

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Is traditional journalism sustainable in an age of citizen journalists and social media?

“The balance of power is shifting and it will continue to shift in the direction of journalists and writers”. These were the words of Steve Marinker, Managing Director, Havas PR, proposing the motion ‘Traditional journalism is not sustainable in an age of citizen journalists and social media’ at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 26 November 2012. The debate was sponsored by JICREG and chaired by The Lord True, CBE.

Steve Marinker argued that social and media platforms will give journalists a potency they could previously only have dreamed of. Many journalists already lead double lives, a traditional media existence constrained by the demands of space and time and, in some cases perhaps, their proprietors’ interests, and a second life on Twitter, blogs and on other forums where they amass large and active constituencies and are able to conduct a parallel conversation with their followers. Steve Marinker acknowledged that the established journalists who work for big media houses owe their fame and following to their employers – without them they would be nothing and have no platform. However, he cited several writers who are not products of mainstream media. Technical journalism is an example. One of the most influential journalists is Cory Doctorow who, though he certainly crops up frequently as an analyst or a talking head in newspapers and on TV, is not a product of mainstream media. He would most likely bridle at the term citizen journalist or even blogger. In fact he simply describes himself as a writer. Doctorow has 266,000 Twitter followers – that’s about five times the number of followers of Rory Cellan Jones, the BBC’s technology editor and six times that of Charles Arthur, who edits the *Guardian*’s technology offering. They are all dwarfed by Pete Cashmore, founder of Mashable, whose global following now tops 3 million.

Steve Marinker commented, “You’d expect geeks to favour the very channels they created”, but he went on to cite the area of politics. Two years ago Paul Waugh left the *Evening Standard* where he was Deputy Political Editor to edit PoliticsHome.com. He now has 36,000 Twitter followers and the channel he joined has been credited with a great many Westminster scoops. In fact, it was said that when he left the *Standard* to join an online channel outside the media mainstream his peers largely viewed it as a sideways move. And that was in 2010. Guido Fawkes, another scourge of Westminster, has 86,000 followers, admittedly 40,000 fewer than the BBC’s Nick Robinson. Steve Marinker commented, “Not bad for a blogger who doesn’t have a nightly platform in the nation’s living rooms”. Guido Fawkes’ following is almost identical to that of Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the *Guardian*.

Pretty much everywhere you look this pattern is being repeated. Journalists covering everything from health and education to travel and football are competing with or contributing to online ecosystems dedicated to that realm. Some are more advanced than others but the momentum is unstoppable.

Perhaps as a consequence of this shift, our media consumption habits are changing steadily – away from the linear model we have known for centuries to something more episodic. Fewer and fewer people consume a news product from beginning to end. In the past year, national print newspaper circulation has declined by 700,000; appointments to view news broadcasts are steadily losing ground to rolling news. Whilst in the newspaper world online consumption has compensated to some degree, the nature of the relationship is very different. Readers dip in and dip out of online content, often driven to a specific article or blog from a social platform to which they swiftly return. Tablet editions of newspapers encourage a more linear experience but they are struggling to establish themselves when much of the content they offer is available for free.

What social and online channels do, and what Twitter in particular does, is to give writers, whether they are products of the traditional model of media proprietorship or not, an opportunity to create a palpable and crucially, mobile asset – their following. All of the journalists followed by Steve Marinker tweet from their own handles. Sam Coates, for instance, who has over 14,000 followers was the Deputy Political Editor of the *Times* but recently became its Banking Editor. The *Times*' banking content is now being streamed to 14,000 'politicos'. Steve Marinker commented "Sure, some will unfollow him, but I bet most won't". If Coates were to leave the title and join another news organisation or to go solo or hook up with a blog, that would be quite a blow to the *Times* and quite a coup for the new channel. In the old days only *the* most famous columnists and commentators had this power of mobility – the freedom to up sticks and set forth their views from a different podium and take their following with them.

