



CENTRE FOR ADVANCING JOURNALISM

The rise of the reader: journalism in the age of the open web

Katharine Viner, deputy editor of the Guardian and editor-in-chief of Guardian Australia, gave the AN Smith memorial lecture in journalism, 9 October, 2013

[transcript]

I'd like to begin with a true story.

I was recently conducting a job interview for a Guardian role, and I asked the interviewee, who had worked only in print journalism, how he thought he'd cope working in digital news. In reply he said, "Well, I've got a computer. I've been using computers for years."

His answer was funny, but also revealing: clearly he believed that digital is just a technological development; just a new kind of word processing. In fact, digital is a huge conceptual change, a sociological change, a cluster bomb blowing apart who we are and how our world is ordered, how we see ourselves, how we live. It's a change we're in the middle of, so close up that sometimes it's hard to see. But it is deeply profound and it is happening at an almost unbelievable speed.

I'd like to talk about what this change is doing to journalism, and the opportunities that are possible if you are truly open to the web. I'd also like to look at how many journalists' resistance to this change is damaging their own interests, as well as the interests of good journalism; and how there is more a need than ever for the journalist as a "truth-teller, sense-maker, explainer".

Information: from fixed to free-flowing

The web has changed the way we organise information in a very clear way: from the bounded, solid format of books and newspapers to something liquid and free-flowing, with limitless possibilities.

A newspaper is complete. It is finished, sure of itself, certain. By contrast, digital news is constantly updated, improved upon, changed, moved, developed, an ongoing conversation and collaboration. It is living, evolving, limitless, relentless.

Many believe that this move from fixed to fluid is not exactly new, and instead a return to the oral cultures of much earlier eras. Danish academic Thomas Pettitt's theory is that the whole period after Gutenberg's invention of the printing press - of moveable type, the text, the 500 years of print-

dominated information, between the 15th and the 20th centuries - was just a pause; it was just an interruption in the usual flow of human communication. He calls this the Gutenberg Parenthesis. The web, says Pettitt, is returning us to a pre-Gutenberg state in which we are defined by oral traditions: flowing and ephemeral.

For 500 years, knowledge was contained, in a fixed format that you believed to be a reliable version of the truth; now, moving to the post-print era, we are returning to an age when you're as likely to hear information, right or wrong, from people you come across. Pettitt says that the way we think now is reminiscent of a medieval peasant, based on gossip, rumour and conversation. "The new world is in some ways the old world, the world before print" he says.

Dick Costolo, the CEO of Twitter, has a similar idea: "If you went back to Ancient Greece, the way that news and information was passed around was, you went to the agora after lunch in the town square. This was unfiltered, multi-directional exchange of information".

It makes me think of this line from The Cluetrain Manifesto, one of the most influential business texts of the internet age, back in 2000: "What if the real attraction of the internet is not its cutting-edge bells and whistles, its jazzy interface, or any of the advanced technology that underlies its pipes and wires? What if, instead, the attraction is an atavistic throwback to the prehistoric human fascination with telling tales?"

Medieval, Greek or prehistoric: take your pick.

What the free-flowing world means for journalism

So what does this free-flowing world mean for journalism now? What does it mean when we move away from a one-way dissemination of information, achieved by editorial processes which had been honed over centuries?

I'd like to talk about some of the new possibilities of a journalism that is genuinely open to the web, and some of the dangers and traps.

Digital is not about putting up your story on the web. It's about a fundamental redrawing of journalists' relationship with our audience, how we think about our readers, our perception of our role in society, our status.

We are no longer the all-seeing all-knowing journalists, delivering words from on high for readers to take in, passively, save perhaps an occasional letter to the editor. Digital has wrecked those hierarchies almost overnight, creating a more levelled world, where responses can be instant, where some readers will almost certainly know more about a particular subject than the journalist, where the reader might be better placed to uncover a story. That's why Jay Rosen calls readers "the People Formerly Known as the Audience"; why Dan Gillmor calls them "the former audience". In the era of the newspaper, there were few writers and many readers. Now, it can be hard to tell the difference. The People Formerly Known as the Audience don't just sit there, and if you don't listen to them, work with them, work for them, give them what they want and need, they have plenty of other places to go.

