

Bhutto, BBC and the public – who to trust?

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Peter [Horrocks](#), the head of the BBC Newsroom, has given a fascinating speech about BBC editorial policy regarding public interactivity. It didn't get much notice, partly because it was given to Leeds University rather than a London media correspondent but is well worth [reading in full](#). In it Peter gives a typically thorough and thoughtful analysis of how the BBC dealt with a flood of [texts and emails](#) after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Horrocks reveals that at one point the BBC considered cutting off public access to the comment facility. Now to someone like me who believes in public access to BBC platforms this sounds horrendous, but read on.

Horrocks explains that the comment facility was swamped with people effectively rejoicing in her death and making offensive remarks about Islam:

So why did we briefly consider freezing this forum? A small part of our thinking was that in the context of the death of a significant international figure, who was herself Muslim, we thought that the weight of remarks could be offensive to some users of the BBC News website. Might some readers believe that such views as "most recommended" represented an editorial line by BBC News? I suspect not, but there was at least that danger. But our real question concerned the editorial value of the comments and how far they should influence our coverage more widely. And the answers to that were: very little and hardly at all.

As he points out, the BBC did not cut the comments off but it raised all sorts of tricky questions for the BBC about how it deals with public comment and beyond that, citizen journalism in general. The BBC benefits editorially from the flood of comment, information and material that it gets from the public (for free). Both on big news events and investigations it can take advantage of tapping in to what the public knows and shows. It also allows the BBC to access a much broader range of opinions than used to be the case when everything was filtered through the BBC's hierarchical management systems. This fits in with what Peter Horrocks has called 'radical impartiality'. By this I believe he means that the BBC ought to consider giving a much more active and less mediated presentation of the variety of different views that the public holds, rather than always trying to give a balanced, moderated, filtered summary of what people think.

But as the Bhutto example shows, this is harder in practice for an organisation like the BBC which has to balance its reputation with the new demand for openness. Now this is where Peter's article gets interesting. At this point he takes issue with people (like me) who argue for greater openness on the BBC's part. Rather oddly he leaps from what people like me and "the vey shrewd commentator" [Paul Bradshaw](#) say about openness and connectivity, to a point where he suggests that this is the beginning of a slippery slope where the BBC will be captured by campaigners "who have a powerful ideological tinge to their critique". This is rather odd and a tiny bit paranoid. He even calls it 'digital bullying' as if the poor little BBC can't stand up to a few bloggers or comment-posters.

I guess this is partly because he is conflating the people who comment on BBC websites with the totality of public involvement in the BBC's editorial processes. I personally think the BBC should be involving the public much more in news gathering and production, and pay less attention to providing places like Radio 5 and BBC Online Forums that produce an endless churn of comment. I am much more interested in how the BBC newsroom can use wikis, crowd-sourcing, and the other paraphernalia of [networked journalism](#) to employ public input to help sustain and develop the news media than I am in providing yet more spaces for cranks to vent their spleen. It is already at the forefront of this kind of work in a small but significant way with the BBC user generated hub at the heart of Peter's newsroom. Indeed, the whole of BBC News has recently been reorganised to reflect the importance of New Media, albeit not necessarily citizen involvement.

I strongly recommend reading Peter's speech. I don't agree with some of the attitudes that lie behind it. But it is a very detailed and challenging piece which shows that the BBC is at the cutting edge of public engagement, it's just that it doesn't feel very comfortable there. Oh, and some of the [comments](#) posted by the public about it are rather good, too.

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