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**“Comment Is Free, But Facts Are Sacred”:  
User-generated content and ethical constructs at the *Guardian***

Jane B. Singer and Ian Ashman

**Abstract:** This case study examines how journalists at Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper and affiliated website are assessing and incorporating user-generated content in their perceptions and practices. A framework of existentialism helps highlight constructs and professional norms of interest. It is one of the first data-driven studies to explore how journalists are negotiating personal and social ethics within a digital network.

Around the developed world, journalists are producing a steadily decreasing portion of the editorial content on their own newspaper websites. The rapid growth of various forms of “user-generated content,” from comments to hosted blogs to “hyperlocal” news stories, means the journalist has far less control over what was once an essentially industrial process of making news. The website has become a shared space, filled with constantly changing content produced by a broad range of individuals and informed by relationships among those contributors.

The changes raise not only a host of practical issues for journalists but also a great many ethical ones. What might an optimal relationship between journalists and users/contributors – the people Bruns (2007) calls “producers” – look like, and what are the challenges to achieving it? If the content space is shared, is responsibility for the content itself also shared? Who decides what is credible, true, or even newsworthy in the first place? What happens to the prized journalistic norm of autonomy in this environment?

This ethnographic case study draws on interviews and a brief questionnaire to examine how journalists at Britain's *Guardian* newspaper and affiliated website – part of a media organization with a strong and explicitly articulated normative culture -- are assessing and incorporating user-generated content in their perceptions and practices. A framework of existentialism, which highlights issues including authenticity and the potentially conflicting constructs of freedom and responsibility, is used to inform a consideration of related professional norms. Although earlier works have offered a conceptual groundwork for exploring these issues, this study is one of the first to collect data indicating how journalists are negotiating personal and social ethics within the digital network in which they now work.

### **The *GUARDIAN* and the SCOTT TRUST**

The *Guardian*, published six days a week, and the Sunday *Observer* are the flagship national newspapers of Guardian Media Group plc, a company wholly owned by the Scott Trust. The core purpose of the Trust, created in 1936, is to preserve the financial and editorial independence of the group's media holdings (Guardian Media Group, 2007a), which include several smaller papers plus a handful of broadcast outlets and websites. Guardian.co.uk leads UK newspapers in online traffic, about two-thirds of it from overseas.

Under the Trust, the group mandate is to seek profit “to sustain journalism that is free from commercial or political interference” -- and, explicitly, to uphold a set of values articulated by former *Manchester Guardian* editor CP Scott in an editorial on the paper's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. “Comment is free, but facts are sacred,” Scott declared in 1921. Newspapers have “a moral as well as a material existence,” and “the voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard.” He believed honesty, integrity, courage, fairness, and a sense of duty to reader and

community should characterize a newspaper (Guardian Media Group, 2007b). Asked by trustees to apply those values to a digital age, current *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger wrote:

The character of Scott Trust journalism depends on its independence of ownership, behaviour and belief. Our journalists should be fierce in their protection of that independence. In the absence of a proprietor, our journalists' main relationships are with other colleagues and with readers, viewers or listeners. There should be a high premium on transparency, collaboration and open discussion. (Forgan, n.d.)

The *Guardian*, *Observer*, and guardian.co.uk employ nearly 800 journalists, about 10 percent of them on the award-winning website. Its Comment Is Free section, launched in 2006, includes print columnists and outside commentators with a stated aim to provide “an open-ended space for debate, dispute, argument and agreement” (guardian.co.uk, n.d.); by early 2008, it was attracting 350,000 comments and more a month (personal communication). Except for topics deemed especially sensitive, such as “Blogging the Qur’an,” comments are not pre-moderated; however, any comment that a reader flags as abusive is reviewed by a staffer and may be pulled.

At the time of this study, the *Guardian* allowed stand-alone user contributions only in an obituary segment called “Other Lives,” a part of its online travel section, and its talk boards. Although the boards, which predate Comment Is Free, remain active, journalists are relatively uninvolved in them.

## **CONTEXT and PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK**

This section begins with brief overviews of scholarship on user-generated content and journalism ethics in a digital environment. The bulk of the section explores key aspects of existentialist philosophy relevant to the current work.

