



Jonathan Jones

THE ANSWER IS YES. OPEN IS BEST.

BY ALAN RUSBRIDGER

Marketeers can be very cold-eyed people. They deal less in people than in categories of people – whether by income, post code or outlook. And age: it was from a marketer that I recently learned of a new generational category: 35 to death.

That’s me, I thought. In fact I’m quite a way along that particular conveyor belt. And then I felt a little bit aggrieved as the marketer described the supposed characteristics of their generation of people shuffling from young middle age to the exit lounge.

But he had a point. In very rough terms – which, inevitably, is what marketers deal in – he was describing patterns of behaviour in media and the division between those who grew up digital and the rest, who may well acquire digital enthusiasms and habits, but will never quite be natives.

One of the distinctions between these two generations is whom they regard as authority figures. Even the term “authority figure” is probably too portentous for the digital natives. Bluntly: where do they turn for advice on life – which books to read; what to watch, where to eat; what music to listen to; where to go on holiday?

If you’re 35-2-D the chances are that a major influence in such choices would be a newspaper. Newspapers employ knowledgeable people with good judgement and give them the time and resources to research and write about things they think their readers ought to know about.

Younger people do read newspapers, even if they read them on their mobile phones; and they do read critics. But they also turn to their peers and friends and the friends of these friends and peers. For at least 10 years now there have been digital platforms that allow them all to publish, share, respond to and distribute their views. They are the post-Gutenberg generation.

All of this has enormous implications for the business of news (not to mention the vast majority of businesses and public enterprises from government to learning). For a long time journalists were in simple denial about the nature of the change. We were the experts, the authority figures. Sure, there were lots of “bloggers” (a word that lived in inverted comma and was inflected with either irony or contempt) out there. But they were no different from any bore in the pub. People wanted experts. And they would pay for them.

Well, up to a point Lord Copper, to quote one of the great books about the world of print in its rumbustious prime. Let me try and explain what I mean through the figure of the theatre critic.

One of the most revered critics on the *Guardian* is Michael Billington, who has been sitting in the stalls on behalf of the paper for a little over 40 years. He’s written a definitive account of post-war British theatre as well as acclaimed books about Stoppard, Pinter and Ayckbourn. Actors, directors and theatre-lovers alike turn to his reviews knowing they will be informed by a deep knowledge and gentle critical wisdom.

Millions of *Guardian* readers will, over the years, have developed a relationship with Michael’s writing. He will have helped shape their perception and influenced their decisions about what to see and what to avoid. He will have educated and amused countless theatre-lovers – and doubtless occasionally irritated and infuriated quite a few. He is in a long tradition of distinguished *Guardian* drama critics, including James Agate and Philip Hope-Wallace.

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What of the others in the audience for the first night of a play that Michael's reviewing at the Olivier Theatre at the National? The *Guardian* is more than 190 years old, but this is not a question that would have occurred to any arts editor to ask until about 10 years ago. We were there to tell them what we thought. And, coincidentally, we had the printing presses – the means of publishing – and they didn't.

Now, no serious editor in his/her right mind would be without a theatre critic such as Michael. But ask three different questions. The first is this: wouldn't it be interesting know what's in the minds of the 900 people around him as they watch the play unfold?

The answer is obviously, yes, it would be better to have a number of responses. So will a newspaper create the forum for their views, or will we cede that territory to others? The answer is surely obvious. By encouraging a wide variety of responses we will have a richer, more diverse account of a cultural event. If we shun the opportunity others will certainly do it. So, both editorially and economically, it's a risky proposition to want to go it alone.

So that's the first question. The second is, how do we filter the good responses from the bad; the mundane from the perceptive; the Brecht experts from the Broadway devotees? Newspapers are hardly alone in wanting to crack this question: in an age of abundant information it's a question which is preoccupying virtually everyone, from the largest search engine or business toying with social media, virtually every business, to the solitary academic.

The third question is, does this open principle apply to other areas of newspaper life? Can it work for investigative reporting; for sports; for smuggling the truth out of repressive regimes; for better environmental understanding; for more complete scientific expertise; for travel coverage and fashion?

