

Britain's Paper Tigers: Past, Present, and Future of Journalism

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Does the last newspaper leaving behind its offices on Fleet Street signal the end of Britain's press? Can quality journalism cohabitate with "jaw-dropping" cat video listicles on the same website? What really holds more influence: the news found on the front-page or on clickbait? Polis hosted two top journalists at LSE to discuss the battle for the soul of journalism as part of the [LSE Literary Festival](#). This article by Christine Sweeney, Global Media and Communications MSc student at LSE. (@csweeney)



Stig Abell, Editor of the [Times Literary Supplement](#), Britain's leading literary newspaper, launched a cross-Atlantic discussion on the waning, but residual influence of newspapers with his August 2016 New York Times article, [Britain's Paper Tigers](#). Abell, who joined [Polis](#) Director Charlie Beckett and [BuzzFeed UK](#) Political Editor, Jim Waterson at the event, noted "Britain's decision to leave the European Union was, from one angle, a final, Pyrrhic victory for British print journalism." Pyrrhic victories that come at too great a cost and often lead to self-destruction were the theme of the night when discussing the current state of journalism. What happened to Fleet Street, the London center of British newspapers? "I blame the media," Beckett offered.

Newspapers feeding and responding to the political preferences of their readers was the original social media "echo chamber," that people are now buzzing about in a post-Brexit/Trump (Brexump? Truxit?) world. The anti-elitist, [anti-expert](#) rhetoric that fueled recent nationalist movements in both the UK and America is not due to the media, Abell suggested. "The power of newspapers has always been overstated," he continued. Newspapers, in addition to the occasional hard-hitting investigative journalism they feature, have always served as a platform for public debates. These debates have been moving online for the past 20 years. Many newspapers have struggled to monetize their content as well as online giants Facebook and Google, both speakers agreed.

Not Irrelevant

Waterson suggested that national newspapers are not irrelevant in the UK. With declining print edition sales, indeed someone has to read the Sunday front pages. Sunday papers drive the news in the UK, even if it is now filtered through the cable news shows, Facebook feeds, and Google searches. “If it’s on the front page, it’s news,” said Waterson. How this news is consumed and discussed is now at the heart of working out where the power lies, he continued. What drives the conversation: the Front Page or the Clickbait, and who clicks?

Abell imagines an ecosystem where a combination of print and online in-depth journalism can be easily-consumed on mobile devices. In other words, just because readers can be easily distracted by clickbait doesn’t mean the clickbait can’t lead to long-form investigative pieces. “Never has there been a better time for reading good journalism.

Never has there been a better time for reading bad journalism,” Waterson said. The “dead zone,” is the sober, middle-ground journalism, historically ruled by BBC, which provides a measured, account of events. Those who seek quality, heavily researched news will be willing to scale the paywalls being built up on Britain’s and America’s most respected online newspapers. On the other end, quick and dirty news subsidized by ad sales and celebrity gossip will continue to thrive.

Waterson and Abell discussed how these major media transitions are playing out in America versus the UK. “Fake news doesn’t exist in the UK,” Waterson observed. The “fake news,” that everyone from President Donald Trump (Truxit?) to American journalists themselves are talking about, is what Waterson calls the “standard exaggeration,” that has always been a fixture in UK media spaces. Brits are seasoned to be both skeptical and cynical about the news they read, according to Abell. Across the Pond and over to the Swamp, “Americans aren’t used to journalists being criticized so openly.” The disillusionment of Americans illustrates the “disconnect between what the media is and what we think of it,” said Abell.

Tweetable Observations

Perhaps one of the most Tweetable observations to come out of the talk (though there were many), came from Waterson, “For Millennials, the worst thing to happen to the news is old people getting on Facebook.” Old people (and I will leave it to readers to define this demographic), lacking the social media tact and adeptness of their digital native counterparts, have taken politics to Facebook, often posting articles without fully reading them. This cursory reading and sharing of articles has led to social media activity driving content. With many now using Facebook to read the news, algorithms now dictate user exposure to articles, according to Abell.



Editor of the Times Literary Supplement (TLS), Stig Abell



On the bright side, it's a lot harder for journalists, and indeed Tweeting presidents, to get away with completely made-up stories. "There is always going to be someone to call you out on Twitter," warned Waterson. Fact-checking has been made easier and more accessible than ever in a time of online databases and news archives. However, when the news media does call out Twitter-happy presidents, they run the risk of being discredited as a "Failing pile of garbage." Just ask [BuzzFeed](#).

Tightrope Walking

American journalists are now walking a tightrope of covering the new presidential administration and fact-checking and correcting the "fake news" it generates, while at the same time being accused of reporting "fake news" by said administration. Both sides are "shouting 'fake news!' at ever-increasing volumes," noted Abell.

"What happens when the host (Facebook) kills the content (the news)?" When "newspapers have become viewspapers," and social media's democratization of public debates also means democratizing aggression, investing in investigative journalism has become more important than ever, Abell said. Waterson shared some of BuzzFeed's efforts to train a new generation of journalists through fellowships and professional development schemes. To fund this revival and its operations, BuzzFeed has gotten creative with using sponsored commercial content. Waterson provided some ethical advice for new journalists reporting the news alongside the sponsored articles that pay for it, "if it feels icky, it probably is." I would suggest that today's consumers of news, be it print or online; fake or fact-checked, could also use this advice.



Political Editor of BuzzFeed UK, Jim Waterson

This article by Christine Sweeney, Global Media and Communications MSc student at LSE. [@csweenez](#)

Britain's Paper Tigers was hosted by Polis and the LSE Literary Festival.

Professor Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, was in discussion with Stig Abell (Times Literary Supplement) and Jim Waterson (BuzzFeed UK).

You can listen to the discussion [here](#), and find Stig Abell's original piece 'Britain's Paper Tigers' in the New York Times [here](#).



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