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Communicating legitimacy: How journalists negotiate the emergence of user-generated content in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In 2006, a video of a middle-aged man verbally assaulting a youth in a public bus thrust user-generated content and YouTube into the public imagination in Hong Kong. Using the concept of legitimacy from institutional theory to qualitatively analyze newspaper commentaries about the incident, this study connects journalists' narratives to the diffusion of user-generated content by showing how they inadvertently promote cultural support and normative acceptance of this new media category as a consequence of efforts at paradigm-repair and boundary maintenance. Those narratives construe user-generated content as a legitimate coin-of-exchange: something relevant, familiar, interesting, and appropriate to engage with.

Keywords: diffusion of innovations; journalism; new media; legitimacy

Communicating Legitimacy: How Journalists Negotiate the Emergence of User-Generated Content in Hong Kong

On the night of April 26, 2006 onboard Kowloon Motor Bus 68X, Elvis Ho tapped the shoulder of a passenger seated in front of him who was talking loudly on the phone and told the passenger to lower his voice. Instead of complying, the 55-year-old Roger Chan turned around and scolded the 23-year-old Ho, “I’ve got pressure, you’ve got pressure, why must you provoke me?” Thinking that Chan was angered by a loss of face, Ho quickly offered an apology. But Chan was not appeased. He repeatedly yelled “It’s not settled!” before hurling profanities at Ho for several minutes. The verbal assault finally ended when Chan stopped to take a call.

Unknown to them, a fellow passenger, Jon Fong, recorded the approximately six-minute commotion on his phone and uploaded the clip to video-sharing site YouTube (see the original video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H20dhY01Xjk> or a subtitled version at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSHziqJWYcM>). This Bus Uncle video quickly garnered over a million views and sparked widespread online and offline discussions in Hong Kong. It inspired a remarkable level of textual productivity (Fiske, 1992) which included 131 spin-offs on YouTube created by 76 users, featuring karaoke, rap, and original adaptations (see Chu, 2009). Phrases from the video “I’ve got pressure, you’ve got pressure” and “It’s not settled!” soon became popular among Hong Kong youths and a few schools even tried to bar students from uttering them (“Bus Uncle scolds youth: Students keenly imitate, schools ban ‘It’s not settled’ ‘I’ve got pressure’,” *Apple Daily*, May 25, 2006). The local press was caught off-guard by the level of public interest—the story was only picked up by journalists almost three weeks after the clip was uploaded. When it finally broke on May 17, 2006, Bus Uncle remained on the headlines for almost an entire week and spawned 154 newspaper and magazine articles within a fortnight. Eager to regain control of the public agenda, journalists

tried hard to drum up news stories about the clip and tracked down the two characters and the creator of the video. Bus Uncle made international news and was reported by CNN (“Irate HK man unlikely Web hero,” *CNN*, June 9, 2006) and other global news agencies. The incident and Chan’s sound bites rose to cultural prominence and became the subject of posters, television shows, films, advertisements, and merchandises. For several months, expressions based on the clip (e.g., “Are you settled today?”) were popular greeting messages in Hong Kong.

Bus Uncle illustrates how the mobile camera-phone and YouTube enable ordinary citizens to spontaneously record and widely circulate their witnessing of everyday newsworthy incidents without requiring significant resources or to first satisfy traditional media gatekeepers (cf. Allan, 2013). It exemplifies user-generated content (UGC) that can command a large following, attract significant media coverage, and inspire a slew of derivative works that feeds on its popularity. Most notably, Bus Uncle provided the first example of these then-novel ideas in Hong Kong and propelled YouTube into the imagination of the city’s public and press (Chu, 2009; Lee, 2009). A search for “Bus Uncle” (in Chinese) in all Hong Kong newspapers via WiseNews found 2,359 articles (over a 30-month period from 29 April 2006 when the clip was uploaded). Only 462 articles were directly related to the video. The rest of the articles mostly cited Bus Uncle to introduce YouTube. There were no mentions of YouTube in the local papers before the video emerged.

From the perspective of innovation diffusion, the propagation of Bus Uncle (a particular cultural item) is coterminous with the diffusion of UGC (a category of new media practices) because it represents the first member of that new category in the social system (Rossman, 2014). The case is significant in marking the period in media history when contemporary UGC first made the news, not only in Hong Kong but also internationally, with the popular emergence of YouTube. Prior to Bus Uncle, YouTube had been gaining traction

in the U.S., where it had launched barely a year ago, but the site was practically unheard of in Hong Kong. Just as a *Saturday Night Live* clip first brought YouTube to the American public's attention (Burgess & Green, 2009), Bus Uncle serves an equivalent role and more in Hong Kong. As it gains wide attention, Bus Uncle becomes an exemplifying prototype and even necessary cultural schema for social actors to talk about and make sense of how to do things around UGC and YouTube. The diffusion of Bus Uncle in mediated communications (news articles, online videos, etc.) thus offers a delineated empirical context and opportunity to understand more precisely how culturally shared meanings, ideas, norms, and values about UGC germinate within a particular social system. According to Rogers (2003), diffusion is a special type of communication in which social actors create and share information to reach a mutual understanding about new ideas. Those narratives in which journalists come to terms with the uncertainty and problems of a media and social innovation heralded by Bus Uncle are what this study explores.

