

Thinking Beyond the Box

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Response to Van der Haak, Parks and Castells

In 1998, I was given a so-called “interactive column.” It worked like this: I wrote articles that were posted online. Readers could log-on and leave a comment, to which I could respond.

Sound familiar? Back when this was considered revolutionary, Mark Zuckerberg was just starting high school and my search engine was called AltaVista. In the 14 years since the Web and its tools have changed almost beyond recognition, prompting Van der Haak, Parks and Castells to speak of “an explosion of journalism.” There is an explosion going on, but is the profession, as they say, “more alive than ever”?

Mainstream papers and broadcasters look and feel very much like they did in 1998. There have been numerous revolutionary Web-only innovations, such as the crowdsourcing of MP’s expense accounts in the UK, the “live blog” and others. But if you pick up a copy of a newspaper from 1998 or watch a broadcast from that time, and compare this to that newspaper or broadcaster’s offerings on the Web today, the overall sense is one of continuity. Mainstream journalism is still primarily about news. It collects its information in a one-way process, and offers it in the form of one-version, one-off pieces.

Why has there been so little disruptive change in mainstream news, even as its business model is crumbling before our eyes?

As someone with firsthand experience, both as foreign correspondent and as a newsroom-based blogger for *The Guardian* in London, I’d say the simple answer is: We are too busy. Putting together a newspaper (or evening broadcast) is like fighting a World War—you have to give it everything you have got, knowing you can always do more. Imagine struggling day-in and day-out to put out the best paper or broadcast you can, only to be told by a media consultant or guru: By all means, keep fighting because this still brings in the money; but from now on, we also want you to start on a space program, from scratch.

There are other reasons why mainstream media remain relatively inert and they seem to come down to this: We are still told to think “outside the box,” when the box itself is no longer there.

Journalism as we know it grew up around the logistical constraints that came with printing on paper and broadcasting on the radio or TV. Today’s information and communication technology (ICT) have

brought about the collapse of each of those logistical constraints. Yet the profession clings to familiar genres, tinkering around the edges of something that has lost its underlying logic.

Adaptive change is keeping your 20th century journalistic genres intact and simply move them over to the Web, tacking on a comment thread, "Like" buttons and an algorithm that suggests related stories. But what would change at its most disruptive look like?

In what follows, I want to talk about an experimental blog about the financial sector I am writing for *The Guardian* in London. The blog is an attempt to look at what's possible beyond the box and to fully engage those who media thinker Jay Rosen calls "the people formerly known as the audience." The goal is information that is "new" but not "news." That is collected in a process that is collaborative rather than one-way, with the stories that are continuously evolving rather than one-offs. Together, the stories form a coherent whole that is no longer presented in a one-version-fits-all, but customized and tailored to the needs and preferences of different segments of the audience.

The blog is a work in progress and there is no business model yet. I will end on an optimistic note because that's what you do in a piece like this.

We started in the spring of 2011 with a simple question: Who are those bankers? We seem to know more about the ancient Egyptians and their pyramids than about financial workers and their sector. This, after the crisis of 2008, had shown that finance is too important to leave it to those working in it. Let's find out who they are.

In the 20th century, this meant that we used our network to find sources and collect as much information from them as we could. Still off-line, we would synthesize all that and once finished, launch it as a book or one-off supplement for the Saturday paper. Best-case scenario, we might win a prize for it, a tiny percentage of readers might keep the supplement for reference, or buy the book. That would be it. It would remain a laudable one-off initiative, its findings utterly inaccessible and therefore highly unlikely to improve the debate.

If we could find sources in the first place, of course. Bankers are barred from speaking to the press, so where were we to find our informants? How could we establish whether they were for real, and if they were representative? And how could we learn what our readers wanted to know from bankers?

Objections like these would probably have killed the initiative right there; the logistical constraints were simply too great. But this was 2011 and we hit on a simple idea: Why don't we ask those among our readers who work in finance? *The Guardian* website attracts more than 70 million users a month. There must be bankers among them! And given modern technology, it's easier and safer for them than ever to get in touch.

