Culture Shock: New media and organizational change in the BBC

A culture that grew organically for the best part of a century is now undergoing a would-be revolutionary transformation in response to changes in news consumption - facilitated by new technologies - and to accommodate the economic and political pressures bearing down on the BBC. Tracking this new dawn through the experience and opinion of many of those involved reveals divergent opinions on how radical, valuable and sustainable it all is, and exposes faultlines within an organisation keen to lay its old image of 'Auntie' to rest, while seeking a new relevance and appeal for the 21st century. New media has been a convenient Trojan Horse for importing a root and branch reorganisation many thought long overdue at BBC News. This short account can only offer a few stanzas from that odyssey. It looks at how new technology meets changing patterns of consumption; how new platforms of delivery have pitted technology against creativity; and how the BBC has managed the change.

New Technology, Old Attitudes

'When they set up the BBC News website, just a few guys did a terrific job, but they wouldn't even allow links to any other BBC programmes', recalled a senior BBC executive from that time. All organisations tend to suffer from this sclerosis, where departmental imperia are fiercely defended as synonymous with job security and status, and change can only occur within established structures. There was a growing awareness in BBC management that cautious step change was an inadequate response to exponential growth in multi-platform competition and recurrent attacks on the BBC's independence and licence fee. They needed a more radical approach to meet these multiple challenges. That would involve many minds and initiatives, but one key feature was the birth of Future Media and Technology (FM&T), an über-divisional body that was to claw back investment decisions from those traditionally warring departments and drive a more forward-looking approach to the future, predicated on a new media strategy. News, traditionally exempt from the organisational changes and strictures routinely visited on more ratings-driven departments, was not to escape the FM&T oversight. They too were to feel the white heat of new technologists breathing down their necks and demanding they up their game. In many respects, they responded positively.

Television is by definition a high tech game, but the senior journalists in News were used to being accompanied by producers and crews that looked after all the technology and left them to concentrate on the reporting. Today, correspondents may well travel alone and unencumbered, enabling them to arrive unnoticed in a country closed to reporters. Both the BBC and ITN reported from Zimbabwe during the 2008 elections, when banned from doing so. As Robin Elias, Managing Editor of ITN says:

> We actually presented an evening news programme from the centre of Harare during the crackdown, during the election, when we weren't allowed in there let alone to broadcast out of it, and we broadcast live from a back garden over a BGAN[i] mobile phone, a satellite phone, and it sort of dawned on everybody, or confirmed for everybody, that there's virtually nowhere in the world that isn't accessible now.

Not only does this technology make stories easier to reach and report, but it can have a significant effect on cutting costs (although the BGAN video link costs as much as a conventional satellite link). While ITN claims to be spending roughly the same amount of money on foreign newsgathering as before, but spreading it further, BBC News has suffered severe budget cuts. Clearly the satellite phone does not deliver the world class engineering standards for which British television was world-renowned, but a more visually sophisticated audience, used to home videos and low resolution internet pictures, is willing to wear that if the content justifies it. As the Head of Newsgathering Operations at BBC News, Martin Turner, says:

> There is no point every broadcaster doing the same because the audience now has access to the original sources of information. The successful news organisation will be the one that supplies distinctive information and context.

Changing Patterns of Consumption

The process of news journalism has been profoundly affected by new media, not just in the technology available to its gatherers and to its editors and distributors, but to its

consumers and their modes of consumption. The exploding multi-channel environment, the technology to manipulate it, and the internet with its endless options and direct sources all put the consumer in the driving seat previously occupied by the news editor. These are the bigger drivers of change, because they challenge the very bedrock of BBC belief in its natural supremacy, and call into question its unique funding formula and the public service role it was devised to provide. The licence fee – a government-set, legally enforced levy on every television set in the land – was conceived when the BBC was without competition. Commercial terrestrial channels on both television and radio forced the BBC to become more competitive in most forms of programming, but News remained a fixed point largely above the fray. Before the arrival of BSkyB and the exploding number of digital channels, most viewers would encounter at least one full news bulletin during the course of an evening's viewing. The zapper, time shift technology and digital channels made news very avoidable, and the total audiences quickly began to slide. The BBC perceive this as not only a matter of audience fragmentation, but long-term cultural drift away from news. Responding to that threat has become a fulltime concern for executives such as BBC News' Head of Development Simon Andrewes.

> We've got a long-term decline in our television news audiences. It's been going down slowly for a while and it's still going and that's partly to do with multi-channel television but that's not the whole story. We have a particular decline among the more down-market audiences and particularly our younger audiences, and it's the younger audience in particular which you sense are leaving television altogether. They're just not that interested in TV, so it doesn't really matter whether you're putting out News on a continuous channel or putting it out in BBC-1 bulletins.

