

Journalism and Emotions

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*This article is from a talk given by **Charlie Beckett** at the **University of Amsterdam** on 20/2/16.*

This talk will argue that as journalism and society changes, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. I will argue that this is redefining the classic idea of journalistic objectivity, indeed, it is reshaping the idea of news itself. That matters because journalism has an increasingly significant role in our lives as information, data and social media become more ubiquitous and more influential. At the moment journalists are exploring this as a professional phenomenon and citizens are seeing it as something that is personal.

This debate is not new so when academics analyse it, they often fit the discourse into rather familiar frames such as 'quality': is emotion likely to create 'worse' journalism? Or politics: does emotion democratise our relationship to news? Or ethics: does emotion create journalism that is more or less likely to foster a 'good society'?



First of all here's a moment when the mask of objective, dispassionate reporting slips.

Everyone recovers very well but it's interesting how his mention of an emotion – hope – triggers his own emotional break up – and then how the formula of properly unemotional TV is re-established.



It's also interesting how people on social media responded approvingly to the fact that Satchell had shown his feelings.

Now this is clearly an extreme example – an accidental moment – and some people might argue that the media responded over-emotionally to the Paris attacks – in the same way that many thought their response to the Hebdo killings was also too personal, too subjective. But it also shows how charged with emotion news is – in this instance because of the sheer scale of humanity involved, but as I will argue, because it is how the audience responds and data and social media is making that manifest and critical to the future of news itself.



Here's the context.

We are drowning in a sea of stories about our world. There is a daily flood of news through the new channels of the Internet combined with the traditional media that together is bigger than ever before despite the business model crisis for some parts of the industry. News consumers have more access, more easily to more journalism than ever before.

That means that the news is everywhere, all the time. And it's a different kind of news – it is *networked*.

As described in I charted in my first book *SuperMedia*, journalism is now interactive, inter-connected, participatory, more open, more global, multi-platform, multi-linear, a stream of data, analysis and comment. (Chris Peters and Marcel Brosesma brought that up to date with their book *Rethinking Journalism*). That can be wonderful. It gives the journalist extraordinary creative and communicative power.



Since the 7/7 London bombings and those shaky pictures of people walking through the smoke-filled underground tunnels it is difficult to imagine any major event or issue being covered without the input of social media or digital devices. It can expand the citizen's choice, information, engagement and understanding but it can also be confusing, distorting and even upsetting.

Beyoncé, cute kittens or relentless tragedy? Is good news really news at all?

As the industry ponders the number of gloomy stories, our relationship with news seems to be changing



This is something I explored in [a radio documentary](#) called *Good News is No News* and I also [wrote about it](#) in *The Guardian*. I have never had such an animated public response to anything I have done in my life as I got to that programme. It touched a nerve among journalists and the public. Through interviews with a range of newsmakers from BuzzFeed to the Daily Mail the programme showed how the old idea of ‘hard news’ that shocks, frightens, disturbs and alarms can leave the audience feeling alienated, disempowered, helpless and, worst of all, apathetic, insensitive and even hostile to learning about our world.

I argued in that programme that journalism must not lose its competitive, critical, independent edge. It must tell people things we don’t always want to hear. But it should also find better ways to give context and promote understanding so that we pay attention to and engage with the news: if you like more ‘constructive journalism’.

There are many clever technological fixes that can help with this – the BBC has just relaunched its main website giving the consumer the option of customising the content to suit your interests. It will give local news for where you are from – and if you don’t want celebrity gossip, then you can turn that off. A Dutch example might be Blendle.

But there is much more that journalists must do to change their craft to help people cope with the increased volume and variety of sources now just a click away – and often thrust in front of you without your permission. I think understanding the new role of emotion in journalism is critical to this.

There are three factors currently driving journalists towards using emotion as a tool.

