

Sourcing the BBC's live online coverage of terror attacks

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Sourcing the BBC's Live Online Coverage of Terror Attacks

Abstract

The live blog or live page has emerged as a bespoke format for covering breaking news online and represents an important 'site' to investigate the impact of social media on news sourcing. This article assesses whether the adoption of live online coverage has facilitated a more 'multiperspectival' journalism through the inclusion of 'non-official' sources. The article is based on comparative content analyses of the BBC's coverage of Anders Behring Breivik's killing spree in 2011 and the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008. The article is strengthened by 'triangulating' data from interviews, access to BBC documents and observation work at the Corporation. The comparison reveals that the incorporation of eyewitness accounts has driven an increase in the inclusion of 'non-official' sources in the BBC's live online coverage, but it suggests that further significant increases are unlikely. In particular, the use of Twitter was becoming normalised by 2011 both in the range of actors who use the microblogging tool and the BBC's approach to sourcing content from Twitter. The article suggests that journalists' approach to sourcing continues to depend as much on conceptions of news values and editorial approach as it does on the live blogging platform through which the news is disseminated.

Keywords: BBC, news, liveblogging, journalism, media, sources, terrorism, Twitter

Introduction

On 22 July 2011, an explosion ripped through the Norwegian capital, Oslo. Far-right extremist Anders Behring Breivik had detonated a car bomb outside the headquarters of the Norwegian government. Eight people died in the blast. Breivik then travelled to the island of Utøya where the Labour Party was holding a summer youth camp. He killed 69 political activists before being arrested by Norwegian police. When World Editor of BBC News online Nathalie Malinarich first saw images of damaged buildings in Oslo she decided to start a live page for the BBC.

It was nearly three years since one of the first times a major off-diary breaking news event was covered by the BBC using live updates during the assault on the Indian city of Mumbai in November 2008 (see Bennett 2013, 145-166). In this attack, ten Pakistani gunmen conducted a campaign of killing in the city. Allegedly orchestrated by militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the attack continued for more than 60 hours while Indian security forces undertook room by room clearances of the city's Taj Mahal Hotel and other occupied buildings. 174 people died and hundreds were wounded (BBC 2009).

In many socio-political respects, the incidents in Mumbai and Norway are very different 'terror' attacks. From the perspective of media coverage, however, both stories represent examples of 'off diary' stories or 'event-driven news' (Lawrence 2000). In both cases, journalists were reporting a major breaking news situation in which an armed attacker or attackers engaged in acts of violence against the civilian population for a significant period of time. The BBC also decided to start a live updates page on both occasions in order to cover the news online.

Live updates, live blogs or live pages have become established reporting tools as a means to convey breaking news to an online audience for a number of traditional news organisations (Newman 2009, 51). The format generates significant online traffic to the BBC news website and live pages have been regarded by senior BBC managers and editors as strategically important to digital news (BBC Digital Event, December, 2011). According to Nic Newman (2009, 51), a live blog facilitates the inclusion of contributions from a digitally connected public into online news enabling 'journalists and audiences [to] report events together, as they unfold'. For Charlie Beckett, the adoption of live blogging formats was an indicator of a more general shift towards a model of 'networked journalism' (Beckett 2010, 3). In response to an identified gap in the literature (see Thurman and Walters 2013; Thurman and Newman 2014), this article tests whether this format for 'networked journalism' does facilitate the incorporation of 'eyewitnesses' and the 'former audience' or 'non-official' sources into coverage of major terror attacks.

News sourcing and the impact of digital and online communication tools

Many academic studies have focussed on the nature of the journalist's sources as they are a critical component of news coverage. A rich literature testifies to the power and influence of powerful 'official' or 'elite' governmental and institutional sources over the news. These 'official' sources and 'authorized knowers' (Fishman 1980, 51) are able to deny and provide access to information (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 18; Sigal 1973). They share reciprocal professional and economic goals with 'socially' and 'geographically' proximate journalists (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Gans 2004) and they are able to fulfil journalists' understanding of professional 'objectivity' and practice (Hall et al. 1978, 57-59; Hallin 1989, 73). This model has been refined and challenged by research into the journalist-source relationship which has also considered the question from the perspective of 'official' sources. These studies have illuminated the nuances of a relationship which could be characterized more as a 'bargaining interplay', a shifting 'tug of war' or 'a dance' (Sigal, 1973, 5; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994 24; Schudson 2003, 54; Gans 2004, 116). Although their access is usually irregular rather than 'habitual' (Molotch and Lester 1974; Goldenberg 1975), it has also been shown that 'non-official' sources can influence the news (Goldenberg 1975; Gitlin 1980; Manning 2001).

