

Help Me Investigate: the social practices of investigative journalism

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Abstract

The way in which consumers understand the economic value of news is said to have changed. Proponents of “Free Culture” suggest that consumers have weaned themselves off paying for news. In response, interested parties offer investigative journalism as part of their justification for charging for news.

'Help Me Investigate' is an online tool which aims to help individuals "organise and pursue questions of public interest you think should be investigated" (Help Me Investigate, 2010). It provides tools and seeks to build a user base to effect the process of "crowdsourcing" (Brogan & Smith, 2009) of investigations which might normally be within the realm of investigative journalists.

The cost of "quality" journalism has recently been cited by Rupert Murdoch as part of his defence of paywall technology (Bunz, 2009). The crowdsourcing of investigations, which ostensibly offers free labour, challenges the orthodox view that news investigations are expensive. It also challenges the traditional notion of the "professional" investigative journalist, suggesting that we can all aspire to be in the elite cadre of newsmakers: we can be citizen investigative journalists.

Textually, Help Me Investigate presents itself using the genre codes and conventions of social networking. Through a virtual ethnography I describe the process of an online investigation as it operates both within Help me Investigate, and within a wider ecology of social media (blogs, twitter and physical meet ups). I will demonstrate the value of a distributed and layered network in leveraging social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) towards an investigative goal, and posit that distributed investigation, using free labour, can be both informed and valuable. While it is relatively easy for news media companies to profit from this crowdsourced activity, participants in the investigation do not go unrewarded; the social act of investigation enhances the aggregate social capital available within a network, but also confers individual benefits on those who take part.

Disruptive technology, disruptive culture and the cost of journalism

It is commonly held that Internet technologies and their attendant cultural phenomena offer a number of challenges to traditional media businesses. Broadly speaking these challenges are: the volume of media texts distributed on the Internet

contribute to an increase in the overall availability of media texts, and therefore a subsequent fragmentation of the mass audience which affects the economics of advertising based revenue; the Internet allows for media commodities to be easily distributed as flawless digital copies or recontextualised and reimagined texts, often with copies being traded in breach of copyright laws; Internet technologies reduce barriers to entry into media production, blurring the lines between producers and consumers of media, and bringing into question the notion of media professionalism (Shirky, 2008). By these means the Internet is understood to have reduced the efficacy and profitability of some established (pre-Internet) media business models and can be understood as a set of “disruptive technologies” (Bower & Christensen, 1995), or perhaps more accurately disruptive culture: the cultural practices which have formed around the Internet (free culture, personal media, social media, various forms of media sharing, mash-up culture, etc.) are seen to have altered the way in which many people chose to obtain, consume, and contribute to media texts. Such disruption creates threats to existing media business models, but also opportunities for new approaches to the business of media production.

It is tempting to see this situation through the prism of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 1976). As a model, creative destruction would suggest that mainstream media companies are locked into established business models which are now set towards failure. Meanwhile, nimble new businesses spring up with the flexibility to respond to the changed circumstances, hastening further the decline of established businesses, and ultimately contributing to their collapse. Google is often cast in the role of upstart start-up. Its innovation in making money out of Internet searches is seen as having a great impact upon the economics of advertising, and it has been suggested that this profit is built unfairly upon the content of media producers. While creative destruction is an attractive concept we must be careful not to apply it in too a deterministic manner: disruption undermines business model, new start ups emerge, old businesses die; disruption does not always lead to destruction in this linear manner. Some established businesses respond to disruptive technology and culture creatively, by seeking out ways to benefit from emerging practices; others respond in a protectionist manner, using influence and power in an attempt to shut down threats to their business; amidst this all, new organisations will attempt to seize what they can of

the opportunity, sometimes helped by sponsors from within existing media organisations.

A full historiography or an attempt to produce empirical data that proves my account of the impact of the Internet on media organisations is outside of the scope of this paper. Indeed the “facts” of this account are not of great importance to this study, but the fact that they are *considered* as facts is. A series of actions and positions have emerged which suggest that this account has been accepted and is being responded to. In the UK for example, the government has acted through consultation with concerned parties to produce the Digital Britain Report (Department for Culture Media & Sport and Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2009) and the subsequent Digital Economy Act, which strengthens the hand of media businesses to enforce their copyright, and envisions a strong creative industry sector supported by strong intellectual property law. The strategies of established media companies can also be understood in relation to the disruptive culture outlined above. Guardian Media Group, publisher of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers, has become a strong advocate of free access to online news. Their established business model relied in part upon readers making a cash contribution to read content (the cover price of a newspaper). Instead of seeking to completely preserve this model, Guardian Media Group offer online content for free and look for new ways of generating revenue that are grounded in the changing ways in which that content is consumed. By contrast News Corporation, publisher of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, has set in place a strategy of preserving old ways, and ensuring that content is valued by readers, and charged for accordingly, whether online or offline. The strategies of these two companies are positioned by media commentators as intractable, ideologically opposed credos; this construction informed a special edition of the BBC’s *The Media Show*. Normally *The Media Show* is a studio-based recording with only a handful of contributors. This edition was recorded with the participation of a live audience and pitted a senior representative of Guardian Media Group and News Corporation against one another in an adversarial debate format. The introduction to the show provides a reasonable summary of how the issue is understood in mainstream discourse:

“Is there a commercially sustainable future for the press and perhaps more importantly for the journalism it delivers in the Internet age? Double digit

declines in circulation and even bigger falls in advertising revenues have left most of Britain's broadsheet press looking, in commercial terms at least, well, shall we say, more than a little bit sick? Readers are going online for news and information in ever greater numbers where, thanks to new players like Google, and newspapers themselves, they can access newspaper content for free. And there's the rub. Traditional revenues are declining much faster than new ones appear to be growing, which leaves *The Guardian* and *Observer* on one hand and *The Times* and *Sunday Times* on the other losing roughly £100,000 and £240,000 a day respectively. All agree the situation is not sustainable. The question is what to do about it. And here a dividing line has emerged between those [i.e. Guardian Media Group] that believe free online access is vital if their journalism is to mean anything – and fingers crossed can ultimately be made to pay somehow – and those [i.e. News Corporation] that believe the future lays behind so called online paywalls – where people must pay for access to content.” (BBC, 2010)

In this account Guardian Media Group and News Corporation are focussed on their existing business in the light of disruptive culture and technology but established business do not limit their responses to preservation of existing activities. Channel 4, the UK public service media company, has set up a commissioning programme called “Channel 4's Innovation for the Public Fund” (otherwise known as 4iP):

“to deliver publicly valuable content and services on digital media platforms with significant impact and in sustainable ways. It represents one of the biggest and most exciting calls-to-action for new and emergent digital media companies in the UK.” (Channel 4, 2009)

Channel 4's response to disruptive culture is to foster new innovations outside of its own organisation; in doing so it re-imagines itself not as a publisher-broadcaster, but as a commissioner-incubator. Help Me Investigate, the website at the centre of this study, is a 4iP funded start up¹. It is an online tool which aims to help individuals "organise and pursue questions of public interest you think should be investigated" (Help Me Investigate, 2010).

¹ The project was initiated with 4iP funding, but no longer receives funding from 4iP.

Journalism as a profession has been described as an “occupational ideology” (Deuze, 2005, p.443). That is to say, professional journalism operates discursively, validating itself through its own work, and in so doing defining what is *not* journalism. The notional dividing line between professional and citizen journalism is key to understanding the valorisation of news. The cost of journalism is often cited by News Corporation in their defence of paywall technology (e.g. Bunz, 2009). In particular, *investigative journalism* is seen as being a higher order of journalism, and therefore more expensive to sustain and to purchase as a consumer. Investigative journalists are canonised as the highest level of their profession:

“Journalists can act as the moral conscience of society exposing what others dare not. It is a difficult role to fulfil, demanding a commitment to truth that can be personally dangerous if not ultimately fatal. Holding political and corporate institutions to account in a complex world takes courage and dedication, particularly when vested interests use extreme measures to silence reporters.” (Finkelstein, 2008, p. 130)

Help Me Investigate enables investigative “crowdsourcing” – “the ability to have access to many people at a time and to have them perform one small task each” (Brogan & Smith, 2009, p. 136). It ostensibly offers free investigative labour, challenging the orthodoxy that news investigations are expensive and putting into question the notion of the “professional” investigative journalist; it suggests that we can all aspire to be in the elite cadre of newsmakers: we can be citizen *investigative* journalists. Journalistic crowdsourcing projects are not a new idea. Muthukumaraswamy (2010) offers a series of case studies of recent crowdsourcing experiments within mainstream media organisations. These experiments are posited as a logical progression of previous initiatives around user engagement such as letters pages, call-ins, and user-generated content. In each experiment, professional journalists were seen as being a key part of the crowdsourcing process, imposing order and professionalism on the work of laypersons:

“Citizens can contribute a great deal to a participatory journalism endeavor, but for it to be fruitful, extensive online organization by the news entity is essential to consolidate information from the public.” (Muthukumaraswamy, 2010, p.55)

Help Me Investigate differs from Muthukumaraswamy's case studies because it does not serve a primary text located within traditional news media industries; investigations do not start with column inches or airtime to fill, but with questions that deserve answers. Furthermore, although "professional" and "citizen" newsmakers may start, contribute, or publish the results of an investigation, the investigation is never the sole property of a news media organisation. Journalism may be implied by the act of investigation, but journalistic reporting is a secondary feature of these investigations; the prime aim is to find the facts – just the facts.