*User-Generated Content (UGC)*: Building on earlier work that traced the encroachment of such forms as blogs on journalists' occupational turf (Lowrey, 2006), explorations have turned

to how journalists are, or are not, accommodating material from users within “their” digital space. Of direct relevance is Thurman’s look at UGC in nine British news outlets. His interviewees highlighted content concerns including newsworthiness, quality, balance, and decency (Thurman, 2008). Deuze and his international colleagues suggest that participatory ideals do not mesh well with notions that journalists should keep their professional distance, “notions which tend to exclude rather than to include” (2007, p. 335).

In another multi-national study of UGC on media websites, Domingo et al. (2008) found that news organizations are interpreting online user participation mainly as an opportunity for readers to debate current events; the core journalistic culture remains largely unchanged, as professionals retain the decision-making power at each stage of the news production process. Similarly, Hermida and Thurman (2008) found that UK journalists are retaining traditional gatekeeping roles in adopting user content on their websites.

***Online Journalism Ethics:*** Hayes and his colleagues (2007) outlined three normative values related to journalistic credibility – authenticity, accountability, and autonomy -- that they suggested need to be strengthened and reinterpreted in a digital environment, where “old assumptions about journalistic roles and values can no longer be accepted uncritically nor old approaches to them continued indefinitely” (p. 275). The current study provides evidence about journalists’ views of these values from within the interactive context in which they now work.

Earlier work by Arant and Anderson (2001) indicated newspaper journalists felt strongly that ethics and standards should be the same whether publishing in print or online, although they worried that time and staffing pressures were eroding the ability to verify information before disseminating it. Deuze (2005) placed the normative values considered here, including autonomy, within what he called the ideology of journalism, a belief system that enables a group

to produce meanings and ideas. In considering challenges posed by external content providers such as bloggers, Singer (2007) also highlighted autonomy, along with accountability. She suggested that in a network, where all communicators and all communication are connected, journalistic autonomy is necessarily contested. In an earlier piece, she proposed reconceptualizing the journalist's role through a combination of existentialism and social responsibility theory. In an open medium that affords complete autonomy over personal communication, "the heart of a socially responsible existentialist lies in a combination of freely choosing to be responsible in order to fulfill a social role based on trust" (Singer, 2006, p. 13).

***Existentialism:*** Several contemporary media scholars have found existentialism useful for exploring how journalists view normative imperatives. The most thorough application comes from Merrill, who has argued for the paramount importance of autonomy, integral to journalists' commitment to seek and report truth (Merrill, 1974; 1996). Freedom implies personal determination of what is right and good, as well as personal responsibility for choices and actions – but not responsibility to others in choosing or acting (Merrill, 1989). In later writings, Merrill (1997) moderated his views and urged combining respect for the individual and society as a whole, although he has continued to distinguish between personal and social responsibility.

Others have focused on objectivity as an area of existential concern. Stoker (1995) argued that objectivity allows journalists to avoid taking responsibility for actions and suggested the existential journalist would serve as an interested reporter and interpreter rather than an "amoral, disinterested observer" (p. 20). In contrast, Ryan (2001) defended the practice of objective journalism on various philosophical grounds, including existentialist ones. He positioned objectivity as a stance that demands moral responsibility to acknowledge personal biases. Keith

(2000) extended the discussion to copy editors, for whom she said existentialism can provide the “courage and confidence to realize their full potential as guardians of ethical journalism” (p. 44).

Several existentialist themes are central to debates surrounding the growth of digital journalism in general and user-generated content in particular. Although the reality seems to perpetually lag behind the ideal, the internet arguably provides dramatic new opportunities to democratize the publication and dissemination of news and opinion (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003). However, the evolution of an interactive media environment raises questions about what counts as “truth,” where responsibility lies for actions and consequences, and whether useful dialogic relationships can be sustained. Existentialism offers a framework for addressing such questions. The rest of this section offers an overview of core concepts – freedom and responsibility, authenticity and truth, and dialogue -- from the perspective of key existentialists.

**Freedom and responsibility:** Merleau-Ponty argues that only two states of existence are logically possible: absolute freedom and absolute determinism. Not two ends of a continuum, these are mutually exclusive – all or nothing. He argues for the former, finding it “inconceivable that I should be free in certain of my actions and determined in others” (2001, pp. 434-435).