The technological development of the internet and more specifically the ability of the ‘former audience’ to publish online (Gillmor 2006, xxv) was regarded as an opportunity for journalists to reflect a broader range of voices and perspectives on news stories and events (Pavlik 2001, 24). Journalists would not only mediate the statements, thoughts and ideas of society’s ‘authorized knowers’ and ‘official sources’, they would also be able to use digital and social media tools to incorporate the contributions of the ‘former audience’ and ‘non-official’ voices into their journalism on a more regular basis. Academic studies looking at whether this potential has been realised are beginning to emerge. For example, Hermida, Lewis and Zamith (2014) have demonstrated how journalist Andy Carvin used his Twitter account to include more ‘non-official’ sources in his coverage of the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East. In the context of European newspapers, a tentative consensus is forming that ‘social media’ is more likely to be used as a means of incorporating non-official sources into news content (Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014). In contrast to the hard news focus of this article, however, the use of social media in this manner was particularly significant in ‘soft news’. Perhaps more relevantly here, then, in a study of the Virginia Tech shootings, Wigley and Fontenot (2009) discovered that 6.5% of the sources cited sources were both ‘non-official’ and mediated through ‘new’ technology, while for coverage of the Tucson, Arizona shootings (2011) the percentage had risen slightly to 9.5%. These studies looked at TV news websites and newspaper coverage, but there are very few studies on the sourcing of live blogs or live pages. Moreover, these ‘sites’ are of particular interest as it has been contended that this bespoke online news format makes it easier to incorporate a range of sources (Thurman and Rogers 2014). Studying *The Guardian’s* live blogs, Thurman and Walters (2013) observed that primary sources were more likely to be cited than media sources in live blogs (although ‘primary sources’ are not distinguished as ‘official’ or ‘non-official’ making comparisons problematic here) while Thurman and Rogers (2014) expressed optimism that these ‘live’ formats contributed to greater citizen participation in the news. This article contributes to this strand of research by providing comparative empirical evidence of the BBC’s approach to sourcing the news on their live pages.

Methodology

A content analysis was conducted in order to ascertain which sources of information were used on the BBC’s live pages to cover the events in Mumbai and Norway. The BBC’s live pages for the Mumbai crisis on 27 and 28 November 2008 (BBC 2008a, 2008b) and for the attack in Norway on 22 and 23 July 2011 (BBC 2011a, 2011b) were accessed. Live updates for the Mumbai attacks continued until 29 November but this page was halted after only 17 updates and disregarded here in order to provide a comparison over a two-day period. Every source of information cited on these pages was coded – ‘a source’ was interpreted in its ‘journalistic sense’ to mean the origins of a piece of information used by a journalist (Phillips 2010, 89).

The live pages were coded at two levels. First, the sources cited by the BBC were coded as individuals, organisations, or groups of people. Twelve categories were identified:

1. BBC (*own correspondents, staff, departments*)
2. Domestic Media (*Indian in 2008/Norwegian in 2011*)
3. Foreign Media
4. News Agencies
5. Domestic Official Sources (*Indian in 2008/Norwegian in 2011*)
6. Foreign Official Sources
7. Experts
8. Eyewitnesses (*Individual who had seen or heard the attacks taking place or who was trapped in the Indian hotels or on the island of Utøya*)
9. Directly Connected Commenters (*Individuals in Mumbai or Oslo/Utøya near the scene of the event or relatives or other individuals directly involved in the story who were not acting in an official capacity for a government or business.*)

10. Audience Commenters (*An individual who apparently had no direct involvement in the news story beyond observing it. This included expatriates who may have been deeply affected by the story.*)
11. Gunman/Attackers
12. Other

In Figure 1, categories 1-4 are grouped together as ‘media’ sources, 5-7 as ‘official sources and authorized knowers’, and 8-11 are collated as ‘non-official sources’. Category 12 – Other – was redistributed on a case by case basis into media, official, ‘non-official’ or into a new ‘other’ category.

Second, the sources cited were also coded separately for mentions of a digital or online source of communication (email, blog, Twitter etc). This two-level approach to coding avoids a weakness of previous research which has conflated the ‘individual or organisational source’ and the ‘source of communication’. For example, ‘Twitter users’ have been coded as ‘alternative’ or ‘non-official’ sources regardless of whether the person updating the Twitter account could be considered an ‘alternative’ or ‘non-official’ source. This method also means the nature of the digital communication sources cited by the BBC can be assessed in relation to the first level of coding revealing which actors were sourced through digital and online means.

The findings emerging from the content analysis were strengthened by ‘triangulating’ the data with other methods of inquiry including interviews with BBC journalists, access to BBC documents and observations at the Corporation. As part of an AHRC/BBC partnership, I acted as a ‘participant observer’ at the Corporation between 2007 and 2011. My access to the BBC meant I was able to analyse internal documents and also witness BBC journalists in the newsroom updating the Mumbai live pages in 2008. The latter provided a unique insight into the journalistic process of live blogging which is not always reflected in the content which is produced. In the aftermath of each attack, semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists and editors giving them an opportunity to reflect on their journalistic practice in relation to live blogging. Their evidence informs observations which move beyond *what* sources were included to *why* BBC journalists thought they were included – addressing a common weakness of many studies based solely on content analysis.

