

What is the future of journalism?

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There is always a risk inherent in trying to predict the future. Precisely what makes it so enticing to do so is the unpredictability of the thing and the lengthy list of evidence that we generally do a poor job of it, such as *Popular Mechanics*' 1949 quote claiming "[c]omputers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons". As such, it's often best to hedge one's bets and create multiple predictions, one per possible divergent case. In this way, one can be fairly sure that they'll be correct, one way or another, and that everyone will forget the missteps.

With this in mind, this essay will be divided into two sections. The first will present a pessimistic view on the future of journalism; a dystopian nightmare in which clarity is purposefully obfuscated for showmanship and objectivity falls to the wayside. The second, as a palate-cleanser, will present a more optimistic one; a borderless world of citizen journalism and new voices from the least likely of places challenging the public's assumptions.

1 The future of journalism is depressing

There's a tendency to look back on the nebulous 'good old days' with rose-tinted nostalgia, and it's no secret that yellow journalism has been around since at least the 1890s, but never quite to the degree it is now. Clickbait, or yellow journalism 2.0, has exacerbated a culture of skimming the news, where the headline and potentially the first paragraph are deemed sufficient. There are many experiments demonstrating this, such as *Ars Technica*'s article "Guns are home more likely to be used stupidly than in self-defense",¹ which embedded a line partyway through instructing anyone who read it to write 'banana' in the comments. The first banana-featuring comment came in around page three.

What does this suggest about the future of journalism? For one, even supposedly venerable institutions are falling under the sway of clickbait as they focus increasingly on their online offerings; *Private Eye* 1385 featured a list of headlines, with the challenge of distinguishing the *Buzzfeed* from the *Telegraph* ones. Considering the latter was founded in 1855 and the former in 2006, it suggests the future of journalism is pulling the past down with it.

However, the bigger issue caused by the prevalence of 24-hour news cycles, mobile phone recordings, etc. is the sheer volume of 'news' one has to wade through. This unbalancing of signal to noise has the unfortunate consequence of making following the news largely impossible for the average person. As such, there is the motivation to seek ideologically-aligned filters who, with large teams of interns, can distil the cacophony into something suited to one's leanings. The obvious example of this would be the prominence of *Fox News* 'characters', such as the prototypical Bill O'Reilly, but even supposedly superior fare like *The Economist* fall foul of telling their readers what they want to hear at times.²

This over-reliance on ideology made to order is a component in the media-savviness often cited as part of what makes groups like the EZLN³ and IS⁴ so successful. Via reduced barriers of access to much the same news recording and media dissemination tools as are utilised by established news sources, groups such as this are afforded both an impression of legitimacy, stand out less obviously as biased in an increasingly partisan news world and, particularly in the case of IS, are given boosts by the very news outlets who abhor them who, by virtue of the modern expectations of the audience to be shown everything happening all the time, are forced to act as unofficial and unwilling soapboxes for the groups.⁵

A final effect of this influx of news, and one that ties into IS, is the desensitisation caused by increased access to unfiltered depictions of atrocities that, in the past, would have generally been kept from the public's eyes. This

¹The line is featured at the end of the seventh paragraph: <http://arstechnica.com/science/2011/04/guns-in-the-home-lots-of-risk-ambiguity/>

²Most eloquently critiqued in a 1991 editorial by James Fallows: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/1991/10/-quot-the-economics-of-the-colonial-tinge-quot-about-the-economist-magazine-washington-post-1991/7415/>

³Zapatista Army of National Liberation

⁴Islamic State, a.k.a. ISIS, ISIL

⁵Nicely summated in *Charlie Brooker's 2014 Wipe*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3EoNsGHZD0#t=1611>

is perhaps the most contentious point for a pessimistic future of journalism, as it could be argued that this news censorship may be used for political gain rather than just protecting the public's sensibilities, but it's hard to argue the virtues of the fact that videos of, for example, brutal beheadings, from Daniel Pearl in 2002 to the Egyptian Copts just over ten days ago, are accessible within a few clicks, with some having been viewed, at least partially, by 25 % of the UK population;⁶ this all leads to a terrible state of, to quote Adam Curtis, 'oh dearism'.⁷

2 The future of journalism is actually pretty good

Doom and gloom is all well and good (and tends to be the favoured fare of most news outlets), but maybe it's not all bad news. Indeed, many of the aforementioned negative developments in journalism have to their yang a drastically more positive yin. Take the first point: clickbait headlines. They may be universally derided, but *Upworthy* make a compelling point for its reason to exist in their about section.⁸ Indeed, their stated goal proved compelling enough to prompt the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to partner up with them.⁹ Clickbait is easy to complain about, but its effectiveness does mean that articles are getting seen (to what extent retained is a different matter). This, coupled with the ease at which a news story can go viral over the various social media sites, allows stories to reach previously impossible scales of audience. Even if only 10 % of those are reading the article, that's still a substantial number.