Beyond mere musings over a person's bad behavior, journalists' narratives about Bus Uncle document "the semantic and discursive struggles that erupt as [new] media emerge in public, command our attention, and becomes receptacles for our hopes and fears about communication" (Peters & Nielsen, 2013, p. 266). As this study will show, these struggles underpin the conflicting explanations of the public attention to Bus Uncle and interpretations of the significance of the event offered by journalists. While the news fact of Bus Uncle as an everyday incident that has garnered disproportionately wide attention was undisputed, journalists grappled with defining the news value of UGC and making justifications through the lens of professional journalism.

The Bus Uncle incident is historically valuable as an instance of a paradigm-defining event (Lee, 2009), during and through which the impact and challenges of new media on conventional media are manifested. For news journalists, UGC fuels an emergent and

efficient source of human-interest stories (Lee, 2012) yet potentially undermine their privileged social position as a producer and arbiter of public knowledge (Carlson & Peifer, 2013; Edy & Snidow, 2011). Drawing on the concept of legitimacy from institutional theory (Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995), this study contends that the need and capacity within the social system to negotiate such conundrums—that is, to render the novel practices acceptable and, thereby, legitimate in the eyes of social actors—not only facilitated the rapid, widespread propagation of Bus Uncle but also initiated the institutionalization of UGC in Hong Kong. Through narrative analysis of newspaper commentaries about Bus Uncle, the focus of this study is to examine the ways in which professional journalism deals with UGC during its emergence and how those ways help to drive the legitimacy of UGC within wider socio-cultural contexts. How is the engagement with UGC made meaningful through those narratives? What are the social and cultural factors involved? What is the role of journalists in shaping the meanings of UGC?

Perspectives on User-Generated Content

UGC lies at the heart of the significant changes to our media landscape in the past decade (Benkler, 2006; van Dijk, 2012). In a bid to better understand those changes, much communication scholarship concentrates on the characteristics, uses, and impact of UGC (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). A less-explored perspective considers how the new media practices around UGC unfold, spread, and become widely accepted into the broader social and cultural frameworks. Extant literature is filled with rich accounts of ordinary citizens employing UGC to share their ideas and engage with others (Gauntlett, 2011; Lange, 2007) and of professional journalists incorporating UGC into their work routines and regular news reports (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012). There has been little attempt, however, to trace the process by which such practices emerge and gain traction. Understanding how new media practices become initiated and accepted into the broader cultural framework provides

insights into how the social system fosters and constrains both the emergence of those practices and their form and features (see Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). While previous **historical** studies have documented the emergence of practices around UGC, they have tended to be descriptive of the characteristics of user activities (e.g., Chu, 2009; Kooti, Yang, Cha, Gummadi, & Mason, 2012) or media framing (e.g., Jones & Himelboim, 2010; Lee, 2009, 2012) rather than analytical of how the communicative acts involved contribute to shared understandings about new patterns of behaviors and beliefs around UGC. This study offers such an analysis through the interpretative lens of legitimacy.

Legitimacy and the Rise of User-Generated Content

The concept of legitimacy provides a pertinent analytical framework in understanding the social arrangements and cultural factors that facilitate or impede the diffusion of UGC in a particular social system. Institutional theory defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). The innovation of contemporary UGC and platforms stems from harnessing the activities of everyday users that generate ideas, texts, videos, or images to create value (O’Reilly, 2005). The technical dimension of this innovation entails tools designed to coordinate and encourage greater levels of user activities and algorithmic data management to organize and aggregate the most relevant and useful information (Sunstein, 2006). Technology, however, is only part of what makes an innovation take off: the innovation has to be compatible with the existing lifestyles, norms, and values in the social system (Berkun, 2010; Rogers, 2003; Rossman, 2014). Legitimacy describes such compatibility. As Rossman (2014) notes, “If an innovation does not resonate as legitimate, it will be prohibitively difficult for even strenuous external salesmanship to find many takers” (p. 53).