Today that privilege is open to a much broader cadre of journalists. "It's tempting to talk in absolutes. To suppose that traditional edifices will crumble in their entirety, that in their place will come a hyper-mobile smorgasbord of channels and platforms, all competing like mad for the services of maverick freelance scribes, heroically uncovering the truth, miraculously gathering and sharing scoop after scoop and earning a king's ransom for doing so". Of course this is not a true picture. Traditional print outlets will continue to struggle. Tablet editions will not be their saviours, though they may arrest the decline somewhat in certain cases. But there will be old media ownership for some time to come, and not simply because the BBC Charter will preserve it.

However, the direction is clear – media moguls will become more and more indebted to the journalists who secure them a following.

Steve Marinker made a digression to question the religious imagery of the term 'followers' and to wonder if the founders of Twitter have tapped into an inner messiah lust embedded somewhere in the human psyche.

There is a crucial enabling factor without which neither the old media fortresses nor the new pretenders can survive and that is revenue from advertisers and subscribers.

Steve Marinker believes that the curators of new channels will be better able to develop sustainable models – quite possibly generating the lion's share of their revenue neither from ad space nor from subscriptions, but from data. Those of us of a certain age find it hard to fathom but the Facebook generation is, to a large degree, perfectly prepared to surrender privacy for privilege. They do not care about their private information. But they do care about quality content and they will continue to value and search out the people who bring it to them. Increasingly they turn to named individuals rather than

their employers and it is for this reason Steve Marinker believes that *traditional* journalism is not sustainable in an age of citizen journalists and social media.

Delivery

Opposing the motion, **Kim Fletcher, Chairman of NCTJ and Partner Brunswick Communications**, commented that the most exciting stories of the last few months have in fact come from social media. However he is puzzled by the idea that we can do without traditional journalism. Among the things he learned 'as a matter of fact' from Twitter in the last few months is that Margaret Thatcher had died, Westfield shopping centre was raised to the ground by rioters, the New York Stock Exchange had closed because of flood damage and of course that Lord McAlpine was involved in sex offences. Social media are wonderful, but we have to be cautious about the truth of their reports. This is slightly unfair because on that last report traditional media have also shown they can get things wrong e.g. *BBC Newsnight*. So of course there must also be caution in respect of traditional media but the difference is that the latter work hard to get it right – there is a very real attempt to get at the truth. They run checks, and the fact that a mistake aroused so much fury shows how generally they get it right.

Social media directs people to traditional media. Twitter messages often tell you to look at newspapers or TV programmes. Kim Fletcher pointed out that the proposer had cited big names in social media who are all journalists who have conquered a new medium. He defined traditional media and argued that by traditional we must be talking about means of production rather than means of delivery. The media have always moved on – from newspapers to radio to television and now online. The skilful use of new technologies has enabled them to develop their products. We are talking about traditional journalism in non-traditional deliveries. Many of us use Twitter extensively as a means of knowing what is going on. But what are the primary sources for Twitter? They are traditional media, whether journalists showing off their own stories and columns or reacting to news events. Newspaper websites are traditional media using a different form of distribution. The journalists on these websites are connected to traditional media. Journalists on traditional media are paid for their contributions. Citizen journalists are not paid. But we have always had citizen journalism: reports from women's institutes, local correspondents etc are integrated into mainstream media. There has always been engagement from outsiders. Now they can go direct to an audience. Sometimes they are just passing on rumours.

Kim Fletcher acknowledged that it has been tough for traditional media. In the old days there was a clear model with two revenue streams – advertising and paid-for issues. They have been through agony about how to move forward but they are finding new creative ways. He refuted the idea that print media are not sustainable. The *Daily Mail* had revenues of £848 million with profit of £78 million. The *Daily Mail* sold off a regional group for £80 million. This now has revenues of £213 million with £26 million profit. These are figures from old media which the proposers believe are dead.

Traditional media are thriving in a new environment which they are learning how to use and traditional media will continue to thrive. There is so much that is going on, so much stuff around us that we need someone to tell us what is actually true and what it all means. Where are the checks and extra eyes on the material emanating from social media? Traditional journalism is imperfect but it does try and check things; it acts as a filter.