Investigating Help Me Investigate

In order to better understand Help Me Investigate, I undertook three key activities which may be considered together as virtual ethnography. In particular my approach is one of "adaptive ethnography" (Hine, 2001, pp. 155-6) in that I am adapting methodologies and blending techniques to create a richer account of the culture. A key adaptation that I make over Hine's seminal approach is to consider networks and activity as located intra-media and also existing offline. The three key stages of investigation were:

- Considering Help Me Investigate as a media text, in particular applying genre analysis to understand the way in which the service has been built;
- Participant-observation of activity within Help Me Investigate and associated online and offline activity;
- Follow up interviews with those connected with the main case study, including community members ("investigators"), Help Me Investigate managers and interns ("staffers") and journalists.

As a researcher I find myself as an active participant, albeit peripheral, in the Help Me Investigate community and the specific investigation which is my key case study. More specifically I'm an active member of the wider social media community from which the majority of key actors in the case study are located. Given the personal relationships I have with many of the potential informants, interviews were conducted via email to afford some professional distance. Interview informants were all given anonymity, to encourage openness in their responses. Much of the online material upon which I draw is in the public domain, and is therefore attributed to its authors;

some material hosted within Help Me Investigate is public domain and is therefore attributable, however material posted in private areas is anonymised.

Help Me Investigate – a social tool for investigation

Social networking websites exhibit a set of codes and conventions which would allow us to categorise them as a genre of website; looked at in this way the Help Me Investigate website can be easily understood as a social networking website, which locates members through the unifying idea of “investigation”.

The user profile is a key generic feature of social network websites. Help Me Investigate provides a space for members to present themselves to other members. Its profile creation form includes specific options for a user photograph, which replaces the site’s standard placeholder avatar, links to the user’s website, blog and Twitter profile, a free-form description box (which allows media files to be embedded) and finally keyword “tags” which the user wishes to associate themselves with. Once created, the profile page brings this user content together with social statistics that demonstrate the user’s activity profile within the network. In the same way that Twitter records numbers of “followers”, “tweets”, “following” and “listed”, Help Me Investigate records the number of “things” which the user is currently involved in investigating, plus the number of “challenges”, “updates” and “completed investigations” they have to their credit. In both Twitter and Help Me Investigate these labels have a mechanistic function: they act as hyperlinks to more information related to the user’s profile. They can also be considered culturally as symbolic references to the user’s social value to the network – they give a number and weight to the level of activity the user has achieved, and so can be used in informal ranking of the user’s worth, importance and usefulness within the network.

Investigations are analogues of “groups” within Facebook – a thematic area of the website where activity is bound by an overarching theme. Users can contribute to the investigation by setting or accepting “challenges” or simply put their name to the investigation so that they can observe the activity. By signalling their interest in the investigation or a specific challenge they can also be called upon by other members of the investigation to provide further input.

Help Me Investigate was built intentionally along social networking lines, although many social functions which my informant described as “game mechanics” were removed from the final specification:

“Points, levelling up, badges for achievements, being able to share on Twitter / Facebook. They were all based on what worked for other online platforms. I wanted to make it fun to keep people coming back.” (Interview with staffer)

The decision to build Help Me Investigate along social networking website lines has benefits in terms of usability; if the user base is assumed to be web-savvy and social media literate, they will easily be able to operate within the website without additional training, allowing them to focus instead upon their investigation. However, the design of any system does close down options for the user and limit the ways in which they can operate. Help Me Investigate used two strategies to overcome this:

“we also 'designed' the community by inviting active citizens who would contribute positively, and only allowing users to join if they were invited. [...] Finally, we used agile design principles, so we launched with it half-finished and then adapted the site based on how people actually used it - which did turn out to be different in some ways to how we expected them to.” (Interview with staffer)

A key issue when presenting a website as a social media tool is the danger of what some technology commentators have dubbed “social network fatigue” (O’Hear, 2007; Recordon, 2007) in that it constitutes yet another social profile to be managed. In some ways we might reasonably ask: what does Help Me Investigate offer that cannot be achieved more flexibly through other means? Why can investigations not be coordinated instead via a pre-existing social network such as Twitter or Facebook, and be brought together using tools as appropriate to the matter being investigated? My research into the process of investigation suggests that Help Me Investigate does not intend to, or succeed in, replacing these networks, rather it works alongside them, and helps to coordinate and articulate investigations in a specific way.

An investigation in action – “When can we expect a new birmingham.gov website?”

The central case study which I wish to consider is the investigation into the development of a new website for Birmingham City Council, an investigation which started (Hart, 2009b) with a tweet:

“<http://birminghamnewsroom.com/> has reminded me, a new Bham Council website was announced 2 years ago. What's up with that?” (Ashton, 2009)

In his account of the investigation, Birmingham based “freelance web consultant and developer” (Hart, 2009a) Josh Hart states that this tweet sparked conversations which led to him creating the investigation “When can we expect a new birmingham.gov website?” on Help Me Investigate (Help Me Investigate, 2009). The investigation began on 2nd July 2009, and Hart blogged his account of it the next day. Over the following eleven-month period to 28th May 2010, thirty-two people joined the investigation’s page at Help Me Investigate. During that time, the investigators uncovered serious delays, budget over-spends and technical issues at the heart of the project to deliver a new website for Birmingham City Council. For thirteen of these members, joining was the only contribution they made to the investigation’s page; other members provided occasional or one-off contributions, while a few users were prolific in their updates on the website.