The lack of legitimacy has been the bane of UGC and related applications (e.g.,

Napster; see O'Reilly, 2001). Although UGC has long existed and was commonplace (e.g., GeoCities, UseNet, bulletin boards), it did not share the social acceptability and credibility of content created by experts or elites. Much UGC belongs to the Long Tail of niche, nonmainstream materials (Anderson, 2006) which are not generally popular (Burgess & Green, 2009; Elberse, 2008). Creators of amateur works have been stigmatized and labeled "idiots" (Keen, 2007) and "losers" (Petersen, 2008). Further, the unregulated appropriation of professionally produced content on user-generated platforms, most notably YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009), has fueled objections over an emergent culture that promotes plagiarism and piracy which fundamentally weakens traditional media and creative industries (Keen, 2007). Innovations, nevertheless, often emerge from marginal ideas or practices (R. Mathews & Wacker, 2002). A pertinent theoretical concern for diffusion research is how UGC becomes transformed from marginal into mainstream. Here, the concept of legitimacy is instructive. It comprises a dynamic, collective process of constructing a social entity as consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that are presumed to be shared by others (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006).

Previous work on how UGC becomes incorporated into the dominant, mainstream institutions of society has overwhelmingly focused on the actions of traditional media institutions in commercializing and professionalizing the contributions of ordinary citizens. For instance, journalism studies have examined the normalization or professional incorporation of UGC in regular journalistic routines (Lee, 2012; Singer, 2005), as have new media scholarship on the formalization or commercialization of amateur works on social media platforms such as YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009; Kim, 2012; Lobato, Thomas, & Hunter, 2011). Several scholars have also detailed how large media corporations commodify audience participation (Fuchs, 2010) or expropriate the labor and creativity of citizens who contribute content without any monetary compensation (Kperogi, 2011) by demanding the

cultural discount of accepting non-monetary rewards as compensation for their work (Ross, 2000). The question of how UGC first gains cultural prominence and becomes more widely accepted remains largely unanswered. Institutional theory posits legitimacy as a multidimensional construct comprising regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive bases (Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Regulatory legitimacy describes conformity to legal or quasi-legal requirements, rules, and regulations. Normative legitimacy describes alignment with dominant norms and values, regardless of legal status. Cultural-cognitive legitimacy describes the axiomatic quality of being taken for granted and symbolically integrated with established culture. In discussing the establishment of structures—rules, routines, incentives, and sanctions—that bring UGC closer to the interests of established institutions, previous work in this area dwells on the regulatory legitimation of UGC. The normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of the legitimation of UGC—two important but underexamined determinants of its diffusion—are the gaps this study seeks to address.

When a new category of practices first emerges, its legitimacy is low owing to the uncertainty that arises from its numerical rarity and novelty (Johnson et al., 2006). In the absence of incumbency, the construal of those practices as legitimate comes about through explicit and implicit authorization or endorsement by particular actors in the social system (Scott, 2001). Those actors' narratives about the new category, in particular, are a crucial legitimation mechanism. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, "Incipient legitimation is present as soon as a system of linguistic objectification of human experience is transmitted. For example, the transmission of a kinship vocabulary *ipso facto* legitimates the kinship structure" (p. 112). We can observe the legitimation process through social actors' narrative construction of Bus Uncle and, by extension, UGC as consonant with and linked to existing, widely accepted cultural frameworks and social norms in Hong Kong.

As a group of elites claiming "the right to interpret everyday occurrences to citizens

and other professionals alike” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 5), journalists have traditionally played a leading role in providing citizens with a framework for understanding an emerging entity as it progresses into mainstream adoption (Rice, 2009; Rogers, 2003). They create awareness for a new entity by presenting it as interesting and newsworthy (Rogers, 2003; Tuchman, 1978)—effectively making a claim for social relevance which initiates legitimation. Through narratives that draw on preexisting cultural scripts, journalists validate the entity’s legitimacy by imbuing it with elements from dominant cultural norms and values (Humphreys, 2010). The emergence of UGC, however, complicates this role. The rise of UGC heralded ordinary citizens’ expanded capacity in telling and distributing their own stories rather than relying on journalists and other professional storytellers to make sense of the world (Deuze, 2006).

Prior research examining the early relationship between traditional media and emergent media suggests that journalists’ narratives of the emergence of alternative media practices are partly founded on an attempt to defend their own legitimacy when facing down the threats presented by those practices (Carlson, 2007; Winch, 1997). Journalists do so by erecting symbolic boundaries or deploying resources to enforce their social, epistemic authority (Carlson & Peifer, 2013; Edy & Snidow, 2011). For example, journalists downplay the legitimacy of bloggers by framing them as mere writers in pajamas (Jones & Himelboim, 2010). Alternatively, they may respond to such challenges through paradigm repair (Coddington, 2012) and establishment of new routines (Lee, 2012). While these responses share the common objective of preserving their institutionalized authority, journalists are not uniform in how they represent new media given that different journalistic paradigms exist even within the same society (Lee, 2012). This study expands the focus on journalists’ self-legitimation when representing new media to explore why and how it might drive journalists’ narratives that legitimize UGC.