The open web makes it possible to interact with this audience like never before, and collaborate with them to discover, distribute and discuss stories in an array of new ways.

Your readers often know more than you

In April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was out of control. Oil was gushing out and no one knew how to stop it. BP had done a call-out for solutions, seemingly because they had no idea what else to do. So the Guardian environment team did its own call-out called: send us your ideas for how to cap the Gulf oil spill. We created a Googledoc for readers to post their suggestions, and before we knew it we had ideas from professional divers, marine engineers, physicists, biochemists, mechanical engineers, petrochemical and mining workers, pipework experts.

We curated some of the best, and subjected them to scrutiny. It was an incredibly rich and deep piece of work, made possible because of the people formerly known as the audience. Some of your readers really do know more than you.

You're more accountable if you're transparent

In a world in which we are all flooded with information, readers also want to know how you arrived at a story, and how you account for any errors you may have made. This is why readers' editors who are independent from editors are so vital, and why the 'show your workings' approach is a powerful tool.

In June this year, just a week after the launch of Guardian Australia, we ran as a splash a story based on quotes that the then shadow foreign minister, Julie Bishop, had given to Lenore Taylor, our excellent political editor. Bishop had told us, in an interview, that Indonesia would co-operate in turning back boats of asylum seekers.

This was a strong story: a putative foreign minister appeared to be saying on the record that Indonesian officials had given her private assurances that contradicted Indonesia's public position. Apart from the newsworthiness of that alone, it appeared that a person who expected to become Australia's foreign minister had made a diplomatic gaffe. The story pre-empted an issue which has proved to be a big challenge for the new government.

Unfortunately, we made an error in launching the article with a headline that suggested Bishop had said there was an actual agreement in place. This was not quite what she had said, and technically only governments, not oppositions, can make such agreements. Bishop complained, and we happily changed the headline and inserted a clarifying paragraph.

I thought our speedy correction would be the end of the matter. But over an hour later Bishop issued a press release saying that she had been the victim of a "Guardian beat-up" - that we had exaggerated the story and used quotes selectively, even in the corrected version.

This simply wasn't true, so we decided to share our version of events with the readers. We published a blog which explained the editorial decisions we had taken, explained why we changed the headline, and published the transcript of Lenore's interview with Bishop. We then asked our readers what they thought. Many of them told us they were delighted and fascinated by this open approach; that they felt they could trust us more, knowing that we would be transparent.

Katharine Viner, A.N. Smith lecture in journalism, 9 October, 2013

The University of Melbourne

Open brings you scoops

Being open can bring you great scoops, too. My favourite example of this was during the 2009 London protests against the G20 meeting, when our reporter, Paul Lewis, was investigating what happened to a newspaper seller, Ian Tomlinson, who had collapsed and died while walking through the protests. The pathologist reported that Tomlinson had died of a heart attack. We were searching for eyewitnesses.

We put callouts on Twitter and on the Guardian site, and within hours Paul was contacted by a Guardian reader in the US. This man was an investment fund manager who had been in London on business; he'd slipped out of his meetings to have a look at the protests, and film them on his smartphone. On reading our callout at his home in New York, he looked back at his footage, and discovered very clear images showing Ian Tomlinson being shoved to the ground by a policeman. As you can imagine, it was a big scoop.

Although the police officer was acquitted of manslaughter in 2012, he was later dismissed for gross misconduct. The pathologist has been struck off. In August the police settled a civil action by the Tomlinson family by issuing a formal apology and agreeing to pay compensation.

None of this would have happened if the Guardian hadn't been open to the web, with international reach.

Commodification

It's also a good example of what journalists need to do more than ever: break stories. Find things out.

Many publishers have responded to the web by commodifying news and producing so-called "churnalism" – rewriting wires, press releases and each other. In his 2009 book *Flat Earth News*, my colleague Nick Davies showed that 80% of stories in Britain's quality press were not original and that only 12% were generated by reporters. This is partly because of economic pressures, but not only: as an industry we are addicted to chasing the same things. Look at the famous photograph of the new Prince George emerging from hospital, with hundreds of photographers and reporters looking at him. What would have happened if all but, say, three of them had been off doing something else? What bounteous other stories were we missing that day? If we're not careful, photographs like these will be our industry's epitaph.