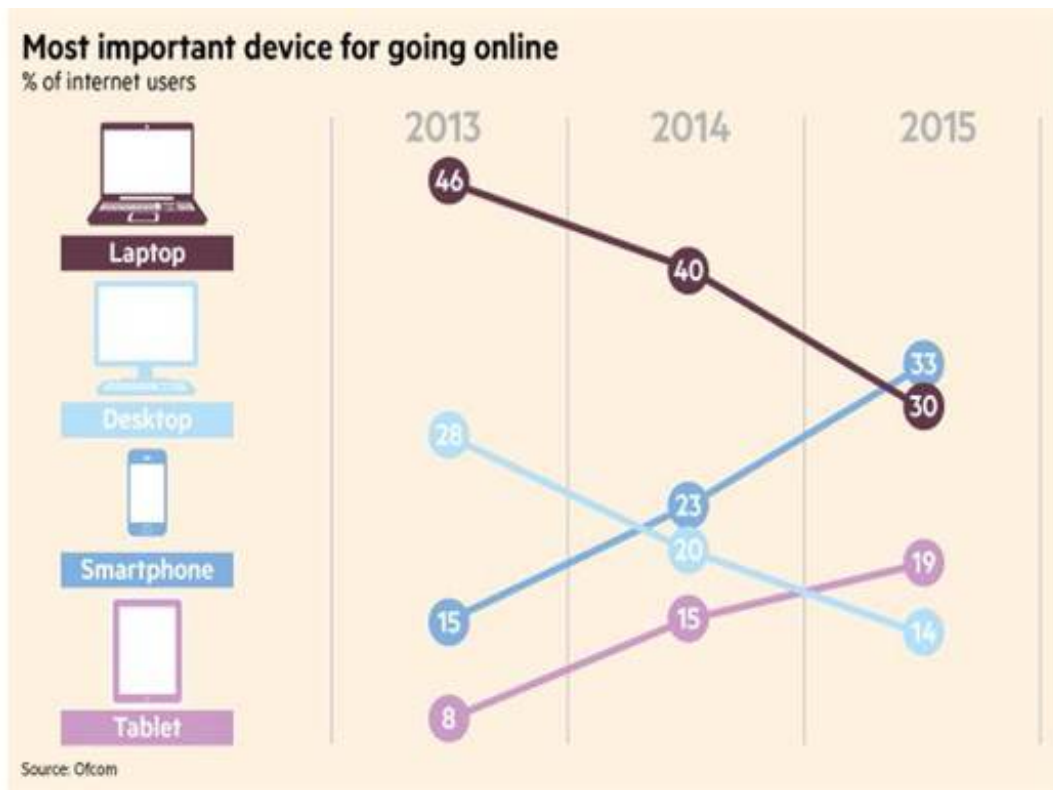
The first is **economic**. Competition has never been more intense. The Internet means that your rivals are everywhere and endless. Distraction away from news is more immediate and accessible to your audience than ever before. As advertising revenues plunge, journalists have to fight harder than ever for every eyeball or ear. Tugging at

your heartstrings is a tried and tested way to get your attention.

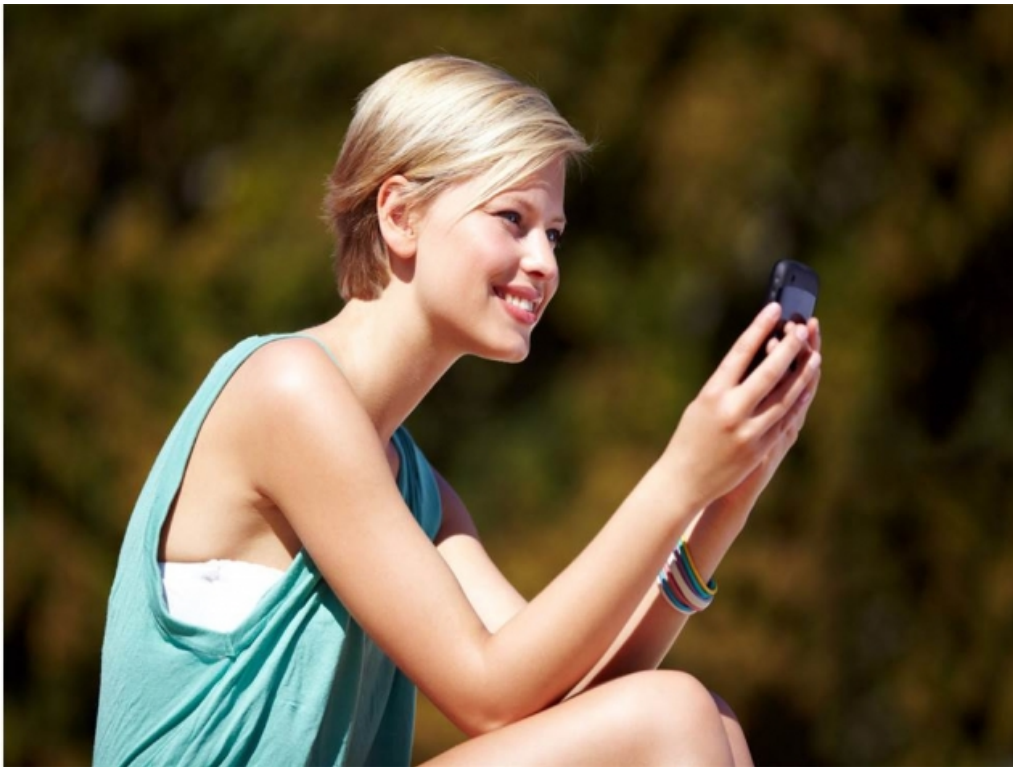
Secondly, it is about the **technology**. We have clear evidence that using emotional cues helps to get your attention and to prolong your engagement. So a story with a visual stimulus gets more traffic. Text written in conversational language tends to increase responsiveness. And there are legions of other tricks that sites like Upworthy have perfected – the so-called curiosity gap for example in a headline – clickbait has its limits but understanding behaviour can inform editorial design and style. Increasingly, journalism is now distributed not by transmitters or newsagents but by social media. Getting people to share your content is vital and emotion is critical to making that happen.

