The People Formerly Known as the Audience

Social-media technologies allow a far wider range of people to take part in gathering, filtering and distributing news

THE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT Barack Obama would shortly appear on television came late in the evening on May 1st. “POTUS to address the nation tonight at 10.30pm eastern time,” tweeted Dan Pfeiffer, communications director at the White House. This caused an explosion of speculation on Twitter. Had Muammar Qaddafi been killed in an air strike? Had Osama bin Laden been tracked down at last? At first these two theories had roughly equal support, measured by the volume of tweets. But then Keith Urbahn, chief of staff for Donald Rumsfeld, a former defense secretary, had a call from a well-connected television news producer who wanted to interview Mr Rumsfeld about the killing of bin Laden. Mr Urbahn tweeted: “So I'm told by a reputable person they have killed Osama bin Laden. Hot damn.”

His message quickly rippled across Twitter. Television news channels began to report the story, which was confirmed by Pres. Obama an hour later. It subsequently turned out that Sohaib Athar, a computer consultant living in Abbottabad, the Pakistani village where bin Laden had been hiding, had unwittingly described the operation as it happened in a series of tweets (“A huge windowshaking bang here in Abbottabad…I hope it's not the start of something nasty”).

The next day a picture that purported to show bin Laden's bloodied face began to circulate online, but on Twitter it was swiftly exposed as a fake. A week later a statement on an obscure website attributed to bin Laden's son Omar, calling his father's killing “criminal” and his burial at sea demeaning, was reported around the world after a link to it was tweeted by Leah Farrall, a counter-terrorism analyst. All this shows how social media are changing journalism, says Mark Jones, global communities editor at Reuters, a news agency: “Every aspect of that story was on Twitter.”
Surveys in Britain and America suggest that 7-9% of the population use Twitter, compared with almost 50% for Facebook. But Twitter users are the “influencers”, says Nic Newman, a former “future media” executive at the BBC who is now a visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University. “The audience isn't on Twitter, but the news is on Twitter,” says Mr Jones.

Thanks to the rise of social media, news is no longer gathered exclusively by reporters and turned into a story but emerges from an ecosystem in which journalists, sources, readers and viewers exchange information. The change began around 1999, when blogging tools first became widely available, says Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University. The result was “the shift of the tools of production to the people formerly known as the audience,” he says. This was followed
by a further shift: the rise of “horizontal media” that made it quick and easy for anyone to share links (via Facebook or Twitter, for example) with large numbers of people without the involvement of a traditional media organization. In other words, people can collectively act as a broadcast network.

At first many news organizations were openly hostile towards these new tools. In America the high point of the antagonism between bloggers and the mainstream media was in late 2004, when “60 Minutes”, an evening news show on CBS, alleged on the basis of leaked memos that George Bush junior had used family connections to win favorable treatment in the Air National Guard in the 1970s. Bloggers immediately questioned the authenticity of the memos. A former CBS News executive derided blogging as “a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing what he thinks”. But the bloggers were right. CBS retracted the story and Dan Rather, one of the most respected names in American news, resigned as the show’s anchor in early 2005.

But in the past few years mainstream media organizations have changed their attitude. The success of the Huffington Post, which launched in May 2005 with a combination of original reporting by members of staff, blog posts from volunteers (including many celebrity friends of Arianna Huffington’s, the site’s co-founder) and links to news stories on other sites, showed the appeal of what Ms Huffington calls a “hybrid” approach that melds old and new, professional and amateur. Newspapers and news channels have since launched blogs of their own, hired many bloggers and allowed readers to leave comments, as on blogs. They also invite pictures, video and other contributions from readers and seek out material published on the internet, thus incorporating non-journalists into the news system.

Journalists are becoming more inclined to see blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media as a valuable adjunct to traditional media (and sometimes a corrective to them). “We see these things as being highly complementary to what we do,” says Martin Nisenholtz of the New York Times. Many journalists who were dismissive about social media have changed their tune in the past few months as their value became apparent in the coverage of the Arab uprisings and the Japanese earthquake, says Liz Heron, social-media editor at the New York Times.