Findings and Discussion

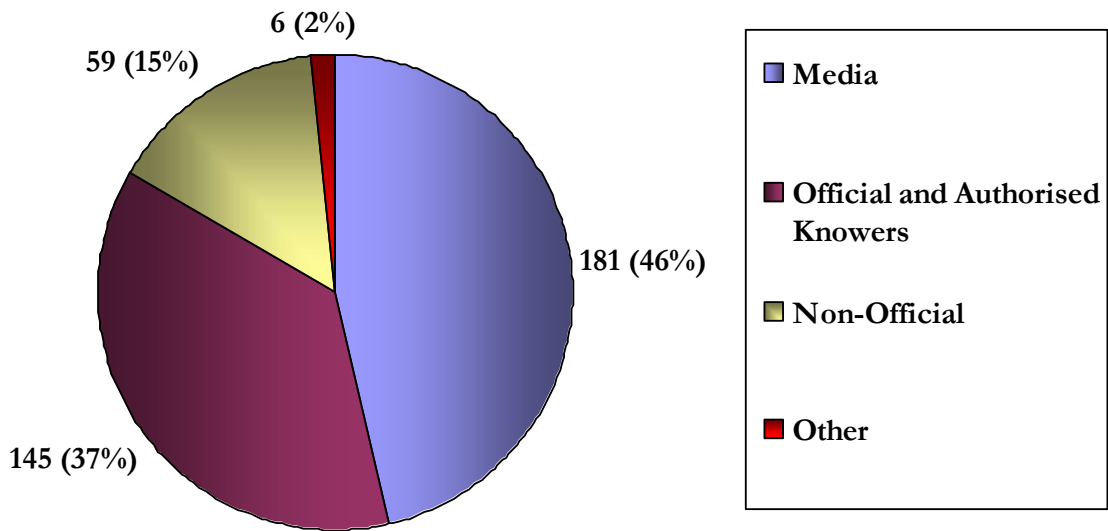
Official and Non-Official Sources

The BBC still relied on their own reporting, other media organisations, official sources and ‘authorized knowers’ for most of their live page content in 2008 (83% of sources cited) and 2011 (79%). News agencies and media organisations accounted for 46% of the sources cited in 2008 and 44% in 2011. Official sources and ‘authorized knowers’ for 37% in 2008 and 35% in 2011. A significant percentage of ‘non-official’ sources were incorporated into the BBC’s coverage of the events in Mumbai and Norway and there was an increase in the percentage of ‘non-official’ sources cited from 15% of sources cited in 2008 to 20% by 2011 (Figure 1). The figures of 15% and 20% for ‘non-official’ sources, however, are not dissimilar to the 16.5% of ‘non-official’ sources cited in 2,850 stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* between 1949 and 1969 (Sigal 1973, 124).

A more detailed breakdown of the sources cited is represented in Figure 2.

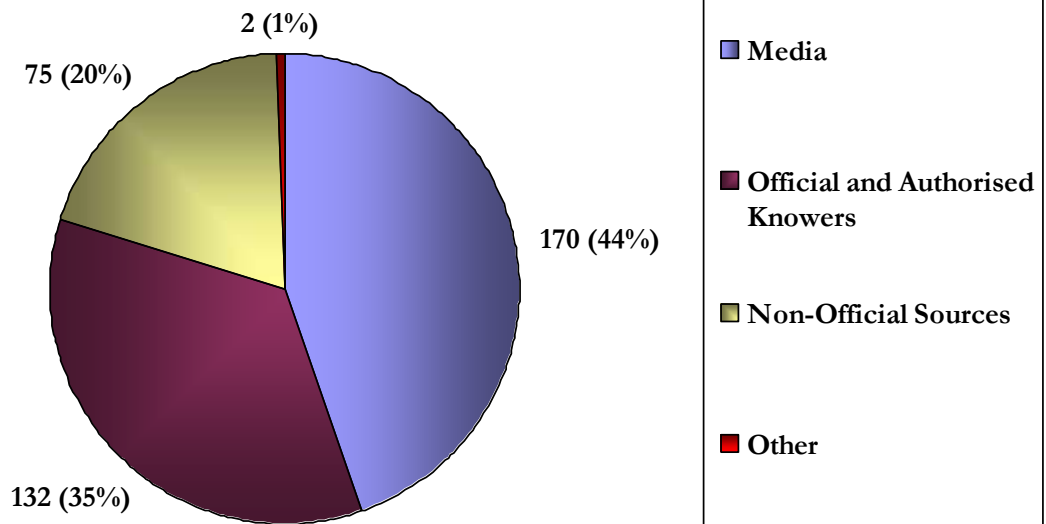
Figure 1

Mumbai 27-28 Nov 2008: Sources cited in BBC live updates



Total: 391 (100%)