Freedom, notably freedom to choose, also is the “chief message” of Sartre’s philosophy (Warnock, 1965, p. 110). A radical and unique premise underpinning Sartrean freedom is that when people make choices, they do so for everyone: Each individual’s freedom is interdependent with that of others. Critics see an attempt to import morality into a dangerously nihilistic doctrine of absolute freedom founded in the absurd, but Wahl offers a sound, essentially Kantian, view:

[The] freedom [of others] is dependent on mine, and mine on theirs. Nothing could matter to me without mattering to others. ... In choosing a mode of behaviour for myself, I choose it in a way for all men; I decide that all men ought to behave in such and such a fashion. Hence man is ... totally responsible not only for his own existence but also for that of others. I cannot will my own freedom without at the same time willing that of others. (1959, p. 62)

Existentialism is thus an extraordinarily harsh philosophy; with radical freedom comes uncompromising responsibility. From this perspective, distinctions among role responsibility -- a preoccupation of journalists -- legal responsibility, and moral responsibility cease to be significant in light of the *total* responsibility of individuals for consequences of their actions. Sartre's brand of existentialism, in particular, removes the possibility of excuses because every act is of the actor's own volition: "The coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero" (Sartre, 1966, p. 43). No matter the provocation or pressure, the existentialist can never say with any sense of authenticity that "they made me do it."

**Authenticity and truth:** Authenticity is another important concept in the existentialist canon. According to Heidegger, authenticity is the condition of those who, through experiencing angst, understand the existential structure of their lives and thus recognize their responsibility to choose their own identity, within personal or cultural constraints (Honderich, 1995). Sartre, with his emphasis on freedom, claims a nearly identical position: "To be authentic is to realise fully one's being-in-situation, whatever this situation may happen to be" (1999, p. 54).

Authenticity is something possessed, not something one can achieve through conscious actions. According to Sartre (1983), those who seek authenticity for its own sake are in fact no longer authentic. The existentialist conceptualization does not correspond with the everyday impression of authenticity as synonymous with genuineness, honesty, and sincerity.

The notions of honesty and sincerity can be defined as congruence between one's inclinations and the prevailing ethos, or as congruence between one's behaviour and one's innermost essence. Authenticity, however, is not in keeping with such a definition. Not only does it deny any rigid a priori essence, but it also rejects any intrinsic value in compliance with a given set of standards. (Golomb, 1995, p. 12)



Sartre links authenticity directly to responsibility. He says authenticity “consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate” (1995, p. 90).

From an existentialist viewpoint, being authentic is not synonymous with being truthful. In fact, the notion of what counts as “the truth” is called into question. Jaspers’ conception of multiple truths encompasses five echelons; all are vital, and all must be present together for the whole or real truth to be approximated (Grieder, 1999). The first is *pragmatic truth*, the usefulness of a belief or opinion. Next is the *truth of consciousness-in-general*, which comes close to the conventional meaning -- the truth of science (or, in the eyes of the journalist, journalism). *Truth of spirit* is rooted in the conviction behind a belief or idea, and the desire to pursue it. Fourth is the *truth of existence*, corresponding to an awareness of what it means to be oneself, akin to authenticity. Finally, the *truth of transcendence* concerns moving beyond the realm of objective existence, illustrated in Jaspers’ emphasis on the subjectivity of truth:

Truth does not lie in something already known, or something finally knowable, or in an absolute, but rather in what arises and comes to pass. Here there is only a relative and changing truth, for empirical existence itself changes. (1997, p. 81)

**Dialogue:** The existentialist conceptualization of dialogue is perhaps best expressed through the work of Martin Buber. He emphasizes two fundamental modes of human existence: the combinations *I-Thou* and *I-It* (Buber, 1958).

The *I-It* establishes the individual in an objectified relationship with the world. This *I* is an observer, with a diminished understanding of both self and others. The objects (*Its*) in the world exist principally for the individual’s benefit, to be explored, manipulated, and used – that is, to be objectified. From Buber’s perspective, the *I-It* relationship represents an impoverished mode of existence characterized by alienation and existential angst.

The *I* of the *I-Thou* experiences a quite different engagement with the world. In this type of relationship, the individual encounters existence as a subject among other subjects. The *I-It* necessarily involves a distance between subject and object; the *I-Thou* requires interaction in close proximity. “The highest human challenge is to be guided in one’s life by I-Thou encounters and to realize in the everyday what one has learned from such encounters” (Gordon, 1999, p. 59).

Thus, for Buber, the individual guided by the *I-Thou* attitude is developed largely by communicating with others. He distinguishes between the dominant mode of communication, which involves simply experiencing others in the impoverishing *I-It* attitude, and encounters with others in the *I-Thou* mode. Buber talks of seeing “the other” in different ways. The observer identifies certain characteristics of the other and categorizes that person accordingly. The onlooker sees the other in a rounded, individualistic, and contextualized way. Both roles are detached from the other, but the perspective is entirely different.

