

The world according to BuzzFeed

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This article is by student Bonny Astor on a talk given by Paul Hamilos (@PaulHamilos), World Features Editor, BuzzFeed speak at the Polis Summer School

“There are stories everywhere” – but to find and report them effectively, modern journalists need diverse skills and a strong imagination.”

Paul Hamilos – BuzzFeed’s world features editor – is an expert on digital journalism, but he’s also a proponent of old-fashioned reportage and its function in modern news coverage. Speaking to students at the Polis Summer School at LSE, he stressed that to be effective in today’s media environment, “you need to be able to do a bit of everything”.

In Hamilos’ personal experience, “everything” has included: finding a decomposing pig’s leg on his doorstep in Madrid, seeing it as a metaphor for an ongoing street-cleaners’ strike, tweeting it, and starting a trend that ultimately took him from the Guardian to BuzzFeed in April 2014. In his new role on the BuzzFeed staff, Hamilos advocates a similarly creative approach to news reporting: look for an unusual way into a story, rather than re-writing a dispatch from AP or Reuters.

“What are you adding?”

The frenetic pace of modern journalism represents a major challenge to all media outlets. Rather than struggling to keep up with breaking stories – which often receive too much media attention – and ending up with generic articles, BuzzFeed attempts to “write about news the same way people talk about news”. This approach requires reporters to have their eyes, ears, and Twitter feeds at the ready because the next story could come from anywhere.

In May 2015, when the news was saturated with repetitive US election coverage, BuzzFeed journalists used old-fashioned investigative methods to dig through local libraries and unearth a long-forgotten 1979 interview with Hillary Clinton. Alternatively, in August 2014, when the mainstream media – and the rest of the world – was struggling to determine whether Russia had invaded Ukraine, individual journalists were able to confirm that Russian troops had crossed the border by checking the geotags on a young soldier (@sanya_sotkin)’s prolific selfies.

It is clear that competitive modern journalism – a trade in which BuzzFeed has become a frontrunner – relies on both traditional techniques and new technology. The art lies in knowing when and how to apply different methodologies, something that perhaps comes more naturally to ‘digital natives’?

Importantly, Hamilos noted that individual journalists’ successes are often attributable to their unique reporting styles, and to their ownership of those styles; in other words, “knowing what they’re good at and then doing it”. For instance, BuzzFeed has one correspondent who covers three newsbeats – ISIS’s social media machine, the Catholic Church, and the British Royal Family – by avidly following each topic on social media. Another correspondent takes the opposite approach by totally immersing himself in interviews with locals on the ground to try and form a clearer



picture of a murky situation. Crucial to BuzzFeed's success is the nurturance and management of its motley correspondents who together provide refreshing and well-rounded news coverage.

“We’re interested in a broad audience, but also a specific audience”

Buzzfeed's eclectic attitude is also reflected in its organizational model; it doesn't limit itself stylistically, topically, or in terms of its target audience. BuzzFeed articles range from “cats and lists” to serious and lengthy analysis – Hamilos' jurisdiction – and while 50% of its readers are aged between 18 and 34, the other 50% are not. When asked whether juxtaposing serious news with lighthearted trending topics might damage BuzzFeed's credibility, Hamilos didn't seem worried. He explained that the company's attitude is “relaxed, because everyone does a bit of everything”. The one exception is print media – Hamilos is clear that the future is digital and that BuzzFeed will never be in print.

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Watch Paul's full talk:

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