Method

The data for this study were drawn from traditional media articles to reflect the perspectives of journalists toward Bus Uncle and UGC (as interrelated new ideas). These articles archive what actually transpired during Bus Uncle's diffusion, enabling this study to draw on actual responses articulated at the time as opposed to those recalled by survey respondents as would a typical diffusion study (Meyer, 2004). A sample of 116 media articles about Bus Uncle was collected by searching all Hong Kong newspapers and magazines in the WiseNews database for mentions of "Bus Uncle" (in Chinese or English) anywhere in the texts. WiseNews covers every major newspaper and print magazine published in Hong Kong and there were 58 such publications in the database during Bus Uncle's diffusion. Articles in the sample were published in 28 newspapers and magazines between May 17, 2006 and July 16, 2006. Most of the coverage appears within three months of the first media story on May 17, 2006 and expanding the time frame did not add substantively to the data set. To capture articles with substantive narrative of Bus Uncle, only feature stories and opinion pieces were selected.

A qualitative approach was chosen to highlight the nuances and symbolic actions in journalists' narratives which may not be captured by quantitative analysis. Specifically, this study adopts a constructionist view of narratives as stories that people make and use to interpret the world in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In contrast to quantitative content analysis which breaks down texts into units of analysis, the significance of the texts was interpreted more holistically. In this respect, the articles about Bus Uncle were regarded as a network of narratives through which the value and meanings of new media practices around UGC are represented, become understood, and are put into social practice. The data analysis began by closely examining all elements (subject, object, information mentioned, etc.) in the media text, questioning the author's motives, reflecting on the symbolic meanings represented, and checking against

other texts. The texts were then sorted and classified through a series of part-to-whole comparisons to identify similarities and differences in ideas and descriptions. The coded data were assembled into higher-order conceptual patterns by noting the relationships that integrate the codes (categories and properties) through the contexts, conditions, and strategies which clustered together. Beyond describing the evolution of news frames (e.g., Im, Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Zhou & Moy, 2007), the analysis was theoretically focused on articulating how journalists' narratives reflect and facilitate the emergence of a new institution of practices.

Findings

Cultural-Cognitive Legitimacy

Creating awareness and familiarity. When the original Bus Uncle clip first emerged, its novelty gave impetus to a flurry of video responses and views which signal Bus Uncle as sufficiently interesting and worthy of attention, and makes the idea of a market for creating and watching UGC in Hong Kong conceivable for the first time. The novelty and unprecedented attention around these amateur works provided the news value for journalists—who have remained on the sidelines when Bus Uncle first went viral—to cover it. That a real life, everyday incident can become so widely talked about after being secretly filmed and uploaded to YouTube constituted a new and unfamiliar phenomenon to most people in Hong Kong at that time. Consequently, many journalists sought to present the novel ideas in more familiar, practical terms. Interestingly, the Bus Uncle story first appeared in the financial news section of popular tabloid *Apple Daily*. Financial journalist Andrew Shuen took pains to explain why he is covering an online clip in his column by likening users' activities around Bus Uncle to traditional media companies' guerrilla marketing efforts. He writes, "In this time and age, the Internet offers many different types of services, enabling a group of strangers to replicate something that previously only traditional media companies

could achieve” (*Apple Daily*, May 17, 2006). In an article titled “Television’s end day,” one journalist writes, “Television channels used to feature interesting family home videos but now who needs the television for that? Similarly, when we can go online to watch someone verbally abuse a complete stranger for real, why bother waiting for those contrived ‘reality shows’ on television?” (*Metropolis Daily*, June 2, 2006). Continuing the comparison with existing practice, another reporter suggests, “‘Bus Uncle’ heralded a new age. Most people carry video recording devices with them wherever they go, which means that there are hundreds of thousands of potential reporters who could instantly record events happening right before them” (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*, August 8, 2006). Through Bus Uncle, journalists found a substantive local example to introduce YouTube and online clip culture, thereby reinforcing their epistemic authority to construct public knowledge and keep citizens abreast of the world around them (Carlson & Peifer, 2013). In doing so, they created broader awareness of the new media practices around UGC among members of the social system.

