

Polis – The Future of News

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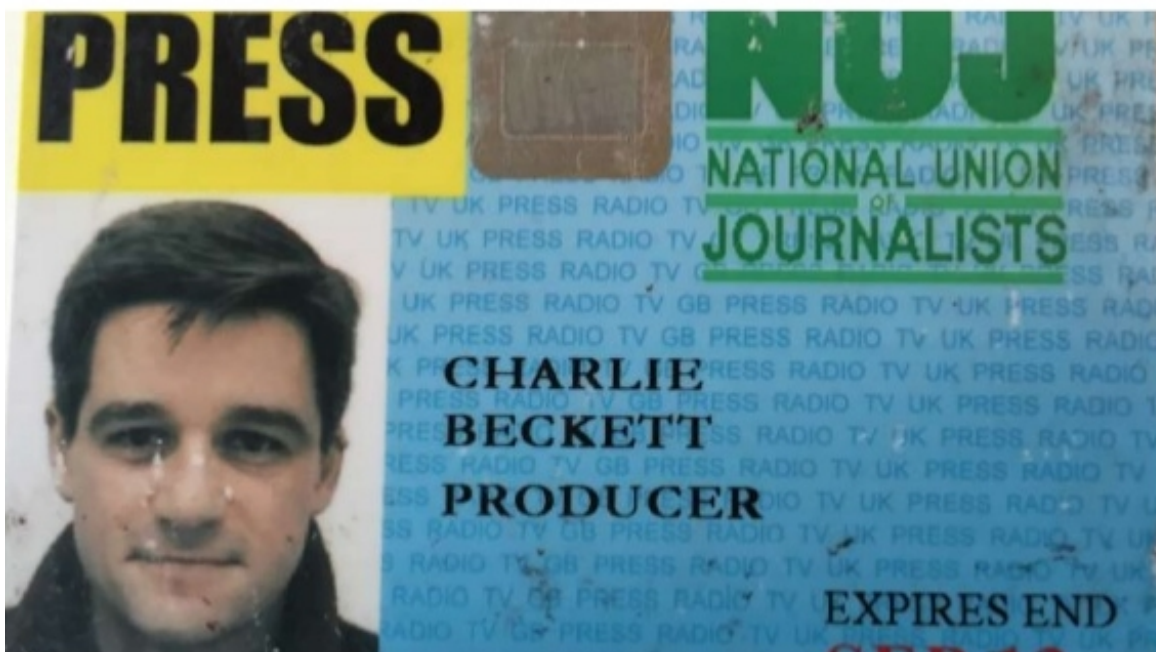
*This article is from a talk given by **Charlie Beckett** at the The University of Amsterdam on 19/02/16*

THE FUTURE OF NEWS IS PAST, LONG LIVE THE FUTURE OF NEWS



Today I want to ask a question I have been asking everyday for the last nearly 10 years: in some ways for the last 30 years – as a journalist and now someone working in a University: what is the future of news?

The answer – SPOILER ALERT! – is in the title of this lecture: the ‘future of news’ as a particular conceptualisation of the impact of new technologies on journalism that has dominated thinking in this area for at least a decade is now passed. But I will also argue that journalism has moved into a networked, hybrid, digitalised set of structures and that means that we have to ask again, what is the future of news? I am going to try to set out some kind of agenda for that.



This is an attempt to update my ideas on journalism first set out at the beginning of my time at LSE. It is nearly ten years since I left the Channel 4 Newsroom at ITN after more than two decades making news at papers and television in the UK. In that decade at LSE I have had a front row seat to watch as journalism around the world has undergone a period of massive and radical transformation.

