IDEAS ON

DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND

PUBLISHING

2006–2012

ADAM WESTBROOK

Contents

introduction

Between 2006 and 2012 I wrote prolifically about two things I was insanely fascinated by: visual storytelling and the business models of journalism & publishing. In total I clocked up more than 400 blog posts, four ebooks, and tens of thousands of words.

During those six years the industry has changed permanently and travelled almost an entire revolution. I wanted to offer an optimistic voice in a time of uncertainty and change, seeking solutions and new innovations over simply reporting on the problems.

My ideas for journalists, filmmakers, publishers, producers and students were influenced by thought provoking writers and leaders in other fields: Chris Guillebeau, Amy O'Leary, Seth Godin, Frank Rose, Robin Sloan, Ryan Holiday, Chris Vogler, and Julian Smith to name a few. Some, but not all, are involved in journalism directly, but they all have ideas which spoke directly to me in some way or another. I put my own spin on them and shared them with you.

I have changed a lot in the last six years: from a rookie broadcast journalist to a reporter, to a freelance video journalist and lec-

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turer and now, to a self-employed digital producer, writer and publisher. My interests have changed too, and I generally no-longer call myself a journalist. It is time, once again, to change direction and I have new projects I want to pursue in the world of publishing.

For that reason it is time to hang up the boots on my blog. Everything will remain online, and for free. As a parting gift I have gone through my archive and collected 20 of my most interesting and thought provoking articles, and written five brand new ones.

It's a decent sized volume, but one you can consume in a single sitting. My hope is that in absorbing all the ideas in one go, a seed might collide with a spark in your mind, and something new will be made. If reading this sparks a cool idea for a project, then please just go and make it.

A lot of my blogging over the past three years at least has been about one idea, which I have been (successfully and unsuccessfully) striking at from time to time. All I've really wanted to say is that in these uncertain times - and there's no getting away from the uncertainty in our future - the best way to survive and thrive is to *embrace that uncertainty*. That might mean throwing away a career plan, and it might mean taking more risks, but whatever it is that you do, you must get busy doing it *right now*. Coders, writers, filmmakers, podcasters, web designers, photographers, and students - always be building something and always be learning something new.

Thanks for reading and I hope you find this collection inspiring and useful.

Adam.

keep in touch

My blog will now be infrequently updated so the best ways of keeping up with what I do next are:

adamwestbrook.co.uk · My homepage and portfolio

journal.
adamwestbrook.co.uk · My new journal - much more personal but with similar ideas. I've started curating things that I personally love.

hotpursuit.co · Hot Pursuit: my new publishing press and laboratory.

@AdamWestbrook · My twitter feed

adamwestbrook.
tumblr.com · My tumblr feed
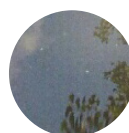
vimeo.com/
adamwestbrook1 · My films on Vimeo

Part One
Storytelling on screen

the principles of editing \\

In 1920 film was still very young, but growing in popularity.

As a new industry grew, practitioners raced to understand this amazing new medium and how it worked. Back then there was no precedent and there were no rules about how a shot should look or how a piece should be edited together.

Sound familiar?

But the early film makers did such a good job of understanding the medium, by the end of the 1920s the basic tenets had been laid down – and are still used by us today.

One of the early pioneers was a Russian film maker called Vsevolod Pudovkin, who started making films in 1920. A few years later he penned a book called Film Technique and Film Acting: inside are five editing techniques. Reading through them, you realise there are plenty of tips and tricks online video journalists can take on board, nearly 100 years later.

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Pudovkin's techniques describe several ways editing can be used to enhance the viewer's understanding of a story, and they're all designed to create a specific reaction from the audience, something he calls relational editing.

01. Contrast: cutting between two different scenarios to highlight the contrast between them. As an example, Pudovkin suggests moving from scenes of poverty to someone really rich to make the difference more apparent.

.02 Parallelism: here you can connect two seemingly unrelated scenes by cutting between them and focusing on parallel features. For example if you were shooting a documentary about fish stocks in the Atlantic, you could cut from a trawler being tossed about in the ocean to a family chomping down on some fish'n'chips – in both scenes drawing our attention to the fish: the object that connects them. It creates an association in the viewers' mind.

.03 Symbolism: Again, more intercutting, you move from your main scene to something which creates a symbolic connection for the audience. Pudovkin (living in Soviet Russia) suggested cutting between shots of striking workers being shot by Tsarist police and scenes of cows being slaughtered: in the audience's mind, they associate the slaughter of the cattle with the slaughter of the workers.

.04 Simultaneity: This is used lots in Hollywood today: cutting between two simultaneous events as a way of driving up the

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suspense. If you're making a film about a politician on election night, you might cut between shots of the vote being counted to shots of your main subject preparing to hear the result. This extending of time builds anticipation.

.05 Leit motif: This 'reiteration of theme' involves repeating a shot or sequence at key moments as a sort of code. Think how Spielberg uses a 'point of view' shot in Jaws showing the shark looking up at swimmers. The first time he does it creates a visual code for "the shark's about to attack". Every time we see that underwater POV we know an attack is imminent. He has allowed us to participate in the decoding.

So can online video producers use these techniques?

Well clearly we don't all make films loaded with symbolism in the way movie directors do; nor do we have time on screen to build anticipation through simultaneous cutting. However Pudovkin's five techniques tell us something deeper and more significant about visual storytelling.

Because sound hadn't been invented when he, Fritz Lang, Eisenstein et al first picked up a camera, they developed a real understanding of visual storytelling. They had to. If you couldn't tell a story solely in pictures you couldn't tell it at all. So they constantly invented ways to manipulate camera, edit, props, rigs and lights to get a message across. What they created was a form of 'picture-telling' where the audience are invited to participate in spotting and decoding subconscious messages.

This, I think, has been lost in the debate about the future of video and journalism, and possibly from the craft altogether.

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Instead we rely on dialogue to tell our story, and (at our worst) plaster pictures over the top.

When we move beyond straight point-and-shoot reportage and we want our viewers to understand a story, to relate to it, to care – the cameras in our hand are more than neutral observers: they are powerful tools, more often being left unused.

You wouldn't learn the intricacies of 3D animation without first being able to draw – so why do we pursue video journalism without learning the basic building blocks of visual storytelling?

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Must read:

On Directing by David Mamet

Click here to view on Amazon

are you a
visual storyteller?
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Lots of multimedia producers describe themselves as "visual storytellers": a sort of umbrella term to cover off video journalism, photography, motion graphics and maybe flash interactives too.

And as an umbrella term it's a good one..but how many visual storytellers are really that?

The mantra in creating television news, documentaries, cinema and now online video – is to let the pictures tell the story. But this is actually extremely rare: watch the majority of news, docs and online video stories and instead the words lead the way, dragging pictures along behind them.

So what is visual storytelling?

To be a visual storyteller you should be able to tell a story with as few words as possible – maybe even none. If someone was watching your film with the sound turned off, would they understand what was happening?

There are a huge number of tools we can use as visual storytell-

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ers to convey messages with images alone: from the type of shot we use, the editing style, whether we go handheld, use a steadi-cam or sticks, transitions, repeated motifs and all sorts.

The first 10 minutes of Dirty Harry have absolutely no dialogue; the last 20 minutes of Sam Mendes' Road to Perdition contain just six lines of dialogue but bring the story to bloody climax and denouement. You know exactly how someone is feeling, what they're thinking, and what they're going to do next – but you haven't been told in words, you've been shown.

One thing is for sure: it is easier said than done. My production, explaining the 2011 AV Referendum had more than 600 words in 4 minutes. Rubbish.

Can you tell a whole story with no dialogue? You bet'cha. I love this 3 minute short by Norwegian film maker Kristoffer Borgli. Drama, plot twists, humour and suspense – all in three minutes – all without a single word being uttered.

Why not set yourself a challenge to tell your next story in 100 words…or less?

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Must read:

Cinematic Storytelling: the 100 most powerful film conventions every filmmaker must know by Jennifer Van Sijll
Click here to view on Amazon

fuck the average viewer

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The above is a quote attributed to David Simon, better known as the creator of the incredible HBO drama The Wire.

It was his response to accusations that The Wire was too complicated and didn't explain things well enough for people to keep up.

Sure, lots of people found the show too complicated to follow. But what would have happened if it had compromised just to keep more people watching?

It reminds me of the cancellation of the cult spoof cop show Police Squad! which was dropped by US network ABC after just six episodes, because bosses felt audiences had to concentrate too much in order to keep up with the gags.