There are peaks and troughs of activity within the investigation, which seem to relate to a series of events and interventions. Leadership, especially by staffers, and tasking appeared to be the main drivers of activity within the investigation, yet informants saw the investigation as being communally owned and led:

“certain members were good at driving the investigation forward, helping decide on what to do next, but it did not feel like anyone was in charge as such.” (Interview with investigator)

“I’d say HMI had pivotal role in keeping us together and focused but it felt owned by everyone.” (Interview with investigator)

Help Me Investigate staffers were key to the longevity of the project, suggesting tasks, and updating the project through dormant periods, fulfilling a caretaker role:

“I just wanted to make people feel recognised and add any information I had.”
(Interview with staffer)

The overall pattern of activity can broadly be broken into three “acts”:

Brainstorm (*July 2009*)

July 3rd, the first full day of the investigation sees the most activity on the investigation page: forty-one contributions are made in total (including new sign-ups to the investigation which account for fifteen of the actions completed). Activity tails off through the month, with half as many actions taking place from 4th-31st July 2009 as took place on the first full day. Much of the activity is scoping the problem – adding background information – and recruiting (this is a key period for new signups).

Consolidation (*August - September 2009*)

Activity only rises again when new information is obtained from Birmingham City Council; there is a surge of new sign ups to the investigation’s page during August, and this time a steady spread of activity is maintained through to September 2009.

The consistency of activity seems to be engendered by a much more “task oriented” approach to investigation; with something formal to respond to members suggest many more “challenges”, and a new track of investigation related to the accessibility (rather than the cost) of the website opens up.

One challenge set is to write to public officials, and one member provides a pro-forma letter for doing this; this activity proves popular, accounting for fourteen recorded actions during the period.

Long Tail (*September 2009 – June 2010*)

From September 2009 to May 2010 there are some “caretaker” activities by Help Me Investigate staffers, but little new activity reported until a brief spike in activity when an official report into the website’s development is published by Birmingham City Council in late May 2010.

Within this basic flow of the investigation, it is possible to draw out some specific areas of interest that arise in the conduct of the investigation into Birmingham.gov.uk

Social media culture

The initial impetus for the investigation came from conversations on Twitter, and Twitter activity continued to support the development of the investigation, as well as

the dissemination of its findings. A social networking service such as Twitter, or indeed Help Me Investigate, is not a network itself, in the same way that the postal service is not a social network; people and their relationships are the basis of networks which are mediated in many different ways. That said, social networking websites do offer opportunities for new relationships to be formed, and they do mediate relationships in very specific ways, guiding group actions in certain directions. Rettberg (2008) offers a useful distinction between centralised and decentralised online social networks. A service such as Facebook or Help Me Investigate is a centrally owned social space where relationships are clearly visible, but these are not the only social networks online:

"the connections between blogs can be understood as digitally mediated social networks" (Rettberg, 2008, p. 64).

Blogs are conversational, but they mediate relationships through "slow conversations" (p.65) across a decentralised network (p.68). This analysis is useful to understanding Help Me Investigate within a wider ecology of online social media activity; it is a centralised sub-network that suits a specific activity, but actors within it form a wider network that sits across other social media spaces. Many investigators working within Help Me Investigate use a range of other social media tools as part of their normal online routines: they tweet, and they produce their own blogs, and yet Help Me Investigate still provided a useful space for them to work within; investigators and staffers feel that the website facilitates investigation in a way that their other social media tools could not:

"It adds the structure and the knowledge base; the challenges, integration with 'what do they know' ability to pose questions allows groups to structure an investigation logically and facilitates collaboration." (Interview with investigator)

"I guess it just offers a chance to dissect an investigation down into all its individual elements. By also seeing others questions and research, it helps develop confidence in starting investigation yourself and developing a sense of all the angles that need to be covered. In short, it's just a lot nicer doing such a long-form piece of journalism with others to support." (Interview with staffer)

When asked directly, my informants didn't feel that Help Me Investigate was a social network, however they did talk of it as a "community" and suggested that being seen communally helped investigators to be taken more seriously:

"In a nutshell public high profile discussions using social networking and HMI have a bigger effect and outcome [then making individual representations on an issue]. Frankly I was completely ignored and suspect there is arrogance in their approaches. I emailed [Birmingham City Council] several times citing as a complaint." (Interview with investigator)