When I first set up the LSE's journalism think-tank Polis I commissioned a series of 'Future of News' round-tables with journalists from all sectors to talk about how new technology plus social, economic and political forces were changing their craft and their business. In those days 'Future of News' was still a novel title and these seminars formed the basis of my book published in 2008, called *SuperMedia*, which attempted to chart those shifts and to outline the idea of a more participatory, interactive, disaggregated news process that I called Networked Journalism. It was inspired in part by the thinking of people like Dan Gillmor, Jeff Jarvis, Yochai Benkler, Jay Rosen, and Clay Shirky and backed up by academic work of researchers and theorists such as Manuel Castells and Mark Deuze. This group was highly influential in journalism studies but also in news media organisations but it has been criticised for their techno-centrism and general over-optimism about the democratic and editorial potential of new gadgets and networks and their assumption that information liberated by digital and online would automatically have positive 'disruptive' effects. We've now seen how the wisdom of crowds has become the the angry twitter mob, the Arab Spring turned into a rather cold Russian winter, the promise of globalised cosmopolitanism has become the Mail Online's 'Sidebar of Shame'. Perhaps the most pithy of the critiques was made by Dean Starkman in his 2011 essay *Confidence Game, the Limited Vision of the Future of News Gurus*. Those critics might well point to the Guardian newspaper, long a pioneer of innovative, open, free online networked journalism which recently announced huge job cuts in the wake of record and potentially fatal losses.

I plead guilty to some of that over-optimism. As someone emerging from two decades of experiencing the limits of analogue news I probably over-emphasised the transformative power of this new journalism and its ability to have positive impacts on the news industry and the society that it serves. My book was subtitled 'How to save journalism so it can save the world' after all. But in my defence, the book's title was always meant to be taken with a dash of English irony and I made it very clear that I was talking about the *potential* of networked journalism as an aspiration. I said explicitly that it was politics and the public who would change the world not journalists – and that journalists would suffer a lot of pain and need to adjust hugely if they were to thrive.

However, the substance of what I wrote about has become entirely routine. I now struggle to find any examples

anywhere of journalism that is NOT networked. This happened quickly. By the time I wrote a research report in 2010 updating the concept as practiced in UK newsrooms I found that it was a reality and the concepts behind it were gaining widespread acceptance. The notorious and utterly pointless 'Are Bloggers Journalists?' debate died pretty quickly, for example. I remain a glass half full person. I think we can state empirically that there is more, better journalism around than ever before. What effect it has and how well distributed or consumed it is, is another set of questions. So 'Future of News' may be dead, but I hope to show today that networked journalism lives and is on the verge of even more profound changes.

Many of the ideas will be familiar to those who read the great work of academics like those here in the Amsterdam University journalism department. I hope that overall it will give you a sense of how I think news itself is being redefined but it might be useful to think of it like a BuzzFeed listicle rather than an essay. So perhaps the real title is

BECKFeed



9 Things You Need To Know About The Future Of News



I think I can tell a lot about this audience by what you thought when I said that. Was it 'Oh God no, not BuzzFeed' or was it 'Oh good, something I will enjoy and understand?' Or was it simply, 'what a corny gimmick'?

Anyway here goes.

1. **Abundance needs curation**

We have long since moved from scarcity to abundance of journalism thanks to Web 2.0 but it is only now that that it is changing the structure of news production and consumption. There is a double effect. On the one hand the old duplication of news production by multiple brands has been disintermediated by search, sharing, and aggregation. At the same time there has been an explosion of new journalism sources – the digital natives. And they have been supplemented by 'non-journalism' news producers such as public relations companies, social media content agencies, governments, corporations, educational institutions, charities and advocacy groups who are all churning out their own news, information and discussion seeking to attract public attention.

