Polis – Time travel

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/05/23/time-travel/

Here in the UK we have a long-running popular TV sci-fi series called Doctor Who in which the eponymous hero travels through time and space in a 'Tardis'. From the outside it is the size of an old-fashioned London phone box but inside the dimensions expand to reveal a vast space ship deck. Now how do we create the newsroom equivalent of the Tardis?

tardis-tennant.jpg

As a journalist technology has enabled me to do more in less time. Digitalisation, the mobile phone and the Internet made me about 50-100% more efficient. But what happens when staffing is cut by a similar factor or the amount of work goes up by the same amount or more? This leads to what British journalist Nick Davies calls 'churnalism'. This is the semi-automated processing of secondary sources such as PR-handouts without proper investigation, checking or creativity or research.

So under those circumstances the question (set by Ryan Sholin the master of ceremonies at this month's Carnival of Journalism) is "What are we supposed to tell our newsrooms when they tell us they don't have time to do anything special for the Web?" Or put it another way: "What should news organizations stop doing, today, immediately, to make more time for innovation?"

It's easiest to say what news organisations should do. They should work through their web-based journalism rather than see it as an add-on. That in itself would save time and resources.

But accepting the challenge of the zero-sum hypothesis, what should we lose in our newspapers and TV?

Firstly, we lose newspapers and TV newsrooms. Rather than diluting the exisiting organisations, some institutions will vanish. New ones will appear.

The new ones will not duplicate their rivals content. They will invest in difference. You can see this happening already in the UK newspaper markets as each title emphasises its particular character. The Daily Mail attends even more to the concerns of its Middle England readership. The Guardian becomes ever more obsessed by the ethical dilemmas of living a liberal lifestyle. All of them are happily online and their journalists appear to be spending much more time on the stuff that defines their papers – comment, features, politics – than the stuff we used to call news coverage. Leave that to BBC Online and Sky News.

As for broadcasters. Stop doing that thing where you try to create a sumptiously produced theatrical experience called studio-based news. Give me something more like Rocketboom. Give me content not packaging.

When I edited TV shows I spent 50% of my time worrying about technical, presentation issues instead of content. I suspect that is behind the relative failure of ITV's 'theatre of news' 10 O'Clock show. Despite ITN's great track record on story-telling, it is simply too formulaic, too game-showy, all fur and no knickers.

But what about the people making these decisions? Suw Charman makes an interesting suggestion at the end of this article that current journalism management is fatally flawed.

I guess that in the end I don't like the premise of the question. I prefer the positive. Other media bloggers such as Pat Thornton or Gary Andrews are better at explaining what we should do than I am. Instead I'll return to my prime-time fantasy TV metaphor. New media technology is like a Tardis. It turns a small space with limited time (the newsroom) into a large space (the online network) that can travel through time.

I you want some practical suggestions about how newsroom practice should change, I like Andy Dickenson's idea of 'ownership' and the idea of 'playtime' for journalists. Will Sullivan also has some very real ideas about how changing

systems such as email can save resources.

[This article is part of the monthly online Carnival of Journalism – go here to see other articles by international media bloggers.]

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