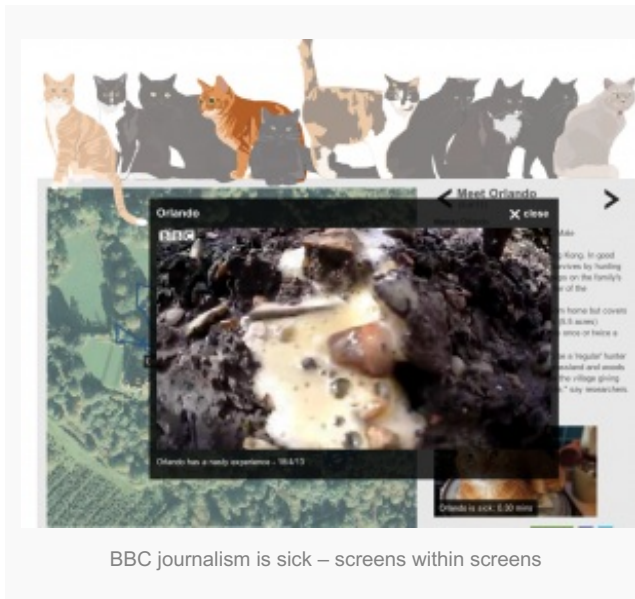


From TV to tablets – how the BBC’s onscreen journalism is changing

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/10/28/from-tv-to-tablets-how-the-bbcs-onscreen-journalism-is-changing/

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“I used to say what I did and people would understand. Now people say, ‘what’s that?’” said [Amanda Farnsworth](#), editor of visual journalism at the BBC, during the latest [Polis Media Agenda Talk](#).

This article by Polis intern Emma Goodman [@EmmaMayAlex](#)

Visual journalism, which Farnsworth described as “one of those new catchphrases,” brings together the cinematic narration of television with the interactive potential of online, reflecting a broader convergence of media. TV-watching habits are changing fast, with a shift towards watching both news and entertainment video content online – either on computers, smart TVs or mobile devices. The BBC recently announcing that its iPlayer mobile app, which allows users to watch BBC shows on demand, had been downloaded 20m times across Apple and Android devices.

Within the BBC’s new multimedia newsroom, Farnsworth’s team consists of online journalists, graphic designers, photo editors, developers and more, and visual journalism is a priority for the BBC because it helps the UK’s public service broadcaster meet three key challenges, Farnsworth said.

First, it helps fulfil a need to be distinctive. In today’s digital news landscape, where consumers are faced by a plethora of choices, you have to stand out, and interactive apps can achieve that.

One of these is [The Great British class calculator](#), which, successfully tapping into what Farnsworth called “Britain’s class obsession,” became the most BBC’s most shared project. (Along with many of my friends, I am apparently an ‘emergent service worker;’ not a particularly encouraging title but doesn’t sound so bad when you read the description.) The app also effectively demonstrated the impact of TV on online activity: whenever it was promoted on the news bulletin, the interactive feature saw huge online traffic spikes.

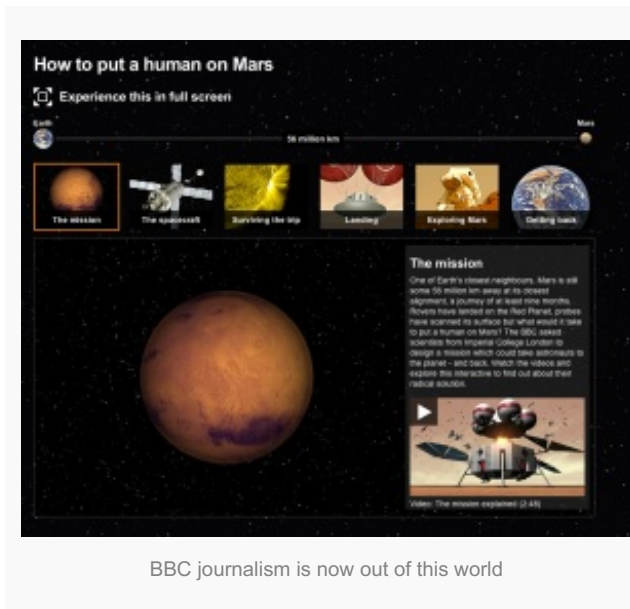
Sick Cats

Another less-newsworthy but still-popular app accompanied a BBC 2 Horizon episode, [Secret life of the cat](#), allowing users to find out more about the lives of the cats featured on the TV programme. (As Farnsworth demonstrated during her talk, you can even see one of the cats – Orlando – vomiting.)