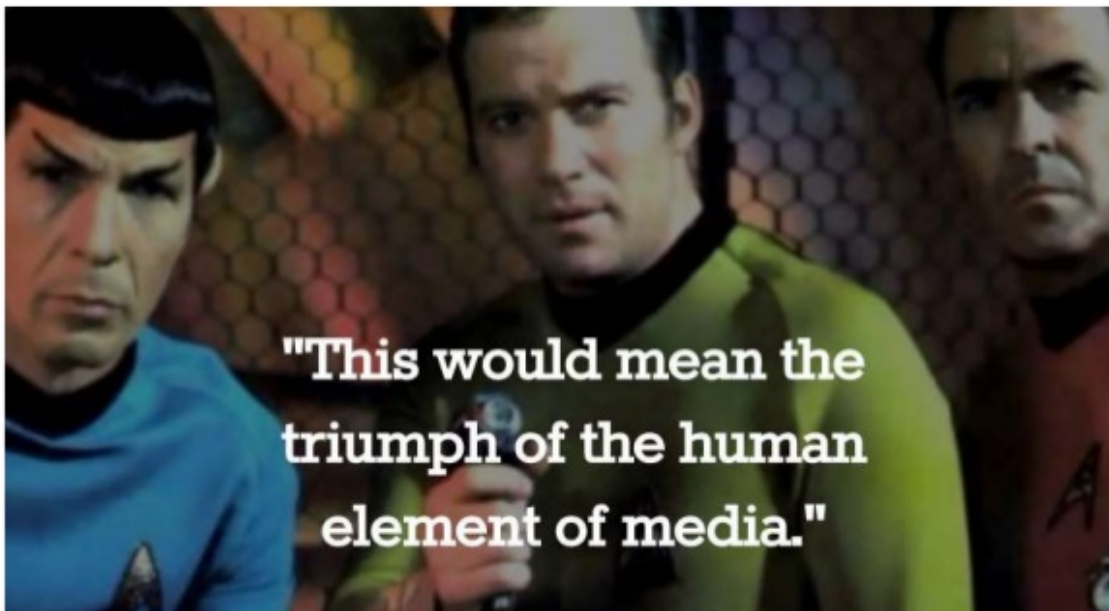
We haven't reached 'peak content' because this will continue. The sea level of this ocean of journalism will continue to rise. This is good for journalists who can filter and specialise and connect. Search is not the answer. Until there is a significant step towards a truly intelligent semantic search it remains a brilliantly efficient but in terms of results, a very crude system. Instead, curation will be key. One example is what Ben Evans has recently written about: the re-emergence of lists where someone else does the searching for you. Email newsletters are another example where you get guidance on what matters to you. Choice is not a tyranny, but unlimited choice certainly is. Editorial selection based on audience data and personalisation is the new discoverability.

Related to this is the idea of 'quality': how do you connect people to 'better' journalism?

2. Quality must be blended

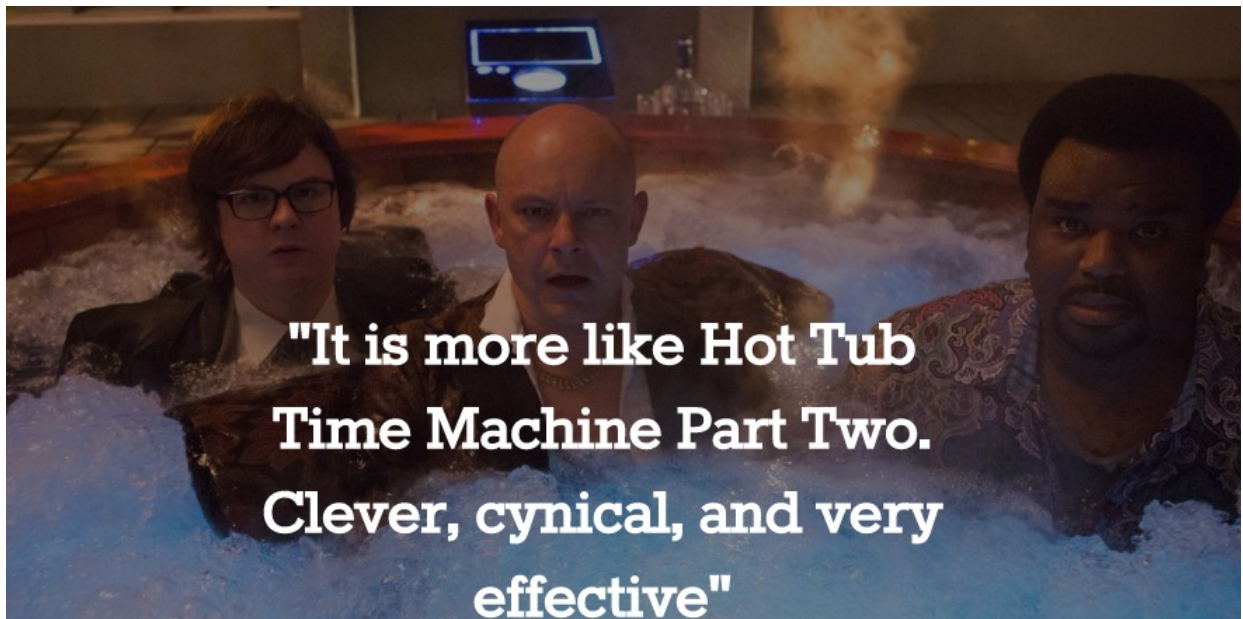
There is a lot of rubbish out there. There always was. This does not mean that there is less good material, too. We know that 'good' journalism has always had to find a way to people in a world of other less worthy distractions. In fact the two go together. Even more so now than before because people get the good content in almost identical ways as the bad, for example through peer sharing on Facebook.