News consumption has been an issue of some interest to the television industry regulator Ofcom, who have commissioned two reports on the subject within five years, tracking the changing perception and demands of the audience:

> There are indications of greater levels of disconnect to the content of news. Some 55 per cent of people agreed that much of the news on TV was not relevant to them, up from 34 per cent in 2002. Indicatively, more

> people in 2006 than 2002 agreed that they only followed the news when something important or interesting was happening (26 per cent compared to 32 per cent). (Ofcom 2007:8)

This drift presents a huge challenge to the very nature of broadcast news, namely news that is aimed at the whole population, reflective of communally held values and objectives. As historians of the BBC from Asa Briggs (1985) to David Hendy (2007) record, the Corporation has traditionally held the nation together - as through World War II and the Cold War - but the verities that construct a central news agenda agreeable to all are under attack from social atomisation and the technical alternatives. A 'pick and mix' culture has grown out of the plethora of sources, promoting a personalisation of demand, the software for which is provided by many websites. RSS feeds and aggregation engines build a user profile and supply content that matches the individual's tastes and interests, just as Amazon recommends products 'customers who bought this item also bought'. Fuelled by a hostile right wing press, a growing number of people not only see no need to buy into the shared platform of broadcast news, but actively oppose it for not suiting their particular interests. Thus the Ofcom report identified the young and immigrant groups as particular news refusers (Ofcom 2007: 61 & 66)[ii]. To add to News' woes, a recent BBC Trust review reported and endorsed widespread discontent within the national regions at perceived metropolitan bias in BBC News.

> Audiences see the BBC as too preoccupied with the interests and experiences of London, and that those who live elsewhere in the UK do not see their lives adequately reflected on the BBC. It is not acceptable that a BBC funded by licence fee payers across the whole country should not address the interests of them all in fair measure. (BBC Trust 2008)

BBC management have accepted the need to accede to these powerful voices from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but point out that they have neither the resources nor the share of the digital spectrum to deliver parallel news programmes in all these regions. They also note that audience reach for their main bulletins is actually higher in Wales and Scotland than in England[iii], so disapproval is not universal. But with the licence fee under constant review and frequent attack, they cannot afford to be complacent. Constantly buffeted by every special interest group,

and accused of social, racial and political bias from all sides, BBC News has usually managed to remain aloof and retain an authority based upon the quality and certainty of its journalism. But the paradigm of telling people what they need to know to function in a democratic society appears to be giving way to a model that offers people what they want - when, where and how they want it. New media have not only facilitated this change, but expedited it. BBC Head of News Peter Horrocks sees the shift away from mass broadcasting to individualised news on demand as inevitable:

> People who've got an interest in [the news] through the web, through new devices, through mobiles and whatever, are going to have a plethora of information which they can assess for themselves, a range of opinions, etc. But because of that kind of fragmentation of information, for people who are less interested in it, they're less likely to come across it and they may just get quite an incomplete view of the world through the information sources that they will see.

The BBC cannot afford to move too far towards being merely a supply line for that incomplete view, not least because of the implications for democracy. A generation that elect to ignore all discourses of no immediate relevance to them worries politicians who fear their power base may whither with the audience. For some years the Government has pressurised the BBC to find new ways of re-engaging the young with the political process, warning them that their licence fee is dependent upon serving all sectors of the community, but news is necessarily immune to fad and fashion. Inept programmes doing current affairs 'for the young', broadcast when their target audience were still in bed, proved a risible approach.[iv] New technology has been hailed as the Holy Grail that will help BBC News reconnect, though, as one telecomms exec says, 'Technology is anything invented after you're born; for young people it's natural'.[v] Fetishizing it may only draw attention to just how uncool and desperate the newly wired news executive is.

New Platforms of Delivery

With BBC TV News reach down 4% from 2001-2008[vi], BBC News is holding up better than ITN but is pledged to help the BBC stem their audience shrinkage as best they can, both by adopting the new devices and platforms attractive to the young and by adapting their current practices to better serve their audience's demands. The Future Media and Technology division have a range of strategies for, as they say: 'keeping the BBC relevant in the digital world'. High hopes are invested in mobile telephony as the means for reclaiming the younger audience, because they use their mobiles as their main communication and information tool. FM&T see it as the '4th screen', after cinema, television and internet. It is, as they say, 'personal, local and immediate', with the widest possible reach for keeping people connected, not least to the BBC, and to 'essential information', such as sports updates when entrapped in family weddings.[vii] That service providers charge astronomic rates for this service the BBC confidently asserts is merely a transitional hiccup, and the benefits of secondary use will enable them to drive those rates down.