Applying established cultural scripts. The newness of UGC as a media category meant that people did not know what to expect. Social actors grappled with this uncertainty in their Bus Uncle narratives by invoking commonly known referents and applying established cultural templates and scripts. Drawing on existing repertoires of culturally prominent knowledge provides the common frames of reference that make Bus Uncle more recognizable among members of the social system. Many journalists highlight the dramatic, and entertaining aspects of Bus Uncle in their narratives, likening the clip to blockbuster movies, such as “*Bus Uncle* rivals *The Da Vinci Code*” (*Apple Daily*, May 27, 2006), or the people in Bus Uncle to fictional characters in local culture. For example, one journalist notes that “the Bus Uncle is like the character in *Man of la Tiger* [a slapstick Hong Kong theater character], he is the most authentic reflection of it, very dramatic” (*Ming Pao Daily News*, June 2, 2006). In such narratives, journalists shore up their attenuating authority as cultural assenters by

accrediting the cultural credentials of Bus Uncle. As one journalist remarks, “Watching the clip, I felt a sense of familiarity. It was like a scene from one of Stephen Chow’s movies. Even if it’s not, I’m quite sure it’ll be in one pretty soon. This is 100% Hong Kong culture!” (*Oriental Daily News*, May 31, 2006). Unsatisfied with being mere commentators, a few reporters turn to investigative journalism, hunting down the protagonist (Roger Chan). The melodramatic headline of Chan’s first media interview reads, “The Bus Uncle cries inconsolably: I want to kill myself” (*Next Magazine*, June 1, 2006). Further stories on Roger Chan and other persons involved in the clip ensued. These media stories illustrate an important distinction between *strategies* used by journalists and *tactics* used by ordinary users (De Certeau, 1984). Ordinary YouTube users build on readily available objects, using tactics of improvisation, customization, and personalization to re-present events. For example, some YouTube users capitalize on the abrupt and undeveloped storyline of Bus Uncle to present their own videos that serve as a continuation of the original incident. By contrast, journalists do not limit themselves to what is available; they are able to employ strategies such as news sourcing and informant interviews to create new public events and issues.

Another way journalists inscribe taken-for-granted ideas and shared knowledge on Bus Uncle is presenting it as emblematic of the lives of ordinary Hongkongers. One journalist, for instance, highlights Bus Uncle’s personal relevance for many Hongkongers, “Many people have had the unpleasant experience of being disturbed by people with little regard for civic-consciousness. Members of the public can easily identify with the incident, despising the behavior of the ‘Bus Uncle’ but not knowing how to react” (*Sing Pao*, June 1, 2006). Consistent with this interpretation, a reporter writes, “‘Bus Uncle’ could reflect the mentality of the working class. It shows that anything that captures the characteristics of ordinary people or is successfully commercialized becomes a ‘folk icon’” (*Ming Pao Daily*

News, June 1, 2006).

Overall, the sustained and repeated exposure of Bus Uncle in mass media coverage bolsters its axiomatic quality. A new cultural schema and routine around UGC emerges as social actors rehearse and develop a shared understanding of “the ways we do these things” from their engagement with Bus Uncle. While the novelty of UGC may have driven journalists to engage with Bus Uncle, it does not indemnify them from the perceived frivolity in devoting disproportionate time and effort on a seemingly trivial incident. In playing up Bus Uncle’s performative and symbolic values by associating it with popular culture, journalists sought to destigmatize both the trivialness of the incident and Chan’s boorish behavior by making the Bus Uncle story more entertaining for those who would not otherwise engage with it.

The carnivalesque and excessive way by which Bus Uncle becomes culturally legitimate, however, is not uniformly endorsed. Some journalists consider the wide attention on Bus Uncle to be “meaningless” or “nonsensical.” One commentator, for example, criticizes the drumming up of Bus Uncle as “a farce developed to the point where it’s a little crazy” (*Ming Pao Daily News*, June 4, 2006). Another journalist questions, “Was this incident widely reported because the uncle’s best quotes do indeed reflect the inner voice of Hong Kong people? Or was it because recent local and international news are not worth looking into?” (*Ming Pao Daily News*, June 2, 2006). Resistance to Bus Uncle’s cultural legitimacy is also apparent in user comments to the original clip lamenting its popularity, saying that as Hongkongers they are embarrassed by his behavior and that the Bus Uncle does not speak for them. Educators asserted the strongest pushback against Bus Uncle’s cultural wave. For instance, a school had informed parents that the students have been warned by their teachers against imitating the Bus Uncle. Students were told that owing to the abusive nature of Bus Uncle’s dialogue, besides the expletives used, phrases such as “It’s not

settled!” and “I've got pressure, you've got pressure” were also prohibited (*Apple Daily*, May 25, 2006). Much of these dissenting voices may reflect distinctions in cultural taste drawn around social class in Hong Kong (Bourdieu, 1984; G. Mathews, 2001) as is evident in social actors' criticism of dumbing down and contempt for boorish behaviors. This incident, nevertheless, illustrates that the establishment of legitimacy is a contested process and depends on common rather than consensual knowledge among members of the social system (Johnson et al., 2006).

