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House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital: inquiry into the future of journalism

News process

You will doubtless hear many submissions on the quality of journalism, how digital journalism has somehow dumbed down the news, led to less mentally demanding and exacting news. How it is simply 'fake' news...

All that is undoubtedly true, but I wanted to write about how the actual news process itself has been impacted by the arrival of digital journalism ; how supplying news has changed, how selecting news has changed and how those very changes themselves have redefined what we consider to be news itself.

The reason I think I am (at least partially) qualified to make a comment to your committee is that, at 55 I am possibly one of the last journalists of the old school who has now returned to the workplace as a digital-only journalist. I worked from age 14 on newspapers; when the presses were still hot metal, when we went everyday for a briefing from the police and would spend mornings at the Magistrate's Court reading the lists.

So I have worked through the changes.

Everyone knows that the UK press has always had a uniquely pantomime aspect to its news

- the goodies, the baddies, who gets collectively booed and who applauded. Then of course there is the interesting reveal as the designated good character (Meghan Markle who brings a freshness to the royal family) is then turned in the villain (boo hiss, she is taking away Harry, how dare she be a working royal etc etc) with the irony of course that the very papers who turned on her have now lost their life blood of feeding the appetite for royal 'news'.

But today the news process doesn't not follow a linear pattern from the bottom up; find out something, someone, somewhere doesn't want being told (the shoplifter in court, the police briefing, the local made good or bad), realise it, report it, check it, publish it, answer it and move on as the news itself is propelled (or not) by its 'worth' up the news ladder.

Because digital journalism is driven only by the market, and that is not controlled in any way by the shareholders (those who buy the newspaper for instance) anyone can report anything, at any time. It is also widely abused, so in a recent NATO study, researchers acquired more than 3,500 comments, 25,000 likes and 5,000 followers, all for roughly \$330. So that means news does not have any value, but it can most clearly be bought. The very worth of news is simply that it is being followed and liked, there is no intrinsic value to it.

So the decision to gather the news is being powered by the data it creates, much like once you have a metric to measure something, by its nature once it starts being recorded it no longer has a value..

Read all about it ... is now more pertinent as read things that someone else has decided are important, the Kardashians make news because they are the news. Start the news cycle, rinse then repeat.

This is by no means a complete and all encompassing system. Some elements have their own news energy - volcanoes erupting, famine, war - although frighteningly they do not seem to endure very long in this click and then swipe environment. The rest of the news is now being led and determined by digital.

So if you get a big hit or a big engagement, your news will leapfrog up the news agenda, and because it is being powered by the mass, then it becomes of itself a news item. So local planning decisions, micro stories, minor changes... this will not get reported, because they have not bought their way into the news. This has a massive implication for our news gathering.

When I worked shifts on Fleet Street, if I had to do a story about someone well-known I was sent to the cuttings library. I would ask the staff to get me what we had on person xx and they would return with a buff envelope of clippings, all the 'news' on that person.

Now, with the clippings desk long gone, and the microfiche of the newspaper which replaced it now in a dump, the decision on what is filed about someone is decided by digital. How many hits, how many impressions. Not even a library assistant with a pair of scissors who is making a judgement.

So the whole process of news is different.

It is often said that the great thing about the internet is everyone can be anyone, and it doesn't matter if you are trying to break into the record business in Midsomer Norton, or you have developed a cure for cancer in Mongolia. But that is not the case; because you may well have done these things, but no one will know or care, because you do not have connectivity in Mongolia or the 'mass' appeal of the biggest data farms in the world, So no 'news' will ever come out about you.

You are news-less. If however you get a lot of hits, a mass of followers and then you are, of yourself, news. Regardless of whether a baby reporter, their sub editor, their editor, the local news agency, a national desk or an international bureau, decided you were worth a report. It is a scary future.

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