BBC Radio - whose News reach has remained stable at 50% - is also exploring ways of aggregating content around the music and messages people want. Already radio is being consumed through digital TV sets (20%), internet (15%) and mobile phones (10%)[viii], and the inevitable move towards a single communications portal also offers the possibility of slipping personalised news services to people using ever more sophisticated metadata. You may not be interested in financial news but, for instance, if you listen to hip hop, the technology may well infer an interest in street culture. With the same sense of cultural positioning, the BBC runs content channels on the leading video sharing site YouTube and has struck distribution deals with two of the biggest social networking sites, FaceBook and Bebo. By this means, not only are the more accessible stories made available to a wider, younger audience, but - it is hoped - the BBC News brand is made more desirable.

The internet remains the key platform in BBC FM&T thinking, and the BBC News website is infinitely more important to BBC News than the equivalent at ITN and Channel 4 News. Unlike the BBC, these do not run a 24-hour rolling news channel, so

they do not enjoy the same close synchronicity of a 24-7 multimedia newsroom that the BBC has now become. The BBC News web team look upon the Sky News and *The Guardian* (a national daily newspaper) websites as their key competitors. 12% of BBC News uptake is through the website and it is growing. They talk of their 'unique proposition' as '3 x 3: three levels of editorial focus – international, national and local – delivered in text, audio and video, offering convenience, control and participation'.[ix] They talk of the progressively empowering process of 'Find-Play-Share', where the audience relationship with the news is transformed from passive to active, enabling them to contribute, challenge and correct the journalism. Some of the journalists are less excited by this new dawn, seeing a great deal of power vested in the hands of technical staff and feeling that their own worth has been down-graded. Hearing the Creative Director of BBC Vision Multiplatform Productions speak, one has sympathy for those that resist the revolution. Richard Williams said:

> We're trying to reverse engineer dyed-in-the-wool television producers and it's not really happening….It's only the next generation that's really going to deliver.

Quite what they are going to deliver, and how they are going to deliver it, remain unclear. Some quite senior BBC News executives privately express disquiet at the zealotry that puts so much resource and belief in the mechanics of delivery platforms, at cost to the core values of content creation.

> I think one of the big leaps for the BBC, which we haven't made yet, is to understand that we are content creators, we are not distributors. But of course the whole fibre of our being is about distributing it and we are spending an awful lot of money on doing that. I think that when history comes to be written, that will be seen as a mistake because, in fact, the people who will be really good at distributing content will be the people like Google, who can build server cities. We can't do that; we haven't the money to do that; we haven't the expertise to do it.

Standing in front of a flow chart that puts FM&T at the heart of the BBC organisation, with Journalism and Vision (Production) banished to the margins, John Denton,

Managing Editor BBCi (TV Platforms) is unrepentant at the sea change he helps preside over.

> We used to make programmes which were transmitted, then archived. Now we make content, captured digitally, sent direct to your desktop, where you can consume it, share it, do what you want with it.

Technology versus Creativity

There has always been a tension between the production and broadcast sides of the BBC, a binary that former BBC Director-General John Birt gave formal organisational division to, but which has since been overridden. This division finds cultural expression in the tension between 'creatives' and 'tecchies'. It has been observed that, during times of confidence and expansion, the BBC invest in programmes and people; at other times it favours the hardware that cannot argue back. The current emphasis on new media is the apotheosis of the tecchie ascendancy, with the FM&T newspeak its dominant argot. George Orwell (aka Eric Blair) got his inspiration for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* while working at the BBC. 'Newspeak was the official language ... The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits ... but to make all other modes of thought impossible.'(Orwell 1949) Orwell will have encountered the sophisticated orthodoxy that determines journalistic standards within the BBC, an unspoken regimen that ensures the same stories are given roughly the same prominence and treatment across its many news platforms and exposes no editor to the charges of a personal agenda, unlike that lauded in newspapers. Ethnographic studies of the BBC, Burns (1977) and Born (2005), have noted this corporate consensus that also tends to stifle debate. But the FM&T newspeak has a different emphasis that challenges the old hierarchy of values, and unleashes a new set of tastes and standards, while demanding a corporate loyalty. 'Get web savvy, or we die…' raved former FM&T Director Ashley Highfield, dutifully headlined in the house newspaper *Ariel*.[x]

The BBC website was constructed early in the broadband cycle, and it has struggled to keep up with the exponential growth in demand for bandwidth, with more video and interactivity. The FM&T team are working to 'reconstruct the architecture of

bbc.co.uk to increase findability and maximise routes to content' and 'harness the power of the audience to enhance journalism and help distribute the content more widely'.[xi] But News has yet to find new ways of instant transmission, which distinguish it from the secondary uses being explored by other programme genres. While the BBC i-Player has been a runaway success, allowing people to catch up with programmes they missed in the last seven days, News does not have the same shelf life and does not get the same hit rate as drama and entertainment. Websites have the vital capacity to track usage instantly, and the BBC website announces its 'Most Popular Stories Now' in three separate lists: 'E-mailed, Read and Watched/Listened'. More pertinently, the multimedia Sky Newsroom is festooned with screens advising editorial staff of the most popular story on the website, and the one with the month's highest cumulative total of hits. Steve Bennedick, Sky News Head of Interactive, says it is not there to drive editorial decision-making, but to inform it.