Thirdly, it's about a better **understanding of behavioural science** and even neurology. We know from politics that people respond to emotion, not ideas or facts – so when we do political journalism we now talk about 'optics' instead of 'facts'. Marketing journalism is no different. We need to understand what makes people tick before we try to sell them news. Understanding how people relate to the news on a personal level is vital to anyone trying to get them to connect to their journalism. Sometimes people will have practical or professional reasons for finding news relevant, but increasingly it is an emotional response, too. Luckily for journalists we now have the technology and the data to measure that process.

So what has changed about media that makes emotion more central?



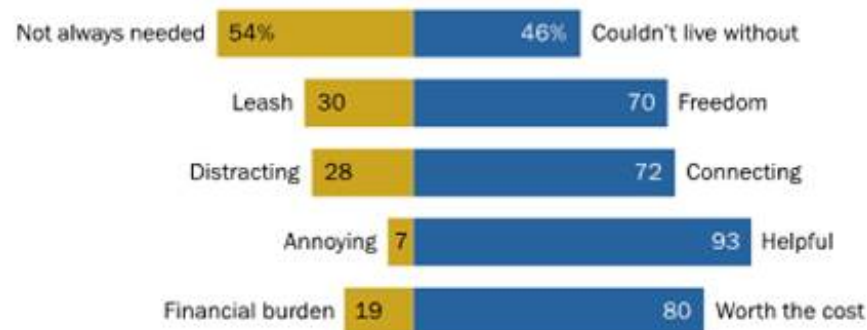
First of all media is now mobile. As this graph shows our devices are always with us. Smartphones especially are set to become effectively universal and their usage is increasing all the time. They are rapidly becoming the primary platform, not just an option.



Our physical relationship to news is changing because of this technology – Rodin’s *Thinker* has become Steve Job’s ‘Swiper’. The device is always on – always to hand – but also part of your personal and public networks. You can customise it with apps for example to get what you want when you want it as well as share and create content yourself.

As humans we love to do this and as it becomes more intimate, we become more attached. You might characterise this as digital dependency.