Buber argues that meaningful dialogue occurs only in the latter kind of relationship. He identifies three types of dialogue, starting with “genuine dialogue,”

where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each within himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources. (Buber, 2002, p. 22)

According to Arnett and Arneson (1999), the critical incidences of personal development or existential growth come through genuine dialogue between individuals. Buber also believes that only dialogue enables “inclusion” of the other and experience of “the other side.” This is different from empathy, which implies abandoning one’s position; dialogue involves maintaining one’s own existential position and accepting that of the other. Dialogue and communication are

not dimensions of the self but rather “the existential and ontological reality in which the self comes into being and through which it fulfils and authenticates itself” (Buber, 2002: xv).

Ethnographic research into these themes is problematic because respondents rarely use existentialist terms to refer to their experiences or perceptions. Journalists are concerned with issues of freedom, authenticity, and dialogue but are more likely to talk about autonomy, credibility, and accountability. Media ethics scholars have long wrestled with optimal ways to connect philosophical and professional iterations of similar ideals. In this journal, to cite just a few examples, Gordon and Merrill (1988) linked accountability to freedom and the exercise of power, while Plaisance called for accountability to be understood as “a fluid dynamic of interaction” (2000, p. 258). Arguments have been made that autonomy empowers both citizens and journalists (Brislin, 2004) and that credibility is tied to a notion of “justifiable consequences” to audiences (Ward, 2005), both suggestive of existentialist ideas about interdependent freedom and dialogic relationships. Ward also highlighted credibility as fundamental to both truth-telling and independence, hallmarks of trustworthy journalism. He emphasized as well that the public has a right to actively test news media claims of credibility, in general and for specific stories, rather than being “limited to passively accepting assurances of credibility” (2005, p. 10).

Joining this effort to connect philosophical theory with professional articulation of related concepts, the researchers here sought evidence within the terminology used by their respondents. This necessarily subjective enterprise was guided by research questions that attempt to pair journalistic conceptualizations with their closest existentialist counterpart, with the expectation that the fit will unavoidably be less than perfect:

**RQ1a:** How do *Guardian* journalists perceive and enact authenticity -- which they may frame in professional normative terms related to credibility -- in an interactive media environment?

**RQ1b:** How do they perceive and enact freedom -- which they may frame in professional normative terms related to autonomy -- in this environment?

**RQ1c:** How do they perceive and enact responsibility -- which they may frame in professional normative terms related to accountability -- in this environment?

**RQ2:** How do *Guardian* journalists conceptualize and negotiate dialogic relationships with users in an interactive media environment?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This ethnographic case study relied on two data collection methods: in-depth interviews and questionnaires. Although ethnographic research primarily uses qualitative methods, some newsroom fieldwork has included non-random surveys (Delamont, 2004). The use of multiple perspectives helps researchers clarify meaning and enrich interpretation.

Ethnography typically involves in-depth investigation of a small number of cases, even a single case, rather than an attempt to identify general trends (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). The purpose, as here, is to represent not the world but the case, a bounded and integrated system with identifiable patterns of behavior (Stake, 2005). Ethnographic approaches are useful for understanding debates among organizational stakeholders about efficient, effective, equitable, and humane means of achieving goals (Miller, Dingwall, & Murphy, 2004). Cultural considerations are central to ethnography, particularly when groups face restructuring and a loss of traditions that may erode earlier certainties (Willis & Trondman, 2000).

In the present study, three researchers conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 11 primarily print and 22 primarily digital journalists at the *Guardian* and its sister media between November 2007 and February 2008. A purposive sample of journalists was selected with the help of a contact in the online newsroom. Respondents were sought who had direct experience with user-generated content (UGC) but could provide diverse insights. Although

digital journalists are more likely to work with UGC, print journalists' output often is open for comment when it appears online; including them enabled perspectives to emerge from within the more traditional format. Interviewees were writers, including bloggers, and editors (most of whom also wrote for their sections); specialists in news, sports, and feature areas such as music or travel; and journalists with especially relevant responsibilities, notably with Comment Is Free.

All interviews took place in London and lasted from 30 minutes to more than an hour, depending mostly on interviewees' time constraints. Interviews were recorded manually, electronically, or both; a textual analysis of the transcripts was subsequently conducted to identify themes relevant to the research questions. All participants were promised confidentiality, in line with the university's human subjects research policies, and are identified here only by medium (print or online) and broad job description (writer, including blogger, or editor).

