

Journalism is getting personal: latest trends from the digital front line

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2016/06/05/journalism-is-getting-personal-latest-trends-from-the-digital-front-line/

2016-6-5

When you take a close up look at how european journalists are innovating with new technology it's clear that the pace of change is rapid and that both the level of complexity and the stakes involved are high. While all the talk is of the death of print, the real story is the fight for life in digital.

Here's some key elements that snagged my interest in a weekend spent with about a hundred digital and social hacks from across the continent (with a few Americans thrown into the mix) assembled for the [Google Newsgeist](#) 'unconference' next to the Guggenheim in Bilbao.



What happens to journalism when it gets social?

There were myriad topics ranging from advertising to performance art (no, really) but at the heart of everything was **the effort to connect content to the user**. The key dynamic in that process is **personalisation of news consumption** and the key catalyst in that dynamic is **emotions**. The vital context is **the relationship between the news brands and the platforms**. **Algorithms** are the key tool for engineering journalism created in an increasing range of formats from VR to newsletters. The essential fuel for this process is **data**.

In the short 12 months since the last Newsgeist in Helsinki the journalists at the front line have gone from the realisation that they must work in a very different way to the creation of specific teams for data analysis, engagement, user experience and product development. The future is happening and despite some remarkable successes and outstanding innovation, that's where the problems start.

[Newsgeist](#) was an attempt to brainstorm ways forward if not solutions. The discussions exposed some lingering

cultural, resource and logistical problems but they were also testimony to the extraordinary commitment and enthusiasm of the networked journalists.

In the last year platforms like Snapchat have thrown up new spaces where the public now communicate and where journalism must go, too. The digital intermediaries like Facebook have created powerful platforms for journalism such as Instant Articles and Facebook Live while Google's AMP is giving news the opportunity for more impact on the user.

Yet the core problem remains. In an environment of abundant information and endless digital distraction how do you get the eyeballs to the editorial? Obviously, the essential economic goal is monetisation but the vital precondition even before you start thinking of subscription or advertising is getting the user's attention and keeping it.

Newsbrands Must Curate

Inevitably, the ways to do this are many and depend on the story, the topic, the customer and the news brand itself as well as where the content is being consumed. There are now loads of opportunities offered for them to tailor what they get and how. But the feedback from Newsgeist was that in practice the user does not want to make much of an effort. The expectation is that the news brand should do the work of curation. When offered a selection of editorial menu options the punter often presses 'select all'.

Of course, not all readers are the same. A 'Super News Consumer' may well want endless articles shovelled their way on similar topics so they can dig deep. Other may want a much more varied diet of light and hard news. Recommendation has to be intelligent or it ends up like those online adverts that pop up pestering you with products that you've already bought. At this point even the more technology-orientated news people often turned to metaphor. It's like offering vegetable soup but with different amounts of carrot or leek to different diners.

One measure of the success of personalisation is impact. This goes way beyond simple traffic measurement. How long did the user dwell? Did they share or interact? What likes or retweets did the content get? But those analytics are still pretty crude and don't tell you why the user liked something let alone why they didn't. And what might they have liked that wasn't provided?

Marketing Matters

It was clear that the old division of Church and State in journalism must be ended. Not just because editorial needs marketing to survive but because the two are utterly interlinked throughout the process. And that process, as I've been saying for many years now, is no longer a manufacturing system that creates products to be marketed. It's now a service relationship with the user where the value chain starts even before the act of journalism occurs.

Trust is vital to that relationship (like any other in our lives) so if you're just selling then the friendship will soon end. Trust is partly about good old-fashioned ideas of accuracy, reliability and authority. But just as important is making sure that the content is relevant to the user and the journalist is transparent and interactive about how it's created and communicated. In the end the revenue will come from building a loyal audience on trust.

Of course, the user also wants the news to be all sorts of things: stylish, easy to consume, sometimes sensational, revelatory and surprising. A lot of journalism will still be utilitarian but the stuff that goes viral has that 'wow factor'. Nothing entirely new in that, but now the data lets us see it happening and how. In theory that lets the news brand shape its product to maximum effect. In practice, the data is still pretty crude. We have little idea about the offline context of audience behaviour. And then there's the need to respect privacy and data protection.

Emotion Built In

I won't go on about emotion, identity and social as the main driver of content consumption in this new ecosystem(s) because [I've written about it elsewhere](#). But I was stunned at the extent to which the idea of putting the human

response and the subjective approach is now literally built into the algorithms and production practices of news on social.

As news now flows through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram or is aggregated through curators such as Apple News the relationship between those digital intermediaries and the news brands becomes all-important. Again, it's clear that the news organisations have moved on rapidly in the last year to full-blooded engagement with those platforms. There was some wishful thinking about creating 'our own' platforms to rival Facebook or Google but the more realistic focus was on finding new ways to collaborate with the big technology beasts to deliver the journalistic content that is still in demand from the users of digital intermediaries platforms.

This was a fascinating weekend and I hope to write more inspired by the discussions.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science