


A blizzard of citizen reporting at the BBC: is it a record?

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There was an avalanche of user generated content into the [BBC](#) this week as (south-east) Britain suffered its heaviest snowfall for twenty years. Head of the BBC Newsroom, Peter Horrocks, [claims](#) that 35,000 people sent in stills and videos. Some of it is up on [BBC Online](#), some of it made it to air.  Is this a global record for UGC?

But is this what the BBC is for? Couldn't Flickr and YouTube have done that job?

The material was not used to reveal hidden facts, it did not chart a particular narrative untold my mainstream media, nor did it map a story. It was simply there to illustrate individual people's snapshots of a huge weather event. In Peter Horrock's words, it showed that, despite the disruption, a lot of people had a lot of fun.

I think that alone justifies the exercise. The BBC's status as a national broadcaster was confirmed by its acting as the country's online photo album for a terrifically photogenic event. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the loss of business for one day was more than made up for by the joy brought to many people.

The last time a snowfall this heavy hit London in 1991 when the World Wide Web was only one year old. Think how our response to media and events has changed in that time. We automatically turn to texts or emails to tell our family and friends. We use the Internet to allow us to work at home. We expect instant information and updates Online. And we turned to the online news media to to share that experience. Surely, that has always been a central function for journalism, it is just that now we can do it with, as well as for, the people.

 It was interesting to hear that the BBC seems to be coping better with these sudden tidal waves of public participation. They haven't done anything particularly clever with the material (apart from organising them into categories such as 'animals in the snow') but just getting it up and available must have been quite a battle.

As the BBC and other news-sites become repositories for this kind of information, it is vital that they 'file' it all in the right way. One of the most interesting ideas to come out of the recent bout of public service reviewing is the idea of a standardised system of collecting metadata. In other words, all media organisations ought to use the same codes and tagging for material so that it can be searched and re-used more easily.

Imagine the public value of such an archive, even if it was just the stuff sent in by the public. After all, they created it, so shouldn't they be allowed to use it? Wouldn't it be a great resource for museums, researchers, artists and citizens if properly organised and open sourced?

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