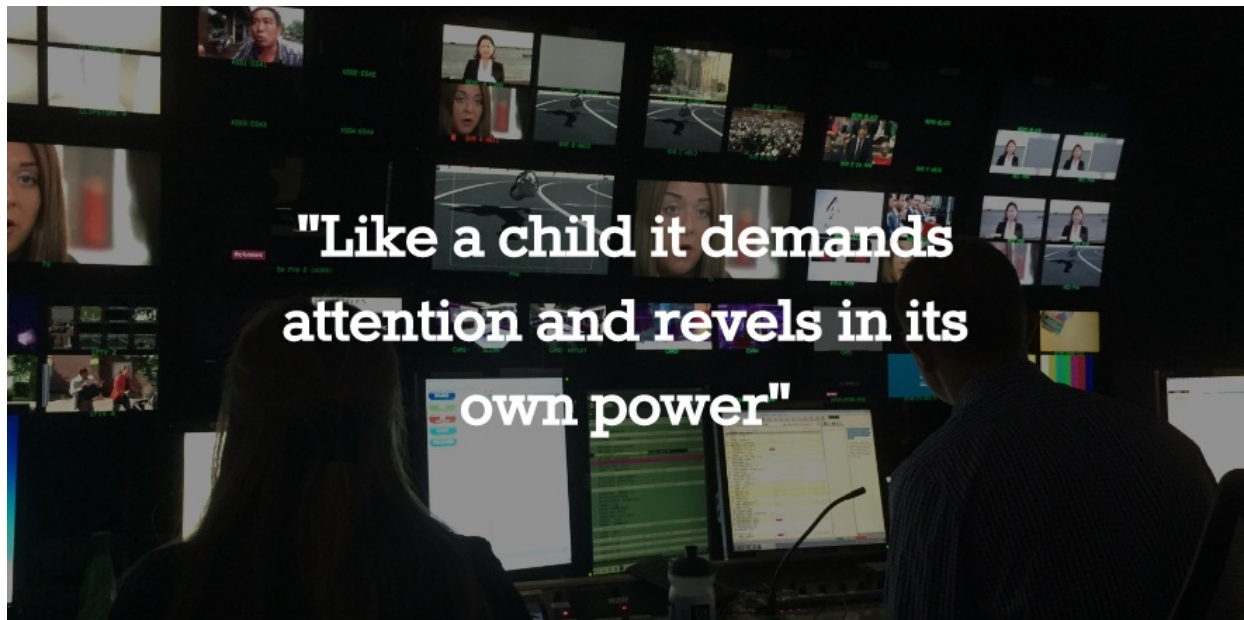


Journalism is a childish practice: the future of news is Hot Tub Time Machine Part Two

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Journalism is essentially an immature craft. The output is inevitably provisional, incomplete and less accurate, complex and objective than the reality it seeks to portray. It must always resort to simplification and formula. Like a child it demands attention and revels in its own power, even if that is mainly the ability to entertain. Of course, some journalists are more childish than others, but even the wisest and most skilful cannot escape the limits on their work of time and the practicalities of topical communication.



This is not to say that journalism is rubbish. It's just that journalists have limited time to understand an event or issue and only a limited amount of time or space to represent it. Academics and scientists sometimes spend a lifetime getting to know one topic. They can give hour-long lectures or write lengthy books to explain in full.

New media has made this better and worse. The research tools for journalists are exponentially more powerful. Travel is cheaper and quicker. The networks journalists work in can enhance the insights of a story and by connecting it to other content give a much deeper or wider picture.

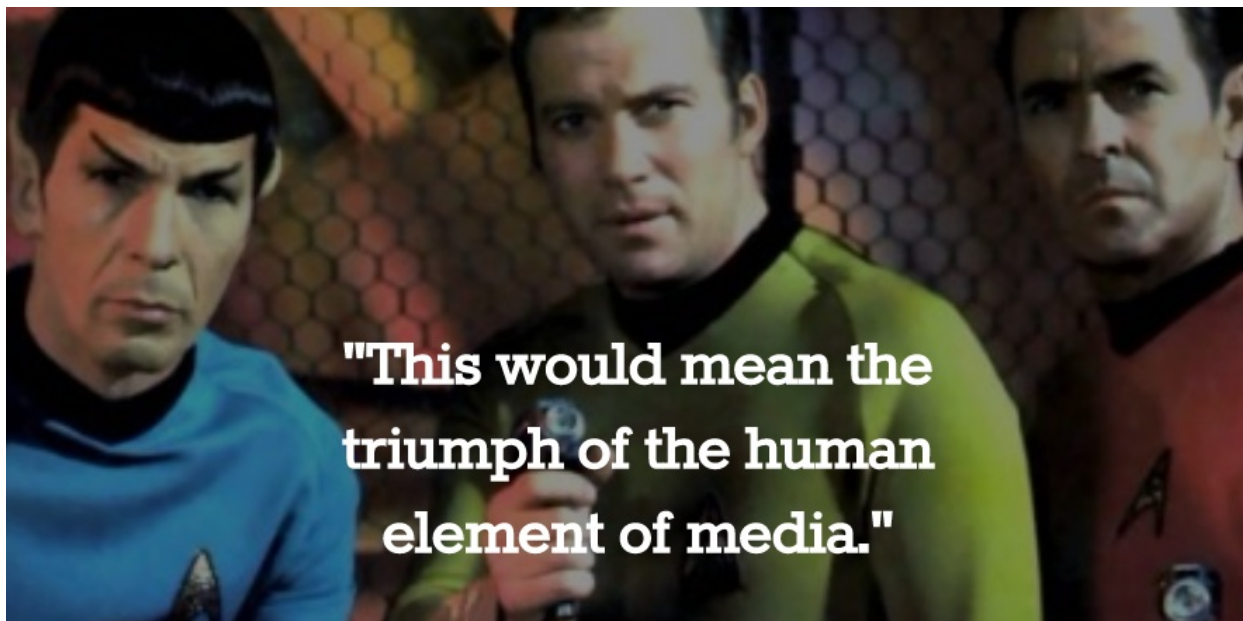
On the other hand the pace of hard news, in particular, has accelerated. With information abundance comes greater distraction and potential confusion. With mobile platforms and a time-poor lifestyle comes a desire for ever more concentrated or concentrated content.

