

Subject To Change: how to create great products for an uncertain world (book review)

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“The uncertainty inherent in the world should be an indication of vast possibilities ... Everyone can and should be involved in creating, prototyping, and evaluating concepts and products, although you’ll definitely want to have folks on the staff who have the expertise to make designs sing and prototypes move”.

This is the core message in a new [book](#) by the web consultancy company [Adaptive Path](#) called [Subject To Change](#). In the spirit of their collaborative vision there are four authors, all with impeccable New Media marketing credentials. The organisation sounds like a religious cult but in fact comes across as rather shiny and sensible.



[Subject To Change](#) mentions journalism but it is much more concerned with commercial marketing in a digital world. This makes it a useful acid test in the design laboratory for my idea of [Networked Journalism](#). My [book SuperMedia](#) sets out how journalism will change as it goes online to a more connected, participatory process. Since writing it I have been trying to think through what that means in practice. What happens to business models when production and consumption patterns are radically altered?

Books like Clay Shirkey’s [Here Come’s Everything](#) and Charlie Leadbeater’s [We Think](#) have been useful in understanding the new open source, crowd-sourced collaborative structures and practices that are emerging. But those books tend to go in circles that give a list of examples, make some general claims and leave you to get on with working out how it applies to your neck of the woods. (And here’s a plea. Can we stop quoting [Wikipedia](#) unthinkingly as an example of a widespread trend? Surely the point is that only the encyclopedia version of the Wiki has ever worked? it could actually be a dead end that has left us with a fantastic online reference work. It’s like [OhMyNews](#). The point is that there is only one example of it and that’s not working too brilliantly).

“Subject To Change” has some of the faults of making general statements out of specific cases but how else can you debate what’s going on when things shift so fast? This is a situation where good questions are more important than categorical answers.

The core idea is that any product needs to be based on how the consumer will experience using it. This is not entirely new. Take Kodak’s camera design which made taking photos easy and left the complicated bit (developing) to the Kodak labs. That was all a century ago.

Now companies like Apple understand that people like iPod because they look good, are easy to use and fit in with the way they live their lives. Easy innit? Surely a few focus groups, some market testing and some groovy design can do the same for everything from cars to condoms?

Well, if it was that easy then Adaptive Path wouldn’t have needed to write a book. And it would be a lot shorter. In fact, it requires a complete organisational overall in culture and practice to get this right:

“Customer research allows you to understand and take into account the behaviours and motivations of your customers, and their contexts. It requires you to do away with reductive thinking and get out into their lives and talk to them, then make this newfound understanding of your customers an

And you have to keep changing – again and again. (Which is good for change consultants, I guess...). But you have no choice:

“It is this uncertainty and miscellany that renders more traditional approaches to product and service delivery insufficient. You can’t simply analyse your way to success. You can’t optimise your way to profitability. Focusing on risk mitigation allows maverick competitors to surpass you. As markets, people’s lives and the world are becoming more complex, many of the old, easy answers to business problems are insufficient. Developing creative, agile, and experience-focused approaches will be a key business practice for small and large companies alike”

I agree with this stuff. I argue in [SuperMedia](#) that media companies have to re-invent themselves – including their management – and not just their products. Journalism is a process not a product. Journalism is a service not a goal. The public are part of the production process and the value is in relevance, community and connectedness, as well as content.

Journalists really need to get to know what the public wants and how it gets it. We need a whole range of new ways of presenting what we do in a way that people will pay for it. Design and technology are vital parts of that. It’s time to bring the technies in from the lab or the workshop and put them at the centre of the newsroom.

It’s also time to re-invent our relationship with the public. Think about why they like [Tesco.com](#), [Bebo](#), or [YouTube](#). More importantly get them to think through with you what you should be doing next. And then when you do it, keep talking to them and making sure they are part of what you do.

This sounds lovely and even easy, but it is still a million miles from how most mainstream media organisations work and think. [Subject To Change](#) is good at pointing out the obstacles as well as offering ways forward. It deliberately does not claim final answers because there aren’t any. It’s a combination of a manifesto and a strategy guide. But I will certainly be adopting some of its insights as a way of coming up with new ideas for [saving journalism](#).

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