Offline activities, which Rettberg's model of "digitally mediated social networks" (2008, p. 64), outlined above, don't account for, are also sometimes strongly linked to online communities and networks. Birmingham has a strong "social media scene" which involves a network of individuals operating collectively through a number of established online and offline fora; physical meet-ups such as Brum Bloggers, Likemind Birmingham, and Birmingham Social Media Café bring together a wide constituency of social media engaged Birmingham residents, and there is considerable cross-over between members of these groups. The city also organises a wide range of events such as the Hello Digital technology festival, which provides a further forum for physical meetings of likeminded residents. These real-world networking opportunities bridge social, professional, experimental and academic discourses, and their conversations move freely from physical to online spaces. These multi-faceted networks sustain and develop a high level of social capital within Birmingham's social media culture. The birmingham.gov.uk investigation seems to have benefited from these strong social bonds. Several investigators cited Twitter activity as drawing them into the process:

"My initial involvement came from a [...] tweet, he asked if anyone wanted to learn how to send an FOI, I replied and he gave me an account and a link to a google doc explaining what to do." (Interview with investigator)

"I was aware of it through [the website's staffers] but did not become involved until [they] sent out the FOI offer via twitter" (Interview with investigator)

Help Me Investigate's team acknowledge the importance of the established social media community to the success of this investigation:

“Very happy [with the outcomes of the investigation], but also wondering how easily you can recreate that. It tapped into the right community at the right time, was supported by a fantastic FOI expert, and unearthed a big story.”
(Interview with staffer)

The effectiveness of this investigation is linked to social capital, embodied in the social media culture of Birmingham. In this sense I am referring to social capital after Bourdieu (1986), rather than to its more common contemporary usages in social sciences which are in the tradition of Putnam (2000) and Coleman (Coleman, 1988). In this regard social capital is the:

“aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.248)

In essence the potential for socially organised investigation already exists within the culture; Help Me Investigate draws upon this, reifying the “potential resources” (ibid.) as an output grounded in social action.

Investigation: In Real Life

The Birmingham.gov.uk investigation engendered its own offline activity. BCC DIY (Birmingham City Council Do It Yourself) attempted to rebuild the Birmingham.gov.uk website using social tools and crowdsourced production effort. The BCC DIY website build involved initial input by a small team, followed by a “hack day” which brought a team together to discuss the website, build new tools, and re-write webpage content to make it more usable and more accessible. The links between the BCC DIY project and the investigation were implicit in that it grew out of the investigation as a community response. Key actors in the process were investigators or staffers who were active in the investigation. Indeed, the organiser of BCC DIY was a Help Me Investigate staffer. There were also explicit links between the two activities, for example Help Me Investigate provided a lunch to activists at the hack day. BCC DIY can be considered an act of alternative media production: it is an activist response to the investigation which does not use formal journalism, but instead has found its own form (Brennen, 2009). Despite this, BCC DIY isn’t recorded within the investigation narrative detailed on Help Me Investigate and is a hidden action.

Hidden actions

Help Me Investigate is not a place where investigation *happens*, but where it is *reported to have happened* to a community of interest. There is, therefore, a disconnect between an action and its logging within Help Me Investigate. That being the case, it is possible for actions to be hidden from the narrative of investigation as it is presented within Help Me Investigate. For example, the investigation does not document the filing of an initial Freedom of Information Act² request (referred to by Help Me Investigate members as “an FOI”) as a “challenge”, however it was completed by Help Me Investigate staffer Heather Brooke, and is cited elsewhere as part of the investigation (Hart, 2009a; Help Me Investigate, 2009). The request asks for:

- “1. The date on which this work began.
2. The initial delivery date and the new estimated date the work will be completed.
3. The initial cost estimate of the work and the current cost.
4. Who is doing this work? (e.g. which unit, division, section, agency, company, etc.)?
5. If any contracts are related to this job, copies of these (including all indexes, appendices and supplements) and the bids to tender.
6. All progress/status reports on this work.” (Brooke, 2009)

Brooke, a renowned journalist and author of two books related to FOI, had a specific role within Help Me Investigate, which was: “suggesting and supporting activities to users who submit or join investigations on the site” (Bradshaw, 2009c). In bringing her professional expertise of FOI to bear on the project, she sets the tone for much of the investigation to come. The Birmingham City Council response to the FOI was the trigger event that moved the project from its brainstorming to consolidation phase; the information uncovered galvanised more support, generated wider interest, and provided new avenues of enquiry and investigative endeavour.

² The UK’s Freedom of Information Act came into force in 2005, giving the right to ask any public body for all the information they have on any subject, with a response expected within a month (if the information is eligible for release).

