

WE ARE THE JOURNALISTS

Speech by Kamahl Santamaria, Al Jazeera English

Good morning everyone, and thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today.

I'd just like to start by saying that I was on-air on Al Jazeera English last night until 1am... so I hope you'll forgive any signs of TIREDNESS today!

In my job as a news presenter , I speak to millions of people every day and yet never get the chance to SEE them... but I certainly get to hear from them... and that's where this new digital world is completely changing the way we do our jobs. The thoughts and opinions of the viewer are now part of what we do.

However, and this is the theme of my speech today, there must be balance. We in the media must remember that "WE are the journalists" ... yes, we ignore

our audience at our own peril, we must always remember that WE are the ones doing the job.

Recently I took part in a study by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism... it's affiliated with the Columbia School of Journalism, which looked at how User Generated Content (UGC) was being used by various TV news networks... was it being overused, was it being properly credited, how was it assisting in telling a story. And the obvious example was Syria... a place where it's too dangerous to go in and report, and so the amateur video which makes its way to YouTube and social media becomes one of the primary sources of information and content.

It places the journalist in a unique and sometimes challenging position.

On the one hand, there is so little access to pictures and Syria is such an important story to tell that using UGC from people within Syria has become almost mandatory.

How else would the world have learnt about barrel bombs and chemical attacks, and the destruction of a country and its people?

But to simply think of UGC as pictures and media is naïve. The people who put out these videos – and they are becoming increasingly sophisticated with how they operate – also have a story to tell and an agenda to push. I’m not saying the videos are propaganda – but they are telling a CERTAIN story.

And so the UGC needs to complement and feed our coverage... not necessarily DRIVE it.

Now interestingly, this first phase of this study came to a conclusion that “news organisations are poor and inconsistent in labeling content as UGC and crediting the individual who captured the content”.

This is crucial, in my opinion. If you’re going to use content which is essentially provided by the viewer – or

at the very least, someone who isn't a journalist in the organization – then you HAVE to tell the viewer that.

We've made a point of this at Al Jazeera English. When we use footage sourced from the internet or social media, we very clearly label it on screen – and not just with a graphic that says YouTube.com, but an additional tag which says ACTIVIST VIDEO.

That clearly tells the viewer: the video you are watching is filmed and provided by someone else... someone who IS an activist... and who has a story to tell. I see that as a responsible way to broadcast such content, so the viewer is always informed.

Then we come to the issue of digital media in its SOCIAL form... Twitter, Facebook... I'm sure people are tweeting right now in here... and that's just a fact of life. Life in real time is being played out through social media..

Therefore we need to use social media, harness it... but don't let it take over or drive the news agenda. WE are the journalists here!

Let me give you a recent example. The Iraq elections. I was approached to produce hourly segments on the day of the election, incorporating social media and international reaction to events in Iraq.

And so I did. I searched the internet for interesting pictures... viewer's stories... real things that were happening in real time.

But I'll admit... even I would question at times exactly what I was doing, and why.

For example, if you wanted to see pictures of Iraqis voting in their election, dipping their finger into purple ink... you could do that yourself. A Google search, a twitter hashtag search... within seconds you'd have that.

And really, can I call it journalism – searching for pictures to show to viewers.

What I call it, in the end, is COMPLEMENTARY COVERAGE. Something visually interesting, something which might make the viewer consider something new, see it from a different angle.

But social media works BEST when it's recognised as a two-way process. The viewer provides us with something, but we either (a) only use in a limited sense, or (b) treat it with the level of credulity which we would treat any story with it, and make sure it's all above-board before we take it to air.

It's about that balance, isn't it.

People like to use the term 'citizen journalists'. How everyone's got a smartphone these days and can provide content from anywhere in the world.

That's great, and it's mean that we've seen images we otherwise would never see. When a Boeing 777 plane crashed last year at San Francisco Airport, one man stepped off the wreckage of the plane, took a photo, put a nice filter on it, and then tweeted it. A few retweets later and it was all over news media.

But I don't know how much I like this idea of citizen journalism. I want viewers to interact, and I want to provide us with what they can when a big story breaks. But I don't want them to do my job.

Social media is already taking people away from traditional media... we know this. And we know it in two ways. First, we use social media. You look at any journalist on twitter... and see how many OTHER journalists and news organisations they follow. In fact I'll tell you. I follow 259 people on twitter... out of those, 144 are either journalists or news media organisations.

And secondly, we have our OWN twitter feeds. Al Jazeera for example, and I'm just talking about the English channel here, has primary twitter feed, a live breaking news one, a sports one, a PR one, and possibly more which I'm actually not aware of!

We know that the best way these days to bring people to our journalism – our in-depth, researched, filmed and written journalism – is to draw them in with social media. That's how it works now.

But it comes back to the balance again. Complementary coverage. Letting the viewer share in the experience of what you do – in a way that was only made POSSIBLE by social media – but still remembering who's in the drivers seat.

The other thing – and this is my final point for today – the other thing we must do with social media, and in fact all media, is recognize its power.

This part of the world, the Arab world, has seen the kind of upheaval since 2011 which we could never have imagined.

And at the time, Al Jazeera was treated with great respect and love. Our broadcasts were projected onto buildings in Tahrir Square in Cairo... we provided coverage which not only Egyptians but the whole world wanted to see. Al Jazeera was seen as a major part of the revolution, because it let Egyptians have their voice in a time of incredible turmoil.

Now look at things. Four of our journalists remain behind bars, for allegedly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. One is gravely ill after being on hunger strike for over 100 days. We can't report from inside the country.

We've not changed from what we were doing back in 2011. But the powers in Egypt certainly have. And now

Al Jazeera gets portrayed as a trouble-maker, even an organization which gives air-time to “terrorists”.

We the media... the Fourth Estate... do our jobs. We challenge power. We give voice to people. And then we get accused of stirring political tension. Of creating instability. And our colleagues pay the price for that.

So I'd like to close today by asking you to remember Peter Greste, Baher Mohammed, Mohammed Fahmy and Abdullah El Shamy... our four journalists still detained in Egypt for doing nothing more than their job.

And in the spirit of our discussion today about digital and social media, please use the hashtag #FREEAJSTAFF on social media, to make sure that their plight is not forgotten.

So that they can get on with doing the story, instead of being it.

Thank you very much.