

The lesson for journalism from the VW diesel test scandal: get help

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2015/09/28/lesson-for-journalism-from-the-vw-diesel-test-scandal-get-help/

2015-9-28

The revelation that one of the world's largest and most trusted businesses has been deliberately cheating on environmental tests has rocked the automotive industry. It is a classic case of what I have [written about elsewhere as the benefits of transparency for all organisations](#). Ethics is as important now as economics. But it is also a significant moment for journalism. This scandal was revealed by an engineer working for a small, specialist environmental agency not an investigative hack or an automotive industry specialist journalist. This is the future of news.

I have argued over the last decade that all organisations are media organisations. Journalists need to understand that they don't have the best knowledge, insight and critical analysis. Stories and information will emerge from 'non-journalistic' sources. Sometimes they will be non-mainstream news sources like WikiLeaks. [My book on WikiLeaks](#) showed how that kind of hybrid, digital native news organisation is challenging mainstream journalism as much as mainstream politics. But it is likely that less spectacular organisations will make more of a difference in the long run.

For decades organisations like Greenpeace have hired journalists to create content and to carry out investigations. These used to be in the format of 'a report published today by...' But increasingly they will be straight copy often delivered direct to the public via websites or social networks. Who needs the hack anymore?

This is how journalists need to respond pro-actively to this trend:



1. Stop being slavish.

How come the automotive press didn't break this story? Like so many other specialists areas it seems that they dare not think for themselves let alone bite the advertising hand that feeds them. Seems like there's a gap in the market there.

2. Connect to the clever and committed

There's nothing new in journalists having contacts on the fringes. But in a world with a super-abundance of complex information around issues such as the environment, it has to be central to editorial strategy to network to the campaigners and experts. By network I mean work with, not just exchange emails. The source is now capable of driving the investigation as well as the narrative and journalists have to be part of that process, not just publishers of the results.

3. Be an honest broker and critical curator

The danger of 'non-journalistic' organisations creating content is, of course, that they have a partisan agenda. The good networked journalist will act as an honest broker who doesn't just re-write the press release. Real collaboration is an huge opportunity for journalism to use its skills to leverage the knowledge, expertise and attitude of other organisations to create credible challenging narratives. The journalism skills of questioning and contextualising are vital in transforming advocacy communication into 'real' news.

There are news organisations who are already doing this. It's not without ethical dangers. [I have [written about this in detail here](#)] The aims of the different partners may not align exactly. Sometimes journalists are prone to 'capture' by the partner. It is just as possible for a corporate or a public relations company to create content as it is for a campaigning group. There are some parallels with the hazards of 'sponsored content' or 'native advertising' in all this. Transparency at all stages and levels is vital. But as the VW story demonstrates, journalism is now happening everywhere. Journalists need to go further to stay with this trend.

[The idea for this article came from a comment by [Guardian executive Wolfgang Blau on Facebook](#)]

Here are some useful links to articles about collaborative journalism projects with case studies:

- The article presents a framework to categorise journalism collaborations

<http://www.freepress.net/blog/12/04/02/how-journalism-collaborations-are-changing-way-news-made>

- The Swiss Leaks Project: Investigative Journalism on a Mass Scale (Investigation into HSBC Private Bank entailed large scale cooperation within and outside the industry)

<http://ajr.org/2015/05/18/all-together-now-news-partnerships-increase-in-digital-age/>

- How collaboration is crucial for investigative journalism

<http://mediashift.org/2013/07/collaboration-key-to-the-future-of-investigative-journalism/>

- The financial underpinning of new global journalism are still weak, but there is hope for greater collaboration and international support. It covers the Offshore Leaks project, led by International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).

<http://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/10/17/13561/shining-examples-cross-border-journalism-recognized-international-conference>

- This article explains how corporate social responsibility is a corporation's initiative to assess and take responsibility for the company's effects on environment and social wellbeing; efforts that normally should go beyond what is legally required. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/corp-social-responsibility.asp>
- These two articles explicitly link Volkswagen Corporate Social Responsibility's strategy to the scandal.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/industry/11896546/Corporate-Social-Responsibility-has-become-a-racket-and-a-dangerous-one.html>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2015/09/27/volkswagen-and-the-failure-of-corporate-social-responsibility/>

- Why are journalists failing to hold corporations to account on sustainability:

<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/media-hold-account-corporate-sustainability>

- An example of journalists networking to campaigners and experts:

<https://www.internews.org/global-issues/environmental-information>

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science