of US newspapers online, Jennifer Saba (2009) quotes Keith Whamond (who oversaw several online newspapers) acknowledging the relationship between comments posted via 'Topix' and desirable levels of traffic but complaining of the huge work burden they create. In their defence Topix CEO Chris Tolles said comments really 'drive people' to web sites but, "Editors want control, and commentary challenges that control."

Power, 'frames' and deliberation architecture

From a socio-technical perspective Angela Lin and L

obvious, overt things that people do. His 'third dimension' describes how it may be invested

Firstly, this is split into two major perspectives: inside and outside guardian.co.uk. The view from inside is based on observations at the office,

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Strategy and Methodological Reflections

Online, offline; inside, outside

This ethnographic study utilises online and offline research techniques. The offline (real-world) component is based upon observations and materials gathered between October 2009 and March 2010 during my employment with The Guardian as Interaction Manager.[2] This was an experimental role based on an editorial desk: comprising editorial development, community development and social media development, and carried out four days a week whilst I studied part-time for this MSc. The online component consists of observations from comment threads — some of which involved participant-observation — i.e. writing an article and participating in comments below it. The desk I was based on was described internally at The Guardian as one of the more digitally 'progressive,' and so was an ideal case for exploring attitudes and practices in relation to interactive media. I also observed and participated on Comment is Free (Cif), from which the commenters' views in this account are drawn.

In common with most ethnography my research questions evolved during my time at The Guardian

guidelines around what was on and off the record (as is commonplace with other research permitted at The Guardian).

In terms of gaining consent from other subjects on the desk I worked, over my time there I had told some individuals about my Guardian

that she could work out who some of them were. I, in turn, felt uncomfortable upon learning she had shared the draft with someone on my former desk who felt betrayed by its content.

A reflexive disclosure of my role in the field

> "You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us."

<div align="right">

Tocqueville quoted by Adorno & Horkheimer (1972).

</div>

This account is not about my Interaction Manager role, although exploring my research

correspond with editorial frames - cognitive frames which cannot possibly be understood by others when they are constructed during years of journalistic training and organisational enculturation?

The issue of the 'right type of conversation' came up over and over again in discussions with editorial staff. This may be deftly related to the dilemma of liberalism, or 'Democratic Paradox', as Mouffe (2000) has termed it: where in seeking absolute truth and 'common values,' we close down the space for alternative viewpoints. She warned that to avoid this there must be an awareness that, "no regime, not even a liberal one, can pretend to have a privileged claim on rationality" (Mouffe 2005, p223). The implications of this for participation are that it should not be hosted on the basis that superior morals exist. I considered whether the very 'liberal' nature of Guardian staff views - mixed with journalistic modes of operation - results in a media production process where those involved feel they have a certain privileged understanding of ideal discourse and worthy stories.

From the perspective of editorial staff, a concern in addition to what was being said, was who aaid, ood of ?4

being described by a staff member as a 'guest' and went on to state **The Guardian** needs its users and therefore the,

> "comparison isn't between a tweedy home-owner and the necessity of a guest to remain gracious, it's closer to that of a restaurant or a shop and customers who are there to be served..... **The Guardian** may be hosting the site, but the readers and advertisers are paying for it."

This exchange was sparked by the topic of moderation - a frequent cause for consternation among commenters:

> "...I remember posting the following comment (under an article by Moazzam Begg): "the moderation on this thread has been astonishing". That's it, not a word more. It was deleted. What on earth standard did that breach? It's like a moderation super-injunction... It creates a long-term malaise that's bound to come out."

It is specified in **The Guardian**'s community standards that commenters should refrain from discussion about moderation decisions, so it is within these for such deletions to be carried out. However, some users obviously felt they have the right to publicly challenge this authority. Conversely, many wrote in support of moderation: but appealed too for consistency, right of appeal and to know why certain decisions had been made. There is no obvious public place for this at the moment, however I was witness to a heavily contested banning of a user, which was eventually overturned by moderators – showing that given enough user dissent on the threads **The Guardian** will take outside views into account and even reverse decisions.

As part of the Cif engagement seminar, moderators stated that commenters will behave more and more 'outrageously' if they feel no one is listening. They told writers that the lack of an 'above the line' presence helped cultivate an unpleasant tone – chiming with Dalgren's (2005 p152) analysis: "there m~~ousge 7@W7OHx5URRW3xo~~

view from above the line because I had entered The Guardian and remained more aligned with the anonymous angry commenter than the serene, successful journalist?

