

What is Open Journalism and what is its appeal?

The fundamental shift in thinking underlying open journalism is that it sees journalism as an on-going process, rather than as a finished product. Traditional journalistic work is presented to the reader in its complete, hopefully perfect form, while open journalism encourages reader participation from the start, and even after the story is “finished.” As such, it represents a key change in the perception of the role of a news organisation; rather than being a mere distributor of news it becomes an informed, knowledgeable voice which steers a discussion around the news.

Open journalism is open to the input and ideas of all: it seeks to take advantage of the abundance of information available on the web and the plethora of members of the public who are not just consumers of news, but have also become producers and curators of information.

As Melanie Sill of the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism says, open journalism is reader-focused, rather than product-focused. “We must reorder the fundamental processes of journalism toward the goal of serving communities – readers, viewers, listeners and customers,” she explains in her report, *The Case for Open Journalism Now*. “We must focus first on service and only then on platform or product.”

The recent enthusiasm for open journalism can be interpreted both as an eagerness to seize the opportunity to make use of newly available information, and as the result of the necessity to find new ways to cover stories in a time of financial difficulties and subsequent cutbacks.

There is a clear, practical business case for supplementing reporting with information from elsewhere when you have fewer journalists who are trying to produce more content. If you can save time by linking out to other sources, or improve an article by tapping into the expertise of your audience, then why not?

“You always get a better account of the world by involving others,” says Alan Rusbridger, editor of the Guardian. “The only problem is how to sort out the good content from the bad.”

A good case for open journalism can also be made on the basis of the need for transparency at a time when trust in news organisations is low. If you are open about what you are reporting on and how you go about doing it, and open to questions and suggestions, then readers will feel more confident that you are acting in their interests.

Being physically open to readers takes this a step further. Inviting readers to express their ideas and concerns face to face can both increase trust and bring the news organisation closer to the community.

Commercial implications

A potential drawback to open journalism is that its very openness makes it harder to sell. If the audience is involved in the reporting process and there is less focus put on the finished product, then it is harder to ask them to pay for it. Open journalism seems broadly incompatible with paid digital content, both for practical and

ideological reasons. At a time when many publications are trying to decide whether to start charging for their online content, or to bet on spreading it as widely as possible, it is an extremely pertinent issue.

Rusbridger argues that in the long term, the Guardian’s open journalism approach will pay off commercially, as well as fulfilling its core aim of spreading its content as far and wide as possible.

The Guardian’s key commercial strategy is growing the audience now, and then finding a way to monetise a massive, engaged audience later on. “It’s a business model for a sustainable future,” Rusbridger said.

As detailed later, Colombian publication *La Silla Vacía* is using the community it has gathered through its open efforts to raise money through reader donations.

Challenges – open isn’t for everyone

One disadvantage of open journalism from a traditional journalistic point of view is that it does not accommodate, or at least reduces the impact of, scoops.

Does this matter? The speed of online communication, particularly through social networks such as Twitter, mean that scoops are ever harder to keep under wraps. It is possible to argue that, as the Guardian’s Paul Lewis said at the 2012 International Journalism Festival, in today’s increasingly connected world “The scoop is dead”. However, it is also necessary to remember that this belief is dependent on the existence of a highly digitally-engaged society.

Definition of open journalism

from Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the Guardian:

"Open journalism is journalism which is fully knitted into the web of information that exists in the world today. It links to it; sifts and filters it; collaborates with it and generally uses the ability of anyone to publish and share material to give a better account of the world.

- It encourages participation. It invites and/or allows a response
- It is not an inert, "us" or "them," form of publishing
- 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-publication processes
- It helps form communities of joint interest around subjects, issues or individuals
- It is open to the web and is part of it. It links to, and collaborates with, other material (including services) on the web
- It aggregates and/or curates the work of others
- It recognizes that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest
- It aspires to achieve, and reflect, diversity as well as promoting shared values
- It recognizes that publishing can be the beginning of the journalistic process rather than the end
- It is transparent and open to challenge – including correction, clarification and addition"

For some publications, the method of producing stories with the audience's participation is incompatible with their core goals. Both the Times of London and the Economist, for example, pride themselves on offering a finished product, which many readers greatly appreciate. The Times' iPad app is released once a day for this very reason: readers want something complete. As a result of the iPad edition's popularity, the paper has now also made a web app which offers the paper in a simple, linear format.

However, online, both publications offer features that incorporate open journalism. Outside of the Times' strict paywall, journalists engage in live chats with readers on Twitter, and for its cycling safety campaign, the paper invited readers to contribute their own stories and to mark "danger points" on a map.

See more about open journalism at the Economist on page 14.

A key challenge in integrating the use of open journalism is getting the staff on board. Open journalism will never work at a publication if journalists are not enthusiastic. And there will always be journalists who are reluctant to include the audience and their views in their stories, particularly as interacting with readers is often time consuming.

Open journalism in practice

For this report we have gathered together key examples of open journalism that highlight different approaches from very different types of news organisations.



Alan Rusbridger,
Editor of the Guardian