Kim Fletcher commented that he was waiting for a generation that does not pick up a newspaper. He has not yet seen it or signs of a commercial model to make digital work. "So, if, in time, we do go wholly digital, we would still be looking at traditional media and we'd be stuffed without it". He

concluded by remarking that if traditional media was finished the PR industry, heavily represented on the platform, would be finished!

Shaping the news agenda

Seconding the motion, **Clinton Manning, Director of Retail, Pelham Bell Pottinger**, pointed out that the timing of this debate could hardly be more pertinent as we await the outcome of the Leveson inquiry. Whatever its conclusions, it seems clear that some journalists, rather like some MPs and some bankers, have acted improperly, falling woefully short of the standards of trust and decency society expects. Clinton Manning believes that Leveson seems certain to recommend changes. The most likely appears to be an end to self-regulation or as former *Telegraph* editor Charles Moore put it 'the industry will no longer be allowed to mark its own homework!'. But even before anything imposed post-Leveson, he suggested that traditional journalism is already changing, albeit too slowly and is increasingly shaped by the digital age. However, rather than being anything to fear or be resisted he believes this is a powerful positive with huge benefits for the industry in terms of its craft and its commercial viability. He would go so far as to say that the future viability, particularly of the newspaper industry, hinges on its ability to embrace the digital age.

Clinton Manning went on to look at the way traditional journalism has already been transformed. Social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly helping to shape the news agenda e.g. events in Gaza, the Arab Spring, Fallout from the BBC's *Newsnight* investigations into child abuse, the subsequent libelling of Lord McAlpine, the complex love life of X Factor judge Tulisa. These are all being played out on Twitter with the more mainstream media reproducing comments of the main protagonists such as Sally Bercow or Tulisa. The sports pages too, often contain comments from players and coaches, obtained from Facebook or Twitter. Whilst some live to regret what they post, others see social media as a safe platform to air their views – confident that they will be picked up by the mainstream media and they will not be misquoted. Big companies too, increasingly make content designed to bypass the media and speak directly to customers via their websites or Facebook where they feel they can control the message. For these reasons, digital is increasingly first with the news – undermining one of the key planks of traditional journalism – breaking stories. Today's appointment of the new Governor of the Bank of England is an example. Journalists working for traditional news outlets, such as the BBC's Robert Peston, are often complicit in this – tweeting or blogging about events before they broadcast or print them. This is partly due to the nature and vanity of journalists. Once they know something they want to share it with an audience and they want to show their peers that they were the first in the know. They are keen to build up their following in the hope that it makes them more marketable. More generously, this interaction is also of value to their employers. In an era of cuts – where newsroom resources are stretched – the ability to engage with viewers, listeners and readers is invaluable in helping generate content. So-called citizen journalists can help provide information and evidence. This has always happened but now people can take pictures on their phones. Pictures of the Tsunami in Thailand which were taken by tourists on camera phones and home video recorders were used on *News on Ten* and there are numerous other examples of this type of citizen input.

The real benefit of social media, at their best, is that they create a dialogue between media outlets and their audiences. In the past, papers in particular only knew whether what they put on the front page chimed with their readers once they saw the circulation figures a day or two later. Nowadays they know from how many hits a story gets on the website and monitoring responses on social media – the court of opinion – if something is of interest. This is also useful to PR.

