Thinking the thinkable: Clay Shirky on the future of newspapers

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Shirky: Unthinking?

Was Clay Shirky being trite or profound in going back to the past to argue about journalism's future? His recent article, Newspapers and Thinking The Unthinkable has provoked a global ripple of applause from technological optimists around the world, although there have been some voices who claim that Clay is merely thinking the already thought. Others ask what his solution is.

It is certainly a very US-centred view. Their papers were bloated and boring and due for a fall anyway. The debate between 'Old' and 'New' media has always been more theological in the States with entrenched positions taken on points of dubious principle. It was always a proxy for a wider cultural debate that lacked the pragmatism of, for example, the British newspaper groups.

But that does not mean that newspapers are not deeply threatened. Nor does it mean that we don't need to think about what replaces them. However, in such a fast-moving, technologically-driven market, is it possible to plan? Or are we, as Alan Rusbridger has said, taking a leap in the dark?

Clay Shirky does not accuse the newspaper industry of failing to spot the coming Internet. Instead he accuses them of failing to spot just how devastating it would be for their business model:

> The unthinkable scenario unfolded something like this: The ability to share content wouldn't shrink, it would grow. Walled gardens would prove unpopular. Digital advertising would reduce inefficiencies, and therefore profits. Dislike of micropayments would prevent widespread use. People would resist being educated to act against their own desires. Old habits of advertisers and readers would not transfer online. Even ferocious litigation would be inadequate to constrain massive, sustained law-breaking. (Prohibition redux.) Hardware and software vendors would not regard copyright holders as allies, nor would they regard customers as enemies. DRM's requirement that the attacker be allowed to decode the content would be an insuperable flaw. And, per Thompson, suing people who love something so much they want to share it would piss them off.

He says that the response of newspapers has been to ignore reality in favour of a 'fable' that newspapers can be funded through the market:

> When reality is labeled unthinkable, it creates a kind of sickness in an industry. Leadership becomes faith-based, while employees who have the temerity to suggest that what seems to be happening is in fact happening are herded into Innovation Departments, where they can be ignored en masse. This shunting aside of the realists in favor of the fabulists has different effects on different industries at different times. One of the effects on the newspapers is that many of their most passionate defenders are unable, even now, to plan for a world in which the industry they knew is visibly going away.

Now, that is the interesting thought. How do you plan for a world without newspapers – or even without news as we know it? I argue in SuperMedia that journalism as we know it has about 5 years left to make its case to society and

preserve its long term future. Despite the current economic chaos I think that much of the current media infrastructure will still be around in 2020, but it will be greatly diminished and transformed. But it would be a useful intellectual exercise to take the worst case scenario and extrapolate it out to the realms of science fiction. What about a post-News world?

doomed

Shirky heads back to history to answer this question. He cites Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. He argues that the consequences of that (the pocket sized mass media book, erotic novels, political campaigning etc) were unforseeable at the time and that the conservatives are indistinguishable from the radicals:

> *That is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place. The importance of any given experiment isn't apparent at the moment it appears; big changes stall, small changes spread. Even the revolutionaries can't predict what will happen. Agreements on all sides that core institutions must be protected are rendered meaningless by the very people doing the agreeing. (Luther and the Church both insisted, for years, that whatever else happened, no one was talking about a schism.)*

Not everyone agrees with Clay's use of the historical analogy. Adrian Monck gives a typically well-informed and barbed critique that draws different lessons from Gutenberg:

> *Shirky's breathless progressivism ignores the fact that printing standardised texts destroyed many of the innovations and experimentalism of the medieval literary world, e.g. the commonplace book, marginalia, etc.*

Ye Old Daily Mail

And anyway, how does this historical detour help us answer the question of what we should do now to help preserve or promote journalism? Unfortunately, at this point, Clay Shirky's elegant (and I think valid) argument disappears. He is quite clear that the dead wood press and the advertising model of journalism is on its way out. He also recognises that it delivered most of what we call journalism, reporting the world from City Hall to battlefields. But what should or could replace it is beyond us all says Shirky:

> *I don't know. Nobody knows. We're collectively living through 1500, when it's easier to see what's broken than what will replace it. The internet turns 40 this fall. Access by the general public is less than half that age. Web use, as a normal part of life for a majority of the developed world, is less than half that age. We just got here. Even the revolutionaries can't predict what will happen.*

I don't disagree with the general thrust of that. If there was an easy answer then I would be sitting on a private jet next to Rupert Murdoch drinking champagne as I explained it to him. But having just written a book on one way forward you will understand why I refuse to take Clay's rather fatalist approach. I guess that Clay is not a journalist and so doesn't quite feel the urgency that I do. I think there are plenty of ways forward. I argue that most of them involve much greater public participation and a shift of power from media institutions towards creating social networks of news.

Clay gives us a final paragraph that recognises the plural future of journalism. It will be essentially networked and it will be diverse. Back in 1500 people didn't stand around waiting to see what block printing would produce. They innovated, they wheeled and dealed, they fought to free the word from manuscript and the censors. It helped unleash a creative and critical tidal wave of business and culture that ushered in a modern European and global civilisation of the mass media world.

I think we really need to move on from the history and think of what the Web reality will be bring. Channel 4 are teaming up with Polis to create a series of public and online events over the next year that will look at exactly that. Get in touch if you want to take part.

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