> I think there's a lot to be said for a journalist being aware of what the clicks are going on, but following his own or her own instincts and judgement…. It's a non-linear environment online but a broadcast is at the moment via the traditional linear running order, and the two are different.

A BBC online editor says that page hits 'influence' story priority, but admits that page leads may yield sufficient information, thereby evading clicks and skewing that assessment. Another problem is the marked disjuncture between these polls of audience predilection and the News editors' perception of news priority. On a day when the BBC News web page lead was 'Africa turns up heat on Zimbabwe', the most popular story was 'Foot mystery baffles Mounties' - the macabre mystery of five severed human feet washing up on the shores of British Columbia. The most watched clip was of a rejected baby tiger cub adopted by a dog in a Russian zoo.[xii] As people vote with their feet to avoid the depressing, distant Zimbabwe elections, there is no sign that editors are yet moved to follow suit. But even before facing the audience and staff losses of the last two years, then Head of TV News Peter Horrocks raised the issue of stories more popular with the punters than with the editors. Speaking to the Reuters Institute of Journalism in Oxford in November 2006, he called for 'an unembarrassed embrace of subject areas that have too often been looked

down on as too pavement-level or parish-pump' and told through local accents and personalities. 'The days of the BBC talking down to them and trying to tell this audience what to think are over because they can simply switch off or ignore us if we don't speak to them in their voice'.[xiii]

This confronts the dichotomy at the heart of the BBC's current choices, maybe better defined as incipient schizophrenia. They have long balanced the cultural heights of arts and drama with the popular attractions of sports and entertainment. Now, shifting notions of reality and democracy challenge News' authority. Revered internationally as a beacon of truth and light, BBC News appears to believe it can only now survive if it does the people's bidding and adopts their modes of speech. But does that mean it must indulge the risqué humour of its highest paid chat show host, Jonathan Ross – who has gone on record to justify his exorbitant pay as 'worth a thousand journalists' – or the scatology of super chef Gordon Ramsay and his trademark 'F Word'? Should it lead on severed feet and cute tiger cubs to keep people watching? Is it set on the same inevitable downward trail from high culture to low commerce first dramatised in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, and more recently enacted in Rupert Murdoch's Wapping? BBC News does now have an 'entertainment cluster'; and the biggest claim made for new media is that it democratises the process and allows other views to bloom than those of the man in the suit reading the news. Of course, he is only reading an autocue, and the extent to which viewers' e-mails or mobile phone footage influences what appears on screen remains firmly in the hands of the news editor.

The BBC makes much of the invitation to people to have their say and send in their shots, but there is little evidence of a transformed agenda. Former BBC producer Kevin Sutcliffe, now Deputy Head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4, feels that the whole BBC News invitation to the audience is 'disingenuous, invented to look as if the licence payer has a say – they don't'. BBC News Channel anchor and former foreign correspondent Ben Brown takes a more pragmatic view of increased interactivity with the audience. 'What we broadcast is always subjective anyway and is informed by what we think the audience is interested in and I guess it just gives us a better idea of what they actually are interested in if we can hear from them not day by day, but minute by minute.' But he admits that UGC (User Generated Content) such

as the pictures from people's mobile phones are only useful when they are a unique source from a particular event.

The pressure to involve the public has grown apace and has taken many different forms. In November 2006, the BBC News Channel launched the weekly half-hour *Your News*, 'the first news programme to be entirely based on emails and views sent in by you'. The re-launched nightly news on Britain's terrestrial channel Five also carries a final *Your News* item supplied with viewer stories about such local issues as cyclists and school campaigns. Neither initiative has yet broken a story to make the main news, and this remains the faultline. The public has always been a potential source for stories, as have their pictures - like Abraham Zapruder's iconic 8mm film footage of the 1963 Kennedy assassination or mobile phone shots of the July 2005 London bombings – but these events are very rare. As the founder Director of the Institute of Ideas, Claire Fox suggested (at a combative BBC conference debating the relative merits of new media), academic researchers are obsessed with new media, while journalists are having 'a collective nervous breakdown'.