The questionnaires, distributed before the interviews, had two main purposes: to give the interviewees a chance to organize their thoughts about the topics and to give the researchers insight into how they conceptualized constructs of interest. Journalists were asked to list up to three words or short phrases related to journalistic credibility, responsibility, autonomy, and competence. They also were invited to discuss what they saw as the key ethical issue related to UGC. Twenty-eight interviewees completed at least part of the questionnaire. Responses were entered into a spreadsheet to facilitate identification of repeated words or themes.

## **FINDINGS**

This section contains three parts. The first two address the first research question, drawing in turn on the questionnaires and interviews. The third section turns to findings related to journalists' negotiation of relationships in a networked media environment.

*Questionnaire data:* The 24 journalists who provided words or phrases corresponding to the constructs of interest here saw a few key traits as essential hallmarks of “good” journalism. Accuracy stood out as central to perceptions about ethical practice; it was mentioned most often in connection with credibility, responsibility, and overall competence.

Other associations also spanned more than one construct. Honesty and balance / fairness were associated with credibility and responsibility; thoroughness and expertise, including notions about authority, were highlighted in connection with credibility and competence. Independence was seen as another important aspect of credibility, as well as comprising the core of journalistic autonomy. In considering autonomy, respondents specified freedom from commercial, political, management, and government pressures; they also cited generic concepts such as free speech and the ability to develop a personal voice.

Most respondents bailed out before addressing a question about key ethical issues raised by UGC. The 15 journalists who identified an issue focused on credibility and civility – and by their absence, the potential for users to denigrate platform and product. Respondents valued providing space for debate but were concerned about abuse of a privilege bestowed by the *Guardian*. “The platform gives credibility to people whose comments may be completely inaccurate, offensive or without foundation in fact. It arguably undermines the work of professional journalists by placing the words of people who have no training or professional responsibility alongside, or even on a par with, those who do,” said an online journalist.

But respondents also linked UGC to values of universal free speech – “letting people have their voice heard without intimidation,” as an online editor said -- and strengthened relationships. “We’re no longer writing for people, but having a conversation with them,” a print editor wrote. “The relationship is more balanced.” However, an online respondent pointed out

that “cultural differences” remain between journalists and users. She recommended “developing ways of allowing users to add more value to debate, rather than giving them a space that interpolates them as ‘inferior’ (or junior) journalists.”

***Exploring ethical constructs (RQ1):*** This section draws on interview transcript analysis to consider the three segments of our first research question in turn. As the questionnaire data suggest, there is considerable overlap; few journalists conceptualized these as distinct normative constructs. They are treated separately here to facilitate a coherent presentation of the findings.

**Authenticity and credibility:** For *Guardian* staff, the exercise of something akin to existential authenticity in a professional context rests on credibility. The extent to which UGC challenges or undermines personal and institutional credibility was a major concern. Journalists felt confident that they took adequate steps to ensure what they wrote was credible – but felt helpless to either assess or improve the credibility of what users provided. An editor said she had no expectation that users would be credible, citing issues of “what they know, what they don’t know, what motivation they have, and what views they bring with them.”

Institutional as well as individual credibility was at stake. Respondents were universally supportive of, and proprietary toward, “*Guardian* values.” They saw their employer as providing a high-quality product and as standing for things they approved, including enabling a diversity of voices to be heard. Many highlighted the value of the website, particularly Comment Is Free, as a platform for a healthy democratization of discourse. “The old model of top-down, from-the-pulpit editorializing just doesn’t do anymore,” said an online editor who emphasized the value of open debate. “You’re not there to give people definitive answers.”

But others disagreed that the online discourse was inherently beneficial, viewing material from users as not only less credible but also less authoritative than what journalists write. These

interviewees also worried about a potentially detrimental effect from “nasty comments, which can undermine the brand,” as an online editor said. They saw a crucial role for “the expert journalist who can interrogate and understand and all of those sorts of things in a way that the citizen reporter just can’t,” as a print editor said.

Another threat to authority was more direct: Users do not hesitate to challenge journalists, often stridently, through personal attacks, disagreement over opinion, and disputes about factual information. All three require time and energy to deal with – resources not always in adequate supply. Journalists who feel they already have too much to do wonder “why would I want to respond to BigDick119?” an online editor explained.