Norway 22-23 July 2011: Source types cited in BBC live updates

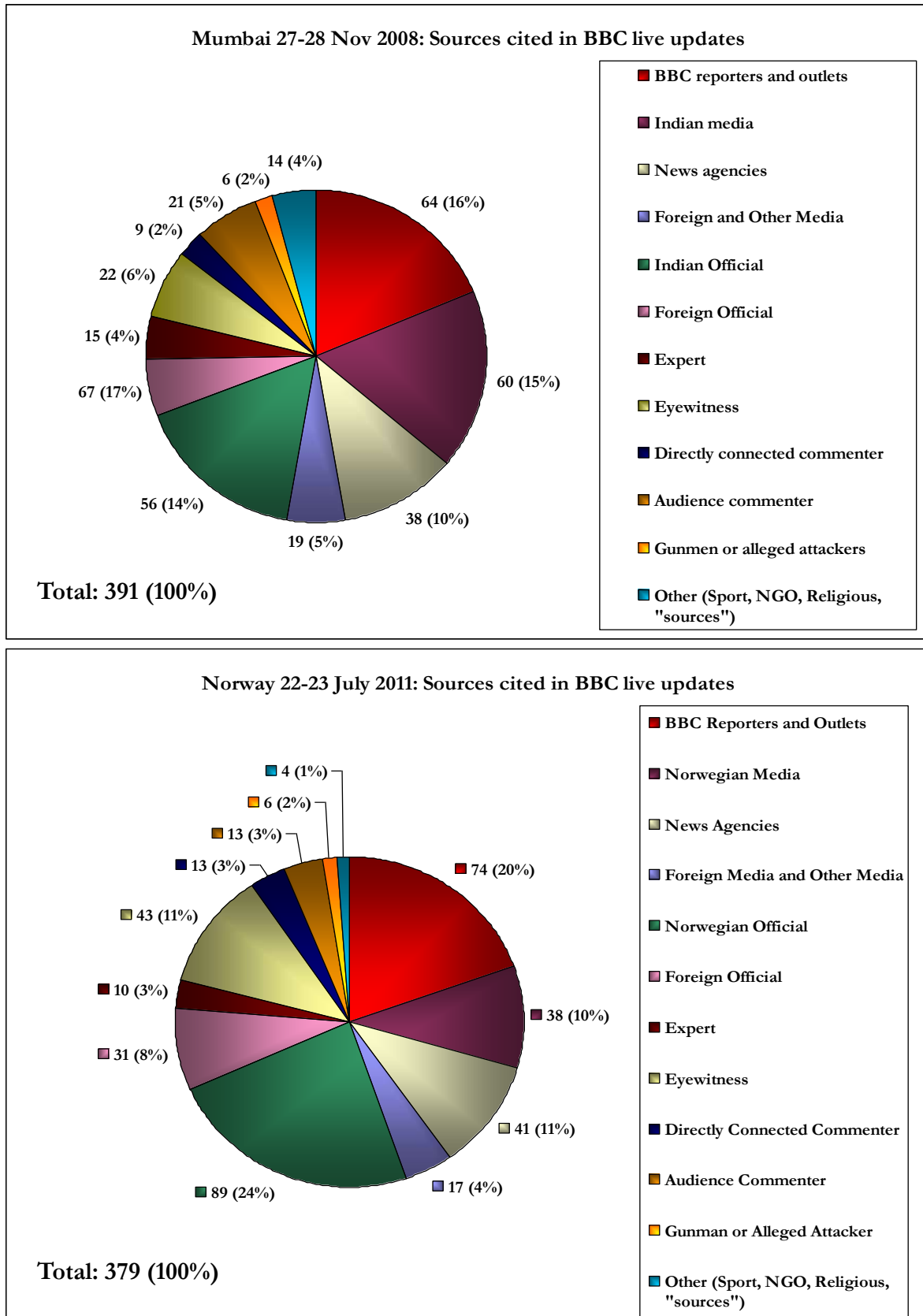


Total: 379 (100%)

The five per cent increase in the citation of ‘non-official’ sources in 2011 might be partially explained by the fact that the Norway live page was started much sooner after the initial report of a major incident than in 2008. The BBC’s Mumbai live page was started approximately 15 hours after the gunmen first entered the city, by which time the BBC’s Mark Dummett was already at the scene of the incident near the Taj Mahal Hotel. In contrast, the Norway live page was started just over an hour after the bomb blast in Oslo. At this early stage, BBC journalists were not receiving information from a colleague at the scene and relied more on eyewitness accounts from ‘non-official’ sources in

the immediate aftermath. In the first hour of the live page on 22 July, the BBC cited 13 eyewitness accounts often sent in via email. Overall, there was an increase in the number of times eyewitnesses were cited as sources in the BBC's coverage between 2008 and 2011 – from 6% to 11% (Figure 2). If the BBC continues to start live pages quickly after a major incident or events occur where BBC journalists cannot quickly access the scene, then this level of content from digitally connected eyewitnesses is likely to be sustained or could possibly increase in the future.

Figure 2



Audience Comment

Eyewitness accounts and ‘directly connected comment’ were sourced by a variety of means including emails to the BBC, on Twitter, through BBC reporting and in other media and news agency reporting. ‘Audience comment’, however, was entirely facilitated through electronic communication from emails, on blogs or via Twitter. Instant digital communication allowed BBC journalists to incorporate these contributions from the ‘former audience’ to reflect the public mood or general reactions on a story.