Again, in everything we do on the *Guardian*, we're finding the answer is yes. Open is best. It worked in finding out who killed a news seller in the middle of a protest; in enlisting 23 000 readers to sort through 400 000 documents about MPs' expenses; in building the most comprehensive news site for environmental news; in covering the Arab Spring; in finding a network of fans who knew more than we could about the 32 national football teams in the World Cup. We ask for help in checking facts. We think that a thousand people who know Berlin or Barcelona like the back of their hand will contribute profoundly useful insights alongside the words of a travel writer. We love the fact that, since launching on Facebook, we've acquired four million additional active users, half of whom are under 25.

Now, this rapid growth of audience – up well over 60% overall year on year – doesn't translate into instant cash, any more than it does for Twitter or Facebook itself. But doing things which are editorially better, which build engagement and trust, and for which there is a large, growing and appreciative appetite (only recently we were rated the most viral newspaper site in the world) seem to me essential first steps on the road to sustainability. The news organisations which understand this new context of information and journalism can increase their reach and influence beyond imagining.

Open versus closed is not just a debate about newspapers. It is a fundamental choice in every corner of our public life and business world. In journalism, it's not about displanting or replacing the skills of a reporter or an editor. It is about understanding how the world has changed and how we can harness the revolution we're living through to produce a better account of the world around us. In some ways the jobs of journalist – and the skills required – have changed a great deal.

So, the world is changing very fast and it's as well for the 35-2-D generation to understand these profound changes. An easy first step: sign up to Twitter.

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SAYING THAT TWITTER HAS GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH THE NEWS BUSINESS IS ABOUT AS MISGUIDED AS YOU COULD BE

BY ALAN RUSBRIDGER

1. It's an amazing form of distribution

Don't be distracted by the 140-character limit, a lot of the best tweets are links. It's instantaneous. Its reach can be immensely far and wide. That has profound implications for our economic model, never mind the journalism.

2. It's where things happen first

There are millions of human monitors out there who will pick up on the smallest things and who have the same instincts as the agencies – to be the first with the news.

3. As a search engine, it rivals Google

Google is limited to using algorithms to ferret out information. Twitter harnesses the mass capabilities of human intelligence to the power of millions in order to find information that is new, valuable, relevant or entertaining.

4. It's a formidable aggregation tool

If you are following the most interesting people they will bring you the most interesting information. No news organisation could possibly aim to match, or beat, the combined power of all those worker bees collecting information and disseminating it.

5. It's a great reporting tool

Many of the best reporters are now habitually using Twitter as an aid to find information. The so-called wisdom of crowds comes into play: the 'they know more than we do' theory.

6. It's a fantastic form of marketing

I only have 70 000 followers. But if I get re-tweeted by one of our columnists, Charlie Brooker, I instantly reach a further 478 000. If Guardian Technology pick it up it goes to an audience of 1.6 million. If Stephen Fry notices it, it's global.

7. It's a series of common conversations. Or it can be

It's not transmission, it's communication. It's the ability to share and discuss with scores, or hundreds, or thousands of people in real time. It's a parallel universe of common conversations.

8. It's more diverse

Traditional media allowed a few voices in. Twitter allows anyone.

9. It changes the tone of writing

A good conversation involves listening as well as talking. There is, obviously, more brevity. There's more humour. More mixing of comment with fact. It's more personal.

10. It's a level playing field

The energy in Twitter gathers around people who can say things crisply and entertainingly, even though they may be unknown.

11. It has different news values

What seems obvious to journalists in terms of the choices we make is quite often markedly different from how others see it – both in terms of the things we choose to cover and the things we ignore. The power of tens of thousands of people articulating those different choices can wash back into newsrooms.

12. It has a long attention span

Set your Tweetdeck to follow a particular keyword or issue or subject and you may well find that the attention span of Twitterers puts newspapers to shame. They will be ferreting out and aggregating information on the issues that concern them long after the caravan of professional journalists has moved on.

13. It creates communities

Or, rather communities form themselves around particular issues, people, events, artefacts, cultures, ideas, subjects or geographies. They may be temporary communities, or long-term ones, strong ones or weak ones, but they are recognisably communities.

14. It changes notions of authority

Instead of waiting to receive the 'expert' opinions of others – mostly us, journalists – Twitter shifts the balance to 'peer to peer' authority.

15. It is an agent of change

Companies are already learning to respect, even fear, the power of collaborative media. Increasingly, social media will challenge conventional politics and, for instance, the laws relating to expression and speech.



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