There are two lessons in David Simon's wise words. One is that you should care about one audience only: the audience who get what you do (no matter how small). If people don't get it, fuck 'em.

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Second, I wonder whether non-fiction storytelling suffers from the same ailment. We're on a mission to help people understand a complex topic, and in order to do that we break it down into digestible pieces and make it as simple as possible. The problem is that it doesn't give the audience anything to think about.

People don't want to be forcibly educated, Hitchcock once said, and I think this applies to journalism and factual content as much as anything else.

So here's an idea: the next story you tell, try and weave it up a little. Take the audience on a journey with many twists and turns. Confuse them. Get them wondering out loud what the hell is going to happen next.

It's counter intuitive for someone who sees their job as to explain. But the magic you create by taking your audience on a journey, forces them to do something special: they put the pieces together themselves - in their own mind. And then they own it a little. They understand and they remember.

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the upside-down rhino \\

What does it take to make a story stick? To make the audience care enough to click "share"?

It's not uncommon for clients to ask video producers or their PR agencies to "do them a viral". But to even try to predict such a thing is to misunderstand its very nature.

Speaking of 'sharing' things around, nearly 200,000 people have shared this short film about WWF's work transporting rhinos around South Africa.

You might think the way it is shot is impressive (it is), marvel at the high quality lenses used, or the style of editing. But there's one thing this video has, that no other does, and it's the reason it has gone viral: an upside-down rhino, flying in the air.

In all my days I never thought I'd ever see a rhino being suspended, upside-down, beneath a helicopter. But there you have it, right there before your very eyes.

And this is what video is for.

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Video is there to take us places we've never been, show us things we never thought we'd get to see. It gives us access to people we'll never get to speak to, close-ups of things our own eyes can't see, it lets people share ideas we would never normally hear, and see what it's like to be someone living in poverty on the opposite side of the world.

It is not there for long interviews with CEOs, or coverage of conferences, or – dare I say it – vox pops.

Tell that to all the newspapers, charities, businesses and the like jumping into the video game to churn out more of just this kind of stuff, and then wondering why no-one watches it.

The upside-down-rhino, though, means different things to different people. To a small community, seeing a politician apologise for embezzling their tax dollar, as opposed to reading about it, has the rhino-factor. So does a video tutorial in using HTML to people who need to see it to understand it.

The next time you commission, or start to make a video, ask yourself this: for your audience, will it have the equivalent of a frickkin' upside-down rhino being suspended from a helicopter?

No? Then put the camera down and go find a story that does.

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this is not an article \\

I've been reading Frank Rose's "*The Art of Immersion: how the digital generation is remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue and the way we tell stories.*"

In it, he quotes the introduction to Daniel Defoe's novel Robinson Crusoe, it goes like this:

"If ever the Story of any private Man's Adventures in the World were worth making Pvblick, and were acceptable when Publish'd, the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so….The Editor believes the thing to be just a History of Fact; neither is there any appearance of Fiction in it…"

To decifer the 18th Century parlance, Daniel Defoe is saying – before you read his fiction novel – "this is not a fiction novel."

Why? Well, with a few exceptions, Robinson Crusoe is one of first novels ever written. Up until then, it had been poems, plays, myths and The Bible. As hard to imagine as it is, the idea of a novel was so new, it was risky to publish it.

Rose notices a common trend in all the major mediums since

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(movies, television and the Internet): when they first begin, they try to convince you they are not new.

The earliest films were basically filmed like a theatre performance: a stage and a stationary camera – the first movie makers were saying "this is not a movie!"

Television did the same thing, up until the 1950s producing shows that resembled theatre – the first TV producers were saying "this is not television!"

You can argue TV News still does the same thing, sticking presenters behind desks to mimic the radio announcers of the 1930s.

And the early attempts at online publishing have tried so hard to mimic print and television that it's almost laughable. From the front page of the New York Times website, to the format of all online video stories, these digital producers are busting their nuts to convince you "this is not the internet!"

And it was ever thus.

But Frank Rose's other point is what's really important for any digital publishers, journalism entrepreneurs and video journalists: we are only at the beginning – and the answers won't come for years. He makes the point that whenever a new technology arrives, it takes pioneers 20 or 30 years to figure out what to do it with it.

Cinema was invented in the 1890s, but it wasn't until the mid 1920s that Pudovkin's five principles of editing were laid down.

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It took decades for someone to say 'hey, what if we edit two different scenes together to make it look like they're happening at the same time!'

TV was born in 1925, but as Rose points out it was another 25 years before it came into its own with the sitcom format, game shows and the like.

So, by the same logic, this marvellous new medium we've created for ourselves – the internet – is 20 years old already. But you could argue, its true power (web 2.0) wasn't born until 10 years ago. Either way, it'll be another decade before we really figure out what the hell this thing can do.

However far we think we've come, we're just at the beginning.

And us? We're the pioneers. Anyone who's produced online video (specifically for the internet), created a podcast, launched an online magazine, started a social network or written a blog: you are the internet's pioneers, marching determinedly into the frontier.

And that's a generational privilege we should relish.

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Must read:

The Art of Immersion by Frank Rose

Click here to view on Amazon

immersive storytelling \\

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Traditionally journalism, publishing, film-making, music, photography & broadcasting are one-way processes. We create some content and a mainstream platform of some kind pumps it out for the masses to consume.

They passively receive stories and information, a concept best explained by Peter Horrocks' End of Fortress Journalism. Attempts to make all this interactive in some way have never got past the "send us your photos" or "you decide!" appeals from our TV sets.

But something extraordinary and unexpected is happening. Audiences are getting involved in our stories – but not how you'd expect. If an audience feel involved in a story, whether it's The Wire, Mad Men, a movie, they are starting to find their own ways to dive deeper into the world of the story. They set up their own twitter accounts, or start wikis, and develop a story far beyond the control of the author.

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This is very new. And journalists shouldn't think their stories are immune either.

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I have, until recently, ignored this trend. I produce online video – an inherently passive medium that cannot really foster interactive engagement. On a selfish level, I don't want anyone else to get involved in my storytelling, thank you very much. Surely the fun is producing something exceptional and then sharing it for others to enjoy?

Well, my view on this, is shifting a little bit.

A few weeks back I discovered Awkward Silence, the website of a UCLAN multimedia student, who goes by the name of Beans. He's produced a couple of 90s style platform games (think Commander Keen or Prince of Persia) which you can play online for free.

In One Chance, you become a scientist who's cure for cancer is threatening to wipe out every living cell on earth. Over the course of six days (15 minutes gameplay time) you must find a cure.

As simple as it looks, it is a very adult game, with a sophisticated story - and it's the story that sucks you in. Inevitably, my less than sensible decisions made throughout the game resulted in everyone dying and me sitting alone with my daughter on a park bench, waiting for the end.

Beans also produced another game recently – except, it's not re-

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ally a game. The Body takes four minutes and you basically press and hold left in order to complete it. Beans himself describes it as:

"...short, confusing and isn't technically fun. It's not a game I'm not particularly proud of. Infact, The body is barely a game at all."

But beyond the gameplay, The Body offers more. In it, you become a man trying to dispose of a body. Who is the body? How did they die? The backstory is (sort of) revealed in flashbacks – a convention more at home on TV or in the cinema. And despite it being not 'technically fun' I engaged with the story.

Beans hasn't created a game – he's told a story. And because I was participating in the story I was hooked.

<center>III</center>

I recently mentioned Frank Rose's new book on how the internet is changing storytelling. As he sees it, these new ways of telling stories are letting us get more immersed – and therefore more engaged.

"Conventional narratives – books, movies, TV shows – are emotionally engaging, but they engage us as spectators. Games are engaging in a different way. They put us at the centre of the action…Combine the emotional impact of stories with the first person involvement of games and you can create an extremely powerful experience."

If I'm honest, I'm not sure exactly how this will change fac-

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tual storytelling and multimedia journalism yet – but I'm almost certain it will. I've got some early ideas which I'm chewing over and if they amount to anything I will try and share them. But as content creators we have a responsibility to tell stories which grab people by the collar. All but the very best online video out there right now fails on that first test.

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"...as content creators we have a responsibility to tell stories which grab people by the collar."

Click here to tweet this

how to make boring things interesting in video \\

There's no doubting that video is an incredible medium. It has the power to transport us to other worlds, feel other peoples' feelings and can affect our emotions quite dramatically, when done well. Ultimately, video can move people to action.

Part of the secret to doing good video is choosing the right stories to tell with video in the first place. Read that sentence again and you get an important truth about video: it can do some stories, issues and subject matter really well. Everything else, it does badly.