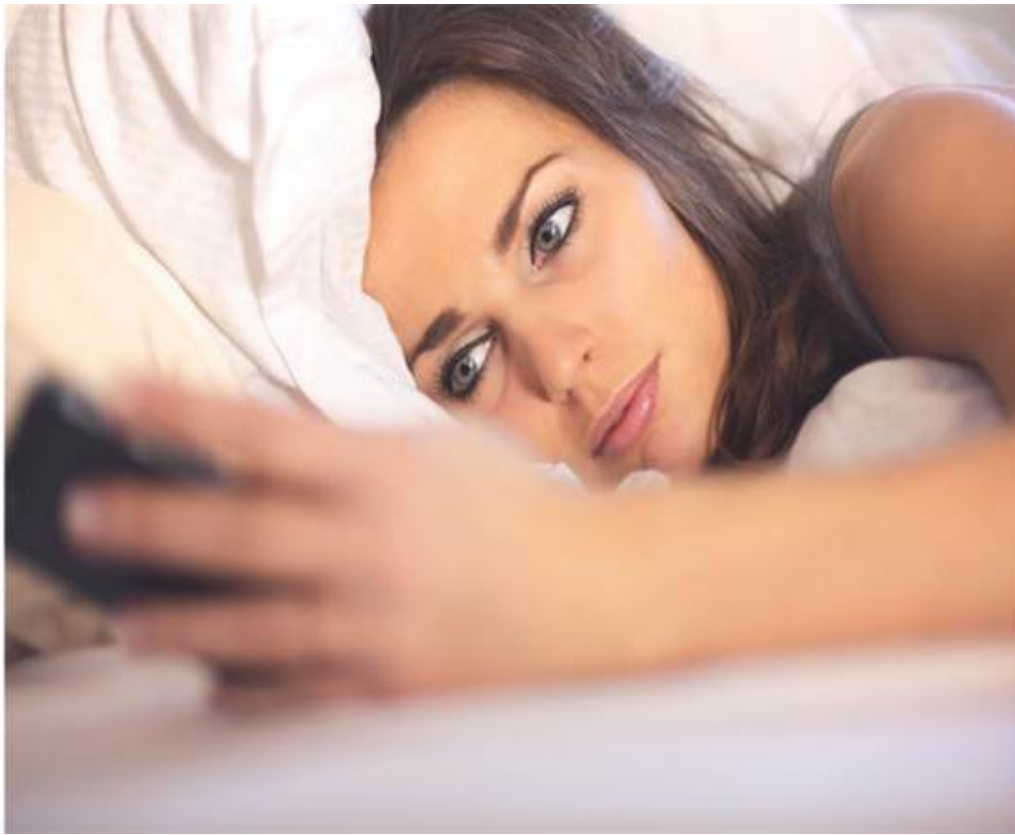
% of smartphone owners who say that the following items from each pair best describe how they feel about their phone



Pew Research Center American Trends Panel survey, October 3-27 2014.

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As this chart shows, despite the cost and the dangers of addiction, people are generally positive about this new relationship with the mobile technology – Smartphone users say they can’t live without their devices – but they also find them liberating and help them to connect better to information and other people.



And I think that it's important to stress the intimacy of this technology – compared to the consumption of news when sitting on the sofa or reading on the train. These devices are what people now turn to on waking.

A study found that 35 percent of people thought about their smartphone first thing in the morning, followed by 17 percent who thought about coffee, and 13 percent who thought about their toothbrushes. Only 10 percent thought about their significant other.

This means that journalism has to work in this world where it is blended into people's digital mobile lives alongside kittens, shopping, sport, music and pornography.

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Cameron Keady
Associate Editor, Good News, The Huffington Post

Posted: 08/31/2015 10:39 AM EDT

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Journalists are responding to this in a professional way. And that isn't always very sophisticated. Arianna Huffington has seen the statistics that indicate that people are more likely to share content that has an uplifting element – look at the Facebook statistics on their 'Good News' section of the Huffington Post. But it doesn't necessarily produce journalism of the most incisive or informative nature.

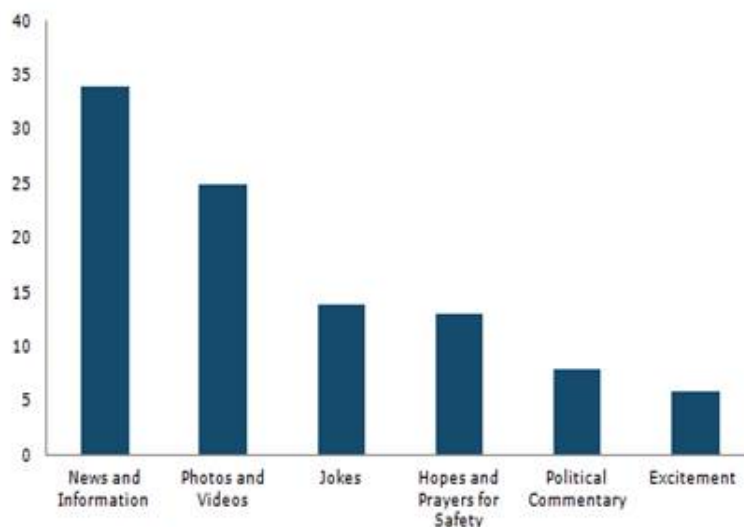


It can also be a way to get people to engage with stories that are disturbing and frightening.

