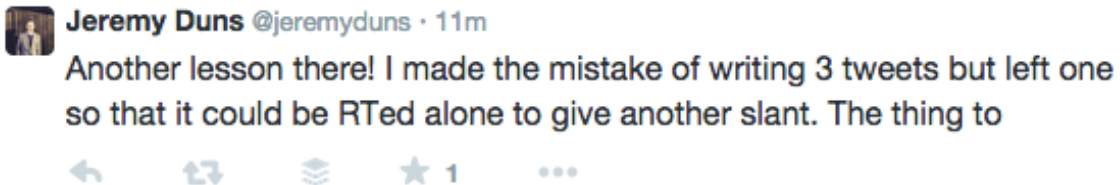
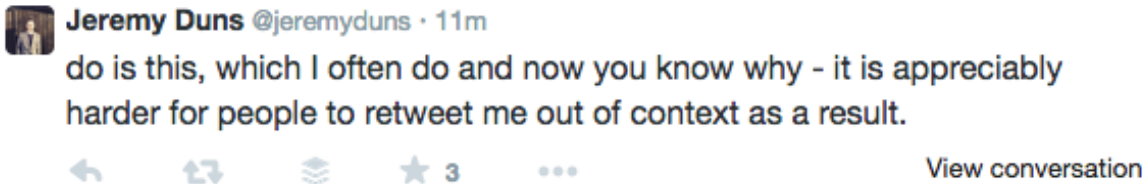


In next week's exciting blog post we will find out what happened to that brilliant new narrative device idea

I am fascinated by how changing journalism technologies can lead to new ways of creating content that almost redefine what 'news' can be. For example, thanks to the Internet we can know the fact of something – such as a plane crash – instantly and globally. So breaking 'news' becomes less about revealing the new fact and much more about context, reaction, analysis etc.

Here's another example from the twitter stream of spy novelist Jeremy Duns who is also a very persistent twitter critic of journalists and political activists that he thinks are being hypocritical, dangerous or plain stupid. He's not a troll because he's not rude or offensive, but he is relentless in a way that sometimes leads his targets to block him or retaliate. He's keen to avoid them misrepresenting what he says so he came up with this clever trick of a line-break spread over tweets:



I joked back at him thus:



Geddit?

Jeremy then made this point in reply to my reply (stick with me, this is going somewhere):



Jeremy Duns @jeremyduns · 7m

@CharlieBeckett I thought you were going to tweet something else there, so it has the added bonus of working as a cliffhanger. :)



[View conversation](#)

That made me think about how cliffhangers seem to be making a comeback in online journalism. However, the natural instinct of most news journalists is to produce complete packages of information. You try to make your newspaper article, blog post or video a finished product. So when journalists go on twitter they try to cram it all into the 140 characters (plus photos or video).

But look at the popularity of cliffhanging TV drama at the moment from House of Cards to Broadchurch. The (in)famous NPR radio podcast serial called Serial used the cliffhanger principle and turned it into a 'live' investigation that progressed weekly. Huge amounts of related social media chat kept people on tenterhooks in between the episodes. It could be argued that this is turning serious journalism into a spectacle. I do think that Serial did sail close to the ethical wind in this and other ways. But why shouldn't journalism grip us by not telling everything straight away?

This is different to the Upworthy style headlines that claim 'This Story Will Blow Your Mind' etc. Those aren't so different to traditional tabloid newspaper headlines (Three In A Bed Romp Shocker) that tease you with limited facts and lots of suggestion. Nor is this the same as those dreadful long-winded introductions to long-form American news features that take 1,000 words to set the scene before telling you the story. The drop-lead is not the same as a cliff-hanger.

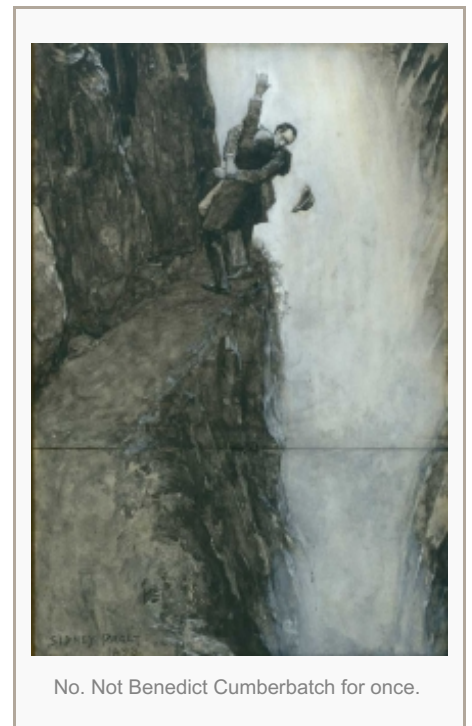
A cliff-hanger is a narrative that is deliberately stopped at a critical point with some kind of delay before it resumes. Perhaps the most famous was Sherlock Holmes tumbling into the Reichenbach Falls, though most people will be more familiar with Benedict Cumberbatch's recent re-versioning of that.

To make this happen in journalism is partly about turning longer content into episodes, but it is also about re-shaping the content overall. To have a cliff-hanger you have to reveal the information in a sequential manner, without prioritising the most important facts at the beginning. This goes against usual journalistic practice.

On twitter some people have got quite good at doing mini-series of tweets but a cliffhanger has to be more than simply listing points. There has to be a build-up, a stall and then a reveal after the break.

Wouldn't the mould-breaking long-form New York Times interactive multi-media story [Snowfall](#) have been much better if it had been broken up into manageable chunks and told as a suspense-full narrative over time? The paradox of the instant Internet may be that we also want some delayed gratification. That might mean giving the consumer the option of binging on the whole thing in rapid succession as we do with boxed set DVDs. Or it might be that you want to provide narrative S&M and force people to wait.

In a way this is all just theatre but we do need to come up with new ways of luring people through content. We need to invent ways to improve engagement, not just traffic. There's no harm if some of these are re-inventing old tricks. Serialisation was good enough for Charles Dickens (who was a very successful journalist) who used it to create very long detailed narratives that kept people turning pages and paying for subscriptions.



No. Not Benedict Cumberbatch for once.