The second and main reason why it is imperative for traditional journalism to change and adapt to the digital age is that most traditional outlets, particularly newspapers, are struggling to hold on to their

audiences. Many have been managing decline for years. This loss of revenue has been worsened by the economic difficulties of recent times, reducing ad revenue. Most are investing in digital content, suggesting they recognise the traditional model is unsustainable. But few have managed to make it pay. Niche publications such as the FT are exceptions. That is because their content has a perceived monetary value. It is also because most of the subscribers are not paying the bill, their employers are. For the others, competing against 'free' alternatives such as the BBC, it is a tremendous struggle to fund both the traditional and the new media. The problem for newspapers in particular, is that many of their readers, especially the older ones, have not switched to the Kindle or iPad age. The next generation will be happy to consume its media this way, giving tremendous benefits to traditional publishers. First it will remove the straightjacket of deadlines that mean they often appear to be reporting yesterday's news. Secondly, it will lead to a seismic change in the industry's cost structure. Once it no longer needs to pay millions of pounds a year for newsprint and trucks to distribute its product, it will have money to invest in journalism.

One could argue that the web has democratised news. It is all out there – you can find information for yourself. But most people are too busy to spend time hunting down news from too many different sources, unless it is a topic of particular interest or a hobby. They want the reassurance of someone to tell them what is important, prioritising events for them. Clinton Manning believes they will continue to turn to media outlets with a tradition of doing this well and one that reflects their views and prejudices. New players may emerge, born in the digital age, but he believes there will continue to be a place for news outlets with a history and heritage. Despite recent events, highlighted by Leveson, they retain the trust of their audiences. The recent Lord McAlpine case should have served as a wake-up call, highlighting that much of what appears on social media is unreliable. In fact, compared with the newsrooms where lawyers are often and rightly an obstacle to publication, it is like the Wild West. So traditional news outlets do have a bright future, but only if they adapt to the new age of citizen journalism and social media and embrace change.

News brands

Seconding the Opposition, **Anthony Longden, Journalist, Editorial Consultant and General Advisor to the Press Complaints Commission**, took issue with the term 'citizen journalists'. Wikipedia, whose roots are citizen-based defines it thus: "the concept of citizen journalism is based upon public citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information....Citizen journalism is a specific form of both citizen media and user-generated content. Critics of the phenomenon, including professional journalists, claim that citizen journalism is unregulated, too subjective, amateurish and haphazard in quality and coverage".

The technological development that has led to this explosion of social media is only one side of the story. "You are quite welcome to plonk me down in front of a flight simulator, but the fact that the technology works does not mean I can fly a plane". The same can be said for journalism. But this should not be confused with self-expression and freedom of speech. 'Desiderata' the poem by Max Ehrmann, carries the line "Speak your truth quietly and clearly and listen to others, even the dull and the ignorant: they too have their story". This is commonsense advice for professional journalists, but it can also be turned on its head: the dull and the ignorant do indeed have their story, and social media have given them free rein to flood cyberspace with bile, tedium, inaccuracy, hatred, onanism and misinformation. Anthony Longden admitted he was the grizzled veteran of many a cyber war with such individuals, waged in the comments threads of newspapers.

The basic skills of professional journalism are unchanging. It is only the means of delivery that has undergone a revolution and it would be a very serious mistake to think mere possession of an iPhone, iPad or whatever comes next, makes you a journalist. Anthony Longden maintained that traditional

journalism is sustainable. It is facing a crisis. Its previous 150-year old business model was a good and long-lasting one, a key reason why it has been so hard to find an alternative. Thanks to the creation of Local World, a new regional publishing company created through the merger of Northcliffe and Iliffe News and Media some interesting figures have become available which show there is still money in this business. Despite the practical difficulties and falling revenues, Northcliffe Media's profits rose from £17 million to £26 million. It was not achieved without a cost of course: the company's headcount has been hacked by 13% – that's 324 jobs gone. Like-for-like revenue was down 6% to £213 million. Newspaper sales revenue stands at £57 million. These are still big figures and they are too big to throw away.