This photograph of a Greek sailor who helped refugees whose boat had sunk off a holiday beach got massive traffic and engagement because it showed a narrative about an heroic and instinctively compassionate and brave response to a tragic situation. It helped that he is very hunky and the picture very dramatic – but it helped frame the issue in a way that literally demonstrated how people could help.

Hurricane Sandy Conversation on Twitter

Percentage of assertions



Date Range: October 29, 2012-October 31, 2012

PEJ analysis using Crimson Hexagon technology

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

This use of emotion can have some unexpected outcomes. Humour has never had a place in traditional hard news – but even with disaster stories such as the hurricane that hit Sandy people cope with tragedy partly through humour – it is also a big factor in sharing of political news.



When Sandy hit people responded with gallows humour – with someone even setting up an account for the hurricane itself – it’s not journalism as such – but it was a way for people to engage with the news story and so became part of the media narrative.

There are functional reasons for sharing material – we want to tell people useful and entertaining things – we want to know things so we can change the world. But the strongest reason for news sharing in the social media space is personal. We are acting in an emotionally charged way in communication with our community or the wider networks.

As Alfred Hermida explains in his book on social media sharing, *“Tell Everyone”*, humans like to talk about themselves to others. It is good for us and it helps build communities. As news becomes part of social media so it becomes part of that process.

But what about the journalist? What does all this emotionally driven sharing and liking lead to? In a sense this a familiar debate within the profession.



This is a clip from the US mini-series The Newsroom.

“I don’t want to feel emotional, I want facts”

So how does this change the newsroom culture and especially that classic idea of objectivity?

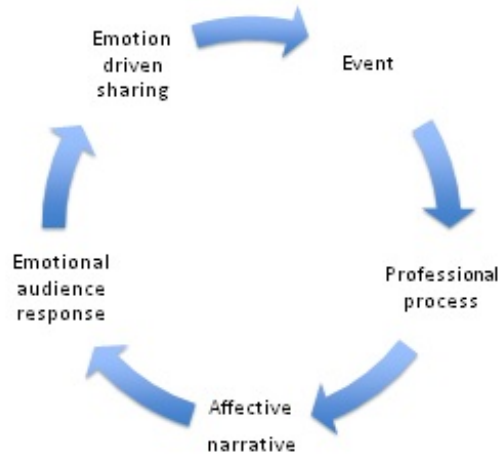
The daily cycle of newsroom sensitivity



Traditional mainstream journalists try to be objective about the news that they produce. Despite what most people think, journalists are human. They are often especially curious and aware of narratives that are interesting and engaging. They respond as humans. But to make the journalism they must objectify the process. This is partly

because of the practical pressures on their work: deadlines, limited resources, the need to turn complex real events into formulaic, understandable, accessible, consumable items of news media. Then after work they either go home to kick the cat or down the pub to chat over the day's events and coverage. Mostly though, they are on a kind of autopilot.

The new cycle of 'sensitive' content creation



But with networked news where events are often being reported and discussed on social media and their own journalism is subject to comment and sharing, they share this process with the public, live, as they are working. And as emotion becomes a more significant factor in that process for both the news-maker and the news-consumer or sharer, so, I would suggest, there will an interesting feedback loop into the professional culture that may impact in its turn on how the news is produced in the future.



I think that this is already happening. My former colleague Jon Snow has always been a passionate journalist – he famously welled-up live on screen while covering the Haiti earthquake. But in this video – not broadcast on C4News TV but put up on their website – he made a strong ethical appeal about the suffering in Gaza last year. I thought it was interesting because while he was making a political point in general, it was couched in emotional terms – a plea to convert empathy into some kind of action – action that was partly about urging people using media to make a point. For many it crossed the line – especially for a broadcaster that is subject to regulation that insists on a kind of objectivity.