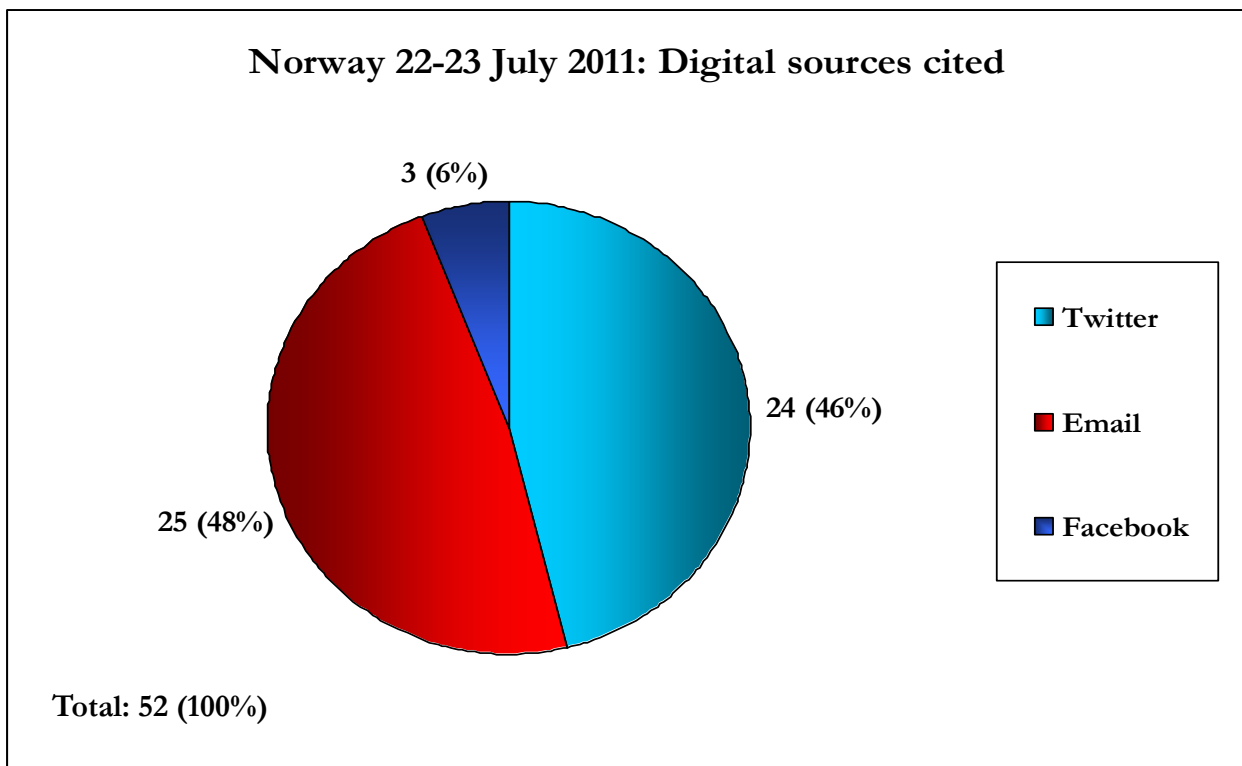
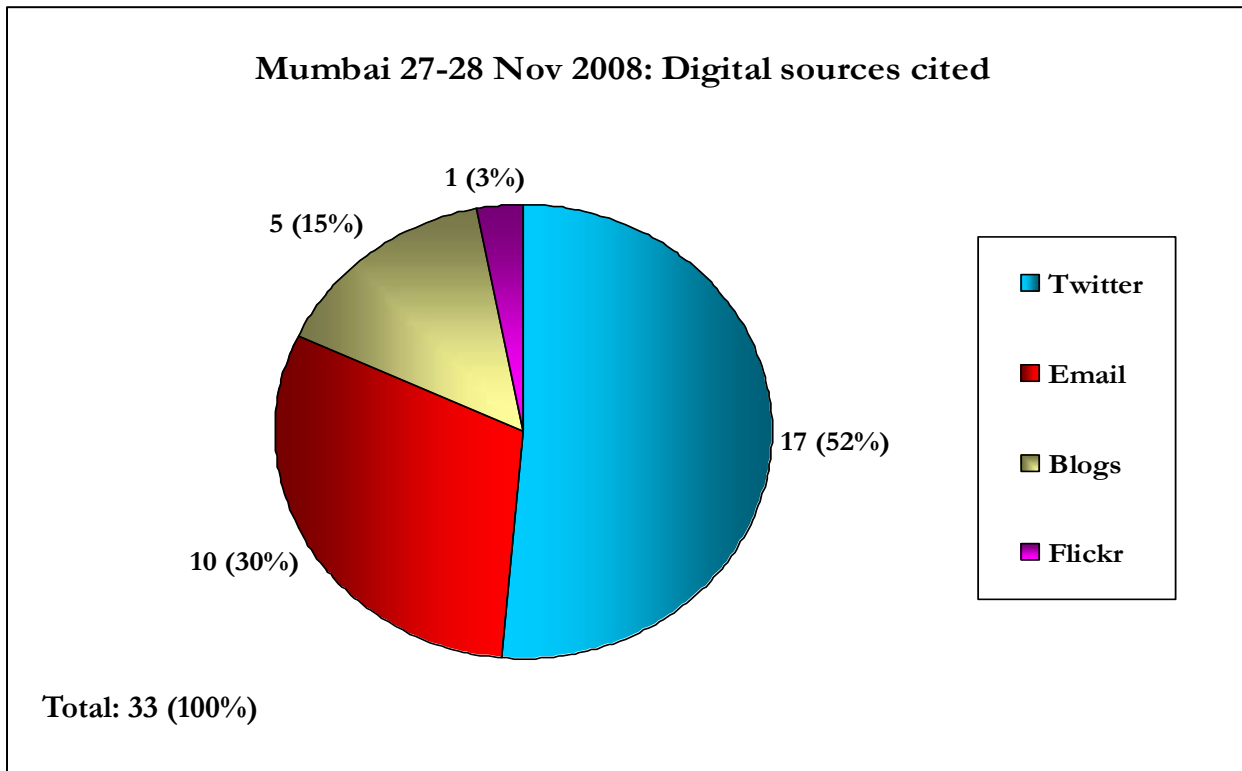
Nevertheless, the level of ‘audience comment’ included by the BBC in the Norway live page (3%) decreased slightly from the Mumbai story (5%) perhaps reflecting a shift in editorial emphasis. Journalists covering the Mumbai attacks were encouraged by editors to include Twitter updates in the live page. In the aftermath, an internal document which collated advice on live blogging reveals that BBC journalists regarded ‘quoting tweets as general comment’ as a valuable method of portraying ‘an all round picture’ of an event and to ‘establish a public mood of events as they happen’ (Smith, 2008). One journalist working on the Mumbai live page, however, felt too much audience comment was included and believed future editors would specify what content they wanted from Twitter rather than just requiring that Twitter updates were included. It was notable, therefore, that in an interview in 2011, the World Editor of BBC News Online stressed the need for a balance of news and comment in live pages. In particular, she believed that ‘*general users or readers don’t like too much comment – certainly not too much uninformed comment*’ (Nathalie Malinarich, interview, 11 October 2011).