Technological optimists tended to think that the future of news would be like the Matrix. Yes, there was a sinister side, but essentially journalism would become more complex, sophisticated, and shiny. A tool for visionaries to help transform a digital universe.



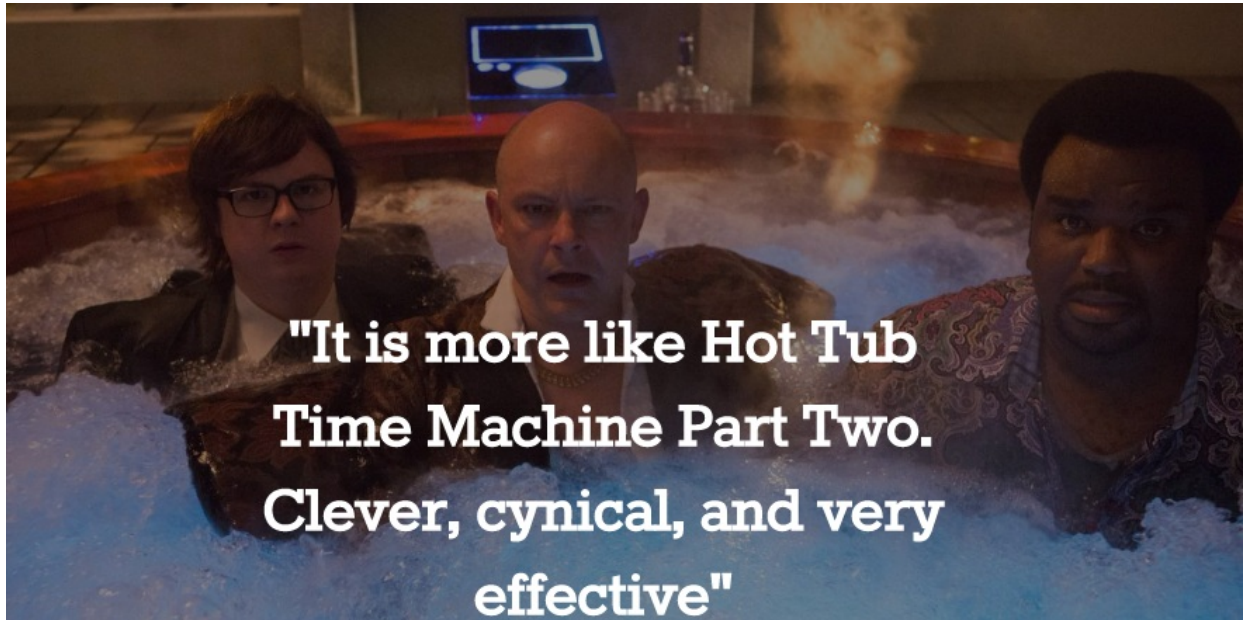
"A tool for visionaries to help transform a digital universe"

Others thought that there would be a more social blending of the new technologies with much greater public participation. Power would flow back to the people – as well as the journalists – in their communicative dealings with the wider world. This would mean the triumph of the human element of media. This is the Star Trek vision of the future of news, where it is always the human touch that allows the space-travellers to overcome technological obstacles and alien challenges.



"This would mean the triumph of the human element of media."

But in fact, I suspect that the future of mainstream mass news is somewhat childish. It is more like Hot Tub Time Machine Part Two. Clever, cynical, and very effective. But essentially a repetitive sequence of unconnected attempts to hold your attention without exhausting your intellect. If you don't believe me then go and look at Snapchat Live news pages. They are brilliantly creative in their use of sound and images to give a morsel of information.



Of course, journalism has always been immature in the way that I mean it here. I would argue that there is far more 'good' journalism around than ever before. New media technologies give us the sophisticated joys of the FT's data journalism, the long interactive essays of the New York Times, and the hard-hitting, compelling investigative documentaries of Vice as well as the more transitory sparks of journalism delivered by drive-by platforms such as Instagram.

In the end it is up to the journalist, as always, to create the best journalism they can given the limits of time, resources and their platform. It is up to the audience, as always, to find and consume the best that they want. That will vary from person to person and from moment to moment. In truth, sometimes we do want Matrix complexity or Star Trek epic, but perhaps most of the time we just want to wallow in the foam.

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