On the subject of commenter / editorial interface, one of the ways I attempted to bring these parties together as Interaction Manager was by rounding up activity in a newly conceived weekly 'community blog' that included comments from several articles. Although this seemed useful to demonstrate to the crowd that someone was reading their contributions the editorial process confounded and diminished the range of perspectives I included. Editorial suggestions on it also went against my instincts - for example choosing a 'best comment.' This highlighted to me how far the web architecture meant editorial control and selection could be easily reverted to by staff, even when bringing in the views of others. Commenter reaction was fairly quiet, with some positive and some negative comments: site participants did not seem to know what to say underneath; one commented, "Great summary but it feels weird commenting on comments on articles." Dissenting voices objected to the top-down selection process, similar to experience reported with, 'My Telegraph' on telegraph.co.uk - where when a 'featured blogger' was chosen participants objected to the selection process and there was 'a huge conspiracy' around who was chosen (Beckett, 2010 p7-8). So the blog did not seem to work either with users or the editorial team: it seemed to trivialise the week's user activity, with its 'above the line' standard format: condense, summarise, show the most 'interesting' bits.

The Cif team put a Read Cif, but never post? article online during my time at The Guardian – to encourage lurkers to 'say hello' underneath. Many site users do not comment and this thread represented an opportunity to understand their lack of engagement: in the discussion they gave a range of reasons. Some cited frustration with moderation – for example, "I gave up posting when my comments were removed seemingly for disagreeing with the ideas being proposed in the piece." One confessed shyness, and another that language and location was a concern. Another commenter suggested how participation might be better structured:

> "The New York Times has a facility that lets you view comments in order of reader recommendations, and also a kind of "editor's choice" selection. The latter option might be a nice way of promoting interesting comments that would otherwise get completely lost in, say 147th place on a long thread."

This argument for an 'editor's choice' seemed similar to the community blog – however the New York Times feature mentioned worked better as selected comments were directly attached to the article they were drawn from. So although it retained editorial selectivity it at

least gave space for several 'selected comments' pe

how can they also incorporate consideration of hundreds or even thousands of comments —
as well as external social media such as Facebook, Twitter and personal and specialist blogs?
This new way of working is being embraced by some, but I spoke to journalists who struggled
with the volume of emails they received and were unclear how they could incorporate even
more information inputs.[8] A non-editorial staff member shared with me his experience of
trying to get people on various desks to include interactivity in what they do - he said it was
incredibly difficult as they saw it as extra work. Correspondents needed to keep producing
stories as they always had, but now to also listen and participate. This presented a practical
challenge —working in a new way (engaging online) that impacts time available for what
already gets them recognised (writing stories) — in

busy website. Furthermore, commenters also desired more transparency about the moderation process. I was led by both commenters and staff to the conclusion that Shirky (2008) is right, that to 'publish, then filter' makes it possible for more to be heard on social websites. The alternative is editorial censorship, requiring heavy moderation resource and creating user disillusionment. Making the flood of participation manageable and enabling important insights to filter upwards implies coding online space for citizens' ideas to be written, searched, rated, and tagged, sorting and showing what is preferred by different individuals and groups: for example the wider crowd, experts, or those most trusted by user or their selected online peers.

Gate-opening: routes up from the bottom

Consideration of what is interesting to its users, combined with a willingness to elevate it, is key to The Guardian providing constructive for35Wwg)RH1WIgX?4I2ØUUfUUHT0f?f IW gwl?P—WCRX?4

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic account has empirically tested theories on deliberation online by observing views from inside and outside guardian.co.uk. The insights I have gathered are highly relevant to aims articulated by Mouffe, Marres, Dahlgren, Benkler and others, for agonistic online spaces where issues may be deliberated and consequentially influence institutional power.

I have considered users' frustrations, such as the inability to publicly challenge moderation decisions, the difficulty of getting into long, linear conversations, and the feeling of being ignored above the line. This perception of being unheard cultivates a particular type of 'othering' (Hall, 1997 p223) by commenters of those above them - creating different norms for how they behave towards article authors in comparison to other commenters. It also leads to an ever-perpetuating cycle whereby users are belligerent, making writers wary of interacting with them, leading to further frustration below the line. This 'long-term malaise'

My analysis has thus revealed the path upwards for ideas, even via the new 'What do you want to talk about' feature, is reliant on editorial selectivity. However the principles of 'mutualisation' are conducive to this altering. There is a philosophical shift required for staff with a more traditional journalistic mind-set to achieve this end: from understanding their roles as having media power, privilege and authority to filter – to having the social responsibility of facilitating, aggregating, and elevating the views of others. This evolution will require continued changes to job roles, work practices, internal information management and the user web interface. More broadly, I have identified a need for 'online newspapers' to commit to the motivation, education and empowerment of staff, users and participants, if they are to be progressive nodes in tomorrow's issue networks.

My account has also raised a related question on how publicly accountable journalists can be made to appreciate, and hold as equally important, those who post under pseudonyms – particularly when they are so accustomed to using identity and expertise to judge who best to listen to. It has also asked how we can expect anonymous online deliberation to influence policy, when policy makers within democracies are accountable to named citizens.