Digital Sources

According to BBC journalist Matt Danzico, who was working on the Norway live page, email and Twitter messages are ‘*extremely helpful in staying current on whatever story we are covering via a live page*’ (Matt Danzico, personal communication, 2 September 2011). There was a significant increase in the citation of digital sources in 2011 compared with 2008. For the Norway story, BBC journalists cited a digital source on 52 occasions – an increase from 33 occasions during the coverage of Mumbai when slightly more sources were cited overall (Figure 3). It should be noted that one of the contributing factors for the increase was the online activity of the Norwegian gunman, Anders Behring Breivik. On 23 July, journalists discovered that Breivik had set up a Twitter account and a Facebook profile to announce his intentions. Breivik’s online accounts were cited by the BBC on 6 occasions.

The content analysis also demonstrates the continued importance of ‘emails to the BBC’ to report ‘crisis’ events. When BBC journalists cite an ‘email to the BBC’, this does include emails directly sent to journalists, but more often refers to people who have filled in a ‘post form’ on BBC webpages. These forms, usually posted at the bottom of a relevant webpage, encourage web readers to contact the BBC if they have information about a news story. The forms are delivered to BBC journalists in the form of an email hence the BBC’s terminology.

Figure 3



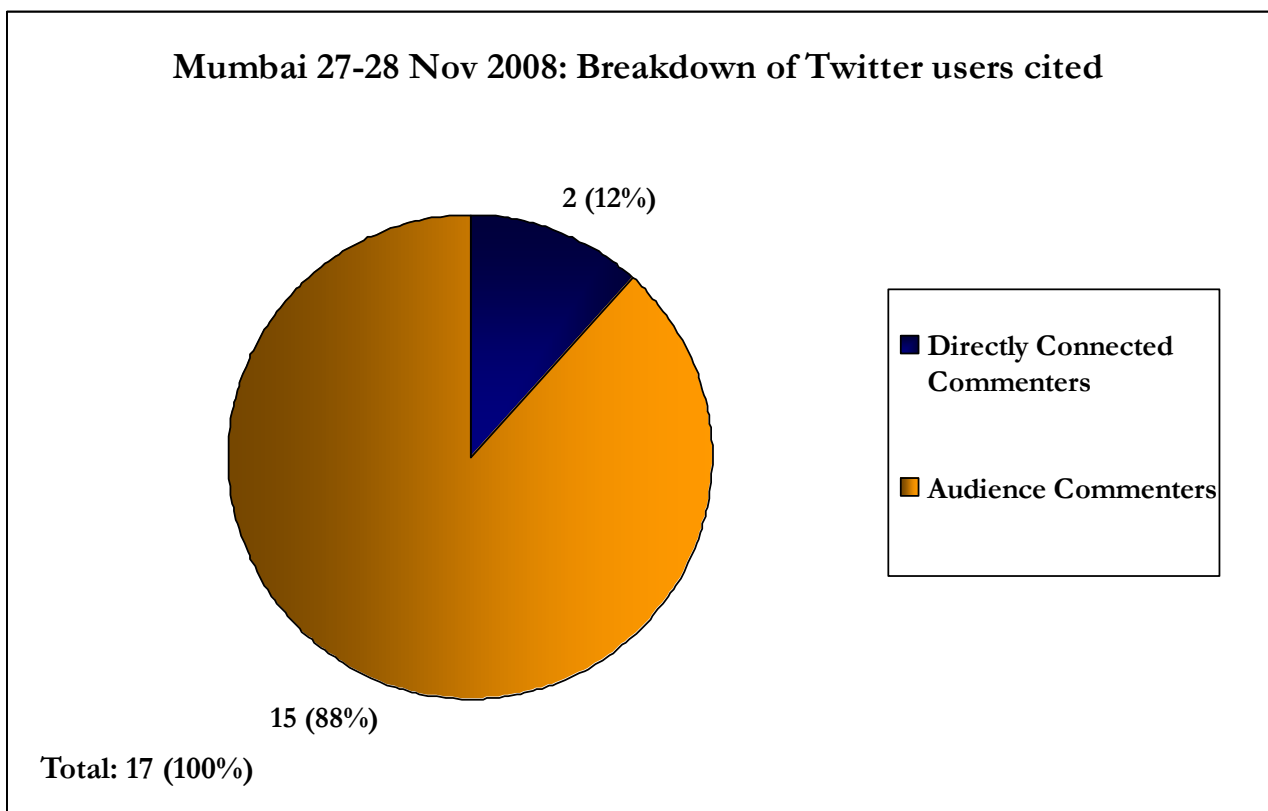
‘Blogs’ – which had accounted for 15% of digital sources cited in 2008 – were not cited as a source of information three years later. In 2008, Samantha Dissanayake, who was primarily responsible for collecting blogs and Twitter updates in her role on the BBC’s User Generated Content (UGC) hub, claimed that individuals who might previously have written blog posts were updating Twitter accounts instead (Samantha Dissanayake, interview, 26 January 2010). She claimed they usually wrote blog posts after the crisis was over. This emerging shift towards the incorporation of Twitter updates rather than blogs is supported by the content analysis. For World Editor Nathalie Malinarich, the lack of blogs included in the live page coverage could be explained by the emergence of Twitter as journalist’s first port of call: *‘I think...people tend to go to blogs when it’s linked off Twitter. I think the entry point is usually Twitter for everything now’* (Malinarich, interview, 11 October 2011).