This turmoil will last for many years to come but Anthony Longden argued that the many and varied experiments being carried out across the industry will lead it into a new profitable and ultimately stronger era. There were several reasons to be optimistic. There is a *need* for proper journalism – the sort of journalism that is not driven by vanity, but has a specific job to do, and where the author is of no importance beyond carrying out that job. Citizen journalism is not the other side of the coin – it is not an either/or situation. So-called traditional journalism – work carried out by professional teams of people continues to be important. It has its own set of built-in checks and balances, and is founded on sound experience, practices and measurable skills. Its framework gives strong support to those journalists working within it, equipping them with the tools to do the job – knowledge and legal help. This is the legitimacy of long-established and trusted brands. The best reporters and writers will tell you that, however good they are, they cannot effectively sub their own work. People editing copy are its first genuine readers. It is a bitter irony that at the time when companies are attempting to change working practices, so many have devalued one of the most important jobs in the entire newsroom – that of the sub-editor.

One of the huge strengths of journalism has been its training. Trainees work alongside experienced colleagues who show them the ropes – an almost organic process that builds confidence, ensures standards are maintained and paves the way for a glittering career. Working as part of an experienced team means that trainees are not free to publish their first attempts instantly online, unchecked. Their talents are nurtured and their skills honed.

People working alone have none of these benefits. They are operating unchecked, in both senses of the word. Anthony Longden pointed out that the blogs and tweets one sees from prominent 'citizen journalists' are not the finished product. Most are derivative – feeding off the original content generated by someone, somewhere, thanks to traditional journalism. If traditional journalism was not there you are left with a fragile series of 'islands of one'. Even if someone is working successfully alone, it would take little to silence his or her voice – a power cut, illness, intimidation, withdrawal of privileges, crippling legal action, lack of funds, lack of time, computer failure, even their own corruption or criminality. Proponents of 'divide and rule' would be delighted and society would be all the poorer as a result. The Internet *is* the Wild West. It is full of dangerous junk. One has only to look at the fallout from the recent *Newsnight*/McAlpine debacle to see how things can go horribly wrong. The BBC decided to trust one of a new breed of not-for-profit news providers, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The internationally trusted BBC stepped away from traditional journalism by not using its own in-house teams and apparently failed to make any appropriate checks on the material it was buying in. The result was a Twitterstorm with McAlpine effectively placed in the cyber stocks to be pelted by the baying mob.

People used to enjoy saying 'You can't trust what you read in the papers'. You certainly cannot trust most of what you read on the Internet and this is not going to improve any time soon. Professional journalism plays the vital role of sorting the wheat from the chaff. Journalists exercise the public's

right to attend court hearings, council meetings and the like. Readers trust them to do this and they are beginning to realise this has a cost. Their trust is of course conditional. If papers get things wrong, they pay for it. Many an editor's phone has been melted when a mistake has been made. Anthony Longden cited the fate of *The Sun* in Liverpool post-Hillsborough. It is still hard to buy a copy there even now.

Newspapers are brands. Newspaper companies do much more than printing – organising events, holidays, competitions, championing causes and getting people together. They are also using social media and bloggers, thereby lending legitimacy and authority to these voices. Micro or 'hyper-local' publications show it is still possible to make money, though on a modest scale – rather like the beginnings of those family-run news-sheets and newspapers at the end of the 18th century and into the Victorian era.

Under charity law, journalism is not on the list of recognised charitable activities. 'Education' is however. If, for example, charitable trusts could fund the first two years of a trainee's career, that would make an enormous difference to the companies struggling to balance the books. Readers still trust those old newspaper brands and realise the material they are reading has been properly researched and placed in the correct context for their benefit. "This contrasts with the online company", according to Anthony Longden, "good for nothing other than self-indulgence and an endless dialogue of the deaf".

There is evidence to suggest that the 'everything is free' culture of the Internet's early days is shifting and as it does so, people are becoming more prepared to pay for content that is tailored to their requirements.

Nick Clegg claimed at his party conference that the press was like "desperate animals around a disappearing waterhole, fighting over an increasingly small number of customers". He used a broad brush to condemn an entire industry to the scrapheap, admitting later he only meant the national, not the local and regional press. Newspaper revenues *have* fallen, jobs *have* been lost, but where is the explosion of journalistic alternatives' online? Where is the financial boom in non-derivative digital journalism? And where, really, is the final death of newspapers that everyone has predicted? Anthony Longden concluded, "I am still optimistic for the future of 'traditional journalism', its resilience and its creativity. And I will not write it off merely because of the current difficulties".