> The BBC says the public are seen as important in creating news. But what do we think about reliability and trustworthiness? What happens if the news those users e-mail in is banal, local, parochial, not actually revealing at all? If objective truth-seeking - as aspirational classical journalism is - gives way, what does that mean for challenging the agenda of power?[xiv]

What point extending democracy in this way if the price is the atomisation of voices and the destruction of investigative skills? Even the more determined fans of new media and its potential recognise the dangers of News primarily being delivered by associative choice rather than directed content. Tom Loosemore is one of the leading internet thinkers and was Project Director, BBC 2.0, including seeing in the i-Player, before going to Ofcom in late 2007 to head up strategy on converging digital media and a planned Public Service Publisher. He rejects charges that the internet is a more isolated experience than television viewing, and feels it is the best thing that has happened to democracy. 'It's the most conversational medium that the world has yet

invented, the internet. You can have conversations over time and space in a way you simply can't with television - and global conversations.'

Another guru, a former Silicon Valley dot.com entrepreneur, is an apostate who 'saw the light' over Web 2.0. Andrew Keen talks of the 'digital narcissism' that has delivered 'superficial observations rather than deep analysis, shrill opinions rather than considered judgement'(Keen 2007:10) and he says that 'the challenge for professional newspeople is to learn to emancipate yourselves from the mass humility and "noble amateurism"' that he sees throttling good journalism.

> The social network bubble is bursting. Web 3.0 will be where the smart people seize back control and get rid of this 'social' media, which fetishizes the innocent, the amateur, the child in us all. I am not against the internet, but I am for curating it by experts.[xv]

As both Keen and Loosemore agree, everyone needs some guidance, some authoritative aid in reading their world. That is BBC News' mission, but the argument continues to rage around whether this is, as Loosemore would contend, the painful self reinvention of a democratised and diversified discourse that has thankfully replaced the old didacticism, or as Keen asserts, the time for those in the know to reassert control. The politics of envy have long cast the BBC as the preserve of the establishment whereas the truth is more complex, with a staff harbouring a richer social and political mix than may appear from the News' studied neutrality. But, unlike print media, both the regulated impartiality and the editorial complexity of broadcast news makes it more difficult for individuals to emerge who can define their respective worlds. Nonetheless, hammered by attacks on their integrity - from the government-ordered Hutton inquiry, following the BBC's exposure of the 'dodgy dossier' on which the UK went to war in Iraq, to a number of instances where programmes misled the public, which led to a crisis in public trust in 2007 – editors have looked for new ways to weld a relationship with their audience. New media have provided a kit of parts from which they can construct a new narrative.

New Ways of Work

On Sunday 15th June, 2008, the BBC News web team finally moved in alongside their television colleagues to complete the transformation of the BBC Multimedia newsroom. While considered for some time, the move was finally precipitated by economic necessity, with swingeing cuts visited on News as part of a corporation-wide cull to accommodate a reduced licence fee. Some 300 of the 3,400 journalist posts were being lost and the profligate duplication of resources in news cover was addressed by this refashioning of the culture as one machine, rather than a set of disparate factions. Newsgathering and the three output platforms – TV, Radio and Web – sit and work together now, served by a Mediawire service that aggregates all external video and sound sources (though this is not currently a 24-hour service). The BBC's main competitors have also gone through the multimedia process. Sky News had moved its online journalists alongside the television news teams the year before, and ITN and Channel 4 News have taken the same path. But none of these share the combined weight of a 24-hour news channel, a regional supply line and a radio network that the BBC has. As the Deputy Editor of Channel 4 News, Martin Fewell, says:

> One of the BBC's big advantages when they moved online, apart from having oodles of cash, was the fact that it was already generating massive amounts of text. It had two radio newsrooms, a world service radio newsroom and a domestic radio newsroom. It already had a Ceefax operation as well and had forty local radio stations, all producing 24/7 or 18/7 radio bulletins….. And it's a very sort of clever, ingenious way to make use of the copy they're already generating by re-versioning it slightly.

The digital hub at the heart of the multimedia newsroom allows all journalists and editors to access material from the moment of its logging in to use across all the BBC platforms. This works for the mass of facts and eye witness accounts that make up some 80 per cent of news, but in some journalist's minds tends to reduce them to butchers supplying a sausage machine. Our limited ethnographic study among the BBC News web team found many frustrated journalists acting as no more than sub-editors reformatting copy. Elsewhere, news reporters are expected to cover a growing number of outlets, across multiple platforms and bulletins, which inevitably reduces

the amount of time for the original newsgathering. Meanwhile, senior correspondent appearances and live feeds overnight have also been cut to save money. At Channel 4 News, dot.com entrepreneur Ben Cohen was the first correspondent to be hired specifically to service the three daily television bulletins, their online site and their planned digital radio channels, relying largely on his expertise to comment on technology stories and leaving, as he points out, precious little time for original journalism. Peter Horrocks admits to the dangers of his journalists being spread too thin, but says that the balance has to be struck between coherence and diversity.

