

## Tech v Hacks: time for a truce?

The formation of two tribes around the future of journalism was understandable back in the day of ‘bloggers v newspapers’ but why are we still waiting for the battle lines to be redrawn between technologists and journalists?

I was at first surprised when Emily Bell, the former Guardian digital boss and now Tow Digital Centre Director at Columbia University appeared to be wading into this binary argument with her lecture [Silicon Valley and Journalism: Make Up or Break Up?](#) Perhaps, I thought, the soldiers fighting the US Kultur wars between techs and hacks have kidnapped her since she moved to New York?



When two tribes go to war...

In fact the speech is as balanced as you would expect from someone who used to work for *the* classically ‘wooly liberal’ newspaper. Emily knows as well as anyone that news-making is now networked through the Internet with social media and digital devices and, as I set out in my book [SuperMedia](#), she thinks that this gives us the tools to make better journalism which provides more value to the public:

*“The language of news is shaped now by engineering protocols, not by newsrooms norms and on the whole the world is a better place for it.”*

But she warns that those empowering engineering protocols – the structures, access and algorithms now controlled by private technology organisations such as Facebook, Twitter, Google – mean that who gets what journalism and how is subject to their policies:

*“No other single branded platform in the history of journalism has had the concentration of power and attention that Facebook enjoys.”*

And as we know, companies like Facebook muck about with our news-feeds to maximise the traffic and revenue that flows to them – not to enhance the journalism. As Bell says, the most worrying example of this new power was the Snowden revelations implying collusion of some kind between the security services and the tech companies. But generally, Bell is talking about editorial independence at a more routine level. Journalism needs

to be able to publish and reach its audience without someone else controlling the channels or platforms, or shaping the flows of information upon them.

*“From Paul Reuter through to John Reith, at the BBC, the pioneers of journalism were also pioneers of communications technology. Today however we have reached a point of transition where news spaces are no longer owned by newsmakers. The press is no longer in charge of the free press and has lost control of the main conduits through which stories reach audiences. The public sphere is now operated by a small number of private companies, based in Silicon Valley”*

And she says that means journalists must create their own technologies:

*“to build tools and services which put software in the service of journalism rather than the other way round. We need a platform for journalism built with the values and requirements of a free press baked into it.”*

This is a big ask and I just don't think it will happen at any kind of scale. Journalism organisations never owned telephone companies, newsagents or broadcast transmitters either. And the news industry has a poor track record in investing in innovation when it had the money. This is partly because the two tribes culture meant that the news business was very slow to see the need to put capital into digital generally:

*“whilst engineers have developed Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest, Ello, Medium, Kickstarter and others, not one existing journalism or media company has conceived of or developed a widely adopted social platform. And only two – MySpace and Reddit were acquired by media companies, by News Corp and Conde Nast respectively. That is quite a record for twenty years.”*

But like Emily Bell, I think we should be much more critical of the technology companies (in the academic sense of inquiring – not hostile) and expect more of them as citizens in helping foster a healthy networked news ecology. I see almost no evidence that they will do this voluntarily.

Veteran technology blogger (he pretty much invented blogs) David Winer wrote [a slightly sniffy response](#) to Emily's lecture which said that journalists don't “know how to listen to technology”. But I think he's right.

Journalists can't force these companies to do things. The news industry shouldn't expect government to sort it out either. But Winer's solution is not to build some kind of alternative structure. Winer says journalists should stop fearing Facebook and get more engaged:

*“there's so much potential right now. It's not time to lock it down and regulate. It's time for tech and journalism to behave responsibly and respectfully of themselves and each other....Come on, let's use the tools we have. Feed your headlines and stories into Facebook and Twitter, you have to do that — they [exist](#) and billions of people use them — but also into new systems for news distribution. There is room for lots of different approaches. We're at the beginning of something new, at a time of exciting possibilities. Let that excitement be reflected in your thinking.”*

I agree with that. At the moment we are now seeing a live experiment in the US where the tech billionaires are trying out journalism for themselves. Amazon's Jeff Bezos has bought the very mainstream quality journalism outfit, the Washington Post, while ebay's Pierre Omidyar has set up a new journalism enterprise, First Look Media, that has recruited the talent and profile of people like Glenn Greenwald. My money is on the former

achieving something more sustainable than the latter which is already wobbling, but they are different and exciting models in the early stages of new business development.

They will tell us a lot about whether the business methods and ethics of Silicon Valley can foster journalism in the digital era. I am sure we need much more innovation but I'm not convinced that the start-up culture – in its most raw form – works for building a lasting and effective news institution. But that is a challenge that technology companies are facing beyond journalism. As organisations such as Facebook or Google become integral and extensive parts of the world's economic and social life they are having to adapt their Silicon Valley principles to the demands of politicians, business and publics. Journalists – as Emily Bell says – must be more active in the renegotiation of the terms of trade between these tech giants and the rest of us.

Journalism educator and Google fan [Jeff Jarvis puts it politely](#), journalists must help educate the tech companies about ethics. But I also agree with Jeff that it was the tech guys who taught the arrogant monopolistic traditional news industry that it had become bloated, out of touch and complacent.

In a sense, the two tribes must continue. Of course, journalists and news media organisations must become better at coding, handling data, online design, platform development. We must understand better digital metrics, engagement and network effects. That will in turn shape our journalism, helping us to better discover and disseminate information and analysis. But the core purposes and civic ideals of journalism as well as the narrative craft remain something special and vital for society. That must not be lost or even compromised as the hacks learn to love the tech.

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You can read Emily Bell's lecture in full [by clicking here](#) I agree entirely with her call for greater innovation, the role of journalism educators and the need for much better reporting of technology issues.

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