What is video good at?

When I give talks, lectures or workshops about online video I usually start by laying out what video can and cannot do. This is my list of its favourite subjects:

Explosions, fire, sparks and noise (ever wondered why these always lead the news bulletins?); action and movement: every video must involve someone doing something; awe-inspiringly

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big things like landscapes; amazingly small things that our eyes can't see — but also anything closeup in general; human stories and emotion — no matter how complex.

What is video bad at?

Human emotions are probably the most complex things out there but video can convey them better than any other medium. When it comes to other complex issues however, video is out of its depth:

Politics and meetings: much of it happens behind closed doors, is polemic and involves little physical movement; business, economics and theory: similarly non-visual at first glance; statistics, numbers and data: video and data journalism don't sit side by side; interviews (yes, really).

Video is not designed for people sitting down and talking, however, almost everyone involved in video finds themselves working on the latter a lot of the time. The nightly news has to cover politics and the economy. A management accountancy firm has to make videos about management accountancy. We all have to run interviews (…do we?)

So the question then is: how do we make this shit interesting?

"There's no such thing as boring knowledge. Only boring presentation."

Dan Roam

I start with this quote in mind. Although I'm putting down business, politics and data as video subjects, there is no denying they

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are hugely interesting subjects in and of themselves. But to make them work on video we have to put in some extra work. There are some tested techniques filmmakers use to inject interest into potentially dry stories – many of these you will recognise from television, where programme makers face this challenge regularly.

In other cases, we are still struggling to make it interesting – so there's potential for disruption from brave new film makers (that's you).

Humanise

Tell a real human story as access into the issue. Ever wondered why news packages about gas price rises always start with an old lady filling up her kettle and worrying about her winter fuel allowance? That's how journalists try to get people to care about a story that is actually about oil prices and Russian diplomacy.

This, incidentally is the secret behind great films that promote either non-profits or business. Duckrabbit's TV campaign for Oxfam uses the real story of a donor to make us care; this series by Phos Pictures uses the same device to advertise -wait for it: a gym. It almost made me sign up, and I live 4,000 miles away.

Visualise

If every story should be human, it must also be visual. Video, like photography, graphic design and web design is about using images to convey the message – not words. A common crime of directors is to rely on dialogue, voice over and interviews to tell the story when ideally people should get it with the sound turned off.

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At its most simple: if you're filming an interview with an IT specialist for your website, don't just film a straight interview. Make it visual: film them at work, going for a walk, cycling to work, eating lunch, playing squash whatever – it's the eye-candy video is made for. Done well, visually led films can turn an interview with a blogger (snore…) into something quite wonderful.

Surprise

Amy O'Leary makes the point in this talk that surprise is a key element to a successful story. We love surprises because they release happy chemicals into our brains. You can hook your viewers on the surprise drug in two ways: you can be clever with your narrative to create a set-up and punchline throughout a piece (difficult) or you can smack them in the face with a wet fish.

For example, if your bread and butter is a weekly video interview with a leader in your field, why not do the interview while they're getting their haircut? I'm serious. Find an amicable barber and you've got something easily set up, that fills its purpose and is visual at the same time…all while sticking annoyingly in your audiences mind. (If you manage to pull it off in your organisation, let me know!)

Be useful

If you can't be interesting then at least make sure your video is useful. Some people will sit through a 20 minute panel discussion if they know the information is important to them.

If you can't even be useful, then for the love of God…

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Be short

Some people say videos on the web shouldn't be longer than two minutes. You can definitely tell a good story in less than this. While I don't think there is a hard and fast rule, I do believe anything longer than five minutes is a result of laziness or ego (please note: I am regularly guilty of both of these).

Does your video have an upside down flying rhino in it? If not, it probably doesn't warrant being longer than two minutes.
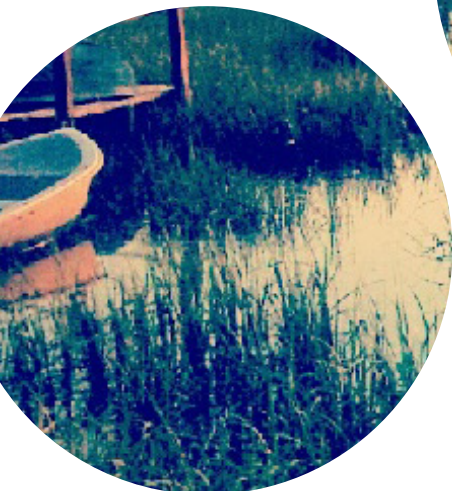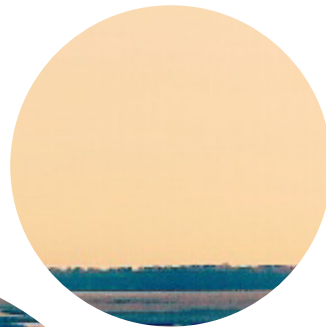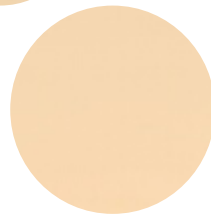
That said, if you've got a great human story, that you're telling visually and is packed full of surprise: then please, I will give you hours of my attention.

So in summary: if you can't be interesting, useful or concise, you've picked the wrong medium.

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Part Two
The new age of publishing

rethinking expertise //

Here are some brief ideas about changing how we think about expertise.

What do you think makes someone an expert? Experience and qualifications? That's what most people think they need to achieve to be recognised as an expert in something.

It's a very 20th century approach and it's what stops a lot of people from doing something bold. It might stop a journalism graduate from starting an online magazine ("I don't have any experience") or stop someone from starting their own web design business ("I don't have any qualifications in web design or business").

But actually our view of what qualifies as expertise is much more fluid.

I've found myself being called an expert many times, but hell, I'm only 27, what can I really be an expert in? I don't have any qualifications in online video, and my experience of publishing and business is extremely limited. So why am I, of all people,

asked to speak about these things at conferences and why do I get lots of emails from people asking for advice?

It's because an 'expert' is not what you think it is.

Here are a few modern approaches to achieving "expertise" that you can leverage. The first, for which I'm grateful to Nick Williams for, says that an expert is someone who knows more than 80 percent of the population about a specific thing. That's not a hugely difficult place to get to, he argues. First, subscribe to the top three blogs in the area, and then head to Amazon and buy two or three of the best selling books on the subject. Study them all thoroughly, and then take what you learned and start creating with it - for example, by starting a blog. Don't position yourself as an expert, but start asking questions and let others join your learning journey. Be generous. After a while, you can offer a free course in your subject, maybe at a local college, and produce a free ebook available on your website. With these in place - believe it or not - you can be in a position to start offering a paid service.

It's often not about knowing all there is to know, but about asking the right questions.

Here's another approach to gaining expertise, this time inspired by Chris Guillebeau. Take $100 and spend it taking as many experts in your particular field out for coffee as you can. That's probably between 10-15 people. Tell them you want to be like them one day and rinse them for how they got to where they are. If they're business-folk, find out how they run their business. If they're writers, find out their technique. People are always happy to talk about this sort of stuff. For a $100 investment,

you'll have taken more than a dozen one-to-one workshops with the best people in the field. Take this knowledge, and follow the other steps from the previous approach.

And finally, here's a third approach, which I heard from Dane Maxwell, and it suggests thinking differently about what type of expert we are. Our 20th century approach to expertise posits that you have to be an expert in something specific. Say, an expert in building iPhone apps. Or an expert in audio slideshows. But that's very limiting. If no-one needs an audio slideshow today, you're out of work. What if, instead, you become an expert in identifying and solving problems, and you do it by assembling more specific experts around a common goal. Then, argues Maxwell, the world is your oyster. You could compare this person to a movie producer. He or she identifies a problem ("Greek inspired blockbusters are going to be huge next summer, but our studio doesn't have one") and then takes the initiative to solve it ("Let's produce one"); they do this by assembling a party of experts: first the screenwriter, then a director, then the cast and so on. Each of those people are experts in their own field, but they need an expert problem-solver to drive the project forward.

Be that kind of expert and you could be anything.

All three of these approaches have one thing in common: they all involve action - *doing* something. They don't involve studying, or taking exams, or getting letters after your name. As Neils Bohr famously once said "An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field.". You only make all those mistakes by getting busy doing.

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goodbye mainstream media (it's been fun) \\

I published this post in the end of 2010, at the height of the wikileaks furore. In it I explain why I lost faith in the mainstream media.

