

# Business and media in the age of uncertainty

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Age of Transparency: Living In A Glass Room

*These are the notes of a speech I gave to an IT business conference about how even commercial companies should pay attention to what I call media ethics. If you learn the new moral economy of networked communications, I argue, you will be more likely to survive the risks of an age of uncertainty and more likely to benefit from social media. You can see the slides for this [here](#). If you want me to come and talk to your organisation about these ideas get in touch as I am always happy to exchange ideas with people working with communications – and as this speech says – that means everyone!*

Every organisation is now a media company: businesses –

government – charities – schools – the NHS.

All produce internal communications such as email. All produce external communications such as websites, press releases, and marketing.

But in a world where can all communicate as individuals we now have mixed or networked communications that are simultaneously: inside and outside, personal/professional communications: Twitter, Facebook, etc

Most of all you now operate in a media world where anyone can talk about anything, anytime – including about you or your business.

A natural urge is to either try to do everything or conversely, to withdraw – at the very least, to seek to control.

## National Park, Not Jungle

There is nothing obligatory, natural, or inevitable about this new media environment. If it is an eco-system, it is entirely artificial. Think national park rather than jungle.

So what I want to stress is that everyone has choices: how you communicate, your tactics, your strategy. These choices will ultimately be driven not just by the technology but by the real goals of your organisations: profit, power, advocacy, charity, entertainment – whatever.

But whatever the goals you need to consider the Ethics. By ethics I mean choices that you make based on your values and responding to other people's values.

This new media environment has some new dangers – some new powerful forces.

## Who Do You Fear Most?

Who do you fear most?

Is it a group of people who are destabilising one of the world's most sensitive regions – with a new ideology and a new way of waging war – using guns and bombs but also blogs and video on youtube – the Syrian Free Army's most potent weapon may be its ability to feed its material direct into the world's news media and direct to western publics to help shape global diplomatic policy

Or is it this guy who with just a few hundred thousand dollars created an organisation that produced the biggest leak of confidential material ever? Julian Assange may be holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy but WikiLeaks continues

to operate and associated groups like Anonymous continue to target corporate and governmental systems – indeed some governments are themselves now waging cyber wars on business and political targets.

Or is it this nine year old? Martha Payne's school dinner blog Never Seconds was banned by Argyle and Bute council – within a few hours they had to change their minds and allow her to continue after a storm of protest on twitter. The ending was even more happy because Martha used all the attention online to raise £100,000 for a charity that provides school dinners for poor children around the world.

The answer to the 'fear' question is 'all of them' – but particularly the nine year old girl.

They are all examples of new actors in the media environment –the BBC, the newspapers, are still the mainstream media monsters – but these are the change-makers.

### **Fear The Unpredictable**

They are not the most important sources of information, not the most influential – but these are the new kids – literally – on the block – and because you don't know what they are going to do next they are dangerous – no-one predicted them but here they are.

All of them are acting in an ethical way.

And the girl is the most dangerous because she has the least predictable and least understood motives of all.

All of them are powerful because of new media trends that are reshaping our world – the world you do business in.

Now what is the background to all this change?

Here are some key ways of thinking about current media change beyond the technological changes that enable this. You have to go beyond the gadgets.

- Disintermediation: as all organisations become media organisations and as all citizens can now create their own media – the organisations that we used to call media organisations can now be cut out of the information chain.
- Personalisation: disintermediation is related to another trend towards the personalisation of media – not only can individuals create their own media but they can customise their own consumption with much greater potential diversity of sources and networks.
- Mobility: by mobility I mean literally the portability of platforms – but also the portability of information with all the implications that has for ownership copyright and so on
- Interactivity: And all the above leads to much greater interactivity – we are not passive anymore – information flows are now more open, and can be accessed instantly, they can also be forwarded or shaped and passed on instantly – we are in networks not audiences. And increasingly we – as consumers and citizens determine the rules for those networks – you only have to think of the struggle Facebook has to assert its control over its own business.

But those trends are playing out in an uncertain and complex world – you only have to think about the recent news around Barclays to see that we are in a period of shocks and instability.

It's the same in media systems where the communications industries themselves are in upheaval and where our use of media is becoming more complex and more unpredictable.

### **Creativity And Opportunity**

But uncertainty can also mean creativity and opportunity – a time for fresh thinking and new ways of doing things. Complexity can also mean choice, variety, diversity and richness.

None of what I have been talking about is natural. None of what I have been talking about will be decided by

technology. Everything is a choice – and we make choices according to our values as well as the other influences such as social trends, economic resources and technological facilities. That is the new media economy of Media Ethics.

I want to situate the idea of media ethics in three areas:

1. Social
2. Political
3. Editorial

Now for those of you from the marketing department, or for any fellow journalists out there, I should explain that Ethics is not a county to the east of London. Nor, however, do I mean some kind of religious code – I am not going to preach.

### **Social Media Ethics**

Have a look at this photo. What are they doing?



What are they looking at?  
What are they doing with it?  
Why are they doing it?  
Is it a good or bad thing that they are all looking at an iPad screen instead of talking to each other?  
The technology allows them to do this, but what motivates them and how do they use it?  
How does it change them as individuals and as family – of

three generations in this case?

These are ethical questions

What shapes the answers is not the technology – it will be other forces or factors –

The granny is there because of increased longevity.

The small child understands because she is taught media in schools

The woman on the right and her family live in a different country because of globalisation so they use this technology to keep in touch.

How they use this technology is based on their own values of identity, personality and their own history.

So social trends plus personal ethics = media trends.

## Political Media Ethics

Every organisation has an ideological outlook that shapes its strategy and behaviour and therefore its communications. It is political because it is the practical negotiation between the organisations aims and the real world.

And in the new media environment that is exposed to accountability from rival organisations, the news media and the public in general to a degree that is unprecedented.

We are now living in what Klaus Swab of the WEF called a glass room. The fact that WikiLeaks and the rest of the world is online means that you can never be sure that you won't be exposed and when it happens it can be swift and endless, beyond legal sanction even.

- Are you really prepared as an organisation for the idea that flows of information about your organisation can be reversed?
- Have you really thought through how that openness could be part of the way you work rather than a threat?

So the ethical risk is two-fold.

Firstly, if you are not transparent and you act badly, you will get found out and you will look worse because you tried to hide it in a world where the default moral expectation of the citizen is that you will be transparent.

Secondly, if you declare a set of ethics that are not enacted in your media policy, you will also be held to account – in that sense, the medium IS the ethical message.

## Editorial Media Ethics

The third area of ethics is around the rights and responsibilities of being a media or a mediated company.

If you want to be trusted – and trust is the way to get attention in networked communications – then you have to accept the responsibilities as well as the rights of being a journalist or communicator.

Online, you are expected to tell the truth, to be factual and accurate.

In return you have the right to free expression and to be heard – and most importantly for people to pay attention to you in an information abundant age.

So to conclude.

Media is environmental

There are new media forces

There are new social forces

You should respond – not just to avoiding risk but by building relationships.

You can read this as a slideshow [here](#)

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