


# Why The Unevenness Of Media Change Is Good

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Ideas battlers

I am not a huge fan of the Institute of Ideas, and the title of their annual talkathon, [Battle of Ideas](#), irritates me. I have always enjoyed a good row but I think that the best ideas tend to come out of reflection and co-operation, not 'battles'. But all credit to the lol for providing a great space for opinion-mongers to air their views. I am amazed how many people are prepared to give up large parts of their weekend to be part of discussions involving people like me.

I was part of a panel on 'Journalism In Jeopardy' with Goldsmith's Natalie Fenton, City's George Brock, and Tarun Tejpal from the impressive investigative Indian news magazine/website Tehelka.

I love football as a metaphor for life so I was delighted with one member of the audience. He said that some journalists are like professional football players who have suddenly realised that everyone can and does play football for fun. Football, they discover, is being played everywhere. Should they demand that the amateur footballers are banned or regulated? Or should they lower the standard of the professional game to match the much more popular and participatory amateur version? Of course not. But that is how some media people act in response to user generated content and public participation.

The debate made me think we are all realising some basic facts about the radical changes in journalism.

1. You can't stop the Internet and its effects
2. Media change is driven as much by social change as the other way around
3. The very nature of journalism and news itself is changing

But I think the key realisation is that not only is the immediate future of news unpredictable, but it's uneven. And by that I don't just mean the huge variations between different international media markets. I am referring to Clay Shirkey's observation that media change is happening so quickly that the new forms are not being created quickly enough to replace the old ones, while for some people the future is already here.

For example, I argued at the Battle of Ideas conference that the elite, intellectual, publicly active people in the conference audience were now super-served by the best elite media that humankind has ever enjoyed.

Yet at the same time it is clear that there is a real crisis with local or community news media where the commercial sector is failing its public badly and a replacement 'new' media is still very thin and patchy.

This 'unevenness' of the New News is partly a function of social media which tends towards trends and clusters around subjects and platforms. Old mass media had, at least, the virtue that it was tangibly, visibly, formed. You could see and measure newspapers and broadcast bulletins. How to measure the evolution of the seething, swirling flows of data, information and influence online?

I welcome this unevenness because it forces journalists of all kinds to focus on the prime task for the news media in the 21st century – to connect. Its good that journalism is in jeopardy (it always was of course and always will be, if it's any good) because it makes us invent better ways to be relevant, useful, challenging and vital to people's lives. Now that's a battle worth fighting.

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