We wrote a piece asking for help, and soon enough, literally hundreds of volunteers from across the sector wrote in to the especially created e-mail account. This was completely unexpected, and it

helped us understand that we needed to rethink our audience. We realized that every story we do actually has four categories of readers: passive insiders, passive outsiders, active insiders and active outsiders.

Active insiders were our sources, while passive insiders could maybe contribute in the comment thread or recommend the work via social media. Active outsiders could tell us in a comment what they were curious about, while passive outsiders would be voting with their mouse clicks.

Now we went to work. I started interviewing bankers and people in finance, carefully disguising their identities. Some turned out to be entirely unrepresentative, but again, new technology made this far less of a problem than it used to be. In the old days, every published bit of information in a major paper like *The Guardian* or *The New York Times* had to be verified, as it would go into countless archives across the world—impossible to correct. In the paper universe, a mistake or falsehood, once released into the public domain, could have a long shelf life. When in doubt, don't publish.

In the interactive and iterative world of the Web, the dynamics are quite different. When the first interview with a financial recruiter went live, for example, the comment thread filled up almost at once with convincing arguments that this was a fringe player. Before the day was over, a second financial recruiter had volunteered for an interview, creating, in effect, a running conversation over several "chapters." By now, there are four financial recruiters, each responding to the interview before them.

Was I asking these bankers the right questions? Again, technology offered an answer. Interviewees get a log-on for the comment thread so they can engage directly with readers. This has produced truly magnificent interactions, one banker explaining with great patience and detail why he believed he deserved his one million pound bonus. A risk manager helping readers understand the causes of the financial crisis, a financial services employee talking about bonding with your clients through the use of drugs or prostitutes . . . Since most people are now almost permanently on-line, interviewees can dip in and out of the thread, usually over a 72-hour period. This is not two-way journalism but three-way, between audience, source and journalist.

In the old days, newspaper journalists had to do focus on news as this was most likely to attract the attention of your readers within the 24 hours that the paper would be read. With the long tail, you can now write timeless stories that can wait patiently for those readers. Even better, the Web allows you to ask each user who lands on your page whether they are newcomers or regulars, insiders or outsiders, and send them to the place best suited for them. We can even offer several versions of each conversation, from a condensed read to the full transcript.

It's not about getting "the story first" but about getting "one story best." To paraphrase *New York Times'* digital pioneer Nicholas Kristof: If 20th century journalism was about what happened today, the news, 21st century journalism can be also about what happens every day—the world at large. Given how little most people understand of their world, from quantitative easing to climate science, this seems a welcome addition. Indeed, the blog has received dozens of e-mails from consultants, lobbyists, ad-people, EU bureaucrats and others, saying: if you ever want to do a project about my area of expertise, you know where to find me.

If this were a presentation at a conference, I would now turn to the audience for questions and before long, somebody would say: "Great. Now, how would you monetize that?"

The honest answer is: I don't know and I am profoundly grateful that *The Guardian* continues to invest in experiments. I keep thinking though that somewhere in here might lurk a business model. If bankers are prepared to risk their jobs to contribute to the conversation, a 100-pound donation seems like a far smaller sacrifice. There may be thousands of professionals out there longing for realistic reporting about their field. We might harness their enthusiasm the way universities set up endowments for specific chairs. Or we might find some other source, perhaps active outsiders who want to sponsor a foray into a specific field.

How would you monetize that? If there's one brainstorm killer, it must be that question. Innovation is one-third thinking and two-thirds tinkering; learning-by-doing. If you demand from an experiment that it makes a profit from the start, you effectively kill it off. Media thinker Clay Shirky said it better than anyone: "Nothing works, but everything might."

On pessimistic days, I feel mainstream news media are steamships in the early days of aviation. On other days, I am too busy flapping my wings.

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Joris Luyendijk's banking blog is available at
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/joris-luyendijk-banking-blog>