It sparked an interesting debate in the comments which you can read here. It was published before the phone hacking scandal in the UK and the subsequent Leveson Inquiry, but makes an interesting read in light of those events.

Interestingly, the 'time problem' I discuss below was not considered by Lord Leveson.

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The past weeks since the Wikileaks Cable release, has seen the first, sustained, clash between two ages: a new era of complete online freedom and transparency (and all that this entails, good and bad); versus the old world of secrecy, authority and control. And it's been paralleled in a clash between a new way of doing journalism and the way the traditional, mainstream media does it.

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As someone very much straddling both sides of the fence, so to speak, it has given me a huge amount to think about. I have now come to the conclusion that the future of journalism will not come in any shape or form from the current established media – at least in its present form.

I want to state that here and now because it is something I have not said publicly before: the future of journalism does not lie with the mainstream media. I am not suggesting it will get replaced by blogs or news startups – it will continue to exist. But anyone looking to it to breed a strong, sustainable and effective craft in the decades ahead – that genuinely performs a fourth-estate role – is looking in the wrong place.

It's taken me a long time to come to this conclusion, and it's the result of a long string of personal events.

Of mice and mephedrone

I've described before on this blog how I quit my job in the mainstream media back in September 2009. At the time I was working for a well-established, popular and profitable commercial radio station in Yorkshire, England. I had the privilege of being part of a news team who consistently beat our local rivals in relevancy and quality of our news, despite far smaller resources.

Earlier this year, I found myself back in the newsroom, sitting in the same chair – for a short period of time. I'd returned to do a couple of weeks of freelancing, to see old friends and keep my skills sharp.

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My return coincided with one of the big media blowouts of the year (although one which has now almost entirely been forgotten). Two teenage boys had been found dead and Humberside Police suggested it may have been the result of a new, and legal drug, mephedrone. Mephedrone has lots of sexy nicknames, like M-Cat and meow-meow and was instant news-media sugar.

For us, both boys were from our local patch, just south of the Humber estuary. A big local story then, and we immediately kicked into action. Over the next two weeks we diligently reported all the details of the story: reaction from local health experts, the latest from Humberside Police, growing pressure for the drug to be banned; statements from the Health Secretary Alan Johnson (who, helpfully was also a local MP); and then how Britain's senior drugs expert Professor David Nutt resigned in protest at that decision.

Finally, on my last day, we reported the funerals of the two boys. Within days, the drug had been banned – the one of the quickest changes in legislation in the UK in years.

At the end of the two weeks, I returned to London and we all felt we had done an excellent job – we had done good journalism.

Except, for one thing. The two teenagers did not die from mephedrone. In fact, they had never even taken it. This didn't emerge until nearly two months later, and when it did, it barely registered in the mainstream media.

And I came to a cold and uncomfortable conclusion: this year I have participated fully in the mainstream media for just two weeks. My only achievement in that fortnight has been to per-

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petuate a national myth, to compound an echo-chamber, to package more lies and unwittingly sell them as truths.

Here's the crux: I am not, on the whole, a bad journalist. The journalism we did was exactly the same as every other news outlet in those two weeks.

Looking back, we should have challenged the police press release. We should have actually asked what mephedrone was, instead of going with what our news wires were saying. When the most accepted expert on drugs in the UK resigned, we should perhaps have wondered if he had a point. And we should have waited for the toxicology reports before linking the deaths to it.

Of course, none of these things are possible inside the mainstream news cycle, which is why it has become so distorting and dangerous. The actions of thousands of journalists telling half truths here and there, and passing on unchallenged information as fact from 'reliable sources' creates a foghorn for lies on a giant scale.

Iraq and The News You Don't See

In 2010 campaigning journalist John Pilger made a documentary about the Iraq conflict called The War You Don't See.

I was at a preview screening of the film, followed by a live Q&A with Pilger himself. The film makes this same point, except with far more dangerous lies than legal highs. In fact, he takes on what has become the greatest single lie of the 21st century so far – the reasons for invading Iraq in 2003 – and points the blame squarely at the mainstream media.

His film tries to show how our most respected news outlets: CBS

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News, The New York Times, Observer, BBC News and ITV News in particular failed to effectively challenge the legitimacy of the war in Iraq. In fact, never mind failed: the mainstream media did not even try to challenge its legitimacy. The film has quite extraordinary confessions from Observer and BBC Journalists (including Rageh Omar) who look back with shame (their words) at their reportage from the time.

But again, they were not doing anything other than follow the cues of their news organisations and the popular narrative of the time. Inside the news machine, they could hardly have done anything else.

The films concludes government propaganda machines have become so fantastically sophisticated – and they are successfully hoodwinking journalists on a regular basis.

Pilger is also very critical of embedding journalists. As a reporter who was embedded in Iraq (albeit very briefly, in 2009) I can see why.

When you are in the pockets of the military (they house you, transport you, guide you and feed you) objectivity is near impossible. Even if you can emotionally detach yourself from your hosts, on most embeds you see what the military want you to see, how they want you to see it. My very affable Media Ops guide, was prone to pointing out all the positive things the army were doing in his soft friendly tones; it was hard to disbelieve him.

And we went along with it, some more than others. Quite remarkably, one print journalist offered her copy to the Media Ops officer to 'check it before I email it home'. It must have been like

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Christmas come early for the MOD.

The new 'fifth estate?'

And so to Wikileaks, the stateless organisation that has given pretty much everyone something to think about.

I was invited to debate Wikileaks' impact on the future of traditional journalism on Al-Jazeera English with, among others, journalism heavyweight Robert Fisk. In our debate he argued that Wikileaks shows mainstream journalists up in a very bad way – he said they've become lap dogs, while Assange hands out the scraps.

While I think that sentiment is unfair to the scores of journalists at The Guardian, Der Spiegel, New York Times and others who have been doing good legwork sifting through thousands of documents, I do think it shows how passive the mainstream media has become.

Wikileaks publishing the unsorted data is not journalism – however it is an act of journalism, and the most significant since the MPs expenses scandal and Watergate before that.

And it has not been done by journalists. If anything, the success of Wikileaks represents a milestone failure for the mainstream media in the uncovering of truth and the holding of authority to account.

The more I am convinced of the need to challenge the authoritarian behaviour of our governments in the years ahead, the less I feel convinced the mainstream media has the capability or willingness to do it.

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So if not the mainstream media, what?

Speaking after the preview of his documentary, John Pilger put his faith in new independent journalists, free from the legacy costs and attitudes of the big news machine and authority itself. He echoed ideas you will have read from me before: the internet has made it faster, cheaper and easier to create and publish content – and that gives these independent reporters a new platform and a new advantage.

It's a future predicted by Richard Sambrook writing about the future of War Reporters for the Reuters Institute. The days of the khaki-wearing Corkers, working their way from hotel lobby to hotel lobby are numbered, he says; but in their place a new, independent – and younger – generation of multimedia journalists can emerge.

I agree. Brave and creative journalists, willing to take risks and innovate online might just be some future protection from corruption, incompetence and abuse of power, which the Cable leaks have shown are all thriving in our 'democratic' governments.

I can't pretend to know the specifics of this future, or even whether it could do a better job than the current mainstream approach. But I do know we need to support and encourage these independent journalists whatever path they take. Our schools and colleges push journalism students through courses towards full time employment, fodder for the hungry news machine. Instead they need to be encouraging them to make a difference in the years to come.

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So…

At first I was unsure about whether Wikileaks was a good thing. Then I watched the footage from the Apache gunship circling over the streets of an Iraqi town, and mowing down more than a dozen people, including two Reuters cameramen, a father and his two children.

The film, made public by Wikileaks – and not by journalists – revealed the value the US military puts on a human life and, in stark black and white, how our governments have lied repeatedly to our faces. And worst of all, how our mainstream media have served but to amplify those lies.

So I'm sorry mainstream media. It's been fun; but me, I'm done.

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laid off: and what to do about it

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Research by the University of Central Lancashire on job opportunities for journalists, makes grim – if predictable – reading.

Laid Off, a survey conducted by Francois Nel, in partnership with journalism.co.uk concluded that there are between 30%-40% fewer jobs available for journalists than there were ten years ago. Meanwhile, the number of students enrolling on journalism courses has gone up – it is currently at its highest number and its highest proportion of all undergrad courses.

It was figures like this which prompted me to write Next Generation Journalist: 10 New Ways to Make Money in Journalism in 2010, a downloadable e-book with advice on looking for opportunities among the bad news.