There was always a somewhat naive hope that the future of news was going to be like *The Matrix* (a triumph of good technology over bad technology)



or perhaps like *Star Trek* (the triumph of the liberal, rational, human spirit using technology to boldly go etc).

In fact the future for most people is as likely to be akin to Hot Tub Time Machine 2.



(this is a vision of technology that is silly, cynical and shallowly entertaining – it's cheap and it sells).

We are in a world where notions of quality are more blended and less hierarchical than ever before. A world where elite ideas and elite journalism are part of networks and flows of information and analysis that are less bordered, more porous and unstable than ever before. The best news organisations are able to adapt to this new environment by changing style but also by tailoring their work to the multiple tone and mood of people's new media diets. Look at how *Vice*, for example, ranges from pop, celebrity, lifestyle to long-form investigative documentary. That's not so new. Newspapers always had cartoons, for example. But the way that *Vice* organically produces material so comfortably and responsively according to the different locale and culture of the various platforms is new. The way that people move effortlessly between the different quality of content also seems different partly thanks to the ease of transition in consumption and production. There is plenty of evidence such as the popularity of serious, accurate, well-designed data visualisation that shows that given the right material in the right format in the places they use, that people appreciate and consume 'quality' news. But instead of just offering it, journalists must, as Irene Meijer has written, think much harder about why people value it and what it does for them.

That leads us on to ask, what is happening to news itself?

3. News is getting faster and slower

News is speeding up. It has been doing so for a few centuries but the pace has picked up in the last few years, partly because of the technology and partly because of people's resultant expectations of on-demand 24/7 information. As news is now instant, it becomes instantly un-new. This means that the premium on being fast is great but the marginal premium of being first is less critical. As any new fact is theoretically instantly available to everyone everywhere the nature of breaking news shifts. When it is live and the story is developing – as with the Paris Attacks – it becomes a window on the world. That is rare. Otherwise it becomes the unpacking, contextualising and significance assessment of an event that has passed – but live and in front of the audience who take part in the spectacle reaction themselves through social media. So the news event becomes a shared collective media event, not an act of reportage and revelation.

Partly because of this news is also slowing down. If the instant is instantly shared then the task of the journalist is to facilitate reaction and explanation, not just breaking the facts. Away from the event coverage itself we can also see that the Internet allows content to be more complex and to live longer – to be sticky. We can see this in the rise of data visualisation and explainer journalism but also in the growing appetite for documentary. NPR's *The Serial* was a clever way of combining both the 'fast' live, revelatory element with a much more sustained act of continuing, slow

journalism.

Related to this is scale.

4. News is getting bigger and smaller

News is getting bigger and smaller. I used to write 7" for the Channel 4 News opening headline – now I can cut a 7" Vine. Journalism on Snapchat is still news. We are seeing an explosion in social media video. This means that any journalist or news organisation is creating more about the same. And what they create is bigger and smaller. This could be someone like Channel 4 News' correspondent Alex Thomson tweeting or vining little smartphone clips of wherever he is reporting from. At the same time his longer finished reports go out on the one hour evening bulletin which is currently promoting itself as the place where news is given time to be explained. And Channel 4 News is also then recycling video from its bulletin – as well as specially made video – formatted specially for social media sharing. It stays within the C4News remit and deals with the same tough, complex issues, but it uses techniques such as text as well as commentary – and the content is selected to appeal to the key drivers for online consumption and sharing such as identity politics, emotional imagery and social justice issues – all core Channel 4 News characteristics translated to social.