The lowering of barriers to entry was previously cited as an issue with modern journalism, but this, too, has a obvious positive side. By democratising news reporting in this way, previously unheard voices are given a chance to enter into the global debate. This guerilla film-making can highlight the domestic silent minorities, as in 2000's *Dark Days*, which documented the plight of the New York homeless, as well as the foreign, as in 2009's *The First Movie*, wherein Iraqi children are given cameras to film their own unique viewpoint of a homeland often shown in a less than positive light.

Indeed, the days of the exposé are far from over. More than that, they are now more common than ever thanks to the increased transparency and prevalence of information sources, as well as privacy tools like *Tor* which allow those in oppressive regimes to speak out in a way they wouldn't have been able to before. For example, the previous few years alone have seen Operation Yewtree, the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, the Snowden leaks, etc. Any of these can rival classic exposés like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* for importance, and many (particularly the Snowden leaks) would likely never have happened without the impact of technology. There are around 1.7m documents in that leak alone, after all, which would take an inordinately long time for humans to sort through.

Similarly, the increased ownership of cameras, in particular mobile phone cameras, has led to a huge increase in the power of citizen journalism, as buzzwordy as the term may seem. Events like the 1937 Hindenburg disaster being caught on camera used to be a matter of chance, the news team there and set up beforehand to document something else. Now, it's more surprising when an event doesn't get captured on camera than when it does. This is particularly important in the oppressive regimes of the world; in 1989, Stuart Franklin's famous photo of the Tiananmen Square tank man had to be smuggled out of the country by a French student, concealed in a box of tea.¹⁰ In 2014, the Hong Kong 'Umbrella Revolution' was comprehensively documented, largely by the participants, capturing scenes of police brutality and the like. The only smuggling that had to take place was the smuggling of the images and videos onto popular sites like *Instagram* and *Sina Weibo*.¹¹

3 Well, which is it?

It would be nice to be able to give a definitive answer to this question, but as any journalist knows, shades of grey are the order of the day. What is undeniable is that journalism has been and will continue to be irrevocably changed by the relentless march of technology and the change in cultural attitudes that it brings with it. As an example, the internet's borderless nature has led to the exposure of Western audiences to news outlets like *Al Jazeera* and *RT*; it's hard to imagine as large an American readership for *Pravda* circa 1980. Its low barriers to entry and massive audience have also led to a flourishing of perhaps more grassroots outlets, such as *The Young Turks*.

⁶YouGov survey: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/08/22/terror-video-reached-83-percent-british-people/>

⁷Excerpt from Curtis' segment on *Charlie Brooker's Newsnight*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8moePxHpvoK#t=55>

⁸*Upworthy* About page: <http://www.upworthy.com/about>

⁹*Upworthy* All 7 Billion page: <http://www.upworthy.com/all-7-billion>

¹⁰Paraphrased from *New York Times* article: <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/behind-the-scenes-tank-man-of-tiananmen>

¹¹1283 words

As evidenced by the fact that the points for either argument each have equally compelling counterpoints, perhaps the same developments in news can be used for good or ill, and it is up to us consumers to try and ensure the former and discourage the latter. In this way, the concept of citizen journalism extends to more than just citizens documenting events, but also to those reading about events as, at the end of the day, they influence the bottom line of whichever outlets they frequent, which in turn has the greatest impact on the outlet's decision-making.

With great power comes great responsibility, so the author's answer to the question is this: the future will be what we make of it. Can we stop clicking on provocative headlines and providing ad revenue to encourage more of them? Can we choose not to remain safe and unchallenged with media we know will only reinforce our worldviews and prejudices? Can we make journalism what we claim to want it to be? Or will we just throw up our arms and say "oh dear".

approx. 1700 words