Chapter 7 of Nel's report asks "what are journalists doing next?" – and this is what makes the grimmest reading. Of all the 134 respondents, 23% had found full time work again, 42% were still looking. Of those who'd found more work, the majority were freelancing.

The one phrase that doesn't appear at all is 'starting my own business' or 'becoming an entrepreneur'. Not one of the re-

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spondents had any intention, it seemed, of using their journalism skills to plug an information gap and provide a new product or service to an audience. (It may have been that they were not asked about this either).

Thing is, the more I look around, the more I see there being a real need for people like this. The number of niches out there, and verticals within those niches, is almost countless. And if anything, it's becoming cheaper and faster to do it than ever before. Rarely easier, but cheaper and faster.

To paraphrase Seth Godin, the majority of people in the world are happy just to observe and let others take the lead. There's a shortage of people who see opportunity where everyone else sees a threat; willing to take the initiative, to enthusiastically accept responsibility for solving a problem which isn't necessarily their's to solve. "Initiative is a rare skill" Godin says, "and therefore a valuable one."

David Parkin could have been like the majority of journalists, when he left the Yorkshire Post in 2007. He could have gone into education, or PR, or maybe tried to get a job at a national newspaper. Instead he decided to become a leader to a community, to create something new and take responsibility for a problem. He founded thebusinessdesk.com, a unique news service for regional businesses in central and North West England.

Within a year it became a thriving publishing business.

Maybe just one or two laid off journalists might read this and be

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inspired to launch their own business. The majority though, will wonder whether thebusinessdesk.com is hiring.

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hold the front page: I haven't got a clue \\

This article was first published in May 2010, in response to an article on how to get into journalism, published in the Times Education Supplement.

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'Hold the Frontpage, I want to be on it' by Ed Caesar paints a predictably bleak picture for journalism students graduating this summer.

"…almost every week I receive an email from some poor sap wanting to know how to break into the business" he says. And what advice can said poor sap expect to receive from Mr. Caesar?

"Today, you'll need luck, flair, an alternative source of income, endless patience, an optimistic disposition, sharp elbows and a place to stay in London."

Charming.

The article then goes on to interview five or six people who have had the luck, flair, patience, trust fund and London pad neces-

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sary to get a job on the Mirror, Daily Mail, Telegraph etc. And what advice can they give?

"Many graduates simply turn up on work experience and refuse to leave. It worked for me" says one.

Caeser gets one thing right: he realises journalism is changing. The advice he has sought, however, is for an era in the industry heading towards the grave.

He is stuck in the mindset that to have any career worth having in journalism it has to be working on a national newspaper or big broadcaster, and it has to be earned through unpaid work, desperate pleas to those already inside, a lot of luck, and presumably some sexual favours too.

But he completely misses, or ignores, two large elephants stuffed into the room. One is the steady decline of legacy publishing organisations - they have further to sink, and a job with them offers no more security than being freelance. And the second is the opportunity created by new ways of publishing and new platforms.

It seems Caesar hasn't even thought about it.

The very concept that the next generation of journalists might take control of their careers, become the chess player and instead of the chess piece seems alien to him; that these 'poor saps' might see opportunity where he only sees despair.

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So here's my advice: if you're just starting out in journalism ignore his advice. While you're at it, don't spend hours squeezing the desperation out of a desperate email to that sub on a national newspaper you chatted to briefly at some conference somewhere. And don't think you should give up just because you're poor, don't live in a big city or because Ed Caesar says you should.

Instead, do this:

Start looking for the exciting new opportunities presented by this wonderful digital age we are entering.

Ask how you can combine the passions and skills you have with a demand in the market.

Or better still, commit to learning some new skills. Teach yourself how to film and edit simple video, and how to make basic audio slideshows so you can do as much of it as possible without having to hire expensive outside companies. Learn how to build a simple website using WordPress which could one day be the platform for a news business.

Start making things - magazines, books, podcasts and films. Start them. Finish them. Publish them, even if you have no-one to publish to.

The Next Generation Journalist is emerging, to whom, Caesar's advice is completely redundant. It's up to you which path you chose.

Caesar's conclusion is, again, predictably bleak.

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"Just as belts are tightened and we are attempting to map our future in the internet age, the legions of graduates keep coming — arts degrees and journalism diplomas in hand — to join the party. Are they, by attempting to start their journalism careers in 2010, making what the hero of Joseph O'Neill's Netherland calls "a historic mistake"?"

The only '"historic mistake'" to make is to ignore the fantastic opportunity to reshape journalism and publishing we now face. And it's an opportunity which won't last forever.

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Must read:

Tribes: we need you to lead us
by Seth Godin

Click here to see it on Amazon

when everyone's a publisher: a manifesto for quality

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I

You could summarise the big change in our industry most simply like this: everybody is now a publisher.

Anyone can start a blog, write and publish a book, make and distribute a film, record and launch a podcast, and - if they do it right - reach an audience of millions or maybe even more.

It's great for everyone, except those who used to make a lot of money from being the publisher. It's a bit like realising your favourite, quiet cool bar, where the barman knows you by name, has been discovered by the masses and now you're stuck queuing twenty minutes to get a drink.

What do publishers do when everybody turns up to the party? How do you stand out from the crowd?

II

Technology has made it quick, cheap and easy to publish. And that's the big problem nowadays - the stuff everyone does is quick, cheap and easy. Which means it's noise.

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I mean, what's special about publishing a blog post of your reaction to the latest big news story, when it took you 20 minutes to write, based on an idea you had on the bus? What's special about curating your favourite instagram pictures? It takes you a second per picture - it's quick cheap and easy to you, and it's quick cheap and easy to your audience too.

Sharing something, liking something has the same problem. It's too easy, and ultimately it's meaningless. Robin Sloan makes the point eloquently in his Tap Essay - when we like something we're saying "this is cool, you should look at this too" - but then we never go back to it.

Chris Guillebeau once said that if you want to get noticed, you have to do something worth noticing.

Tossing off a blogpost once a week is easy, but spending 100 hours crafting an ebook or a film is not. It requires hard work, commitment, expense - in time and money - and love. It is worth noticing. It is signal.

III

This is a manifesto for the professional publisher in the 21st century. And I don't mean you need a payroll and a job title to call yourself a publisher. A so-called professional who's publishing pictures of cats instead of crafting something high quality is an amateur compared to the sixteen year old who builds something with love in her bedroom.

So I mean anyone - *anyone* - who is committed to producing meaningful work.

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This is a manifesto to embrace quality - and all the hard work, dedication, love, sweat, failure and recovery that comes with it. "You gotta bet the farm on quality", Brian Storm once told me.

How can you make your publishing work higher quality?

Encourage quality

Involve more people - collaborate. The best things in the world are made by teams and not individuals.

Embrace creativity - have an environment where new crazy ideas are pitched. This is how some of the most memorable scenes in the early Disney scenes were devised.

Refine and iterate - the best products are made through a process of fast prototyping - iteration. In software it's known as the agile method. Your work should be a rough sketch that changes quickly.

Have lots of test audiences - every week, the whole This American Life office sit down and listen to the pieces that are going into the program. In particular, the producers want to know the moment people get bored. This way they can keep refining.

Go through lots of ideas - your first idea is never your best, so be committed to coming up with more than you need. Pixar do this a lot - and even animate different versions of whole scenes to see which one is best.

Challenge yourself to break - the best creatives are always biting off just a little bit more than they can chew each time. It's more painful, harder work but ultimately you grow.

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Take your craft seriously - if you call yourself a storyteller make it your business to understand narrative architecture. If you're a writer you must be reading and writing prolifically.

Ultimately, quality - real, substantive quality - is the hardest thing to genuinely achieve. This is both good and bad news. It's bad news because you're going to have to bust a nut to make quality stuff, and there's no shortcut: just commitment and hard work over time.

But the good news is that for this reason, a remarkably small number of people will make it - many won't even bother. For the ones brave enough to try this is a race worth winning: it is a race to the top.

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Must read

Fish: a tap essay by Robin Sloan

Click here to view on iTunes

big reasons to stay small \\

"Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius—and a lot of courage—to move in the opposite direction."

Albert Einstein

Do you know how many people are employed in the two Chinese factories that makes Apple's iPads and iPhones?

Well, according to a Guardian article & NGO investigation, the Shenzhen and Chengdu factories house 500,000 workers. That's larger than the population of Manchester, UK or Atlanta, Georgia.

The industrial concept of 'economies of scale' has led us to create mammoth corporations, in the belief that the efficiency makes them more profitable. It's a daunting prospect for new entrepreneurs. But very few consider the benefits of doing the opposite – of running an intentionally small company.