Secondly, visual journalism can help to change the perception of the BBC from an old-fashioned organization to a modern, cutting-edge news outlet, Farnsworth said.

Interactive video is one of the things the news industry is keen to explore and get right, Farnsworth said, and the BBC has been experimenting with different ways of doing it. [One feature on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill](#) allows users to click on interactive tags in the video to find out more. Interactivity makes a linear TV asset into something more suited to online. Another example investigates [how to put a human on Mars](#).

Easier To Understand



Thirdly, visual representations of information are often much easier to understand more immediately. Farnsworth stressed the importance of designing these for multiple mobile devices as well as PCs: content shouldn't be directed at one specific platform any more. As at many news organisations, mobile usage is growing fast, and is already overtaking PC traffic at weekends.

When asked what kind of journalists she hires, Farnsworth said that you need a lot of technical knowhow to stand out, married with strong editorial skills. There has been considerable transatlantic [debate](#) over the last couple of weeks among journalists and journalism educators about the importance of learning to code to succeed in journalism today, prompted by [an article in The Atlantic](#) arguing that it's not a useful path for aspiring journalists to go down. Farnsworth suggested that knowing basic coding is useful, pointing out

that it's not that hard.

Whether or not you agree that building elaborate interactive apps to indulge the nation's cat-obsession is a good use of the licence fee, the BBC's innovative experiments with visual journalism can offer the public deeper, clearer explanations of complex, newsworthy issues.

This article by Polis intern Emma Goodman [@EmmaMayAlex](#)

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Polis reporter Clare Sheehan caught up with Amanda Farnsworth for a quick questionnaire on what's trending in the world of contemporary media.

What is your favourite social media platform?

I'm a dual user – Twitter and Facebook. I use Twitter for work and Facebook for home.

Where do you get your news? Is this different from where you get your political news?

I get my news from everywhere. I am a news junkie. So I get it from television, I get it from radio, I get it from social media, I get it from online. I get it from everywhere, and that goes for politics as well. The thing that surprised me was how much I use social media to get news, and I thought I never would, but I do. And I may buy a newspaper, but I still look on the various Twitter feeds and click through the interesting articles or interesting videos as well.

What is one thing you wish you could change about the media industry?

I wish it could slow down a bit. It does just seem to move at such a pace now, and I think that's difficult for everyone, really. It's difficult for people in universities who are training. If you're running a media course, you might be buying a very expensive kit that only actually is useful for five or ten years and then it's out of the window and we're on to something new. I think that's very difficult for people trying to get into the industry and for people trying to train people who want to get into the industry. You kind have that feeling of, "Everything is happening so fast." But there's no way to stop that. You just have to change your outlook and the way that you make decisions and how you decide to do things. You can't stop the world and get off. It's always been one of the most fast-moving industries, and I think it will remain like that.

Do you think social media is making us smarter or dumbing us down?

I guess it depends who you follow, really. I follow a lot of very serious journalists and organizations, and it's undoubtedly making me kind of clever-er, to put it like that, because I notice things I probably wouldn't have gone to seek out in the first place. They've sort of sought me out on my Twitter feed. You can use social media in such a way that it's more either an entertainment or a commenting kind of thing – which, you know, sometimes there's some pretty stupid things on social media, but there's pretty stupid things in lots of media. So, I don't know whether it's dumbing anyone down in particular, but it feels to me like it's a great source of information.

What news stories are you currently following intently?

Every one! I literally am. I am, like Charlie, a West Ham fan, so I am intently following our performance or poor performance last weekend in the Premier League. My favourite stories – I love foreign news and I like politics, so I eagerly consume those. But it's my job to consume every story around, and I love the quirky stuff too.

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