> There are some processes in terms of bringing the content from the field, from where the journalism is being originated to the platforms, which can be quite synthesised. You can have planning, and intake operations, which are shared but then the teams that choose the content for the different platforms, at the moment at least, are largely single platform. And especially in news areas which are very rapid response it makes sense to do that because if people have got to do more than one platform at a time that can slow things down. So yes, we're going in a multimedia direction but it's not, it doesn't mean, that everyone is working in a multimedia way all the time.

Few of what ITN's Managing Editor Robin Elias calls 'the big beasts' are also expected to shoot and edit their own material as well, but 'some very old established experienced reporters, producers, actually have taken to it very well. Because a lot of the systems are so intuitive, if you like, it's enabled even the old hands to get a grip of it very quickly.' He would not expect them to edit big rolling stories, but admitted that more were editing their own - and 30 of his editors were being laid off that very day. Broadcast Journalist Vanessa Edwards is one of many who took voluntary redundancy from BBC News, because at 42 she felt new working patterns favour the young. She instances the replacement of graphic designers by software that she was expected to operate herself as one example of the technologisation of her role, producing bulletins on the News Channel night shift.

> I loved my job, which I had been doing for 10 years, but they made me an offer I could not refuse. It was a time to move on: it is increasingly a young person's world. I would not say it is worse, but it is different.

Both Horrocks and Elias admit that the fast-moving technological demands do favour the young, for whom the skills are second nature, but even some of them complain at the workload and allege that it leads to many more mistakes being broadcast. The most far-reaching changes in work practices have occurred in regional newsrooms, where productivity has been kept up by a dwindling number of staff. Emma Hemmingway (2008) spent 12 years as a BBC reporter, producer and news editor at BBC Nottingham. Her study uses Actor Network Theory to chart a reading of the advance of new technologies as a complicating factor in an already complex process. She takes various examples of the ways in which machinery such as the digital hub can become a narrow portal whose control is fought over by competing agencies, elevating the technically competent over the journalist.

> Those operators who consider themselves to be more technically adept, deliberately stress how their communication is between machines rather than human actors. The media hub operators share a similar discourse; human actors are displaced by the ability for the machines to communicate, thus enjoying a particularly strong form of agency. The media hub operator expresses relief that the network facilitates this discourse between technologies; the reporter is deliberately bypassed, perceived as a subsidiary actor whose presence is more often than not considered to be a hindrance. (Hemmingway 2008: 153)

The media management and production system used by BBC News is appropriately called Jupiter. Simon Jenkins - in a tirade against the spuriously scientific claims of economics – accused economists of 'a "Jupiter complex", a misguided conviction that scientific certainty, applied with enough rigour to any problem, triumphs over all'.[xvi] It is a complex that is recognisable in the BBC newsroom. This 'technological determinism' has long been identified and denigrated by Winston (Winston 1998). 'The digital is significant, but it is merely an encoding system', he says.

But digital technology has progressively conditioned content in ways that challenge the core values of news. The Electronic News Production System (ENPS) developed by Associated Press is at the heart of the digital system, what former Head of BBC News Richard Sambrook called 'the spine of the BBC's daily news operation' and

Hemmingway calls ‘the black box hub’, one she reports journalists reluctant to use as they cannot even edit their own material before it has been logged onto its open access servers. Digitising that material has to be undertaken by a technician in real time. This not only loses the journalist time but loses them control over their material, which can now be accessed by anyone on the system. Journalists prefer to preserve their own exclusives. One explanation Director-General Mark Thompson advances for the lack of national regional stories on the network news is that - if and when they occur - those regional newsrooms naturally hold them back for their own 6.30 regional bulletins, rather than see them poached for the national 6 o’clock bulletin.[xvii]

Another key regional development in BBC News has been the training and deployment of videojournalists, who do report, shoot and edit on their own. Since September 2001, Paul Myles has been responsible for putting 650 through the 3-week videojournalist training course. A former cameraman and picture editor, he feels that VJs have added new pictorial quality to regional news, where journalists too frequently ‘wrote the story first’ and did not let the pictures tell the story. ‘You don’t need to be a journalist to be a good videojournalist’ he says, although around 90 per cent of those he has trained are.

> Video journalism is very much the key to the BBC’s plans for a new web-based service that it’s constructing at this very moment. We can’t make it happen if we’re dependent on traditional ways of working. The only way we can make it happen is if we use VJs, because of cost essentially.

