

Nick Davies' Flat Earth

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/04/nick-davies-flat-earth/

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It is now received opinion that the news media is worse than it's ever been. So perhaps Nick Davies' new book *Flat Earth News* lamenting "Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media" is hardly a challenge to orthodoxy. But I have to say that I think it is wrong-headed.

Of course, I welcome the book. It has managed to get [praise](#) from people as diverse as John Pilger and Peter Osborne. I do not disagree with Nick that 'good' journalism faces all sorts of threats from new economic, political and technological forces. Indeed, my own forthcoming book *SuperMedia* also warns that we must do much more to support the role of the news media in contributing to a healthy civic society.

What I disagree with is his analysis which seems to be largely based on a textual [analysis](#) of the UK newspaper market. Please go to the report [website](#) to judge for yourself. It makes the case that journalists have less time to do basic fact-checking, digging and verification. For many journalists that is true. All journalists want more time. Our work is by its very nature limited by deadlines. My quarrel is partly with their data and analysis but mainly with the context they put it in and their conclusions.

I think they are looking at news production as a static object and comparing it to some Golden past Age. Their model is that "We the professionals make it and you lot consume it. We need trade protection and regulation because the public can't be trusted to choose the right thing." I don't think that approach is sustainable.

There are some problems with the report in the detail which Adrian Monck tackles in his [critique](#) of the book:

Nick's jeremiad is familiar to anyone who has [thumbed through the literature](#) of reporters critiquing their profession ...but I would argue that his hope for journalism as an agent of change are the real problem. By over-estimating its influence, he falls prey to pessimism, rather than looking at ways in which his goals could be secured by other means.

These are my problems with the report/book. Firstly, it is not a global study – it is UK and it just newspapers. Broadcast and online news means that newspapers are less important as sources of core information. Overall, people have much more direct access via new media to facts and debate. We need fewer journalists to process news. New technologies such as mobile phones have made us much more efficient in producing news. And new dissemination platforms and devices such as Internet links mean the consumer can access information more easily.

It also seems blissfully uninterested in alternatives to Big Media. There is a world of citizen journalism, user generated content, and bloggers out there. There is also a whole range of new journalism techniques that can link the hack with the public to create a more interactive, transparent and trustworthy news media. It can support even the most sophisticated kinds of investigative journalism.

I think this is an essentially backward-looking piece of work, but it is a welcome and substantial contribution to the very necessary debate about what we do to sustain good journalism in the future.

Have a [read](#) of what Lesley Riddell thought about the book. She was supportive of the gist of it but felt that he ignores huge swathes of good journalism and thought it spent too long trying to prove that the *Observer* was part of a pro-war, pro-Government campaign. I would agree that at that point Nick Davies and his colleagues reveal their political colours and lose objectivity. [Roy Greenslade](#) is also distracted by the book's implied attack on the *Observer*, but Davies' thesis fits in with Roy's belief that national newspapers are much worse than in his day. [Here](#) is Simon

[Jenkins'](#) robust assault on Davies which I share to a great degree.

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