The big opportunity is surely in the opposite: not chasing the pack, doing something different. As CW Andersen, Emily Bell and Clay Shirky put it in their spectacular essay on post-industrial journalism, "hard news is what distinguishes journalism from just another commercial activity". What we're really here for are the things that matter, with Lord Northcliffe's famous dictum ringing in our ears: "news is something someone somewhere doesn't want printed. Everything else is advertising".

On Guardian Australia, which launched only four months ago, we've tried to bring something fresh and new to the Australian audience. If you'll allow me a short moment of un-British exuberance: we have seen a 75% increase in unique browsers year-on-year; some days our traffic is 100% over what

it was a year ago, against already a high figure. The revenue this month is more than treble the target. I know, it's early days, but it's going well so far.

There was and is a gap in the market in Australia, and being digital-only means that we've been able to embrace everything that digital has to offer. Not having a paper to think about, you start with an event or an idea and then you ask: what is the best way to tell this story? As an article? Or as a live blog, a list, a series of tweets, a video, some audio, a picture gallery, a data blog, a visualisation, an interactive, a panel of short blogs, a networked piece, an open thread where we publish one line and then open it up to the reader? Or something that begins with the reader? Or with the data? Or something aimed specifically at the user on mobile?

These conversations have led to content such as the incredible immersive interactive, Firestorm, which told the story of the bush fire at Dunally, placing it in the context of climate change, using text, photography, video, audio and graphics; the revelations by Oliver Laughland about Sayed Abdellatif, an asylum seeker who was labelled a jihadist murderer in parliament but, as we discovered through investigation in three countries, was nothing of the kind; the deep analysis of policy that Lenore Taylor and Katharine Murphy bring to Canberra politics; holding ministers to account; the thoughtful and bold perspectives of David Marr, especially in his insightful piece Ashbygate: the great disappearing scandal about to roar back to life; an interview with Everlyn Sampi, the child star of Rabbit-Proof Fence who had never spoken before but whose difficult life in the ten years since the film told a distressing story about the experiences of Indigenous Australians; a policy of finding new and diverse voices from all sorts of different backgrounds on Comment is Free, getting away from the dominant middle-aged white male commentator as standard; a serious focus on the environment and climate policy; a rigorous approach to data, spearheaded by Nick Evershed; a commitment to running Indigenous writers, including a partnership with the IndigenousX Twitter feed; a close relationship with our community on our site and on social media, bringing in perspectives and stories.

It's also about our approach: it's journalism with a progressive voice, which seems to be particularly important in a media market so dominated by a single media owner so vociferously on the right.

That's not to say we're all about hard news. I've always believed that no subject is off-limits, as long as you can find a way to make it significant, thoughtful and interesting. If you're going to run something about twerking, then place it in its political context, analyse its significance in gender relations, decode it with flair. Similarly, our witty content about sport has proved very popular, as has our "total coverage" approach to arts festivals. These kinds of articles brings readers close, bind them to you.

But so far it's the serious stuff which readers in Australia seem to want most. Getting away from commodified news, to serve the public interest. Doing something different.

Being part of the web's ecosystem

So being open has many advantages for journalists. But to do it, you need to be part of the web's ecosystem, not just plonked on top of it; to submit to the web's architecture, psychology, mores, rather than imposing a newspaper's structure over it.

When you put the reader at the heart of what you're doing, then you learn from them how the web works at that moment. In this transitional era we're all creating this new ecosystem together - and the users are often one step ahead of us, working it out as they go along.

I'd like to discuss four examples of issues that many are struggling with in this new ecosystem: paywalls, linking to sources, readers' conversations, and how to handle data.

The trouble with paywalls

The issue of paywalls gets to the heart of the central difficulty facing media organisations in the digital age: who is going to pay for it all.

Journalism, particularly the serious and painstaking kind, is expensive.

And with the collapse of the old newspaper business model, money is needed. A paywall is a typical "newspaper mindset" answer to that need - readers paid for content before, let's make them pay again. It is still unclear whether paywalls bring in enough money to be worthwhile, and it may be that they work better for more specialised content. Economically, it's too early to rule them out when we're all trying to survive.