If you're a journalist dreaming of dipping your toe into business

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waters, staying small is where it's at.

Every project I start, I keep intentionally small, and intentionally simple.

The risks are lower for a start. When you stick to being small your overheads are much lower and you invest less time and money. If the idea eventually fails, you haven't lost too much, but gained plenty of experience. It's the old adage: fail fast, fail often.

You are profitable sooner. You don't have a business until the money you bring in exceeds the money you spend. Up until that point you're running a hobby, not a business. Staying small – keeping your overheads low – means you'll be in profit sooner, and your profits will be higher. Technology has made it possible to start a business for under $100.

It's an edge over the competition as well. If you're going into competition against established brands, online magazines or production companies, your small size is a big advantage. With no office to rent, stationary or admin staff to pay, you can focus on investing in the business itself.

You can do things a lot faster. You can launch faster. If it's clear the business needs to go in a different direction you can move that way almost instantly; a larger company needs to consult its board, its shareholders and put strategies in place. Cue big delays…

People make the mistake of believing that being bigger and more complex makes them better. I think the opposite: the more sim-

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ple and small your business is the better your product or service is going to be.

So, if you're toying with the idea of launching your own news business – an online magazine, a hyperlocal blog, or a design agency, then set yourself a challenge of doing it small:

The microbusiness challenge

Challenge yourself to launch your next project for less than $100, in less than two weeks, and make profit in just two months.

Over Christmas 2010 I launched studio .fu, my online video production company on these terms. After I wrote my idea down I kept reducing it, removing the complexity and convolution. I narrowed my offering down to just online video and motion graphics. I challenged myself to launch it on less than £100 (it actually cost me £60) and in less than two weeks (I did it in 5 days). Within two weeks I had my first gig – which instantly knocked me into profit.

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Must read:

Rework by Jason Fried

Click here to view on Amazon

advice for a snowy day \\

I was walking home through London last night as the first of the latest snow began to fall. I love how quiet and still everything gets as the snow settles.

It's a good opportunity for reflecting and thinking, so next time you get the chance, take a long walk in the snow.

On my mind: innovation and the urgent need for it in the publishing industry.

Innovation isn't easy though. It requires imagination, bravery, lateral thinking, creativity…and risk. Real innovation is an uphill struggle. Breaking the mould in storytelling, video journalism, interactivity and entrepreneurship requires going against conventional wisdom, going against other people, and going against the voice in your head telling you to give up.

And it's not easy.

So if you need a pick-up, just look outside the window, at the snow. On the pavement, grass or road there'll be two differ-

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ent paths. One that's already been trodden, laden with scores of footprints and bicycle tracks.

And another, untrodden path: a blank white canvas.

Which one will you go down?

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"Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path – and leave a trail."

Click here to tweet this

every day \\

Here's the best advice I can give you about succeeding as a creative entrepreneur, whatever field you're in, and it is very simple.

Whatever it is you want to do, you must produce it and consume it every day.

Stephen King's popular book about the craft of writing On Writing makes this point very clearly:

"If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot."

If you want to write, you must write every day and you must read every day. If you want to be a web designer you must design something every day and you must study good web design every day. If you want to be a film maker, you must find time to make films every day and watch films every day.

You don't have to finish a film or a design a day, but you must devote a solid block of time to working on it.

Note there's a difference between 'simple' and 'easy' and this isn't easy. For many people, myself included, it involves getting up an hour or two before everyone else to put the work in before heading out to do the stuff that pays the bills. Or it means

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staying up late, or working on weekends (when I am writing this article, incidentally). It's not easy. But it is simple.

There are things to help you. I recently started using 750words – a clever little platform which nudges you to write 750 words of something every day. It doesn't matter what, it just has to be written.

If you have passion for your craft then this should come a little more easily. But even passionate people lose motivation and direction occasionally. These are the days where it is even more vital you keep producing and consuming. If you do it every day, even for just an hour, it becomes a habit (in other words: automatic). When you achieve this, your day won't feel right until you've done your thing. Stephen King admits he writes 365 days a year – even on Christmas Day – and for him "not working is the real work."

It doesn't have to be for long, and it doesn't even have to be productive or successful.

But it does have to be every day.

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Must read

On Writing by Stephen King

Click here to view on Amazon

on revolution \\

In January 2011, Egypt's 30-year-old regime fell.

The hundreds of thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square showed the rest of the world what persistent, peaceful protest can really achieve – in a short space of time.

The revolution in Egypt follows (but is not necessarily connected to) a series of major revolutions affecting the world this century. Most immediately the similar political ones in Tunisia and Yemen; but more importantly the revolutions in society, careers, technology – and yes, journalism, which are reforging the way the world works.

The fact is unavoidable: we live in revolutionary times.

These aren't the thoughts of a lone conspiracy theorist crackpot. I'm not the only, and certainly not the first person to write this. In fact, one of the smartest people on the planet – Sir Ken Robinson – has been saying it for ages. In this speech at the Aspen Institute he defines what revolution really is:

"…we are living in times of revolution. And I believe this is literally true; I don't mean it figuratively, like 'it's a bit like a revo-

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lution', or what we think of as a revolution, or what we've come to call a revolution. It is a revolution."

A revolution is a time when things you think are obvious turn out not to be. Things you take for granted turn out to be untrue. Things you do habitually turn out to be ineffective. And I believe that's where we are now, and the pace of this is picking up.

If you work in journalism, hopefully that last paragraph rings true.

If you're under 30, I think revolution will be the gift, and perhaps also the burden, of your generation. It certainly sets us apart from the baby-boomer generation before us. It is not for us to choose this burden, but it is in our power – and our responsibility – to live up to it.

All you have to do this: accept it; relish it; embrace it. Revolution is messy, so be prepared to get your hands dirty and your feet wet. You'll have to accept the conventional wisdom is wrong, and the things you might have taken for granted are untrue.

But whatever you do, don't resist it. Don't linger in the past, don't yearn for things to be the way they were. In a revolution, the Mubaraks always lose. And the only person who suffers when you do that is you.

For the last six years, this blog has been about a very specific revolution: the revolution in journalism; and about a very specific way of dealing with it: seeing opportunities where other

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people see threats; being entrepreneurial and creating your own luck…in other words embracing it. The revolution is why I quit my conventional job – and it's been a wild ride since.

I genuinely think there are unique and extraordinary opportunities to reshape our craft and our world (for the better) that our predecessors never had - if only we go for them. For as long as the revolution lasts, it is possible to bend spoons if you believe it can be done. But to do so you need to take risks, make your ideas happen, create change, lead other people and start movements…but do it now, because it won't last forever.

So seriously, jump in – the water's lovely.

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The fact is unavoidable: we live
in revolutionary times.

Click here to tweet this

advice from monty python \\

If Terry Gilliam were a 20-year-old nobody today, I have little doubt he would be all over the internet, with a Youtube, Audio-boo and Tumblr account, creating mashups, animations, films and the like.

He'd be one of the many people creating shareable stuff, probably using music without permission…and probably getting some of it taken down by Youtube.

Instead, he was lucky enough to be part of Monty Python in the 1960s and 70s, creating their instantly recognisable cut-out animations. I stumbled across this video recently, where Terry appears on what looks like a brilliant 70s children's art show on the BBC, the likes of which just aren't made any more.

After a rather odd title sequence which offers to teach you "something to your advantage" he explains how he produces his animations – and there's lots for the new generation of digital publishers to learn.

Very early on in the video, Terry says "the whole point of animation is to tell a story, tell a joke, express an idea. The technique itself doesn't really matter, whatever works is the thing to use."

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Terry is not animating for animation's sake, nor his own vanity. Each time, he has a story or a joke to tell, or an idea to share. The takeaway: make sure your own work, whether it is making a documentary, writing a blog or launching a podcast is more than just for the sake of it – you must have a meaning you want to express, somehow.

In a sequence that might shock many of us today, especially those versed in copyright, Terry confesses – well, he really just states – to using whatever he can find to create is now famous collages. He steals from magazines, books, paintings- literally whatever he can get his hands on. He says he loves old photographs because the faces are so expressive.

This is – I think – a wonderful attitude to have to creating content, and one that, luckily, enough amateur online publishers still have. Obviously, there are (often crossed) legal boundaries, but without their willingness to use other peoples' content we wouldn't have Newport State of Mind, these great Brian Cox spoofs, nor much of the expanded Star Wars expanded universe, now a big industry.