FOI is a key tool used in many investigations within Help Me Investigate. Indeed, in other investigations which I joined “send an FOI” is one of the first challenges set. This investigation triggered several other FOIs. These secondary FOIs were not undertaken by staffers but by investigators who were new to the process, indicating a transfer of knowledge had occurred within the network:

“The process was interesting and I learn't many knew skills, such as how to submit an FOI and I also learnt about great services, such as 'what do they know' and 'they work for you'.” (Interview with investigator)

The issue of hidden actions was not limited to Brooke’s FOI. The challenge “Send a Freedom of Information request clarifying access for users with disabilities” was set on 25th August by a staffer, and followed up the same day by an investigator. The investigator only reported this action as completed on 10th September and has not fed the subsequent council response back into the investigation at all. These two hidden actions were both eventually reported, but they illustrate the disconnect between action and reporting. It seems reasonable to propose that there are many other hidden actions within the investigation that go unreported, for various reasons. Help Me Investigate seems to offer a narrative of investigation, a timeline of activity, but it is in fact an imperfect record of the process.

Hidden actions and Lurkers

I have previously noted that thirteen members of the Birmingham.gov.uk investigation made no contributions to the investigation beyond the act of joining it. The presence of hidden actions within the investigation might suggest that some silent members are, in fact, active; they are simply not reporting their actions on Help Me Investigate. Silent membership of an online community is generally referred to within digital culture communities and scholarship as “lurking”. Previous studies of lurking have indicated that lurking is expected within online communities, indeed it has been suggested (Nielsen, 2006; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000) that successful online communities maintain very high levels of lurking (around ninety percent). Although lurking doesn’t produce visible actions within a community, it can be understood as a valuable activity; Chen (2004) suggested that lurking provides an opportunity for informal learning. Lurking within Help Me Investigate can therefore be seen as a way

of building competencies and confidence amongst investigators, which may be carried into much more directed activity in parallel investigations:

“I have been marginally involved with aspects of a couple of other investigations, but no where near to the extent I would have liked [...] I think it takes quite a conscious amount of effort to be involved in an investigation because most of the tasks that challenges involve can be complicated and time consuming - especially if you have never done something before - like submit an FOI.” (Interview with investigator)

The Help Me Investigate community appears to value passive observation, seeing it as a contribution to the overall skills-base of the group:

“By also seeing others questions and research, it helps develop confidence in starting investigation yourself and developing a sense of all the angles that need to be covered.” (Interview with staffer)

Of course some lurkers are not simply passive observers, learning about the investigation. Within the wider context of the investigation, across wider online networks and offline activities, there were many hidden actions. Several lurkers within the Help Me Investigate were vocal in speaking about the issues within other online fora, most notably mainstream news coverage of the issues around the Birmingham.gov.uk website (Blackaby, 2009; Dale, 2009b; Oliphant, 2009) but also within Twitter and blogs, including the Birmingham City Council’s own “newsroom” blog (Birmingham City Council, 2009a, 2009b).

One lurker was a key technical member of the BCC DIY collective: the narrative within Help Me Investigate suggested a low level of engagement with the process and yet this investigator was actually quite prominent in terms of their activism; the lurker was producing pragmatic outcomes and responses to the investigation, although he produced no research for the project. On a similar note, several of the BCC DIY activists were neither active nor lurking within Help Me Investigate. For example, one activist’s account of BCC DIY shows awareness of, and engagement with, the connection between the activist activity and the investigation, even though he is not an active member of the investigation within Help Me Investigate:

“This story originally started with a question raised on Help Me Investigate, where the progress and cost were brought under public scrutiny [...] Then, on

September 22nd, @stef headed in a new direction- he had an idea to pull together a more usable, relevant and open website, at a much reduced cost, developed using Web 2.0 tools and techniques. Not intended to compete with, but more to compliment the original” (Hadley, 2009)

Citizen investigation and mainstream news

One of this investigation’s lurkers was a professional journalist, working on the local broadsheet *The Birmingham Post*. This particular investigator de-lurked to offer the following comment:

“I just wanted to thank you all for working with the Post & Mail staff including Paul Dale on this” (Help Me Investigate, 2009)

This comment acknowledges the newspaper’s indebtedness to the efforts of the investigators and indicates that the newspaper has been drawing on the investigation to inform their journalism. The relationship between established news organisations, in particular *The Birmingham Post*, and the free labour of the Help Me Investigate team offered some controversy, but this was quickly and effectively negotiated to reach a clear understanding between citizens and professionals.

