

# THE IRISH TIMES

## Digital Excellence entry: User Generated Content tool

### Background

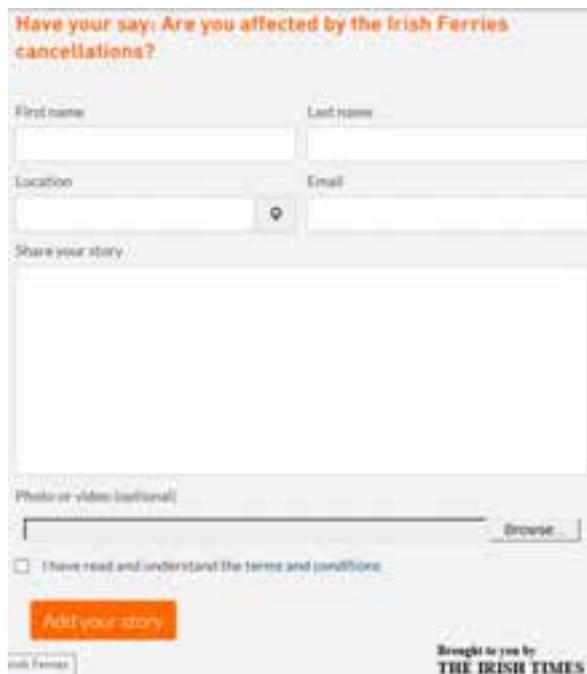
Readers are interested in stories written by and about people like them. Allowing them to share their experiences and opinions by publishing them both online and in print not only breaks down the divide between reader and journalist, but also creates a sense of community among a group of readers with shared interests.

“User generated content” (UGC) is an area of growing importance for media organisations worldwide. Being part of the conversation is something our readers increasingly expect.

In recent years, The Irish Times has successfully used user generated content (UGC) in several editorial projects, by inviting readers to contribute to series on burnout, commuting and the rental crisis, for example. The resulting articles containing a moderated selection of submissions have been published both online and in print, with good traffic figures.

When our readers have been given the opportunity to send a considered submission, they have responded with text written to a high standard. These are stories we might not get using conventional journalism techniques. We knew this success could be replicated across other sections of the site through greater use of UGC.

### New UGC tool



The screenshot shows a web form with the following elements:

- Title: "Have your say: Are you affected by the Irish Ferries cancellations?"
- Input fields for "First name" and "Last name".
- Input fields for "Location" and "Email".
- A large text area labeled "Share your story".
- A "Photo or video (optional)" section with a "Browse" button.
- A checkbox labeled "I have read and understand the terms and conditions".
- An orange "Add your story" button.
- Footer text: "Brought to you by THE IRISH TIMES".

Prior to this project, UGC was gathered by The Irish Times using two methods:

1. Email
2. Online forms, which lead to Google Docs at the back end

Both methods were cumbersome for both the user and the journalist. A UGC gathering tool was necessary to make the process of receiving and processing UGC easier, for both the user and the journalist.

A small team from the editorial and technology departments were tasked with developing a bespoke UGC tool to facilitate the process of gathering UGC from readers.

The tool enables journalists to create a simple call-out form (see above), which can be embedded into an article on the website (as a third party HTML element). The journalist can specify what fields they want the form to contain, ask specific questions, or specify whether a photo, video etc is required.

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Irish Times social media (Facebook and Twitter) accounts are used to promote the call-outs to readers, allowing journalists to target a particular audience – e.g. this call-out about the Irish Ferries cancellations in June 2018 was pushed out through the Irish Times Travel Facebook page, and the Life & Style Twitter account.

At the back end, contributions can be edited and approved to be fed automatically into a gallery widget on the website, or selected for bulk download into a single Word document, or zip file for photographs.

The form design is responsive on mobile, which allows readers to upload photographs, video and text directly from their phones. They are currently being adapted to work in Google AMP articles.

## UGC tool in action:

Since September 2017, the UGC tool has been used approximately 80 times, often producing a series of articles from each call-out. Overall, almost 4,000 contributions have been received from readers using the tool – these range from a single photograph, to text contributions which have been published as standalone articles on the website and in print.

Some examples include:

1. **Eye-witness accounts/photographs:** During the “Beast from the East” snowfall in February 2018, a UGC call-out for reader photographs and stories resulted in more than 500 submissions, which were published as four daily galleries, including this one <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/cold-snaps-your-snow-pictures-from-across-ireland-are-simply-stunning-1.3408902>. The tool has been used successfully to produce galleries of reader pics for several other extreme weather events, including Hurricane Ophelia in October 2017, and the heatwave in summer 2018.
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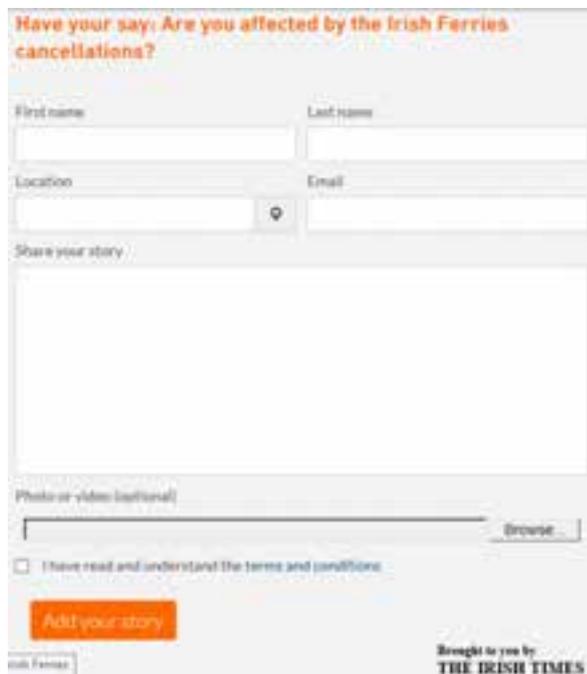
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