Normative Legitimacy

Valuing and rationalizing engagement. Having examined the narratives that exemplify “the way we do these things” regarding UGC, this section turns to those narratives that assess “the reasons we do these things” and how they align UGC with dominant norms and values in Hong Kong. Many journalists valorize Bus Uncle and its genre of UGC by using it to externalize the stressful lifestyle of Hongkongers and ensuing societal dislocation (intergenerational conflict, lack of civic consciousness, etc.). As one commentator writes, “‘I've got pressure, you've got pressure’ and ‘Unresolved! Unresolved!!’ — these golden words that have captivated the whole of Hong Kong tell of the tensed and difficult lives that Hong Kong people lead to earn a living” (*Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, August 17, 2006). Framing Bus Uncle as symptomatic of wider societal problems, a journalist notes, “Conflict among commuters is nothing novel yet this one garnered so much attention. The point is why was it that the first thing this ‘uncle’ uttered was ‘you've got pressure, I've got pressure’? Does this indicate that the entire society is under too much pressure?” (*Ta Kung Pao*, May 27, 2006). The headline of another such narrative screams, “City full of ‘bus uncles’ just waiting to explode” (*South China Morning Post*, May 28, 2006). The author quotes an expert as saying, “Hong Kong's macroclimate is that everyone feels annoyed all the time and angry

some of the time... the whole Bus Uncle phenomenon shows that society has reached a tipping point.” Other journalists offer a more positive spin to the incident’s value by suggesting positive externalities. For example, a commentator notes, “Ever since ‘Bus Uncle’ has aroused widespread attention, the platform for the video, YouTube, has gained further visibility, attracting independent filmmakers and enthusiasts who did not enjoy the support of television or production companies to actively create new work, enlarging the pool of producers and productions” (*Wen Wei Po*, August 10, 2006).

Journalists who resist the valorization of Bus Uncle tended to emphasize the ordinariness of engaging with UGC—which inadvertently authenticate its normative credentials. Alluding to the ephemeral but regular public attention for such content, one commentator argues that “as long as it’s entertaining to watch, it may lead to some discussions, but after a while it is completely forgotten and we eagerly await the premiere of a new ‘show’—nobody cares whether it is authentic” (*Apple Daily*, June 2, 2006). A journalist quips that the popularity of Bus Uncle among Hongkongers is unsurprising given that the spectatorship of unruly public behaviors is an established social practice in the city: “Hong Kong people love to watch scolding matches. The five million views [of Bus Uncle videos in total] speak for itself. Whenever there are people arguing in public, you’ll find nose-ey onlookers crowding around, even at the risk of being attacked by the people involved, to enjoy the debacle till a ‘final settlement’ emerges before dispersing” (*Ming Pao Daily News*, May 28, 2006). Beyond the curiosity for events in their environment, journalists further suggest that the clip resonated with citizens because of its social and communicatory utility. Citing the views of local academics and social commentators, a reporter explains that the clip was actually not that interesting but “the boring lives that Hong Kong people lead, the lack of conversation topics, and the media coverage coupled with pop culture-like word-of-mouth recommendation led so many people to go online to watch it” (*Ming Pao Daily*

News, May 26, 2006).

Social actors often invoke Bus Uncle's wide attention to legitimize their engagement—a logic encapsulated in the album title *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*. Although not everyone finds Bus Uncle interesting, many citizens feel compelled to pay attention to it because everyone else seems to be talking about it. A reader's letter to the press reads, "If [Hong Kong] residents do not watch this clip, they cannot discuss it with their friends or colleagues. Under peer pressure, they also watch the clip" (*South China Morning Post*, May 31, 2006). Mirroring this sentiment, journalists reference the popular demand for Bus Uncle stories to justify their coverage and, thereby, reinforcing their reputation as good storytellers, "Readers are after talking points... whatever readers love to read, the press shall write!" (*Ming Pao Daily News*, June 4, 2006). Through these rationalizing narratives, UGC garners normative legitimacy because its engagement is constructed as not only normal but also obligatory.

