institute of
network cultures

Quick notes on the mapping and open data afternoon at Picnic in Amsterdam, September 17, 2012

This session entitled Maps, the Power of the Crowd & Big Data Verification was put together by the Maastricht-based European Centre for Journalism that lately has been focused on data journalism. Videos of the event will be available later on at http://emergencyjournalism.net/.

Charlie Beckett of LSE/Polis presented the figure of the "networked journalist". As he described himself as an enthousiast (how could it be otherwise, he is a speaker at Picnic) we have to ask to what extend this is an idealistic proposition. Do social trends really drive media consumption, as claimed? Is Julian Assange really a new media magnate? What's wrong with these types of questions? Are they the "change makers"? Or rather puppets of Zuckerberg? Uncertainty and complexity are easy ways to do the hard work of critical research. News is no longer a product, it is a process, a service.

Next presenter was David Clinch from Storyful, an ex-CNN journalist who presents itself as a new type of news broker. In defense of the traditional skills. There is always someone who is closer to the story. Code word: create value. Read: those stupid social media content uploaders have zero idea how to make money (so we will do it for them). Other code word: closed door networking. Next one: trust (no one trust Facebook but some do trust their friends on Facebook). "Trust but verify." Buy our curated Twitter list now! Insight shared with us audience: "It is not just information, it is people." What is left out here is the question of (self-)organization in the internet age. Journalists may not resolve this. David added that most of the viral videos that are out there have been commercially produced. Who is making money here?

Anahi Ayala of World Bank/internews talked about crisis mapping, which started at Harvard around 2007. Then the Crisis Mappers network was created in 2009. It is a combination of mobile phone data on the ground and satellite imagery from above. The next step is then visualization, and the next then is analysis. Where are the relevant voices? This all leads to decision making, the ultimate goal. The Haiti earthquake was a beginning. The Standby Volunteer Task Force was a next step. Social media mapping was done in the case of Libya on the Ushahidi platform. (libyacrisismapping.net). The Egyptian Freedom House regional election verification team was a next step, run by bloggers. The Syria Tracker at

Crowdmap.com who started working with the HealthMap project at Harvard. And a mapping project in Turkey of Al-Jazeera during the earthquake where users verify information on the ground. Ayala is now working on project in Central African Republic where information comes in from anonymous sources that is then verified by journalists. The absurdist Russian realtime webcam election monitoring system that Putin installed during the last elections might be the Termidor moment of this movement? Another comment asked about the reliability of the maps.

Matthew Eltringham works at the BBS Hub which acts as the gatekeeper and started off early 2005 in the aftermath of the boxing day 2004 Tsunami (before Facebook and Twitter). Training its journalists is key now. Social media is just another source and should be considered for use. It is used to find witnesses. And pulling audiences into the news flow. This has affected the architecture of the new news room of BBC World Service. However, everything that is being done there relates back to the BBC core values.

Last speaker Erik van Heeswijk of the Dutch broadcaster VPRO compared karaoke with user generated content. It is not an Orc Attack. The initial response was that this was an avalanche of anonymous masses. Erik's training sessions for journalists showed that you have to show that you value the feedback and input of audiences. And remember that good user generated content is not free! (I left before the final debate)

Fazit: this session lacked focus as it was trying to cover both the politics of map making and the role of user-generated content in general by mainstream media. Needless to say that the critical viewpoints were missing (we're at Picnic, after all). No theory please, we're in the Netherlands. Just ignore what is being done in this field in higher education, here and elsewhere. And forget the individual users themselves. In the recent past a blogger or two were invited but that's no longer necessary. Welcome to social media, the cynical, institutional chapter. The gates are under control, again. How about the social media conflicts that we witness? They are happening anyway, regardless of the 'reasonable' social media strategies of the BBCs, CNNs and their consultants.