Terry uses felt-tip pens, sellotape and perspex to get the job done. Not very glamorous but it did the trick. He doesn't invest in expensive paper, or professional ink he just uses what's cheap. If you want to create multimedia stories – video, audio slide-shows, photographs and the like – you don't need to blow £2k on the priciest camera, when a Flipcam will do the job for you. People take extraordinary pictures with their iPhones too: Rich-

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ard Koci Hernandez creates wonderful images on his phone.

Wherever Terry could save time he did – even to the extent of replacing legs with wheels. In the surreal Monty Python universe that worked, but there are lessons for young publishers too: don't fret about creating perfection. Instead create a quantity of work – the more you make, the better you become.

If so, create a platform or a vehicle which forces you to create content regularly.

So there you go: even an old bit of BBC archive floating on Youtube holds lessons for new digital producers in the 21st century. Work fast, with whatever you can find, remix (within reason) and above all: do it to tell a story, make a point or express some kind of meaning.

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advice about money \\

I recently received an exciting letter from the bank.

I have finished repaying a so-called 'Career Development Loan' I took out when I graduated from my first degree six years ago. I took it out so I could afford to take a postgraduate diploma in broadcast journalism: one of those things which seemed like a good idea at the time.

What wasn't such a good idea was the £200 repayments I've had to make every month since 2007: a financial ball and chain round my neck. I've learned a lot about money in the last few years - most of it the hard way.

Money's a big issue, whether you're a freelancer or whether you're starting your own business. I recently gave a talk with journalist Alex Wood to City University's MA students about to embark on the world of work, and lots of the questions revolved around money. So I've put down some advice - things I've learned from hard experience - that almost no-one tells you at school.

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Do not borrow money - ever

Honestly, not if you can help it. It never ends well, even if you keep up your repayments, you're still down in a big way. Yes, I know this is a debt-economy or whatever and even governments can't avoid borrowing cash, but seriously, earn your own way in the world and live within your means.

Now I've cleared my big debt I'm not going back down that path. I have one credit card still, but I pay most of it off a month.

Sure, if you're into the Martin Lewis thing and fancy going through the hassle of transferring from one 0% to another go for it - only if you're savvy enough to keep on top of your repayments.

For the rest of us, it's just best to live within your means. You might not have an iPad, but there is a priceless freedom in not owing money.

Bootstrap...

There are lots of simple, effective ways to cut back on costs. I have a £6 cafetiere and every two weeks I buy a £2.50 pack of fresh coffee - and never go to Starbucks. I have reduced the amount of meat I eat and through some planning I've cut my weekly shop down to £15.

Swap the car for a bike and the gym for a pair of running shoes. Join the share economy - I have Spotify instead of CDs and Love-

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film instead of DVDs. I use AirBnB instead of going to hotels.

The same goes for business. Don't spend money on things you don't need. Your flat can double as an office, get a free wordpress install and a free theme and save thousands on the web designer.

...but not too much

In his book *The $100 Startup* Chris Guillebeau makes a good point that bootstrapping is good - but it can be taken too far. You don't want to get into a 'poverty mentality'. Instead of saying "how can I cut my expenditure to save money for my big project?" you should ask "How can I earn the money I need to start this big project?"

A micro example: say you want to buy Adobe InDesign. You have the cash but don't think you can justify splashing out. Don't bootstrap your way out of investing in the software. Instead buy it, and immediately build something with it that will earn you the money straight back. Selling £300 of ebooks is very achievable. Which brings me nicely to:

Know how to make and sell something

It is a crime that when we leave school most of us have no idea how to make a penny without first getting a job. If the world economies crashed tomorrow, the smartest, highest paid people would be screwed because they wouldn't have a clue how to earn anything without someone else to hire them first.

Get out of that rut now. Learn how to make something with

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your own hands and how to get it to market. It doesn't really matter what it is (it doesn't even have to be related to your job) but learn how it feels to build something and put it on sale. It could be an online training course or pairs of socks you knit and sell on Etsy.

Online commerce is a lot easier than high street retail but there are still lots of hurdles, like setting up with an online merchant, so use this as an opportunity to figure this stuff out.

Have less and be happy

Minimalism is a popular movement and has lots of advantages. Look around your apartment now and pick out ten things you don't really need or use. Then sell them, recycle them or give them to charity. I do this every year and it is a great way to clear the clutter. This goes for DVDs, books and yes, clothes.

I know people who hate their jobs but are trapped there because they've become accustomed to a standard of living. Ditch this and ditch your stuff, and you'll find a freedom money can't buy. Speaking of which:

There are three things you *should* spend money on

Firstly, experiences (instead of objects): you only get one trip on the merry-go-round so make sure you drink it all in. £100 for a day's gliding is money better spent than on a £100 pair of shoes.

Secondly, your own learning. Your education is worth investing in, it will pay dividends in the future. That means online training courses, seminars, books and classes. I've invested in all of those in the last year or so, and don't regret any of it.

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Thirdly, assets: these are the things which add value to your 'business' (whether that's freelancing or a company). They either help you make more money and, if worst comes to worst, you can sell them to raise funds. A laptop is an asset, renting an office is not.

Be ready to lose everything

The Stoics had it right 2,000 odd years ago. The best way to use money is to enjoy it when you have it, but be ready (and happy) to lose it should that happen. A good trick here is to vividly imagine (and write down) what that would look and feel like, which usually leads to the realisation that it wouldn't be all that bad.

No kidding, being terrified of losing what you have is a trap: it's paralysis. You're afraid to do anything in case it might cost you valuable dollars. It makes you afraid of uncertainty too, which I guarantee will limit your ambitions and achievements.

Let it go.

Don't worry about money - even for a second.

Which leads me nicely to the best advice anyone ever gave me about money. Not to worry about it.

I used to give myself ulcers worrying about how I was going to pay the next bill, or being angry at my bank for refusing an overdraft. Seriously, life is too short. A second spent thinking about money is a second you're not going to get back.

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Here's how I do it: the moment I catch myself stressing about money I consciously change the subject and think about something else - anything else. And then the stress stops. You might think that amounts to burying my head in the sand, but let me tell you, in the two years I've been doing that I've made more money and not less, meanwhile saving myself from some ulcers.

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"Seriously, life is too short. A second spent thinking about money is a second you're not going to get back."

Click here to tweet this

the beauty
of beta mode \\

I think everyone should have the word 'beta' after their name. In fact, I'm thinking of putting it on my website when I give it a redesign.

It's a reference you'll probably recognise to new websites and businesses which often first go public in 'beta mode'. It denotes the fact that they are still in a a process of testing, experimenting, failing and debugging. Gmail was famously in beta mode for more than five years.

Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn says the startup approach can be applied to real people: their lives and careers ought to be in 'permanent beta'. "We are all works in progress" he says.

Thing is, many people try to get out of the beta version of their lives as soon as possible, and into 'finished' mode: the complete career, the complete marriage, the house and car boxset.

And us creative types: online publishers, designers, film makers do the same thing when we make something new. We rush to get it into 'perfect mode' as swiftly as possible.

The problem with this approach to anything is it is extremely limiting.

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Firstly, it limits ideation and iteration: two important parts of any creative process. If you aim for a perfect first shoot, it means your first idea has to be the best. Therefore you ignore all other ideas. You're also less open to changing from that idea when something better comes along.

> Quick tip#1: your first idea is never the best one.

Some say a good approach is a 10:3:1 ratio. You come up with at least 10 ideas, whittle down to the top three, and then pick the best. I used a similar idea when I hosted a series of "future of publishing" meetups in my living room in 2010: I got people to brainstorm a large number of ideas around a problem, aiming for quantity over quality.

Secondly, and with more serious consequences, aiming for perfect limits your mindset. Rushing out of beta mode into finished mode makes you do dangerous things, like avoiding starting projects you don't know for certain will work or discarding projects you don't think will make any money.

What if you were always in beta?

Imagine how your life would be if, instead of aiming to get out of beta-mode, you relished being in it.

Imagine relishing experimentation, failure, uncertainty, being scared and unprepared. Think of the things it would make you do. The projects you would start for the hell-of-it, and the serendipity that would create. The places you would travel to just to see what it was like, the events you would go to just because.

We would be more bold and more experimental in our careers.

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Young people wouldn't feel pressured into a specific path early on, or feel like they couldn't move on to something completely different. More risky innovative projects would get started and finished, which in turn would affect and inspire more people. People wouldn't wait for permission or the 'right time' to come, to get going with something.

Quick tip #2: you don't need anyone's permission and the 'right time' never comes.