Reaffirming norms and values. In some ways, the Bus Uncle incident is consistent with the definition of a media scandal which "occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media" (Lull & Hinerman, 1998, p. 3). As with a scandal, it entails communicative acts or "rituals of collective absolution" (Thompson, 1998) that reinforce the norms and conventions which are transgressed by the activities in question. Through these acts, the actors responsible for disrupting the social order are disciplined (cf. Edy & Snidow, 2011) and "belief in the social order is reaffirmed by the public demonstration of its capacity to expose and condemn—and perhaps eventually to forgive and pardon—the transgressor" (Thompson, 1998, p. 57). In their narratives, journalists raised a range of moral concerns regarding Bus Uncle. Many journalists expressed their disapproval of Chan's behavior. As one reporter writes, "The 'Bus Uncle' incident caused ripples throughout the city because he

lacked civic consciousness and did not follow the rule about keeping your voice down when traveling on public transport. You might be under pressure but that doesn't mean you can take it out on others in the bus" (*The Sun*, August 15, 2006). Other journalists criticized the lack of intervention from bystanders. One commentator writes, "You may be afraid to confront the person at fault because he's fierce but there's no need to make a big deal out of it. It sends the wrong signal to society that you can simply record someone's nasty behavior and post it online to castigate them" (*Apple Daily*, August 11, 2006).

Edifying narratives were also extended to the behaviors of citizens and other journalists in this incident. In a commentary titled "We are morally worse than Bus Uncle," the author castigates both citizens and journalists for creating a common enemy out of a helpless person and gleefully turning a tragic event into entertainment (*Ming Pao Daily News*, June 7, 2006). Journalists also highlighted privacy concerns in recording the public acts of private citizens. One reporter, citing expert legal opinion, argued that although such acts may not constitute privacy infringement, derivative works that cast someone in a bad light might run the risk of defamation (*Sing Tao Daily News*, June 3, 2006). Another journalist laments that current privacy laws are only directed at media paparazzi and warns that "every ordinary citizen runs the risk of having their moments of weakness and ugly behaviors publicized—unknowingly become the target of ridicule in online news—because anyone with a camera phone is potentially a paparazzi" (*Ta Kung Pao*, June 6, 2006). Through these criticisms, journalists conduct boundary work whereby they reinforce their own legitimacy by distancing themselves from private citizens taking on journalistic activities and other journalists who violate professional norms (Carlson, 2007; Winch, 1997). As a commentator writes, "The mass media has an important responsibility of monitoring social order. The recent performance of the mass media has been quite worrying. The exaggerated reporting of the 'Bus Uncle' and polling to select a favorite female artiste for

indecent assault are violations of journalistic integrity” (*Ta Kung Pao*, June 8, 2006). Another reporter at the paper criticizes other journalists for violating the objectivity norm of observing the social world without appearing in their own stories (Edy & Snidow, 2011), “The Bus Uncle clip is self-explanatory. Yet, yesterday a group of reporters brought Roger Chan to Elvis Ho’s workplace in an attempt to stage a drama” (*Ta Kung Pao*, June 6, 2006).

The above narratives do not necessarily reject the engagement with UGC as morally unacceptable—not least because they are mostly targeted at specific transgressors and transgressive acts. In fact, they reinforce such engagement as beneficial to society because the heightened levels of attention and discourse provide an opportunity for collective edification and concern for societal problems (cf. Cheong & Gong, 2010). As a reporter claims, “The media coverage of the ‘Bus Uncle’ is a positive thing. Even foreign media paid attention to it. Schools and non-governmental organizations held talks on the ‘Bus Uncle’ incident to promote civic consciousness. Lately the ‘Bus Uncle’ has been able to wean himself off welfare assistance by his own efforts. These are good news!” (*Oriental Daily News*, July 1, 2006). Although the dangers of privacy invasion and cyber vigilantism in recording and online sharing of others’ public misbehaviors were raised by some journalists, these problems have yet to gain prevalence given the hitherto numerical rarity of such UGC. Moreover, a practice need not be morally spotless to be normatively legitimate. For example, gossip has a morally dubious reputation but, in most contexts, normatively legitimate. After all, gossip is a habitual pattern of social communication and plays an important part in socialization (Dunbar, 1996). Similarly, despite its association with socially undesirable behaviors, engaging with UGC garners normative legitimacy by becoming recognized as fulfilling the needs of social actors and becoming linked with existing conventions.

Conclusions

The year 2006 heralded UGC's cultural ascendance. Led by the rapid adoption of YouTube, the dominant platform for such content, it culminated in *Time* magazine naming "You" as person of the year. That ordinary citizens could create content and share it online is not new; the idea of a shortcut to rapid, widespread attention for such content, however, was unprecedented. Bus Uncle was the vessel that brought this and other novel ideas about UGC to the attention of Hong Kong's public and press. As this study has demonstrated, the heightened levels of attention and discussion on Bus Uncle help to facilitate the adoption of UGC and related practices in Hong Kong by fostering their legitimacy.

