UGC: an ugly word for a beautiful thing – but what is it and what to do with it?

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This week I 'led' a session at the excellent BeebCamp on UGC. It means User Generated Content. But as fellow camper Suw Charman-Anderson has pointed out:

> collaboration is now almost a given, "We ought to collaborate", but that it's not entirely clear what it is or how to do it.

UGC is a beautiful thing. It is the public creating something and then sharing it through the media. It gives you a warm feeling. It is the things that politicians dream of: public participation. It is the act that both conservatives and socialists believe binds society together: voluntary collaboration.

And best of all, from a news business model point of view, it is free. Or at least it is until you start to do something with it. And that, of course, is where Networked Journalism comes in. As I keep on about in SuperMedia, public participation is not a natural phenomenon. It requires citizen media literacy and it needs investment by journalists to provide platforms, production and editing of that wonderful, creative, diverse, democratic user generated stuff.

I have just read an unpublished paper which attempts to set out a typology. I won't steal the author's ideas but it would be useful to distinguish between someone ringing a radio phone-in from the person who creates a Google map with a whole community.

It would also be useful to chart the flows, the expectations and the outcomes of different types of UGC. Think about the process of sending in a photo from a mobile of a snowman during last month's blizzards. Why did they do it? what did they expect to happen? who owns it and what should you do with it?

And what about the value? Is it worth the media organisation connecting to this stuff? how does it benefit the creator? and what possible interest is it to the rest of us?

There is obviously a book in it, one that I think would follow on rather neatly from my own. But I haven't got time, so suggestions, thoughts and ideas in the comments section please.