At the same time we are seeing a classic effect of a market where consumers are able to access what they want more easily. You have a long tail curve of news events where major stories gather far more attention, accentuated by social media clustering: such as the Paris Attacks – while all the other stories find themselves with less space and lower attention. The task of journalism now is to find optimum ways of operating along the whole of the curve.

This requires resource...

5. There Is More Resource And Less

There is a resource problem. It's a revenue model problem caused by a combination of advertising decline, content over-supply and increased competition. It is causing some real problems such as local news coverage. Some titles will close – all newsrooms will have to become smaller. Some solutions create some relatively new problems such as the ethics around native advertising. However, the signs are that people are prepared to pay if you find the right method: sophisticated paywalls, blendle, bundling, subscriptions, memberships, all seem to be creating sustainable revenue streams. We are also seeing a reformation of news organisations and the market – some of that is painful. There are going to be fewer big newsrooms. Two things should give real hope for the future of news as a business: mobile and data.

We now know so much about how people consume and distribute journalism. That allows news organisations such as the New York Times to strategise new business opportunities such as their new Spanish-language Latin American service in a targeted, efficient and flexible way. With mobile we are now part of people's intimate, sharing, always-on lives on a device and series of platforms, apps and networks that are being more used than any media before in a more personalised way. We are part of people's mediated lives in a way that was never possible before. All the evidence is that people want to know what is going on in their world. The demand for news is growing. If we can't make this work we don't deserve to survive but it requires a proper on-going strategy not a one off solution. News management now involves continually monitoring, reacting and developing content for connectivity. News is now a service not a product.

These new business models will require new news institutions.

6. Institutions are too weak and too strong

In the past I have spoken about how news organisations have had to change from being closed fortresses to open networks. I admit that I might sometimes have confused how their work and production models should become networked with the institution itself. Yes journalism is networked but the news organisation itself must have a real

presence. Digital has disrupted business but it does not mean that the value of a structured organisation disappears. Google and Facebook, for example have become more not less institutional. They recognise the need for training, legal services, public policy, research and development, public relations, even sometimes, paying taxes. But it's more than these utilitarian functions. Andrew Marr recently put this well in his reaction to the closure of the Independent:

..the old question – what, really, is a newspaper? – remains key. If the answer is simply a means of transmitting information, titles are merely nostalgia. No, the proper answer is that a decent newspaper is a platoon of similarly minded, but not identically minded, people who argue, debate and together fashion a view of the world which is distinctive. A newspaper, properly understood, is the space between what editors and senior correspondents think, and how that space is challenged by reporters bringing in unexpected information; and the static energy all that produces.

In an age of transparency a brand is nothing without a coherent internal identity including editorial, even ethical values as well as a business strategy. That may or may not be contained in one building but there will be a sense of being together even if there are no literal walls.

And that takes us on to what kind of model works best for the future of news – open or closed?

7. Journalism is too open and too closed

Not surprisingly, the Internet is obeying market laws, albeit it is not a free market. So the Internet produces some very big and lots of small players in news media. The Mail Online, the BBC and the Guardian went for free and open and that requires scale because ultimately it depends most on advertising – or in the BBC's case – taxation. The Mail does celeb/shlock news more brutally than anyone else so it wins (though barely makes a profit) – the BBC does boring but trustworthy – the Guardian is the 'world's liberal voice'. But open and free and mass is the exception not the rule, and as the Guardian's recent heavy losses have shown, it is the most exposed to risk and has to be managed the most tightly.

Those organisations that went the way of the paywall soon realised that they had cut themselves off from the very people they needed. They were right to find a way to identify a pay point that gave value to their content. But now we see a whole range of variations on the subscription model including micropayments.

Other organisations have taken different models such as BuzzFeed's native advertising (selling the brand's attention-getting value) or Politico's trade journal style subscriptions (selling intelligence and insight).

All these models are challenged as the future of news is to become more distributed and aggregated. Platforms are key. Apps for example provide a revenue source and a direct channel from consumer to content but the fact that we use so few and that the digital intermediaries and device makers control their prominence means that news organisations will have to continue to battle for a place in the digital shop window. That raises fundamental questions about future access for the citizen to informational choice. Whither the public sphere?