Otherwise, journalists favored a different response to each challenge. Personal attacks were in some ways the easiest: Grit your teeth and try to ignore them – if you can. “Sometimes I snipe back,” one online writer confessed. “I try to take a deep breath, be positive and say, ‘Well, the reason we said this was because ...’ But to be honest, I don’t feel it’s part of my job to go and disabuse people of notions they shouldn’t be holding in the first place.” “If you’re aggressive and high-handed back, it will inflame them even more,” an online editor said. “It’s a good lesson in human psychology.” The lesson was not universally learned. A print editor said his reaction to abusive users was: “YOU set the tone for the discourse – you can’t expect us not to respond in kind. If you call us ignorant imbeciles, you’ve got to expect that we’ll take it to heart a little bit.”

Differences of opinion drew mixed reaction, though particularly among online staffers, honest (and civilly expressed) disagreement was seen as providing healthy opportunities for meaningful engagement and self-reflection. Having opinions challenged combats complacency, a print editor said, and responding constructively to users involves explaining why you disagree with their viewpoint: “You have to question yourself as well as them.” But not all opinions are



seen as deserving a response. Some journalists “refuse to engage with people if they think the criticisms are unfair or just kind of nasty,” an online editor said. “It’s very off-putting, especially if you’re used to just having your work out there in the newspaper, being unquestioned.”

Challenges related to factual statements also were valued, though for a different reason: Knowing their work would be open to user comment made them pay extra attention to getting it right in the first place. One blogger said she asks herself if what she has written is “bullet-proof” because “I know someone will shoot me down if I don’t, and obviously that will destroy the credibility of anything else you say.” However, there was concern that responding to challenges of what the journalist considers basic information can become a time-consuming distraction. “It’s good that people can raise things. The internet gives them more standing to do that. The difficulty is it can then involve the media in long and tedious work to justify themselves,” an online editor said. “They often question very basic assumptions.”

**Freedom and autonomy:** In challenging “basic assumptions” and otherwise questioning what journalists do or write, UGC has the potential to erode not just authority but also its close relative, professional autonomy. Most interviewees treasured what they felt was a great deal of autonomy. Online staffers in particular commented on the freedom they had to write – and post – what they liked, in comparison to more protracted print editing processes. An online writer said the newspaper editor who “scrutinizes everything” before publication has been replaced in part by users who “can act as whistle blowers if there’s dodgy content.”

But journalists are wary about undue user influence on what they write or how they write it. UGC potentially impinges on their autonomy mainly because of the ready availability – indeed, the seductiveness – of hit logs and comment counts. Journalists accustomed to their work

being part of a package for which only aggregated readership figures are available a few times a year can see exactly how many people read each story and how many feel compelled to respond.

Some saw such information as useful. “I have an enormous amount of independence. I can write about anything,” an online journalist said. “But there's got to be a reason for it and a demand for it and an audience for it. Online you do have this kind of instant knowledge of whether something you've written is of interest.” However, most were reluctant to say that usage data did or should dictate what they wrote or how they wrote it, a practice a print writer described as “traffic whoring.” They stressed the importance of journalistic autonomy in content decisions. One online writer said he was appalled at what he would have to do for popularity. Another said she would feel “slummy” if she abandoned depth just to attract comments.

Some interviewees phrased their objections in terms of safeguarding the *Guardian* brand as distinct from the down-market British tabloids. “You have to balance the desire for hits with what we think the paper should represent,” an online editor said. Several said that while “dumbing down” their content, for instance with celebrity gossip, would attract more hits, such appeals to “the lowest common denominator” ultimately would alienate “real” *Guardian* readers.

**Responsibility and accountability:** This is the most explicitly social of the three constructs, considering the effect of individual actions on others and thus referencing an existentialist idea that responsibility entails looking outward as well as inward.

Journalists talked specifically about accountability and responsibility. Most felt a responsibility to uphold the *Guardian*'s reputation and Scott Trust values. Several editors described a “duty of care” to writers, especially those commissioned to write blogs – but perhaps unprepared for the outpouring of reaction they were about to get. Journalists also felt a duty to

readers related to quality of both the content and the discourse about it. “There’s a responsibility to maintain civilized discourse,” an online journalist said. “It’s a problem for everyone.”

