

Life's A Media Riot (Speech to Almedalen in Sweden)

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2013-7-3



Talking media with the media

This is the text of a speech I gave at the extraordinary annual Swedish political festival called ‘[Almedalen](#)’, when the whole political class of the country moves to a Baltic island for a week of debate open to the public. You can hear [interviews I did for Swedish radio here](#). The theme was the future of ‘quality’ or public service journalism.

Here in Sweden you have an excellent news media – newspapers that are innovating and a great public service provider that looks like it has just been given a sensible settlement by the politicians.

I come from a land where newspapers are struggling to survive and the BBC’s world service has just taken a 20% cut. The BBC has been hit by a series of scandals and the press is fighting regulatory reforms in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson Inquiry into its standards. But I am also very proud of British news media and its tradition for both aggressive and thoughtful journalism. There are still strong signs of life in our news media, too.

Ultimately I think that you face similar trends and challenges here to other countries like Britain across western Europe that are having to come up with new ways of working in the face of the economic crisis, the media business crisis and the challenge of the Internet.

What’s The Future?

So what will happen here in the future? You may have say 60% reach but what about the 40%? – what about the youth – what about minority communities? Surely even Swedish media can do better?

Before we can get to practical policies I want to consider the wider social and economic context and the significance of continuing changes to news media. If our media is restructuring so radically, as I think it is, surely it’s time to go back to basics when we consider what kind of media we want? Here at Almedalen you are all talking politics and policy, which surely makes this the right setting to state that we have choices as well as challenges.

We need to think again about why we need good media and how that can be provided. In the end I hope that I can show that this is the best and most important time to invest in trustworthy media.

Swedish Life Is A Riot

Almost all of the important events that happen in the world are mediated and often in new ways. Mass protests and riots, for example, seem popular right now from Brazil to Turkey, from Egypt to Israel. It's an age of networked disruption.

I first heard about your riots through social media and as we can see from this image that is how people who were actually there also experienced them. How you know about something, how you understand it, how you do something about it, now largely depends on information gained through our various media.



We live a media life.

British Life Is Also A Riot



We watch them watching them

In Britain we've also had riots recently. Some of the participants used social networks to plan, organise and celebrate their actions. Social media was also used by citizens and mainstream media to report on the riots and in shaping its significance. The dominant mainstream media narrative of mindless criminality competed with more diverse online discourses that variously interrogated, explained and even celebrated what happened. We saw something similar around the Boston bombings and the London Woolwich attacks. Factual truth, let alone understanding become very complex when modern networked media are part of the story as well as trying to explain it.

Who Do You Fear?

So in this world of uncertainty and disruption whom should we fear most?

WikiLeaks? Ed Snowden? The National Security Agency? The state paid hackers from China or the adolescent activists from Anonymous? As information becomes more open and privacy becomes more precious, who do we trust and what power does the citizen have?

The schoolgirl Martha Payne might actually be the most threatening person to anyone who currently has power. Martha Payne is a Scottish schoolgirl. Her School Dinners Blog caused such offence to the local education authority that they banned it. If you've ever eaten a British school dinner you will know why. Of course, you know what happens when faceless bureaucrats ban bloggers. You get a Twitter storm. Within hours the blog was reinstated.

But what followed on from this was that she used the publicity to raise money for school dinners for pupils in Africa. She became a powerful actor in the world. Not quite Bono but not bad for an Argyll primary school pupil. But what makes her more dangerous is not that she personally is a direct threat to power. It's what she represents. She is the next digital generation and no one really knows what they are going to do next.



I am about to play a [video made by Austin Guevara, a student of media scholar Mark Deuze](#) when he was teaching at Indiana University (now at Amsterdam University).



I think it shows how profound the shift is to a world where media is environmental and unpredictable. It also shows what big questions it raises for the new generation.

It is clear that we live in a world of complexity and uncertainty.

The real world is more complicated and unpredictable than ever before for us as individuals and as societies.

And our media lives are more complicated and uncertain than ever before. Just think of the variety of platforms and sources now available. Think back ten years and the media organisations like Google, Facebook, and Twitter that dominate media change did not exist.

But this complexity and uncertainty is not necessarily bad.

Uncertainty allows for change and possibility. It gives space for innovation, nice surprises and new things.

Complexity can mean choice. It is a precondition for flexibility, richness and diversity.

Yes, people are puzzled and even frightened at modern life. We have an ambivalent, double-edged relationship with

the new technologies. But generally people seem to prefer the more open, personalised, interactive, diverse media to the old top-down, linear standardised offering.

Here's a couple of slides to give some evidence for this from the excellent recent [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Digital report](#). It paints a picture of continuous change in audience behaviour, albeit at different speeds in different countries and with different generations and social groups or types.

Here's just one example that shows the nuanced nature of this media change.

It shows that for young people accessing news is increasingly through social networks – although it seems that young people are at least as attracted by major news brands when they do this.