The 'normalisation' of Twitter

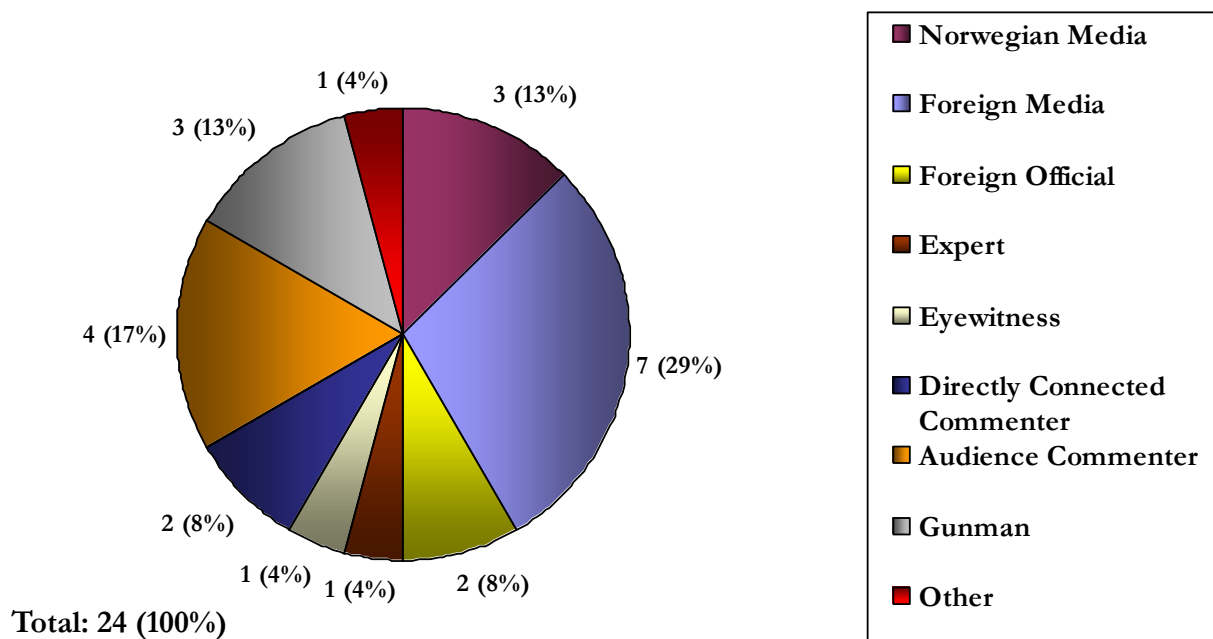
The content analysis reveals a marked change in the nature of the sources cited via Twitter by BBC journalists. In 2008, BBC journalists cited two Twitter accounts from Indians who were in Mumbai (directly connected commenters). The rest of the Twitter updates cited were comments from other Indian cities or Twitter users based in other countries. In total, 'audience comment' accounted for 88% of the Twitter updates cited (Figure 4).