Further research into the themes raised in this thesis could look at how online newspapers' nt Hx5U0 @Web)

Appendix 1. Example Cif article, showing the line

A screenshot showing the much referred-to 'line' with an article above and comments below:

Article 'Contributor'

Article: 'above the line'

'commenter'

Comment: 'below the line'
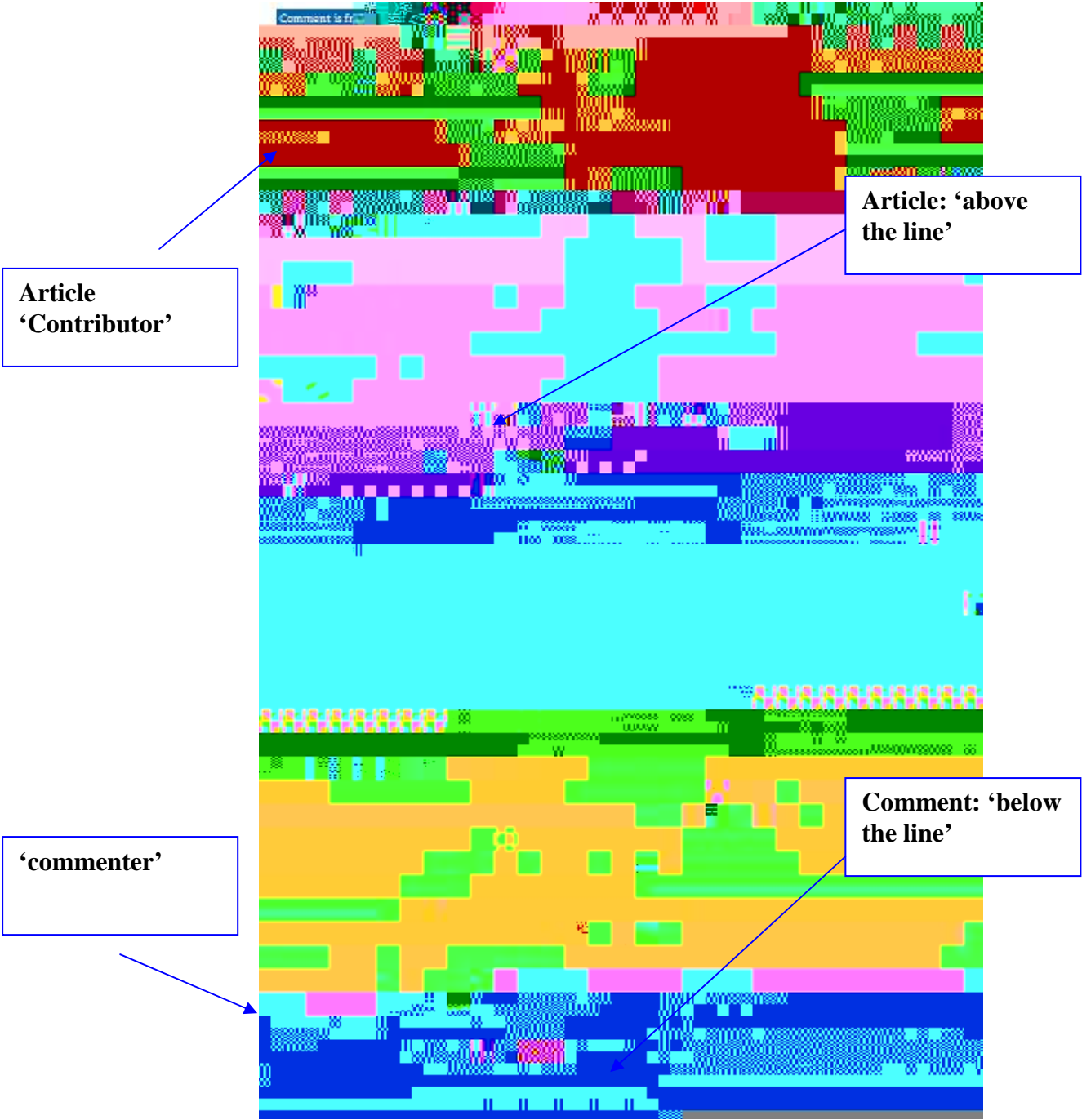
Appendix 2: 10 possible principles of 'mutualisation'

These were discussed at the mutualisation breakfast meetings hosted by Alan Rusbridger from April 2010:

1. It encourages participation, It invites and/or allows a response

2. It is not an inert "us" to "them" form of publishing

3. It encourages others to initiate debate, publish material or make suggestions. We can follow, as well as lead. We can involve others in the pre-production process

4. It helps form communities of joint interest around subjects, issues or individuals

5. It is open to the web and is part of it. It links to, and collaborates with, other material (including services) on the web

6. It aggregates and/ or curates the work of others

7. It recognises that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest

8. It aspires to achieve, and reflect, diversity as well as promoting shared values

9. It recognises that publishing can be the beginning of the journalistic process rather than the end

10. It is transparent and open to challenge - including correction, clarification and addition

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