Not all of his mainstream media rivals criticised him. Sky News' editor Jon Riley thought he might even have been able to broadcast it, albeit with some signposting to signal that it was outside of normal coverage:

We expect broadcasters as fellow human beings to neuter and cauterise their own emotion to what they see. Jon has seen a lot of suffering around the world in the last 40 years, and we should respect that emotion.

objectivity

/ˌɒbdʒɛkˈtɪvɪti, ˌɒbdʒɪkˈtɪvɪti/ ◀▶

noun

the quality of being objective.

"the piece lacked any objectivity"

synonyms: impartiality, absence of bias/prejudice, fairness, fair-mindedness, equitableness, equitability, even-handedness, justness, **justice**, open-mindedness, **disinterest**, disinterestedness, **detachment**, dispassion, dispassionateness, **neutrality**

"the ideals of journalistic accuracy and objectivity"

But do we want to undermine objectivity?

The value of objective journalism is the idea that journalism can attempt to give an account that is balanced, fact-based and a fair summary not just of what has happened but the context around it without the distortion of the journalist's own feelings.

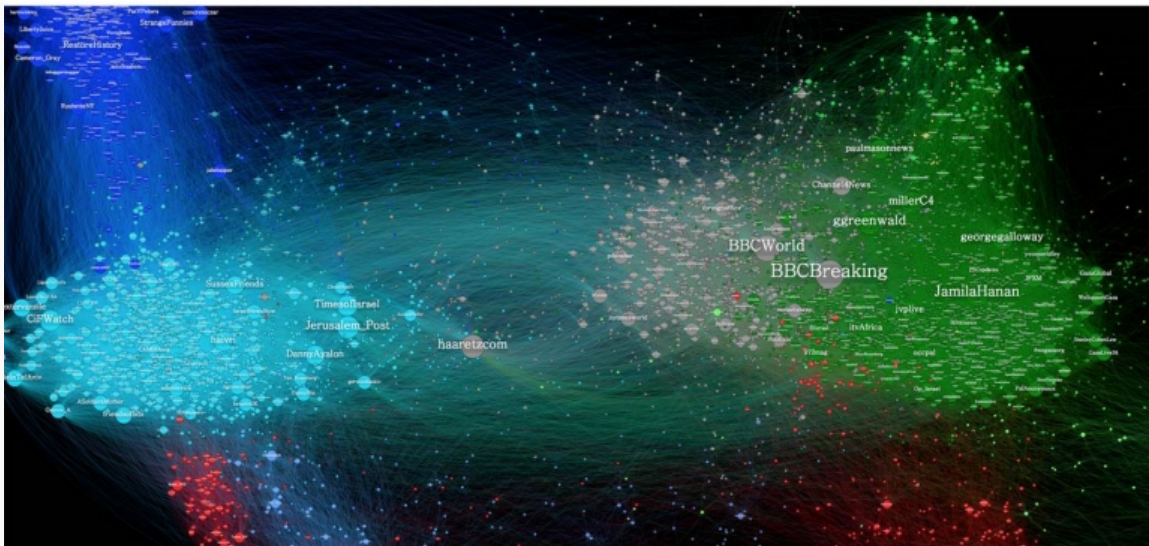
This can only be an aspiration. All journalists are human and have different factors that shape their worldview and their understanding of particular circumstances. It's all relatively relative. By selecting a story for reporting you have made a choice. The facts that you omit as well as those you include are selective. Even the most emotionless narrative has subjectivity. Simply by putting two sides to an issue does not mean you have reported it accurately. Yet it has been a very useful aspiration for mainstream journalism over the last century or so.

We seem to be witnessing the end of that kind of objectivity.

There's nothing new about the idea of emotion in news journalism. American journalism invented the idea of the 'yellow press'. Sensational journalism that sought to stir your fear, wonder and excitement about what is happening in the world. Making a drama of a crisis has always been part of mass media. If news does not get your attention, if you do not find it interesting, amusing, frightening or uplifting than you are less likely to take notice.

But like so much in modern media – that has all become much faster, more complex and more unstable. The narrative is no longer in the control of the journalist and emotions now threaten to run riot.