But journalistically, paywalls are utterly antithetical to the open web. A paywalled website is just print in another form, making collaboration with the people formerly known as the audience much more difficult. You can't take advantage of the benefits of the open web if you're hidden away.

The narrative in defence is that good journalism must be paid for. Well, certainly good journalists must be paid. But these are different things. As Melbourne writer Bronwen Clune points out in *New Matilda*, "the theory behind a paywall ... is that people will pay for good investigative pieces that are in the interests of the general population. But if information is in the interests of the general population, how is putting it behind a paywall fulfilling the role of journalism?" And further, why is it that, if important journalism must be paid for, media organisations often drop their paywalls when they have a particularly important story?

Clune adds: "We need to reframe the paywalls debate as a journalist's dilemma. It's an illusion that the future of journalism is safe behind them". Indeed, I would argue that we are confusing two things. Journalists want to be paid, yes. And we want to find business models that make that possible - via advertising, partnerships, donation, cross-subsidy. But how could the future of journalism be safe behind a paywall, when the future of journalism is going on outside them?

Linking to sources

In September this year, Guardian Australia got the scoop of persuading Julia Gillard, the former prime minister who was ousted in June and had not spoken since, to break her silence with an

exclusive and extensive article. It was very revealing, thoughtful, personal, a big scoop, and of course was followed up by all news organisations in Australia and many around the world.

But only small handful of Australian sites included a link back to the original Guardian article.

If you look at the idea of linking out to external sources with an old media, newspaper perspective, of course you'd never do it. They're a competitor, why on earth would you give them traffic?

It's only when you adjust to the logic of new media that you see that linking out to a source is essential. It's only when you use the web yourself that you realise how annoying it is if a site doesn't link out to a something it's talking about. Not linking out means prioritising what you want your readers to have, instead of what all evidence of digital behaviour shows they want and need, which is diversity and connectivity.

Linking out makes for a much richer experience for the reader, and it's part of the reason why Katharine Murphy's politics live blog for Guardian Australia is so successful: not only do you get her witty, knowledgeable take on the day's events; you also have a one-stop shop for anything else of interest that might be happening - you'll be linked to it - and a genuine two-way conversation.

Readers' conversations

For several years, the Guardian has been running comments beneath many of our articles, especially op-eds, requesting engagement and response. An article doesn't end with the op-ed writer's last full stop; in many ways, a piece is brought to life with the first comment. An op-ed without comments is now not only unthinkable to Guardian readers, but to Guardian writers too.

But it has not been an easy process. If you open stories up to comments, then sometimes readers will say things that are threatening and rude; and certain groups, such as women and writers who are not white, can have a difficult time, despite a skilful team of moderators who give them more protection than they are afforded on social media. Some writers hate it, and it's hard to blame them.

But when it works, it is a multi-layered encounter which helps readers and writers alike refine their points of view, hone perspectives, acquire useful new information.

When we launched Comment is Free in Australia in May, we learned from the successes and mistakes we'd made in the UK over many years. So right from the beginning, we treated our users with respect: launched the article at an appropriate time for their lives, not a time that suits newspaper deadlines; asked the writers to engage with the commenters, with editors and other Guardian colleagues; did light-touch moderation; explicitly solicited readers' views; profiled interesting commenters; commissioned interesting commenters; used Twitter as a place to find writers; engaged with comments on other platforms too, particularly Facebook; and treated both praise and protest with consideration.

Go with your gut instinct... but use data too

The Guardian has an in-house traffic measurement tool to which I am addicted. I read it first thing in the morning, even before Twitter. It tells you what is being read in what numbers; where the readers came from – via the front page, or search, or social media; and where they go next - have we managed to interest them in another item?

Traffic data is a controversial area. We've all heard horror stories of content farms where people are paid by the click to write about Miley Cyrus's tongue, or "traffic whoring"; we've all seen media organisations turning away from genuinely important stories in order to focus on those that drive mass traffic. Old-fashioned journalists can consider knowing about traffic as beneath them, as part of the dumbing-down of a once-great industry. Old-fashioned editors may consider their gut instincts to be what got them to the top, and think that is quite sufficient, thank you very much.