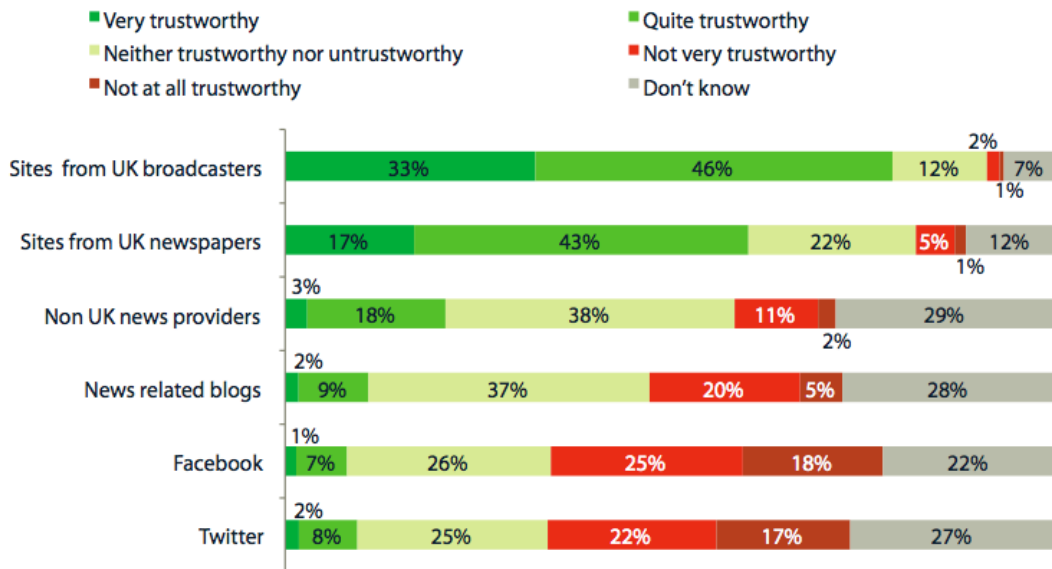
And have a look at how people rate these new sources of news.

It seems people are sceptical about the new platforms. That's not so surprising as they are new and work in different ways so people are rightly careful to be more questioning about them.

Figure 3.5c: Top gateways to news (UK and US compared)



Figure 3.4c: Trust in different types of online news providers (UK)



Q9a: Thinking about the types of sites, mobile sites or apps where you get news online, in broad terms how trustworthy do you find the news content of the following?
Base: UK=2078

Again, my conclusion from that is not that good journalism should stay away from those networks but that it has an important role to provide quality on those platforms – it should be more networked, not less.

New Structures

But the structures that

will deliver all these different types of information, data, debate and analysis has changed. In a world where media is environmental every organisation is a media organisation.

The British government is now opening up its data to the public and creating interactive channels where civil servants communicate with citizens – that is alongside, of course, the vast amounts official bodies spend on PR and spin.

The LSE is now a broadcaster. Every month millions of podcasts of its public lectures are downloaded.

Then there are the new players. One of my favourites is the UK's biggest women's website Mumsnet which has hundreds of forums on everything from nappies to welfare reform. It's so powerful that politicians now queue to be interviewed and organisations pay to be allowed to talk to their users.

And of course, mainstream media is changing. The Guardian is no longer a UK newspaper. It is a global online network. It is also a cooking class provider and Britain's third-largest online dating agency. NRC Handelsblatt in Holland now has its own restaurant where the public can eat alongside journalists.

Advertising Not Magic

Advertising was a magic way to pay for news. Now that is decreasing journalism has to re-invent itself. Not just to find new revenue to do what it used to do, but to find a new place in people's worlds. If media organisations only do these innovative things to replace advertising revenue they will fail to understand the new relationship between information and the consumer.

So I would argue that we still need institutions with a brand based on authentic characteristics. Institutions have value. They are centres of quality control, they are containers of values – both economic and ethical – and they can be held accountable. They can do things like train people and protect them legally. In a world where new global media forces are springing up it's vital to have national or local brands too.

Fortress to Network

But we need new institutions that reinvent themselves profoundly. It's up to private sector media companies to respond to competition and innovate. But I believe that public sector organisations should also lead on this. I see lots of evidence of this in Sweden.

Public Service media organisations need to stop being closed institutions with internal walls. What's happening at the BBC with the integration of its global news services in the new combined newsroom is a good example of this. They also need to break down external walls and start thinking as networkers. For example a recent NESTA report on hyper-locals suggested that the least the BBC could do would be to link to local websites. I think it could do much more.

This means moving beyond the idea of creating a product that is handed out or sold towards the creation of a service industry that is responsive to what the customer wants when they want it. This means creating a relationship that is based on good content but also values such as trust, transparency, shared creativity, and community of interest.

Content and Connectivity

It also means doing a lot of things we have always done because good content is more important than ever. In the case of journalism it means being fast, accurate, clever and responsible. It means being tough on those in power and taking time to investigate in depth. But at all times to be also connected, interactive and participatory. It means having new skills and probably a lot of new people. That might mean connecting people to other sources rather than claiming to have it all. It means supporting both citizen and entrepreneurial forms of media creation. It means redefining the job as a curator. That means shifting resources from the endless duplication of old media towards adding value.

So to conclude. I know that a lot of this is already happening. Here in Sweden you've often been pioneers. When I first wrote a book about networked journalism back in 2008 it was an aspiration. Now it's a working reality. However, I think that the full implications for organisational reform have not been understood by policy-makers – which is odd because many of these shifts are playing out in other industries and other parts of society from health to education as the citizen expects more from the state and from the market and as new technologies unleash potential new relationships.

This does not mean that we need more government interference or regulation. I am very impressed by the way that different Swedish journalism sectors have tried to talk to each other and find a way forward rather than play a blame game in the face of the threat from international competition and the Internet. I am also impressed by how

government has supported public service media. I hope that all concerned resist the urge set limits on what anyone can do online. In the end it is the customer and citizen who must judge what works.

I believe that reformed public service with a new concept of its purpose and a new culture to deliver better value to all citizens should be at the heart of the change. To misquote JFK, instead of asking what we can do to our public service media we should be asking what it can do for us.

[I have [blogged about whether Britain stage a similar political festival to Almedalen](#)]

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