

Shirky on journalism: online and at the LSE

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There is a great interview with Clay “[Here Comes Everybody](#)” Shirky in [Columbia Journalism Review](#). Here he is on how news is changing and the shock to the Old:

“News is very complicated because the news, in fact, is not a very coherent category. We use the word “news” to describe more than one sort of rough set of things. We use “gossip” to describe another rough set of things. But, in fact, they overlap. And the news used to be defined with reference to news organizations. So, for example, you know, FDR’s polio was kept out of the news. Now, clearly, the information that FDR had polio would have been news had it come up. But because there were few enough news outlets, they could essentially conspire to make it not-news by simply not reporting it. As we know from the Drudge Report during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, those days are gone. And so the news is suffering the same kind of breakdown that I was talking about with behavioral economics and evolutionary psychology, which is the edge case of a group of accredited professionals deciding what becomes news and what doesn’t become news has now been set aside in favor of a much more soft-focus, kind of permeable membrane-oriented way of handling or thinking about the news.”

Here is his view of mainstream media complacency:

“A lot of working journalists, and especially print journalists, are in the position of being sort of kept women. They don’t really understand where the money comes from but, you know, their particular sugar daddy seems pretty flush, so they just never gave it much thought. And then one day the market crashes and they suddenly discover, “Wait a minute, we were a business? And our revenues had to exceed our expenses every year? Why wasn’t I informed?”

This is his vision of journalism’s future:

“I mean, what’s going to happen is, basically, the number of people who commit acts of journalism will rise enormously and the number of people who derive most, or all, of their income from acts of journalism is going to shrink. It’s just what happened to photographers with the spread of cameras. There’s just many, many, many, many more photos than there used to be. But it’s harder to make your living just by owning a nice camera and setting up in town and taking pictures of people’s kids. So, you know, I think that changed. And I think journalism is essentially next in line to see that change, to go through that change.”

And here’s the optimistic bit:

“The average quality of something written is going to fall to the floor because of the volume of written material. But the competition will mean that the premium for having something especially interesting is going to rise.”

I will be chairing a [lecture](#) by Shirky at the LSE on February 3rd at 6.30pm in the Hong Kong Theatre, LSE.

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