The view from the street

When a young Tunisian, Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire on December 17th to protest against the police confiscating his fruit stall and the lack of jobs for young people, his action prompted demonstrations by other youths in the town of Sidi Bouzid. A video of one protest, led by Mr Bouazizi’s mother, was posted on Facebook, where it was seen by the new-media team at Al Jazeera, a satellite news broadcaster founded in 1996 and based in Qatar that has become the Arab world’s most influential media outlet. Al Jazeera showed the video on air, and by the time Bouazizi died of his burns on January 4th protests had broken out across Tunisia and spread across the Arab world.
Marc Lynch, an expert on Middle Eastern media at George Washington University, says social media and satellite television worked together to draw attention to the Arab spring. Social media spread images of protesters in Tunisia that might otherwise have been suppressed by the regime, he wrote on his blog at Foreign Policy. “But it was the airing of these videos on Al Jazeera…which brought those images to the mass Arab public and even to many Tunisians who might otherwise not have realised what was happening.”

The staff in Al Jazeera’s Arabic and English newsrooms had, as it happened, undergone intense social-media training only the month before. “It was just in time,” says Moeed Ahmad, the network’s head of new media. Although Al Jazeera had used material from the internet in its coverage before, in Tunisia there was no other choice, because it had no reporters on the ground. With its journalists freshly trained in the use of such material, theory was quickly put into practice.

The training was the culmination of a two-year initiative to make better use of social media throughout Al Jazeera, prompted by the realization during the three-week Gaza war of 2008-09 that the channel’s audience was swiftly moving online. This meant convincing journalists that social media are not a threat, but “the biggest assets you can have”. Instead of flying a reporter somewhere to cover a story, Al Jazeera can draw upon networks of trusted volunteers whose credibility has been established.

Other news organizations are working along similar lines. Sharek, launched in 2008, seems to have been inspired by CNN’s iReport website. Over 750,000 people have volunteered as iReporters, and reports have been submitted from every country on earth. CNN’s coverage of the Japanese earthquake in March, which drew heavily on iReport material, won it its best ratings in more than five years. “Because it happened so suddenly and in such a remote area, having the extra iReport material was enormously helpful,” says Mark Whitaker, managing editor of CNN. “I just see it growing.” But it is always vetted before being used on air, he adds.

Verifying material to ensure it is suitable for broadcasting can be an elaborate process, says Mohamed Yehia of BBC Arabic. Journalists examine photographs and video footage for recognizable landmarks, street signs, vehicles or weapons to determine whether images really come from a particular city or region. Sound can help. Shadows can indicate the time of day. Comparing weather reports with date stamps can reveal whether a video or photograph really was taken on a particular date. Even when verified, such material will not be used if it identifies people and puts them in danger, Mr Yehia adds.

As well as getting involved (if they choose) in newsgathering, verification and curation of news, readers and viewers have also become part of the news-distribution system as they share and recommend items of interest via e-mail and social networks. “If searching for news was the most important development of the past decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next,” noted a recent study of online news consumption in America by the Pew Research Centre’s...
Project for Excellence in Journalism. Typically around 20-30% of visitors to the websites of big news organizations come from Google’s search engine or its news site, Google News.

The proportion of visitors referred from Facebook is smaller, but growing quickly as social-sharing features become more commonplace and easier to use. With a single click of a Facebook “Like” button, for example, you can recommend a story, video or slideshow to your entire network of friends. Some news sites present visitors with a list of stories recommended by their friends because they reckon an endorsement from someone you know carries extra weight. “This year you'll see more and more news sites where referrals from social networks exceed those from search engines,” says Joshua Benton of the Nieman Journalism Lab. “Facebook is beginning to join Google as one of the most influential players in driving news audiences,” observes the Pew study, as social sharing steers readers to the stories that are most popular among their social circle.

The feeling is mutual
Clearly readers and viewers are getting steadily more involved in gathering, filtering and distributing news. The Guardian’s Alan Rusbridger calls this process the “mutualization” of news. “If you are open to contributions from others, you generally end up with richer, better, more diverse and expert content than if you try to do it alone,” he says. Involving thousands of readers through “crowdsourcing” also lets news outlets do things that would otherwise be impractical, such as searching through troves of documents looking for interesting material.

Rather than thinking of themselves as setting the agenda and managing the conversation, news organizations need to recognize that journalism is now just part of a conversation that is going on anyway, argues Jeff Jarvis, a media guru at the City University of New York. The role of journalists in this new world is to add value to the conversation by providing reporting, context, analysis, verification and debunking, and by making available tools and platforms that allow people to participate. All this requires journalists to admit that they do not have a monopoly on wisdom. “Ten years ago that was a terribly threatening idea, and it still is to some people,” says Mr Rusbridger. “But in the real world the aggregate of what people know is going to be, in most cases, more than we know inside the building.”

As Mr Rosen points out, even if just 1% of the audience is now involved in the news system, that's millions of new people. “It isn't true that everyone is a journalist,” he says. “But a lot more people are involved.”