Some regional news editors have been less than enamoured by the quality of VJ work, and currently only use an average of two in a half-hour programme normally running eight items. They have been ‘encouraged’ to double this uptake to at least four in every ten reports, a fact retailed by Davies (2008), where he equates this imperative with the pressure on journalists across the print and broadcast spectrum to produce more at lower costs, with predictable effects on quality. Davies also quotes at length from memos and guides circulating in BBC News Interactive to beat the opposition by getting the story up first.

> Some of the results are worrying. Journalists on News Interactive say the pressure for speed is sometimes so great that they are required to write half of their story before it happens, a job which is made even more difficult by the fact that, in the same five minute, they are expected to harmonise the story they write with the rest of the BBC's coverage. (Davies 2008:7)

This pressure sits uneasily with the public rhetoric, to include the 'user' more, the management of whom can take time. User Generated Content is a much sought source, particularly at times like the terrorist attacks in London and at Glasgow airport, where the public images were the first to be broadcast until news crews made it through the security cordons. But, as we have seen, television has always grabbed the best pictures it can from any source. It may have recently discovered that its audience is composed of sentient beings with views of their own - and evolved means of tracking those view - but the running orders remain surprisingly unaffected, to the relief of many. The BBC sponsored Media Futures Conference 2008 appeared to mark a decisive sea change in the industry's attitudes towards new media, with the tide of zealotry falling back from its high water mark and people engaged passionately in recalibrating the objective values of News, particularly at a time of Ofcom consultation on the future of public service broadcasting.[xviii] Journalist and academic Andrew Calcutt captured the zeitgeist in regretting what he characterised as a generational sinking from objectivity into subjectivity.

> I think journalists will end up slitting their own throats. They have been bleeding since the advent of so-called 'New Journalism', retreating from objectivity and what I take to be our professional sense of responsibility. Never mind all this *inclusive* stuff. Our job is to get '*exclusives*', which of course involves talking to people and sources, but not this fetishisation of the subjective. The slogan should be: 'Come on in, the participation is lovely!' They would, of course, not be allowed in if there was any prospect of real power.

The television parallel is found in the identification people feel for their local regions through local news, where resources have been run down at both the BBC and ITV. ITV, originally a federation of regional companies, is downsizing from seventeen news regions to nine, albeit that eighteen new 'sub-regions', including Tyne-Tees, will get their own

six minutes of local news belted within the regional programmes at 6.00 p.m.[xix] On 24 June 2008, the BBC Trust began its Public Value Test on the BBC's new proposals for a local TV news service delivered exclusively on broadband, superseding previous plans for a broadcast service.[xx] It meets the evolving platform of community specific web work while recognising the BBC's reduced means, but it remains to be seen if it meets with the approval of the public. With the digital switchover due in 2012, the BBC is not only fighting to retain audience share with a reduced income, but is also facing an encirclement of commercial interests keen to make inroads on its unique funding and its multiple fields of excellence, where those companies see their potential profits constrained by the BBC's free services. News is not under direct fire, but the BBC 's economies of scale and the international pre-eminence that help sustain it are, so an overweening obsession with new media could be seen as threatening to divert attention from the democratic values at stake.

Former Channel 4 News Editor Charlie Beckett, now Director of Polis, the journalism and society thinktank, feels a false dichotomy has grown up about whether new media works for or against democracy. 'I don't think the e-mail us your view is that important…but I can't believe there are still people who argue citizens shouldn't be part of the [journalistic] process.' Patrick Barwise, who chaired the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's critical review of the BBC's new digital channels in 2004 and the BBC Governors' review of public attitudes to the licence fee, feels the BBC has protected its core business well, delivering great content and great value for money. 'All new technologies have been overhyped in terms of revenue and audience behaviour', he says, whereas all they do is enhance convenience. 'There is overwhelming evidence that in 2020 television will still be being watched the way it is now, mostly live as scheduled – none of it UGC.'

This is a variation on the sanguine view that books were not killed off by modern media, any more than recording has replaced live music. But Clay Shirky argues that television - like the publishing and recording industries - is still stuck in a 16th century model of production, where its prohibitive economics allow centres of control (Shirky 2008). The digital makes the means of production cheap and universal, shifting the filter to the consumer. The ubiquity of reception becomes the means of production. We may not have attained the future foretold in Brent MacGregor's study of the impact of new

technologies on news in the 1990s (MacGregor 1997), but many elements of his dystopian vision are here. The lone editor selecting feeds from a cornucopia of surveillance cameras for a wired society - augmented by live videojournalist feeds from the stories serving the highest subscriber predilections – has not yet replaced the news machine, but these possibilities have shaken the corporation to the core, leaving journalists feeling in thrall to the machine.