But here's one of the dangers – the filter bubble – the echo chamber – the danger that we end up only responding to emotional triggers that please us – that we only want to hear views that support our views and confirm our prejudices.

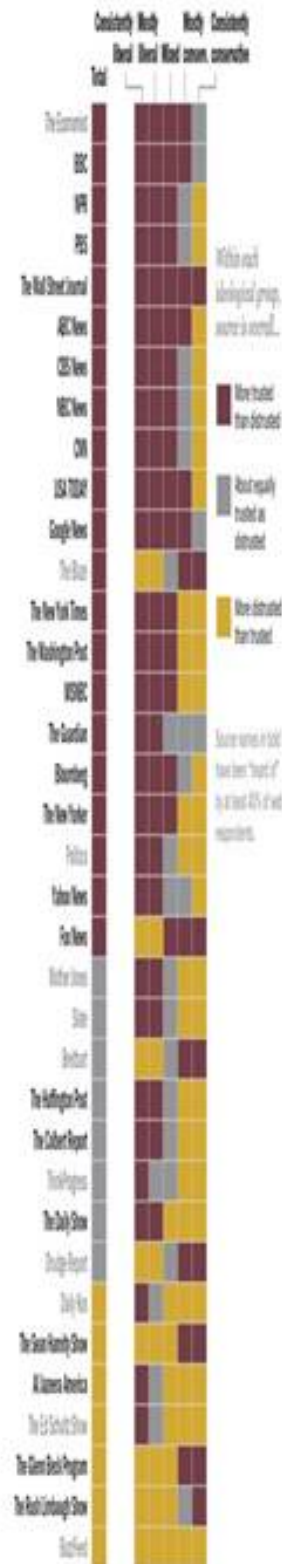


This tag cloud represents co-occurrence of hashtags on Instagram posts. The larger a tag, the more times it appeared. The tighter-connected two tags are, the more times they appeared together.

The point of this is not to show that people disagree about Gaza. We knew that.

But we can see from this graphic how people trust and thus select media sources that share their ideological outlook.

Trust Levels of News Sources by Ideological Group



American Trends Panel survey, 1. Survey conducted March 22-April 23, 2014 (2014-2015).
 Based on web responses. Ideological consistency based on a series of 10 political values
 questions asked in the survey. Grouping labels is determined by the percent
 who trust source significantly different from the general who distrust source.
 Labels are shown only for groups who have more than 100 respondents.

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The problem is that social media algorithms combined with the emotional dynamic in sharing and interaction will tend to reinforce that divisiveness. These networks are programmed – just as humans seem to be programmed – to follow the flow of our prejudices – like tends to connect with like because we prefer that to communication that challenges.

As Data Scientist Gilad Lotan writes:

The better we get at modeling user preferences, the more accurately we construct recommendation engines that fully capture user attention. In a way, we are building personalized propaganda engines that feed users content which makes them feel good and throws away the uncomfortable bits.

This shift towards consuming journalism as self-affirmation seems to be a factor in the current rush towards a rampant relativism. Increasingly, this social media driven dialogue is more about affirming one's own perspective rather than seeking new viewpoints or counter-arguments. Healthy liberal democracy and society depends on the idea of a diverse public sphere with agonistic dialogue between different viewpoints. Objectivity is important to that process because even where we disagree, we need to have a structure based on evidence and reason as well as emotion. Yet, everywhere from the coverage of Ukraine to the contest for the Labour Party leadership we can see how social media is challenging that and replacing it with a series of ideological self-referential bubbles. This is paralleled in mainstream media with the growth in partisan press – either subsidised propaganda machines like RT or CCTV or the 'views news' of Fox News or the Guardian.

I don't blame social media or journalism for this. I think it is a product of much bigger social and political forces at work in our post-ideological age. In many ways it is to be welcomed if people resist the idea of neutrality and if they have a choice of more divergent perspectives



But as journalism reinvents itself it is important that it looks at this powerful mix of emotion and relativism and asks how best an aspiration to objectivity might be fostered in this environment.

It certainly isn't by insisting that the authorities know best – let alone the journalistic authorities.

I also don't want to panic. New forms of objectivity are emerging.

Look at the boom in data journalism based on facts.

Look at new visual narrative makers like Vice. They feature personable young reporters telling you what's happening out there in an informal style. But by avoiding the usual formula they are getting out of the way and allow the public to see stories more directly.