Interviewees felt willingness to be accountable, particularly when they made a mistake, was especially important online, partly because users had fewer such obligations: “With citizen journalists, it’s all rights and no responsibilities,” a print writer said. For journalists, overlapping considerations of honesty, transparency, and trust related to their accountability in a network. “It works by being honest,” a print editor said. “What makes people cross is if they think you’re being unfair or dishonest or disingenuous.” An online editor said: “The barriers are broken down. Users do expect more journalists to step out from behind articles, defend, and discuss them.”

Respondents saw anonymity as a UGC characteristic that distinguished bylined *Guardian* writers from those who merely commented. Indeed, almost all the respondents who mentioned anonymity suggested it was a factor in the too-often uncivil tone of online discourse. Because they are anonymous, “people feel licensed to say things in content and style that they wouldn’t own if publishing as themselves,” an online editor said.

Though not as prevalent a theme, a few respondents touched on issues related to balance and fairness, highlighted in the questionnaire as a component of responsibility and credibility. An online journalist cited a need to “consciously signal” efforts to look at a topic “from different perspectives, partly because immediately following the piece, you’re going to get loads of perspectives! So if you haven’t even thought about one of them, I think it undermines your initial attempt.” Again, they saw the website as offering an unparalleled opportunity to enact CP Scott’s dictum that the paper should be a forum for a diversity of views: Instead of only people from “a middle class Oxbridge background telling you what to think or steering your opinion, you’ve got a range of voices,” a print editor said.

*Negotiating new relationships (RQ2)*: The complexities of negotiating new, closer forms of interaction with audience members were a significant interview theme. Comfort levels varied.

Many said they valued new relationships. “It’s made it a much more balanced site,” an online editor said; despite the disruptive contributors, “most are eloquent, intelligent, and able to add to the debate.” Interviewees embedded in online communities outside their *Guardian* role also had an easier time interacting. Veteran journalists asked to engage with users want to know “‘why am I being thrown to the lions?’ Whereas I don’t see them as lions,” a blogger-turned-journalist said. “They’re part of the tribe that I am still part of, but in a different way.”

Others were taken aback by a disturbingly confrontational discourse that they saw as rude to the point of being abusive. An editor said one of his writers told him, “If I wanted to be called a cunt all day, I’d become a traffic warden and do it in the open air.” Some confessed to feeling hurt or upset. “You get really, really depreciative comments,” an online writer said. “Whatever kind of maxims you repeat to yourself about how anything good always has haters, it subconsciously works away.”

At the time of the study, no explicit policies for journalist-user interaction existed at the *Guardian*, though informal guidelines were emerging. They suggested thanking users who correct errors, engaging with those who raise interesting (in the journalists’ eyes) points ... and ignoring the irredeemably obnoxious.

One point on which interviewees agreed was that the latter were Not *Guardian* Readers, whom they characterized as left-of-center, politically engaged intellectuals. The website, they said, attracts “people who spend the day being mad about everything” and come just to bash an institution they hate. A print editor said too many users were “at the barmy end of the market and

not really reflecting what the reader base thinks”; editors need to avoid being “driven by agendas that are outside of the paper to tell you what the paper should be doing.”

Overall, journalists indicated the presence of UGC on “their” website was spurring a reconsideration of what the relationship with the public has been, is, and might be. “It takes time working out what the best way is to respond,” an online writer said. “People who raise interesting points, it’s nice to acknowledge that.” Several other interviewees also indicated they were coming to see encouragement of cogent contributions as having more long-term value than discouragement of the less cogent. “You can ignore the very hostile ones and respond to the more constructive ones,” an online editor said, adding it was good to “go in and say ‘fair point.’”

Some said a bit of professional distance was helpful, though. A print writer said he saw his pieces as “the beginning of a conversation” but did not have “in-depth relationships with readers because that would be weird.” Taking a step back also can be a self-preservation strategy. Reading comment threads, an online editor said, can lead to “getting very depressed: ‘They all hate us, what’s the point, why don’t we just pack it all in?’ And that’s where the sense of autonomy comes in, and you have to say, ‘Actually, this is still our website, and this is what we’re trying to do here.’” She cited the Scott Trust mandate to enable debate, adding: “If we didn’t have our autonomy, we wouldn’t be producing that range of voices that we do produce.”

*Guardian* journalists, then, conveyed considerable ambivalence about an interactive terrain that they were only just learning to navigate. One online journalist said her colleagues were not trained or prepared for the “slip from professional discourse into a more personal discourse.” Their role is no longer simply to inform or entertain; it is to engage and interact with an enormously diverse range of unseen, but definitely not unheard, people.

## DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

The evidence presented here suggests that journalists are struggling with how to ethically accommodate the opportunities for freedom and dialogue presented by UGC while safeguarding their credibility and sense responsibility. They are encountering a host of issues, from the limits of their own authority to the duty of care they bear to themselves, their employer, and their audience. Although the Scott Trust creates a particular ethical framework for *Guardian* employees, the literature suggests that the issues with which these journalists are wrestling are increasingly ubiquitous as more media organizations open their digital doors, however cautiously, to content created by people whom they do not employ – and cannot fire.

The existentialists' insights may help. The internet as a medium inherently foregrounds key existentialist concepts outlined here. It affords every individual user enormous freedom, as well as near-total responsibility for how that freedom is exercised. At the same time, a network increases the interdependence of individually authentic actors. It accommodates Jaspers' multifaceted aspects of existential truth and the dialogic relationships described by Buber.

Journalists think about these existential themes through the potentially distorting lens of professional norms, established in and tailored to a very different media environment from the digital one. When journalists control the news product and the published discourse surrounding it – and position autonomy as a safeguard of their own credibility -- relations with users are destined to be held at the distance characterized by an *I-It* relationship. Yet in a seamless network, with its flattened or even obliterated hierarchies, each individual is a subject among other subjects (Buber, 1958), and all are in equally close proximity – a click of a mouse away.

Accepting one's interdependency on other equally authentic individuals is necessary but undeniably challenging.

The first research question asked how *Guardian* journalists perceived and enacted the existentialist mandates of authenticity, freedom, and responsibility, framed in professional normative terms with which respondents are comfortable. RQ1a focused on credibility. A perceived value of UGC was that it encouraged increased attention to accuracy, a paramount professional virtue. But journalists expressed concerns about the credibility of user contributions, as well as the effects of uncivil comments on personal and institutional credibility. UGC also potentially challenges their authority; while journalists appreciated the fact that more voices could be heard, many felt a lot of those voices were not worth listening to. More broadly, however, the interviews indicate these journalists possess considerable existentialist authenticity. They did not express denial or resentment; they understood their situation, along with its limits and opportunities.

RQ1b considered issues of freedom, conceptualized by journalists mainly in terms of individual autonomy. *Guardian* journalists valued their autonomy highly, and most were adamant that usage data – direct and immediate feedback from users about what they were interested in reading – should not be allowed to encroach on their own professional news judgment. Ultimately, the online environment appears to have had little impact on changing the existential attitude of respondents toward their own freedom.

RQ1c turned to matters involving responsibility, including journalistic perceptions of accountability. Respondents felt accountable to internal and external constituencies, seeing their explicit responsibilities as something that set them apart from users. The simple fact that users can be anonymous while journalists cannot was highlighted as crucial. More broadly, however,

the networked environment exacerbates the difficulty of establishing lines of responsibility for content. A cornerstone of the existentialist perspective serves as a reminder that passing the buck is unacceptable: Each individual – user as well as journalist -- must assume personal responsibility for decisions and their consequences.

All these issues are connected to the challenges inherent in negotiating new, more dialogic relationships, the focus of the second research question. It seemed to generate more questions than answers. *Guardian* journalists, particularly those most thoroughly embedded in the traditional media culture, expressed considerable ambivalence about such relationships. Many were taken aback by the tone of the online discourse and responded by seeking ways to establish distance from users, labelling them as different from “normal” – that is, newspaper -- readers and expressing wariness about engaging with them. How does a journalist, with the best of will, engage the readership in a Buberian dialogue when many readers are actively opposed to an *I-Thou* stance – and many journalists are committed to maintaining professional distance? Most saw a theoretical value in interactivity, but the reality presented a more profound challenge to their professional sensibilities than they had perhaps anticipated.

Overall, this study suggests that journalists are incorporating issues raised by UGC within an existing normative framework, one defined by professional constructs and, for these particular journalists, by the moral mandates of the Scott Trust. Both the Trust and the familiar norms explicitly highlight the value of free and open discourse – “comment is free” – but also of a traditional journalistic approach to ensuring credibility and accuracy – “but facts are sacred.” Yet journalists face challenges in a network that they did not confront when the product they alone produced was one they alone controlled. An existentialist approach may offer a valuable path toward understanding the ongoing changes in this open, participatory environment. The nature of



the medium invites consideration of optimal ways for journalists to combine freedom with responsibility in fostering and nurturing new relationships.

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