My experience, however, has been different.

Watching the traffic isn't about clickbait - it's about finding out how your readers behave and what they are interested in, and if they're not, working out why not. I use our measurement tools to push for greater traffic for things we know are good. If a story is important, and it's not getting many readers, then I want it to get more. So we might promote it to a more prominent position, or we might change its headline for something that might work better for Google's mysterious algorithms. We might send it to a relevant person on Twitter, or to a broadcaster, or post it on our Facebook page. This is us, trying to get more readers for something that matters. In the print world, you never knew what was really being read, despite all those readership surveys. And you had no way to try to get it read more, because once the paper was out, that was it. You kissed it goodbye at last edition.

This isn't to say that gut instinct doesn't have a role. On the contrary - the best journalists always need a nose for a story, and a sensitivity to the zeitgeist, that in some people is ingrained and in others is learned through experience. But decent measurements can help you refine your instinct.

Behind the barricades

In this new, open world, where everything we once knew is being disrupted, many journalists are barricading themselves in, building higher walls than ever, literally and metaphorically.

They get furious that anonymous nobodies can have their say in response to their articles. There seem to be more award ceremonies for journalism than ever before, and endless conferences on the future of the media, where someone always claims, like a groovy free-thinking radical, that print has got a limitless future, actually. Before they've even had a go at finding out what Twitter is all about, staff journalists request a blue tick of verification on Twitter, confirming that they are different from everyone else on Twitter, that they are a person of substance. They are obsessed with survival, both personal and industrial. Up against it, they are defending their traditions, their titles, their access, their status.

As Clay Shirky says: "it's true that if you're in the layer that's getting disrupted you might go to the beach at low tide and stand out and hold your arms up and command that the tide not come in, but the tide actually doesn't care".

But outside the barricades...

Meanwhile, really big stories are often being broken by people who are not necessarily like conventional journalists.

The biggest story of the year, the revelations that the US's National Security Agency, the NSA, is undertaking widespread surveillance of our emails and phone calls, was leaked by former NSA employee Edward Snowden to Glenn Greenwald, a journalist with the Guardian in the US. Glenn is an iconoclastic columnist who has written extensively about the invasion of citizens' privacy by the state in a way that is unlike anyone else; for this reason, Snowden took his leaked information to him. He gave the scoop to a journalist he trusted; he gave the scoop to someone he knew shared his concerns about the effect of mass surveillance on ordinary people's lives.

You might have thought such devastating revelations would have brought glory to the journalist who exposed them, especially among the journalistic community. But instead it brought fury, with Greenwald classed, by other journalists, as somehow undesirable.

The host of NBC's Meet the Press, David Gregory, wondered whether Greenwald should be 'charged with a crime' for 'the extent he aided and abetted Edward Snowden' and questioned whether he is a real journalist.

Jeffrey Toobin, of the New Yorker and CNN, compared Glenn Greenwald's partner, who had been held at Heathrow for nine hours, to a "drug mule".

And Willard Foxton, a blogger for the UK Telegraph, described Greenwald as "odd" and began a column musing 'I sometimes wonder why I don't like Glenn Greenwald'.

The source, Snowden, has been vilified too, even though he put his liberty on the line to reveal the extent of the digital surveillance; as has Chelsea Manning, now in jail for 35 years for leaking the US Embassy cables to Wikileaks; as has Wikileaks' Julian Assange, about whom a senior correspondent at Time tweeted, "I can't wait to write a defense of the drone strike that takes out Julian Assange".

As David Carr wrote in the New York Times, "What are we thinking?". Why are we so appalled by people exposing these big, significant, devastating stories? There are different kinds of journalists – those who try hard to present themselves as neutrally as possible, and those who happily declare their political perspective in a transparent way. Surely we want as many different kinds of people doing journalism as possible.

Instead, journalists are turning on journalists.

Very real threats to journalism

And all the while there are very real threats to journalism that make these internal squabbles look petty.

As Guardian editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger said, "governments are conflating journalism with terrorism and using national security to engage in mass surveillance. The implications just in terms of how journalism is practised are enormous".