In terms of cultural-cognitive legitimacy, the narratives reduced the uncertainty in engaging with UGC and lent cultural support to it. Bus Uncle's repeated exposure and association with culturally prominent knowledge in social actors' narratives foster a shared understanding of the cultural schema and routine around UGC. The adoption of UGC in new situations requires less explicit justification or reflective thought because actors became familiar with methods and reasons to engage with it from the example of Bus Uncle. Establishing familiarity with an innovation is crucial for its diffusion because it reduces the uncertainty and fears stemming from its novelty (Rogers, 2003). As Berkun (2010) argues, "The love of new ideas is a myth: we prefer ideas only after others have tested them" (p. 55). Bus Uncle provides the first proof that such content can command public attention, thereby giving impetus for more citizens to share such content and for journalists to report it in future. Journalists, in particular, would have developed a preliminary understanding of how they ought to engage with UGC from their experience with Bus Uncle which ranged from initially ignoring the story to covering it excessively (Lee, 2009).

In terms of normative legitimacy, the narratives addressed problems in engaging with UGC and aligned it with prevailing norms and values. Through narratives that valorize Bus Uncle and rationalize its wide attention, engaging with UGC becomes perceived as normal

and even necessary. As Bus Uncle gains normative acceptance, UGC becomes more readily adopted by actors in other contexts because they expect that it would also be accepted by other actors. A crucial factor in fostering this expectation is the narratives around why people engage with Bus Uncle construing UGC as consonant with goals already widely accepted in society. UGC like Bus Uncle is familiar for many Hongkongers given that they live, work, and commute daily in tight confined spaces where unpleasant incidents over the intrusion of personal space are fairly common. For citizens, such content affords a sense of witnessing and opportunity to reaffirm the norms and values that provide social stability. They may feel obligated to pay attention to popular UGC to avoid social sanction—the embarrassment of being ignorant during social conversations. For journalists, reporting on UGC reinforces their role as professional storytellers. The possible threat to traditional journalism is no barrier given the lack of a hegemonic journalistic paradigm coupled with a highly competitive newspaper market in Hong Kong. Furthermore, it would be difficult for journalists to resist appropriating this efficient source of human interest stories (see Lee, 2012).

Moving beyond UGC, this study advances an alternative approach toward understanding the diffusion of innovations. Thinking of diffusion in terms of communicating legitimacy paints a richer picture of how new ideas spread. More than the cumulative number of adoptions, this study returns the concept of diffusion to its communication roots as “essentially a social process in which subjectively perceived information about a new idea is communicated” (Rogers, 1995, p. xvii). From this vantage point, this study demonstrates that the compatibility of an innovation in a social system is not inherent but constructed and validated by social actors. The examination of journalists’ narratives brings the role of mass media back to the center of the diffusion process; a role sidelined by diffusion research’s emphasis on social networks and interpersonal relations (Katz, 2006). Beyond mere awareness, this study offers some insight into how journalism fosters normative acceptance

and cultural support for an innovation as a by-product of their efforts at preserving their own legitimacy through paradigm-repair and boundary maintenance.

Using the case of Bus Uncle, this study has documented a key moment in communication history when a new media category spontaneously rises to prominence within a specific social system by focusing on the process of legitimizing UGC. Given that legitimacy is not a static commodity that can be possessed or exchanged (Scott, 2001), future studies could examine the process of reinforcing UGC's legitimacy or de-legitimizing certain undesirable UGC. The dimension of regulatory legitimacy of UGC which was not examined in this study, partly because it was at an emergent stage, may be another fruitful area for further research. Apart from copyright issues, questions regarding UGC's regulatory legitimacy could include privacy invasion, hate speech, and cyber bullying. This study also has contemporary implications for understanding other emergent media practices such as the significance of legitimacy in big data journalism. As Lewis and Westlund (2014, p. 2) argue, "the big-data phenomenon raises many relevant questions for news media, some of the most essential have to do with the legitimation of new claims about knowledge and truth." The conceptual framework of communicating legitimacy and its attendant components explicated in this paper can provide additional insights and advance research on the nascent phenomenon. Specifically, the framework guides researchers to go beyond inquiries about the rules, routines, and procedures of what journalists do with big data (De Maeyer, Libert, Domingo, Heinderyckx, & Le Cam, 2014; Parasie, 2014)—toward questions regarding how journalists align big data with prevailing norms and values (e.g., data-privacy, surveillance, and democracy), and symbolically integrate it with established culture (e.g., via data visualization or personification through prominent characters such as Edward Snowden).

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