On the first day of the investigation an article (Dale, 2009b) on issues around Birmingham.gov.uk was published by *The Birmingham Post*; Josh Hart, the instigator of the investigation at Help Me Investigate, was magnanimous in claiming its publication as coincidental to the investigation (Hart, 2009b) but Help Me Investigate founder Paul Bradshaw linked the *Post* article directly to the investigation (Bradshaw, 2009b). A further report (Dale, 2009a) drew upon new information obtained through Help Me Investigate’s FOI but did not credit Help Me Investigate as the source of the information. Following an intervention by investigators in the comments on the online article, it was corrected:

“What a shame the only credit you give is to an anonymous "member of the public". That person - who deserves to be named - is Heather Brooke. She did the FOI as part of an investigation on Help Me Investigate.com, which was started by Josh Hart.” (Bradshaw, P. in comments on Dale, 2009a)

This move to correct the article was received well by the community, who shared the link to the updated article through Twitter (e.g. Booth, 2009). Bradshaw even wrote an account of the exchange, which held *The Birmingham Post* up as an exemplar for

engagement between journalists and online communities (Bradshaw, 2009a). Further articles published by *The Birmingham Post* were careful to cite Help Me Investigate where appropriate (e.g. Blackaby, 2009). The use of crowdsourced investigations by a news organisation for profit might reasonably be seen as problematic. From the professional news reporters' point of view, it weakens their right to claim a privileged position; from the investigators' point of view, when considered monetarily, this is an exploitative process. These issues can be resolved if we consider the relationship as an equal exchange: attention from *The Birmingham Post* for journalistic facts from Help Me Investigate.

Help Me Investigate has no implied audience or end point for its activity; the community is about pure, platonic investigation hence its motto "just the facts". Investigators are free to disseminate findings from Help Me Investigate as appropriate, but if this is limited to individual's blogs then the prospects for dissemination are limited to the small audience of each bloggers' immediate social network. Given that the investigation relies so heavily upon pre-existing social networks, this would be tantamount to the investigation speaking only to itself, unable to amplify itself beyond a closed network. If an investigation is to impact beyond its own bounds it needs a route to a wider audience; investigations don't need journalists but they do need audiences, and the newspaper has the audience. Given that "Blogs rely on personal authenticity, whereas traditional journalism relies on institutional credibility" (Rettberg, 2008, p.92) a community of bloggers can be relied upon to provide genuine accounts, but a traditional journalist can claim to shape this into something that will be accepted by a mainstream audience; the journalists can claim to add value to the investigation through editorial processes. As it is understood that the journalist is operating as the designated professional in the process, they safeguard their privileged position. A *Birmingham Post* journalist who wasn't directly involved with reporting related to Birmingham.gov.uk, summarised the new hegemony negotiated between the professional and citizen camps in an article for Journalism.co.uk:

“what's most important when working like this is to recognise that you're part of a process, not the end result of it. Which means giving credit where it's due, getting the facts right, and making clear in the article the process by which it was created. All the sort of things that ought to be standard practice for a reporter anyway, but are more crucial then ever when using a source like this.

And the risks are higher - get things wrong and you not only look stupid, but also like you're stealing the work of others.

So there's no room for complacency - but get it right and you're becoming part of an investigative team that's bigger, more diverse and more skilled than any newsroom could ever be.” (Scotney, 2009)

The investigators concur with this, and they value the input of journalists in shaping the problem and structuring it for wider audiences:

“[Help Me Investigate] doesn't make you an investigative journalist, journalists still have some training, an understanding of the law to some degree and an understanding of how to construct and conduct an investigation.” (Interview with investigator)

I have already shown that a representative from the *Birmingham Post* was a lurker within the investigation; like many other lurkers they actually offered a hidden action to the community: the mainstreaming and dissemination of the investigation's findings.

“Like any other HMI user it's about looking at what the paper can do uniquely towards a project - in this case, use its access to power to get an answer, and then use its network of readers to bring the story to a wider audience than it might have got just as an online investigation.” (Scotney, 2009)

The uses of material from the investigation by a for-profit media organisation is therefore not as simple as claiming that the citizen-investigators are being exploited as free labour. There is a trade off between the provision of investigative labour from the Help Me Investigate community and the services of support, education and access to an audience provided by professional journalists. Furthermore there are opportunities for investigators to gain professional and social advantages through the relationship, thereby profiting overall from the transaction. Such advantages include public profile, new connections which may lead to business, and new skills. Notably one informant in the study used the capabilities acquired during the investigation to launch a new business (Interview with investigator). Of course the desire and ability to profit personally from the investigation may not be uniform throughout the investigation team, as Baym & Burnett's study of fan labour relations to the music industry suggested:

“this is neither a black and white issue, nor is it one they all understand in the same way. There are costs they all share, foremost among them time, and they all gain cultural and social capital (e.g. music, expertise, travel, influence, relationships) they could not otherwise attain. But they differ in how they position themselves vis-a-vis the industry and those within it. Some see themselves as outsiders and feel it devalues them and the artists to suggest they deserve fiscal compensation. Others see themselves as peers, engaged in a social exchange relationship rather than an economic one.” (Baym & Burnett, 2009, p.446)

They go on to add that “even an individual’s perspective on his own balance may change over time” (ibid.) suggesting that we might see investigators’ attitudes to relationships with the professional press change from time to time, or from investigation to investigation. Given that Help Me Investigate is a relatively new community, it is too soon to test how investigators’ attitudes to relationships with for-profit media might change over time.