What happens to journalists' sources if all our metadata, the tracks of our emails and phones, are available to this government, unaccountable corporations and every subsequent government? Will secret courts and politicians really prevent surveillance of conversations between a journalist and a source, when journalists' partners are being held under anti-terrorism legislation at Heathrow airport, and when journalists' sources are being sent to jail for 35 years? And why on earth aren't journalists around the world absolutely up in arms at this threat to journalism? By focusing on our own loss of status, two bald men arguing over a comb, we could be missing the far larger story of new technology making journalism near-impossible.

What is a journalist?

"So what is a journalist?" is the question that's being asked, in a classic example of the sort of self-examination that happens in a time of crisis.

Margaret Sullivan says in the New York Times that "a real journalist is one who understands, at a cellular level, and doesn't shy away from, the adversarial relationship between government and press". I like this definition because it's about a state of mind, not a closed shop. Journalists need to be on the outside of all kinds of power - political, institutional, corporate. We are here to find things out which otherwise wouldn't be known - and while journalistic experience and techniques are excellent qualifications for this, you don't need a press card to do it.

Yochai Benkler, who testified at Private Manning's trial in July 2013, said that journalism isn't what you say about yourself, it's what you do: "It's not a unique organisation or individual identity. It's a behaviour."

Journalism as a behaviour. Journalism as something you do, not something you are.

In a provocative post headlined 'There are no Journalists', Jeff Jarvis wrote: "anyone can [now] perform an act of journalism... anyone informing anyone. We [need to] reconsider journalism not as the manufacture of content but instead as a service whose goal is an informed public".

People are performing acts of journalism everywhere.

In defence of journalism

Nevertheless, there is a crucial role in society for journalists to play.

As Anderson, Bell and Shirky say, "now and for the foreseeable future we need a cadre of full-time workers who report the things that someone somewhere doesn't want reported, and who do it in a way that doesn't just make information available, but frames that information so that it reaches and affects the public."

This is not necessarily straightforward.

Original reporting is often misunderstood by those who don't do it, often perceived as simpler than it is. It can be complex and twisty, laboured and intricate. Nurturing a source over many months so they bring you their story. The ability to spot a story; the sense when something isn't right, something is being hidden. Asking uncomfortable questions. Getting the important bits of information from a witness. Knowing how to talk on the phone. Knowing where to find a certain public record or piece of data, and knowing what you're looking for. Knowing how and when to challenge a CEO, or read between the lines of what they're saying; having the discipline to challenge a politician you might otherwise agree with. Knowing when to go with a story, and when to wait. Bravery to resist pressure from others - whether from the police, the politicians, or journalists on other publications - or in the case of the Guardian's reporting of the phone hacking scandal in Britain, all three.

None of these things is as simple as non-journalists often imagine.

Who to trust in the digital age?

Doing serious, transparent reporting is one way you get to be trusted. And trust is a job that needs doing in this digital age: after all, in that town square, in the agora, someone needs to be the one people believe, the one who can confirm some stories and debunk others. Who will that be? Will it be the journalist as verifier, as interpreter?

During the English riots of 2011 the Guardian produced an interactive showing how rumours spread on Twitter during the riots. I love Twitter, it has changed my life, but how much can you trust it? How much can you trust anything? On the interactive you can see, as an example, how an untrue story about tigers escaping from London zoo went viral. This is the pre-Gutenberg world in action: a rumour begins, is spread, and then is quashed. False rumours are usually, eventually, overcome: people get to the truth in the end. But only if you stay until the end.

Sometimes, false rumours are not quashed.

In April 2013, in the hours after the Boston marathon was bombed, Sunil Tripathi and Mike Mulugeta were named as suspects on Reddit and Twitter. So certain was the crowd that they had got the right men, that one of the speculators tweeted "If Sunil Tripathi did indeed commit this #BostonBombing, Reddit has scored a significant, game-changing victory."

Tripathi was a missing student, completely unrelated to the bombing. Mulugeta didn't exist. But as the ABC's Media Watch showed, quite a few conventional news organisations repeated the line, including here in Australia three TV channels and three newspaper mastheads. Reddit publicly apologised; most of the conventional media didn't.