Discussion from the floor

Contributors made the following points from the floor:

For the motion

- The contributor referred to the power between the media owner and the writer. New media platforms will change the balance of power. But this will not impact on traditional media. He also referred to the speed with which you can now obtain and disseminate information.
- There are two main areas of clash – delivery and content. Traditional media are dependent on social media and traditional media exploit social media. The potential of a very large amount of data is the way of making social media independent. An ordinary person can have a great impact through social media. There is better research in traditional media but a lack of resources. In the future social media will not need traditional media

Against the motion

- The circulation of good hard copy is being produced by traditional journalists who double-check what they are writing about. Why should people listen if there is no element of trust?
- The contributor preferred the comfort of traditional journalism in the form of a newspaper in front of him.
- Media owners want to encourage citizen journalism because it is economically more viable. Trust is fundamental. The contributor believed that traditional journalism is sustainable but not with the current model.
- Traditional journalism is not just about speed, but about depth. If it were not for traditional journalism we would not have had the Leveson inquiry.
- The contributor pointed out that the debate is concentrating on news but for technical journalism the traditional model is vital for checking facts and making his job work.
- The quality of articles you get in traditional media is far better than you get on the Internet. The stories on the Internet may not be factual.
- Citizen journalists don't have to have training. People need training for traditional journalism.
- Social media is not journalism but freedom of speech and personal points of view.
- The contributor stressed the importance of sources and suggested that traditional media relies on proper sources.
- Journalism is about sharing information, but professional journalism boils down to the fact that the writer is paid.
- Social media are not regulated.
- The contributor opposed the motion, but pointed out that we need to ask what happens in the future when citizen journalism becomes profitable and organised.

Undecided

- The contributor questioned the ownership of blogs. Bloggers in traditional organisations are being poached by other organisations. A recent court case has ruled that bloggers cannot take their 'followers' to another job. However, just because you follow someone this does not mean you have an engagement with them.
- A large amount of information is collected in journalism. Distribution is a means of distilling it. Both social and traditional media increase the amount of information that is collected. How do social media filter the wheat from the chaff? How do social media stop being just headline grabbers?
- How does a young journalist become a professional journalist? Who pays for the research?
- We are trying to find an ecology that balances citizen journalism and traditional journalism. Lord Leveson showed us we can't trust either.
- Traditional journalists often build up their stories from blogs.
- We are in a transitional period. We don't know what will happen in the future. Will journalists be twits? Traditional media is embracing social media. The model is changing – a good financial position of the press is an exception rather than the rule. The model is in flux and the two sides are merging.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition **Kim Fletcher** suggested that the use of the term 'content' instead of stories had done journalism a great disservice.

He discussed how a young journalist becomes professional. The National Council for Training of Journalists (NCTJ) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to training journalists and making sure they adhere to standards. It is only a small minority who are not to be trusted. Young journalists want a career and they want to be paid. They can be bloggers on the side. Traditional journalism is essentially a craft not a profession. Trust is essential and the industry is working hard to get it right. Saying you are from the *Times* or BBC should mean trust.

He has no objection to social media. People can write as much as they like.

Kim Fletcher concluded by remarking that he had yet to see an impoverished media proprietor.

Summing up for the motion **Steve Marinker** pointed out that the motion was not about what *should* be the case, but what *is* the case. By traditional journalism we mean journalists employed by old media. Social media is changing the landscape. As a consequence the writer is more valuable. Why should we stop people taking followers if that makes them more valuable? It is true that a lot of rubbish goes on Twitter, but well-argued material will continue to flourish. It started with new technology but it will not stop at this. It is remarkably self-governing. Truth will out and nonsense will not go unchallenged.

The result

The motion was defeated.

Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 28th January 2013** sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Marketing. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, on 020 8202 5854, e-mail: doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com www.debatinggroup.org.uk