Areas of further work

This research raises a number of interesting angles for further enquiry. This paper discusses a successful investigation; a parallel project assessing the determinants of unsuccessful investigations would help build a picture of good practice in crowdsourced investigation. The relationship between the investigators and the for-profit journalists is also worthy of further investigation. A longitudinal study of membership of Help Me Investigate might reveal how stable the entente between profit and community motives truly is and what determinants influence an investigator’s willingness to provide journalistic content to media companies. Finally one key actor is missing from this account, namely Birmingham City Council. The Council made a number of responses to the investigation and the activist project, which were mediated through both the newspaper and social media channels as well as public meetings. Further work could explore the relationships between investigators, activists, council staff and journalists.

There are three key sets of conclusions I would like to draw from this study: methodological thoughts, effective practice in managing a crowdsourced investigation, and theoretical comments on the social practices involved in this case study.

Conclusions

Notes on methodology

Help Me Investigate is not a network, it is simply an online space where a specific activity can be realised and it actually relies on wider networks for its activity to be successful. The decentralised network at the heart of the Birmingham.gov.uk investigation required that my fieldwork be multi-sited and multi-modal; it was not the website that was my object of study in this research, rather it was the wider social media culture of Birmingham which I needed to interrogate. If the study had been limited to observations within Help Me Investigate, I would have been unable to observe the many hidden actions within the project; even branching out into wider online and offline activities, this study is limited to the actions which I was able to observe. Established modes of virtual ethnography offer excellent tools to interrogate online communities, but they seem to privilege questions of medium theory and post-humanism. They are less suited to exploring questions related to social media culture, and scholars looking to explore this field should look to adapt them appropriately.

Effective practices of Help Me Investigate

The key finding from this study is that crowdsourcing is not an easy win, and nor is it cheap labour. Crowdsourcing is commonly understood as being organic, self-organised and grassroots yet Help Me Investigate is not truly self-managed. Investigations can be initiated by community members (who at this time are only invited members), but the community is supported and encouraged by the team of staffers. There is no evidence of a process of community governance or accountability involved in selecting and managing the staff team, instead this structure flows from the source of funding, which is a public service media fund. The community of Help Me Investigate relies upon designated organisers, who are institutionally appointed to maintain the flow of an investigation and provide information, building the skills and capacity for investigation among the members. In this regard it is not dissimilar to the projects described by Muthukumaraswamy (2010) which drew on professional expertise. The point of difference is that the investigations at Help Me Investigate are

not owned by a mainstream news outlet, and have no implied audience at their inception.

One of the core functions of the website appears to be to facilitate the development of advanced aspects of media literacy, namely investigative journalism skills. Help Me Investigate provides space for investigators to observe processes, without demanding they take action immediately and it is successful in developing skills for investigation and confidence amongst its members.

Finally, developing an understanding with for-profit news organisations has afforded Help Me Investigate with a platform to disseminate its findings. The Birmingham.gov.uk investigation did not need a journalist, it needed an audience; mainstream, for-profit, media companies can provide that audience. While the arrangement that has been brokered may still prove problematic in the future, the solution appears to provide positive outcomes for all parties at the current time.

Social practices of Help Me Investigate

Help Me Investigate is positioned into the space created by disruptive technology and culture as an answer to the problem of journalistic investigation in the contemporary context. Like all citizen journalism, Help Me Investigate could be understood as a challenge to professional journalism. More specifically it is a threat to the prized and privileged profession of *investigative* journalism, which is seen as being an important in justifying charges for commercial journalism. However, in the case of the Birmingham.gov.uk investigation, it has negotiated a relationship of mutual convenience with a for-profit news organisation. In this arrangement, investigation continues to be important in justifying the price of paid for news content but the emphasis in this justification is not about the exclusivity of the information but about the validity granted to it when published in an established, branded newspaper; it is the audience which that newspaper can reach that truly imposes importance upon the content, in a way which dissemination through social media may not have achieved. In the Birmingham.gov.uk investigation, Help Me Investigate allowed *The Birmingham Post* to gain economic capital from their crowdsourcing; the investigators gained their own value, which was non-economic.

The investigation grew from other, pre-existing networks, drawing upon and objectifying social capital (as proposed by Bourdieu, 1986) and operated through many channels within a pervasive social media culture.

Although many projects operating within social media spaces might be readily considered as *alternative media*, Help Me Investigate, through its funding from 4iP, is truly *public service media*. Furthermore, Help Me Investigate is limited in terms of representational power by a lack of implied audience and no clear direction for investigation to be channelled into. Journalistic reporting is a secondary feature of the investigations; the primary aim is to find the facts – just the facts. The Birmingham.gov.uk investigation relied upon established for-profit media to disseminate its findings, and in doing so ceded its ability to represent its own wishes and mediate its own story. By comparison, when expressed as direct action, through the BCC DIY initiative, the project became self-representational and activist driven, shifting from being a public service initiative to produce an activist-driven alternative media outcome from the project.

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