Some social media had failed catastrophically - the town square gossip labelled the wrong people. But some conventional media failed even more catastrophically, by failing in its duty to verify, to report only known facts, and by not accounting for their errors when they got things wrong. The story is a case study of the chaos we're in. The downsides of that gossipy town square, but validated by organisations you're supposed to be able to trust.

It's well-known that there is a crisis of trust in the media. Edelman's trust barometer for 2013, a global measure, puts media as only just ahead of banks and financial services in terms of public trust. In Britain, the phone hacking scandal led to deep alarm among the public about some journalists' methods, particularly in relation to ordinary people. Australia, meanwhile, ranks 24th out of 26 countries surveyed on how much its media trusted, ahead of only Turkey and Russia.

And undoubtedly, journalists have betrayed trust, whether by hacking phones, engaging in corrupt relationships with officials, or getting too close to the powerful people they should be holding to account. So if they want to earn the public's trust, they have a battle on their hands. But surely the best place, the only place, for the media to be is getting it right. Better to be late and right. Better to be late and right and transparent about how you got there.

The alternative is to publish something that isn't true, like tigers running through London, and get a load of traffic for it.

What is journalism for?

I guess it all depends on what you think journalism is for.

If you think it is for speaking truth to power, if you believe that the role of the journalist is as an outsider, then you will be in favour of the open web, open journalism, the free flow of engagement and challenge and debate with the people formerly known as the audience.

But if you think journalism is instead for brokering power, influencing power, keeping power, then you will want to close down the web as much as possible and keep debate to a minimum. More about your own interests, less about the public interest.

This is where the issue of media ownership is the crucial underpinning. In my view, the Guardian's ownership is the secret to its digital success and rapid growth to 40m users as the third-most read English-language newspaper website in the world. The Guardian is owned by the Scott Trust, and our lack of a proprietor or shareholders gives us real editorial freedom: all money must be reinvested back into journalism, and being open to readers and the web fits the ethos. It means that people come to us with their stories because they know we are independent, whether it's Edward Snowden or Julia Gillard; it means that readers are more likely to trust our motives, trust that we're not running something for commercial gain or political purchase.

But many media owners don't like the open web, which undermines hierarchies in such a dramatic and visible way.

The increasing concentration of ownership in the media provides less diversity and less breadth for readers; and, arguably, more complacency in those who are left. Australia has the highest concentration of newspaper ownership in the world, dominated by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, and with the top three newspaper companies taking a 98% share of daily circulation, compared with 26% in the US and 62% in the UK.

As we saw at the beginning of this lecture, the digital revolution is not just a technological change. It is a shift in power. The open web has the potential to be a huge democratic space; even better than that Grecian town square, because now respectable women go there to talk, and slaves too. The doors are open anyone with the internet, currently 39% of the world's entire population, up from 16% just eight years ago.

But it might not go like that. The web has been fragmenting for a while: instead of one internet, there are many different products and platforms: desktop, Android, iPhone, tablet. As Jonathan Zittrain has written, "tethered appliances" like iPhones have led to a closing down of web innovation. Anonymity online is now harder to pull off. We know that every page we look at can be monitored by international spy agencies. And, in light of these revelations, there is a new issue: countries such as Brazil are talking seriously about a 'national internet': so instead of the world wide web, we face the prospect of a Brazilian internet, an American internet, maybe an Australian internet. What a loss that would be.

If tech companies, media owners and some governments have interests in shutting down the flourishing open web, it may not lead to the democratic utopia some are imagining.

Shaping a new journalism

But it doesn't mean it isn't worth a try. We are privileged to be living in this era of great transition, privileged to be alive to help shape a new journalism for a new age.

Remember the Gutenberg parenthesis of 500 years?

First, there was a whole heap of conversation but no clear version of the truth.

Then, there was a very clear version of the truth, but no space for conversation.

Now, what we have is the truth made better by conversation.

What if we were to embrace the ecosystem of the web and combined established journalistic techniques with new ways of finding, telling and communicating stories? Opened ourselves up? Put the people formerly known as the audience at the heart of everything? Combined the elite and the street... and the tweet?

Not gut instinct or data: both.

Not the phone or Twitter: both.