8. The public sphere is dead – long live public value

I have always found the Habermassian idea of the public sphere a distracting concept and perhaps the idea of a networked society is not much better. But the idea that journalism can play a vital role in deliberation and democracy and in the formation of community and identity seems to me self-evident. In some ways the social, economic and political structures are more resilient and less disrupted than we thought might be the case in the face of so-called digital disruption. But at the same time they are increasingly hybridised and, especially through mediatisation, new relations – usually more complex and unstable relations – are evolving between citizens, institutions and other social formations.

Flows of information such as news are more contested and less stable. This might well be a Good Thing. Habermas may be dead but we don't want Zuckerberg to replace him. The coverage of the refugee crisis is a good example of this on a dramatic scale.

Much of the journalism was extraordinarily good on diverse platforms in diverse formats with facts, empathy, drama, spectacle, detail, data, and analysis. But what did people actually consume? I suspect that there is evolving a media literate elite who are enjoying an unprecedented wealth of quality journalism while the wider population is increasingly reliant on a snack-sized diet of news. More research is needed to determine the reality of this.

But perhaps the real problem is not the distribution of journalism but people's perception of the way it influences or does not, public consciousness. In the end the danger is not propaganda or control by Putin or Murdoch or digital intermediaries, instead it's a new kind of relativism that says that in a world of infinite news and comment, nothing is true, just a different view. Which takes us to the point where those of us who care about the public value of journalism and its role in the Good Society must ask, like Lenin, 'what is to be done?'

9. Journalism should be objective. It must also be creative and emotional

Successful journalism as a craft will depend upon the four Cs – a combination of traditional and novel skills, aptitudes and editorial strategies:

CURIOSITY is first of all a basic required instinct for anyone wishing to be a journalist but other qualities are associated with it such as accuracy, reporting, investigation, questioning, and research.

CRITICAL: In a world where everyone has an opinion and facts are free, there will be an increased premium on the journalist who can avoid confirmation bias and groupthink, who writes without cliché and who practices self-awareness and independence from audience, colleagues as well as from public relations and spin.

CONTENT: In a world of abundance and effortless duplication there will be a premium on the added value of distinctive content: especially video but also data visualisation, imagery, and curated and verified user generated content. The content will have to be good and differentiated but it will also have to be relevant: produced in a way that connects to people's lives and discoverable and shareable in places where people act out their mediated existence. So news has to be on Slack as well as Snapchat.

And finally, the one that has not until now been considered a core skill:

CREATIVITY: This is related to content but in ways that go beyond the idea of well-made material. Journalists will now have to show a talent for design in its fullest sense, for imagination, beauty, serendipity, playfulness, humour and above all a new understanding of the art of listening. By this I mean that instead of just creating good content that you hope finds an audience, the journalist will create content that fosters attention and traction. It is about fashioning connectivity that sees the news from the consumer's perspective in their social setting. It is about creating the interfaces that allow media literacy. It's the idea of engagement but not just as a snare or bait but as a relationship that empowers the consumer through the journalistic act itself.

Let's get emotional



The key to all this is the role of emotions as a key driver of new creativity for journalism. I will be talking about this in more detail tomorrow but for those who won't be there this is what I mean in summary.

Emotion is increasingly a driver for news dissemination – especially because of social media the consumption of journalism has become more personalised – people share partly to distribute information but also because they are committing a social act and because they want to affirm their own identity and their sense of belonging in a community or network.

The emotional drive means that journalists are having to redefine objectivity. They have to signal their own emotional response and they have to demonstrate empathy towards the subject and to the audience. Again, social media is the key factor here but we can see this happening across all platforms and channels for journalism.

This poses the threat of the filter bubble effect and a reduction in the independence of journalists who seek traffic and engagement rather than revelatory, challenging, counter-intuitive journalism. But it also offers great opportunities for connection, contextualisation and accountability. Perhaps most importantly, it offers the opportunity to do what great journalism has often sought to do, to put human interest at the core of the news narrative in a richer way.

The key to sustaining 'good' journalism in affective networked news is transparency: as long as the journalist says what they are doing then ethics remains central. Abandoning responsibility to algorithms is not a positive option, but harnessing the power of emotions to make more truly networked journalism could lead to more constructive, engaging and effective news making.

That would be a good future for news.