Buzzfeed is famous for its cats but look at their burgeoning news content. Yes, they use lots of pictures and often they are quite witty. But the actual reporting is remarkably straight.

So along with the emotion, people want more facts and reliable narratives – this is not a contradiction.

This is what I call networked journalism. At its heart is the human factor because the audience is now part of the process. There is no going back. Subjectivity in journalism is fine as long as it is overt and if it is not always affirmative journalism. Journalism is supposed to challenge cognitive biases not reinforce them. It must also be self-critical and self-reflexive as well as being critical of others.

The key principle in this for the citizen as well as the journalist is transparency.

Transparency is the new objectivity. If you are open about your own subjectivity and as long as you are open about the algorithms you use to filter and connect content to the consumer then there is no ethical problem with emotionally-driven networked journalism.

This transparency could draw upon the neo-Aristotelian idea of sincerity, the idea that you are acting upon your beliefs but with:

Authenticity – your motives must be given

Accuracy- you must seek to represent a truth

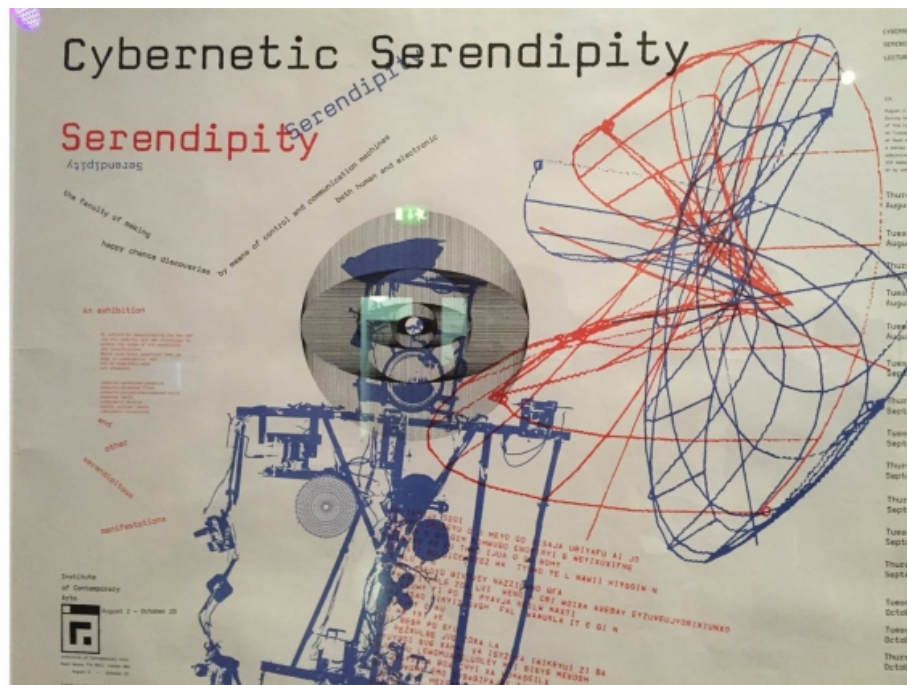
Apology- if mistaken, be accountable – admit fault and take responsibility

But to make this happen in the fast-changing environment of modern news media we need more than instinct and experiment – even more than just ethics.

We need to know much more about the role of emotion and the consequences:

- the ontology of data,
- the political economy of identity when privacy goes public
- the sociology of influence when power is redistributed emotionally.

At the moment journalists don't understand how the technology works in this context. We don't know the detail of algorithms created by the digital intermediaries that drive search and sharing. Perhaps science – and not just computer science – can also help to build algorithms that encourage serendipity, that foster media literacy and even protect us from emotional harm? We need more evidence-based analysis of what Zizi Papacharissi calls 'affective publics'. What motivates attention and agency related to media?



I don't think that a computer programme is the answer in itself.

At the moment we have what Andrew Chadwick called a 'hybrid media' system blended between linear legacy journalism and the new socialised, networked news media. There is much more change to come. But the trend is clear: towards more mobile, personalised and emotionally-driven news media. And the challenge for the networked journalist is also clear: how best to sustain the ethical, social and economic value of journalism in this new emotionally networked environment.

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