Conclusion

As James Curran says in Chapter 1, technological bandwagons come and go, few living up to their promise, and the danger in BBC News would be to jettison core journalistic content creation in favour of transient delivery platforms. While reporters risk their lives to retail the truth from China and Burma to Zimbabwe and Iraq, the values of a free, independent news media, robustly committed to informing us all on the affairs of the world, are constantly being reiterated. The technological tower of Babel that is the internet can add context and clarification to that critical role, but there is little evidence that it can transform it, let alone supplant it. Self-appointed citizen's journalists can contribute novel insights, occasionally investigate issues the complacent ignore, but are no match for the citadels of power and their systems of control.

Morale at the BBC, as former Director of Programmes Bill Cotton once observed, is 'always at an all-time low'. Cuts and re-organisation shake people's self-confidence, which is rarely as strong as their assured performances on screen may suggest. Budgetary pressures favour the young, biddable and cheap. As old dogs have difficulty learning new tricks, a naturally youthful industry says goodbye all the more quickly to the residue of talent and experience that takes decades to build. Current Affairs, formerly a flagship department that has produced more BBC chiefs than any other, is now shrunk to a fraction of its former size and is merely a sub-division of News. None of this automatically presages bad programmes, but it is instructive that Michael Grade jumped to the conclusion that the trust issues that paralysed the British television industry in 2007 were a result of the inexperienced being over-promoted. In fact, the malaise was more systemic and ran into a senior management that had taken its eye off the moral compass.

Peter Horrocks says that public trust is now higher than it was before the debacle, and it is arguable that this and the licence fee cuts have forced a much greater, long overdue soul-searching than would have otherwise have happened. Not all is rosy or settled in the multimedia newsroom, but there is a reborn sense of confidence in BBC News that is even willing to question some of the wilder claims of the new technologists. As Horrocks says, 'We probably lowered the bar a bit too much and

now we are elevating it a bit. I don't expect to see a huge amount of UGC on *Newsnight* in the future…But we will employ every trick in the book to bring people to content that is more illuminating and insightful than they will find elsewhere.'

This is a relativist position that falls short of an endorsement of core values. Journalists who feel that those values are threatened by technologically-driven reductionism are dismissed as latterday 'luddites'. They know that the Luddites were not thoughtless vandals opposing progress, but artisans concerned to preserve craft standards and appropriate rates of pay. Two hundred years on, their natural heirs may not face deportation or the gibbet, but they do face an uncertain future, with more illuminating tricks yet to be turned and more cuts to be found.

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Endnotes

[i] Regional BGAN is a mobile satellite data transfer system that offers internet access at more than twice the speed of GPRS in 99 countries around the world.
[ii] Ofcom report 2007 *New News, Future News* : '64 per cent of young people believe that much of the news is not relevant to them' (p. 61) 'Some 46 per cent of people from minority ethnic groups felt that ethnic minorities got too little airtime in mainstream news' (p. 66)
[iii] *op.cit.* Annex: Initial BBC Management response, June 2008
[iv] *Weekend with Rod Liddle & Katie Silverton* ran at 9 am.on Saturdays for just 6 weeks on BBC-1 in 2003
[v] Norman Lewis, Chief Strategy Officer, Wireless Gridcorp, speaking at Media Futures Conference, London, 20 June 2008
[vi] Data supplied by Kevin Hinde, BBC FMT Head of Software Development, Journalism, 26 March 2008
[vii] BBC FMT presentation to Skillset Media Academies, 26 March 2008
[viii] Source: Michael Gray, Interactive Platforms Producer, BBC Audio & Music, 26 March 2008
[ix] Kevin Hinde, BBC FMT Head of Software Development, Journalism, 26 March 2008
[x] *Ariel* headline, March 2007
[xi] Kevin Hinde, BBC FMT Head of Software Development, Journalism, 26 March 2008
[xii] BBC News website, 19 June 2008
[xiii] Peter Horrocks: St Anne's College / Reuters Institute lecture. 28 November 2006
[xiv] Claire Fox, *What is Media For?* (sic) Media Futures Conference, London, 20 June 2008
[xv] Andrew Keen, speaking at the Media Futures Conference, London, 20 June 2008
[xvi] Simon Jenkins, 'When the going gets tough, economists go very quiet' *The Guardian*, 9 July 2008
[xvii] Mark Thompson, evidence submission to Welsh Assembly broadcasting committee, 16 June 2008
[xviii] Ofcom's 'Second review of Public Service Broadcasting' closed its public consultation on 19 June 2008
[xix] Tara Conlon, 'ITV rethinks regional news cuts', *Media Guardian*, 3 April 2008
http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/apr/03/itv.television1
[xx] 'BBC Trust begins public value test into local video proposal' 24 June 2008
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