

Scherer: With the internet and social media everyone can be a broadcaster. The audience doesn't need to wait for the news show to start. Online videos have thousands or millions of viewers before you could even judge if they are accurate or not. How does this affect your job at the news desk?

Hamilton: The whole rise of first of all digital technology, so websites, the internet, meant we started to see content being produced by more and more people and distributed more and more easily, whereas in the old days, you had to rely on, you had to own a printing press, or own a TV channel. Now as soon as the internet came along, more and more people could publish their own stuff. Social media, that's the next level, youtube, facebook, twitter, with hardware, digital technology, mobile technology, that means everyone in their pocket now has a device that can record very high quality video and stills. And yes, inevitably, that means that we are seeing more and more content around news stories, which is great most of the time, because that means we can tell those stories in ways that we weren't able to before. Before we had to wait to get people to the scene of something that had happened, or we had to spend sometimes months investigating reports of a massacre. Often people are there and they've taken pictures. The problem of course is that there's always been propaganda, right? And now people who had the same drive to create propaganda back in the old days, they can now have all these same ways to get their propaganda spread in the same way people here are present and actually want to do something real and report something real in front of them, now the propagandists can use the same tools. So yes we're seeing much more of it, it's a big challenge, we're very lucky here at the BBC, we've got this team, the UGC hub, User Generated Content hub, it's been created for ten years now, and we're very lucky to have that specialism, that means that we've built up quite a lot of expertise and are able to, most of the time, spot those fakes and those hoaxes, but it's a big issue. Twenty years ago, I had to worry about a lot less, and certainly you didn't need specialist teams to do it.

Scherer: So if people still say, well, internet is a democratic tool and it helps democracy and it's a basic thing against dictatorship and censorship and everything, does that turn to be naïve or just half of the truth?

Hamilton: Half the truth, I just think we have to accept it in the same way the printing press transformed democracy because suddenly ideas could be spread very easily, but of course equally, ideas you didn't like or didn't agree

with or people who wanted to kill those ideas of democracy and freedom might use the printing press to distribute their own propaganda or whatever you want to call it. It's exactly the same thing with the web. I think the challenge for us is helping people to understand how the web works, how information spreads on the web, and to make sure that we're doing our jobs as journalists and as news organizations as well as we can.

Scherer: Is the profession prepared to work with it and to handle it accurately?

Hamilton: I think we're in a much better place than we were a couple of years ago. It's true, we are seeing more of it, but I think we're much better prepared now, so whereas a couple of years ago, when suddenly news stories broke, and often on social media, people were just spreading pictures and video without really thinking too much about what they were spreading, and now, I think, obviously there are still things in the middle of breaking news situations where people are jumping the gun, they're sharing information too quickly, before just doing even some really basic checks that you can do within a few seconds or minutes. But I think we're in a much better place than we were and I think most newsrooms now, as far as I can see, have a much better understanding of the risks and what they need to do. But that doesn't mean that there aren't still problems and mistakes being made, we see it all the time.

KS: Could you give us some examples of, actually yes, mistakes that went their way?

Hamilton: Sure. I can show you one example, this is from the early days of the war in Syria and shows footage, where you never see anyone's face, and it shows a group of men around this pit, and there's a man, unfortunately, down there in the pit, that's a spade there, and the voiceover, the men are telling him he's being punished. And so the footage goes on and they carry on shoveling all this earth and stones and grits on top of him. And I remember when it came out very clearly, it was in the morning, early morning in the UK, and I was on my way into work, and I saw it being sent around on twitter, and I got into work, we were already working hard to try and verify it, because this was in the early days of the Syrian conflict, and it was, at that time, could've been one of the first examples of an atrocity caught on camera, really illustrating where I think we knew the Syrian conflict was string to go, and it would've been, could've been a very important piece of material. But we were suspicious of it for a few reasons,

one being that at the very end of this video, it cuts off very quickly, so if let's just say it was a piece of staged propaganda, and some people have speculated for example that that could actually just could be an ordinary prisoner that's been taken out of a prison, but actually at the time they didn't want to kill him, so maybe they dug him out, and to do that, for him to stay alive, they'd have to do it very very quickly. So why did it cut off so quickly at the end? But really the key element here was that the sound level. You can see that the camera is up at sort of chest level, and the sound level between the men as they speak in the circle standing around and the voice from the man down in the pit, are almost identical, it's the same volume. And this is despite the fact that they're several feet apart, five or six feet apart, and also that he's having shovelfuls of grit thrown in his face. And yet the sound quality is the same. So clearly, there is something not quite right here, something that doesn't stack up.

Scherer: So the sound was manipulated and mixed afterwards?

Hamilton: In some way, yes, that's the suspicion. The other suspicious factor was that we've seen this in propaganda videos before, so those three things were enough for us to think, and there was no other information around this, you can't see any of the faces, there's nothing that we can, as we sometimes do, that's allows us to compare weather or location, we can't see any buildings, there's nothing. This could be anywhere, literally anywhere more or less. We've never been able to find out why this was made, who it was or indeed whether it was real or not. It could've been real, but we don't know, and we don't know enough about it for us to have it in our news output.

Scherer: So how do you handle that as a responsible news editor? It might have been wrong to not publish it, because it might have been true. And it might have been wrong to go out with it.

Mann: That's right, it's difficult, I mean one of the problems with this, and this I think applies to those kind of decisions, the fundamentals, but also to the judgments you're taking is that it's not black and white, it's not binary. And I think the most important thing for us is to make sure that the news that we're reporting is, as far as we know, the truth or as near as possible as we can get to the truth. And if there's something that we are not confident about, and it could be, that's a risk of course that in some way we're not reporting truth, we're not reporting the news. But I think our judgment is that it's better for us to be as sure as we can be about something than to

run something that we just don't know about.

Scherer: Are you confident that in the long run, enough people recognize that quality journalism is the better service compared to buying anything?

Hamilton: We're slightly cautious. I don't think it's either-or. I remember a few years ago, especially when twitter was the big thing, when it first came out and everyone was saying, this is the death of traditional journalism, mainstream media, because you can go straight to the source now, you don't need us anymore. You can go to the poor man stuck on a rooftop outside Tokyo as the tsunami comes in. Why bother, you don't wait for the likes of us to tell it to you in the evening broadcast, you can go straight to the man himself, he's there. I'm cautious of both extreme, of the people who say, there's no need for mainstream media, and the people who say, forget all that horrible stuff out there, just come to us. Because I think that's arrogance as well. And I think that the answer is that the two can co-exist. So yes, you want to go to the man who's on his rooftop, because that's amazing to be able to go to the source. That's fantastic. But at the same time, there's a role for the curator, for the experienced, the context-giver, who can help with verification of the hoaxes and all the rest of it, but also of what this actually means. Maybe the tsunami is not a great example but in Syria for example and the whole region in general, how does this all fit together, what does this mean in the big scheme of things? And I think for that, you do need, I think, and I have no problem with justifying that, you need experienced trained journalists. But I don't think that means we should be saying to people: stay away from there or from all the dark corners of the internet.