

Futures Journalism

A Strategy to Shift Our Focus from Current Affairs to Long-Term Solutions

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Journalists have traditionally reported current affairs – or the very recent past – with the purpose of keeping their audience up to date. Yesterday’s news was quickly considered waste in a rapid consumption model typical of an industry nurtured by advertising.

As the business model for newspapers falls apart, there’s an opportunity to reconsider what we want from journalism, and what form it should take. Is it enough to be keeping up with current affairs? The pace of change and the complexity of its implications – for health, nutrition, water, energy, social cohesion and so on – indicates that it’s not.

Who hasn’t felt unease at the sudden recollection of last year’s top story? Some famine or disaster held our attention for a few weeks, but was soon forgotten – its aftermath deemed unworthy of attention. Now, as the pace of sharing picks up, the challenge of engaging deeply with a story increases. When is there time to explore the socio-political questions it raises, and reflect on what can be done?

Rather than the short-lived sensationalism of yet another disease outbreak, yet another conflict crisis, we need media to help us spot the opportunities to move away from an endless stream of bad news, towards the future we want.

For journalism, this means shifting the emphasis beyond the current story towards its long-term implications. The crux is no longer what happened, but how this might change our future landscape, and what response it demands. This new approach, which could be termed ‘futures journalism’, responds to the need to make sense of rapid change and inform our actions.

The changing nature of media, from broadcast to sharing, creates a breeding ground for new approaches. Newspapers and magazines traditionally packaged stories by nation, trade or interest, which made sense for advertising: the more narrowly the readers’ interests could be defined, the more accurately they could be targeted.

But social sharing means stories slide over section divides, giving our interests new room to grow as we follow the responses of other readers and roam over the questions they raise. New platforms, from Timeline to News Deeply, are responding to enhance these learning journeys with briefs, chronologies and maps, while articles are peppered with hyperlinks to more information.

Media sites may be maturing as educational platforms, but they are yet to recognise that they have a role beyond this: as a means for design. When we talk about the future we want, we also shape it. Appetite for media focused on positive solutions is growing, fed by the likes of DailyGood, Good News Network, Good.Is and SunnySkyz. But are we in danger of developing

what Lilian Kivel of the Carnegie Foundation calls “a culture of *solutionitis*”, in which we’re “constantly jumping to implement solutions before fully developing a clear sense of what is creating the problem”?

The role of the futures journalist is not simply to stockpile solutions, but to help us navigate their implications, raising questions that can support us in making better decisions. The Futures Centre¹ offers an example: its ‘signals of change’ comprise a short factual description of an unprecedented event, followed by an enquiry into the long-term implications in response to the question, ‘So What?’

If the notion of the journalist as a sort of societal consultant seems surprising, it’s because we have yet to acknowledge that the reporter has always been more than a passive observer. By selecting elements of experience to share, they shape our perception of the world, as well as our aspirations for the future.

A paper by researchers at Glasgow University, published in the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, looked at the impact of media coverage in areas such as disability and climate change, and found – somewhat unsurprisingly – that negative coverage led to a hardening of attitudes.² Further studies have found that our perceptions of the world influence our behaviour – right down to how we vote.³

With this responsibility towards the possible worlds they are shaping in mind, the futures journalist needs a new ethical charter. The conventional framework for journalism is characterised by principles such as freedom of expression and the fundamental right of citizens to receive truthful information and honest opinions. A good starting point is the call of the *Journal of Futures Studies* for contributors to surface their assumptions – essential if we are to imagine things differently, and also maintain a strong sense of our humanity within a shifting system.

Notes

1. www.thefuturescentre.org
2. Happer, C. & Philo, G. The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 2013, Vol. 1(1). <http://jspp.psychopen.eu/article/view/96/37> [accessed 31 July 2015]
3. Mills, M et al. ‘Obama cares about visuo-spatial attention: Perception of political figures moves attention and determines gaze direction’ *Behaviour Brain Research* Volume 278, 1 February 2015, Pages 221–225
4. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0166432814006469> [accessed 31 July 2015]
5. Laber-Warren, E ‘Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals and Conservatives’ *Scientific American* (Aug 2, 2012) <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/calling-truce-political-wars/> [accessed 31 July 2015]

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