By 2011, 'audience comment' only accounted for 19% of all Twitter sources cited as BBC journalists more often cited Twitter accounts belonging to a range of journalists and news media organisations as a method of presenting the latest information on the breaking news situation to their audiences. Twitter updates from Norwegian and foreign media accounted for 47% emphasising the uptake of Twitter by journalists and news organisations by 2011 (Figure 4). An eyewitness, an expert, two foreign officials and Anders Behring Breivik's Twitter account were also cited demonstrating that a variety of sources were using Twitter and being included by the BBC. The BBC could also have cited official Twitter accounts belonging to the Norwegian government – such as Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg or the Prime Minister's Office – which were used to provide news updates on the situation. Although these 'official' Twitter accounts were not included on this occasion, it is clear that journalists at the BBC were no longer using Twitter simply to include 'alternative sources' or as a means of only including the voice of the 'former audience' (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Norway 22-23 July 2011: Breakdown of Twitter users cited



These findings point to a marked change in journalists' use of Twitter. In 2008, BBC journalists were grappling with Twitter as a new source of information. One of the BBC journalists covering the Mumbai attacks revealed he had little experience of the microblogging tool prior to November 2008. Another journalist working on the BBC's live page had never used Twitter before and had to learn how to use the social media site soon after arriving for his shift as his editors were keen to include Twitter updates in the BBC's coverage. By 2011, a number of the journalists working on the live page had their own accounts and were already experienced Twitter users: both Matt Danzico and Silvia Costeloe, for example, joined Twitter in 2007. More generally, the BBC had begun running a series of training workshops in social media tools in November 2009 and produced an internal reference document outlining 'good practice' and 'helpful hints' for Twitter in 2010.

Journalists' experience of using Twitter had evolved considerably in three years, but as importantly so too had the nature of Twitter. In March 2008, technology website, TechCrunch, believed there were just over 1 million Twitter accounts and around 200,000 active users per week (Arrington 2008). Twitter claimed that around 300,000 tweets were being sent per day in 2008 (Twitter 2010). By the middle of 2011 – just prior to the crisis in Norway – Mashable reported that Twitter had passed 200 million user accounts, while Twitter claimed that 200 million tweets were being sent every day (White 2011). Twitter had also been adopted by a wider range of actors including members of the public, journalists and media commentators, politicians, celebrities and 'official' sources (Sambrook 2010, 33).

It appears that by 2011 then, the use of Twitter appeared to be 'normalising' (see also Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton 2012) both in the sense of the range of actors who were using the microblogging tool and the way in which BBC journalists were sourcing information from Twitter.

Conclusion

The live blogging format does enable the BBC to present 'multiperspectival' accounts of major terror attacks, but this article offers a nuanced picture of the opportunities and limitations of live pages for the incorporation of 'non-official' sources. There was an increase in the number of 'non-official' sources cited in BBC live page coverage between 2008 and 2011 – from 15% to 20% – but the findings caution against predicting any substantial further increase in the overall level of material included from 'non-official' sources in future BBC live pages.

First, the volume of ‘directly connected comment’ and ‘audience comment’ from ‘non-official’ sources decreased slightly from 7% in 2008 to 6% in 2011. Second, the BBC’s citation of sources through Twitter changed significantly. Twitter can be used by journalists to include more ‘non-official’ sources in their journalism (see Hermida, Lewis and Zamith 2014) but the percentage of ‘directly connected comment’ and ‘audience comment’ cited through Twitter in the BBC’s live coverage decreased from 100% in 2008 to 25% by 2011 (Figure 4). The widespread adoption of Twitter and other online tools as a method of public communication by a range of governmental, institutional and particularly media actors between 2008 and 2011 has meant that digital or social media sources are no longer used by journalists simply to access the voice of the ‘former audience’. It suggests that the BBC’s use of Twitter during the Mumbai attacks in 2008 should be judged as unusual in the context of the uncertain and uneven adoption of digital media tools by news organisations and official sources – a period of flux which was already ending by the Norway attack in 2011.

Ultimately, this article also emphasises that the live blogging format does not necessarily lead to an increased use of ‘non-official’ over official sources by journalists despite the alleged ease with which it facilitates the inclusion of the ‘former audience’. The BBC’s approach to news traditionally relies more on ‘official sources’ (Hargreaves 2003, 27; Born 2004, 379) and interviews with BBC journalists in this article, for example, revealed that they had an understanding of an ‘appropriate’ level of ‘audience comment’ which should be included in a live page. Editorial decisions such as these – which are informed by the organisation’s news values – effectively limit the number of ‘unofficial’ sources included in the coverage. The wider implication of this observation is that organisational news values, newsroom culture, editorial approach and the nature of the news story remain important indicators of how sources will be used regardless of the technological platforms used by news organisations to disseminate the news. Although the ways in which journalists are accessing and presenting the news have significantly evolved as a consequence of digital technologies and social media, their understanding of what ‘news’ is and from whom it should be sourced appears to have remained relatively unchanged – at least in the context of ‘hard’ news stories such as terror attacks.

At most, then, live blogs updated by traditional news organisations have helped facilitate the inclusion of a *slightly widened* array of news sources which may increase further if news values, editorial approach and newsroom culture shift. However, Herbert Gans’ (2004, 304-334) ‘multiperspectival’ hope for ‘an *ever-widening* array of news sources’ does not yet appear to be fulfilled within the context of live blogs updated by traditional news organisations. If traditional media live blogs, therefore, remain an important ‘site’ where news of terror attacks are accessed, then it suggests that public understanding of such events will not be informed by any particularly greater diversity of ideological, political or cultural perspectives.

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