

Journalism as archeology

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Journalists?

I am in what we in journalism refer to as The Eternal City. What better place to think about the parallels between journalism and archeology.

This is what social media does. I am here to give a talk about Leveson and WikiLeaks (and then on to the Perugia International Journalism Festival). As I flew from Heathrow James Murdoch was giving evidence. By the time I landed the Media and Culture Secretary of State was under pressure to resign. Even in the land of Berlusconi they found the tale of a police horse, a Prime Minister and phone-hacking colourful.

Rome (like London but warmer and much more operatic) is a city where lurid current affairs are always on a stage shaped by centuries of layered, theological, amoral urban life. (For me the ultimate expression of this is 'Il Divo', the dark and beautiful film about the profound but corrupt Prime Minister

Giulio Andreotti).

So to understand this place – especially in the post-Berlusconi era you need to dig. Excavate.

On the TV in the bar Chelsea were digging out a famous victory against Barcelona but I was distracted by this conversation on Twitter by journalists about archeology. Ex Guardian Exec and Columbia Prof @EmilyBell said one of her offspring was thinking of taking up the Indiana Jones trade. My eldest is studying Ancient History. Which reminded me how close the hack is to the archeologist.

 **Charlie Beckett** @CharlieBeckett [← Reply](#) [🗑 Delete](#) [★ Favorite](#) · [Open](#)
[@emilybell](#) [@chiggi](#) [@Philippa_Perry](#) I have one going that way. I don't think it's a big step from journo to archeologist - it's all digging
[← In reply to emily bell](#)

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[@CharlieBeckett](#) [@chiggi](#) [@Philippa_Perry](#) never thought about it like that but of course...one man's earth closet is another's email trail
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But as The Guardian's erudite Arts Correspondent Charlotte Higgins responded,

it's not that simple. Neither archeology nor journalism are really sciences:

 **Charlotte Higgins** @chiggi 11m
[@CharlieBeckett](#) [@emilybell](#) [@Philippa_Perry](#) Yes, archaeology frequently as fanciful as journalism (she said darkly).
[← In reply to Charlie Beckett](#)

In the end both crafts are about turning fragments into universal hypotheses. They are forms of story-telling that attempt to make sense of the

past with very limited evidence.

In truth, both form their judgements with present prejudices when they pretend to be objectively assessing what has past (recent or very distant).

The phone-hacking story is a wonderful example of this as talented archeologists like Nick Davies and Martin Hickman – even MP Tom Watson – attempt to reconstruct what life was really like in an early 21st century tabloid newsroom. Certainly they have their own view of the actions and ethics of those distant times which may mean they exaggerate some of the evidence.

But as more shards of digital pottery emerge it seems that not only were these more barbaric times than we thought, but rather more connected to the present than many people, like Jeremy Hunt and James Murdoch, would have liked to imagine. The end of Empire, as the present day post-Berlusconi Romans I was with last night know too well, is always a fascinating time.

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