More people would get their hands dirty. We would stop trying to plan and prepare for things we can't control. And if things don't work out it's not a deal-breaking catastrophe, just an opportunity to take stock, change-up and pivot to something new.

That's what good startups do when they're in beta mode, because it's the best way to deal with the uncertainty of entrepreneurship. Isn't it time we accepted our lives & careers today are filled with just the same uncertainty?

Footnote

Since first publishing this post I've been thinking a lot about the practicalities of living life more experimentally. It's easier said than done: after all, how do you actually apply it?

It's a mindset first of all, which means you don't switch to it overnight. My conclusion is that is best done by conducting a constant series of mini-experiments, with all aspects of your life; collectively it builds up to a bigger experiment.

Taking the scientific approach, an experiment should be conducted to answer an unknown (ie, you can't know for certain

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whether it will work); it should be measurable (you should decide beforehand what success and failure are) and it should be temporary (ie work fast and prototype).

I'll be doing a lot more of this over the coming months.

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Must read

The Startup of You by Reid Hoffman

Click here to view on Amazon

working in television \\

I

Ask someone who works in television what they do, they'll tell you they do just that.

"I work in television" they'll say. Same with folks in radio too. And newspapers and magazines.

But skip down the road five years, and what happens when we're all watching IPTV, internet streamed through a television set? It's a pertinent question because when Hybrid-IPTV does arrive on the mass market, we will effectively have iTunes on our remote controls.

Never mind another dose of bland reality fodder from BBC One, or NBC – what about a niche documentary shot and uploaded by someone in Mexico? Or the latest interview by online video wunderkind Jamal Edwards on SBTV? They're both yours for $2.99, or perhaps less, all streamed straight to your living room.

Or perhaps even a sci-fi action movie, complete with top of the range special effects, made entirely independently from the Hollywood systems, for just a few thousand dollars? Gareth Edwards

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has already proven, with great finesse, that it can be done.

When we can get the internet and all its varied signal and noise through our TV sets, what will "working in television" mean? People talk about it as if it is a craft and a career – but actually a television is no different to Youtube, Twitter or Flickr: it is a platform.

<center>II</center>

Thing is, from an advertiser's point of view, it is becoming a disproportionately expensive one. Why pay £10,000 for a 30-second slot after Downton Abbey, when you could sponsor an independent drama series, or a magazine show on iTunes – aimed at your target customer – for far less?

And from a viewer's point of view, why watch something at a time decreed by a scheduler, when you can watch it at your leisure?

I'm not dismissing TV's past or present, nor the people or work that goes into it. Television as we know it has a future, and it is a future making some extraordinary, life changing shows.

But like newspapers before it, it will fight a difficult battle with its own legacy costs. Television is still eye-wateringly expensive to produce. Studio television is some of the most expensive, and that's declined so much, the BBC are now selling off their studio complex in West London.

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We'll have to redefine what we call things a little bit. Jamal Edwards wouldn't say he "works in Youtube" just because that's his platform. He probably says he's a film-maker – or even just a content creator. This (or something like it) might be the job-title of the future. And of course there'll be issues of quality, copyright, and too much noise – all things we've already proven we can solve together.

So if I was young and wanted to "work in television" I wouldn't bother competing with thousands of others for work experience at the BBC, or spend three years doing the Pret runs at an Indie, just so I could have my shot at pitching segments for Gordon Ramsey's Strictly Come Cash In The Attic SOS: the celebrity special.

No sir, I would pick up a camera and start making something instead.

Out there, on the internet already, "content creators": ordinary people, small businesses and independent film makers, are proving that remarkable, popular video can be made with little or no money. Its limitation is that viewers have to peer at our work in a small box on their laptops…but one day soon, hybrid-IPTV will project our films onto 45-inch plasma TVs.

And when that happens, "working in television" won't mean anything at all.

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you can learn anything \\

I

It was late on a Friday night and we were all drunk.

My flatmate Rob picked up some juggling balls and offered me a challenge. "I bet I can teach you to juggle in 10 minutes" he said.

I remember trying to learn how to juggle when I was about 12 years old: a short lived experience full of frustration and ultimately failure. But now seemed as good a time as any to try again.

Over the next 10 minutes, Rob showed me the basic technique, starting with one ball, then two, and finally three. When the 10 minutes were up, I had managed to juggle all three balls about once or maybe twice before I dropped them – but I got the general technique.

Then something interesting happened. As everyone else went to bed, I stayed up and kept practicing. I tried juggling the three balls, and dropped them. Then I picked them up, and tried again. I practiced this over and over and over – until four in the morn-

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ing. Silently throwing the balls up in the air, dropping them, picking them back up.

As I was doing it, I could almost feel my brain making new connections. Arm movements which seemed awkward an hour before were beginning to feel more natural. Soon I could juggle for two rotations, and then three, before dropping the balls.

II

This was the moment I realised something: I absolutely love learning new things. And I realised that learning something new is as simple as picking up the technique, and then working at it, silently, humbly, unflinchingly, until it sticks. They say your brain is like a muscle – you can train it new habits and build strength by regular repetition.

Of course, most people give up before then. Learning French seems pretty romantic until you factor in the hours of repeating irregular verbs over and over in your head. Every boy dreams of becoming a footballer, until it comes to the moment he has to practice hundreds of penalty kicks over and over in the rain. Everyone signs up to a new gym membership after Christmas with dreams of toning up, until they realise this involves dozens of painful press-ups, over and over again.

III

I've decided to take a route where I make myself learn relentlessly with machine-line procedure: first I study the key points

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and then I practice, putting in the repetitive legwork until the muscle is strong. I won't ever make it to Malcolm Gladwell good, but good enough. So far this year, I've been teaching myself some new web design skills: HTML 5, CSS3 and Jquery, building on my French, and hopefully a new musical instrument too.

This attitude to learning is essential in this modern world where technology seems to continually create new platforms, new workflows and new disciplines. In 2010 I taught myself how to animate motion graphics following this idea, something which soon became a source of income.

How to learn anything

So what's the best way to learn? Luckily for us journalists, producers and publishers access to knowledge we need is pretty easy. But there are things you can do make it easier on yourself.

Find free or cheap resources: if you need video skills, hit the Vimeo Video School. Anything code related, tap up the Code Academy. You can even learn how to code your own iPhone app at Stanford University – for free! For everything in between I highly recommend Lynda.com. They've got a huge range of courses on design, coding and other key software, and a month subscription costs $25 (£16).

Learn on a need-to-know basis: you need to be smart about this sort of learning. There are no exams, no coursework: you decide the curriculum. So don't waste your time learning something if it's not going to be useful to you. What I mean is, if you want to learn how to make small styling adjustments to your WordPress blog, there's no need to delve in to the history, syntax and ins and outs of CSS. Just get what you need.

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Allocate regular practice time: this is where the legwork comes in – the regular practice, the bit where you create those grey matter connections. Depending on how intense you want to make it, somewhere between an hour a day and an hour a week will do it. Keeping motivation going is tough though, which is where the next tip is the killer…

Give yourself a project: quite simply, the best way to learn something new is to turn your learning into an exciting creative project. In the education world it's called experiential, or work-based learning, and experts are sure that people learn better when they're excited by a particular goal. I haven't been learning HTML step-by-step in factory fashion. Instead, I challenged myself to redesign my personal website from scratch and learnt on the job.

At the heart of all this, is the belief that there is nothing you can't learn, regardless of age, income, background or education. Director David Mamet puts it well:

"…you get someone who knows how to take a picture, or you learn to how take a picture; you get someone who knows how to light or you learn how to light. There's no magic to it. Some people will be able to do some tasks better than others – depending upon the degree of their technical mastery and their aptitude for the task. Just like playing the piano. Anybody can learn how to play the piano…There's almost no-one who can't learn to play the piano…The same thing is true of cinematography and sound mixing. Just technical skills."

Finally, an important note about learning. Too often, we use education as a procrastination tool. Someone who wants to make

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a documentary (or says they want to) will go out and buy a big book about documentary making for beginners. What they should do instead is pick up a camera and start filming. Learning is best done by doing.

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your unique route into journalism
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How do you get into journalism?

The common advice will tell you to start off with some work experience, followed by an expensive undergraduate or post-graduate degree, some unpaid internships and - if you're lucky, they say - a low-paid job.

This route will be familiar to anyone working in journalism as a typical career path into the industry. The sad thing is most people who want to be a correspondent will do their best to follow this track, because they assume it is the only way. And they'll spend a career in a never ending race with all the other people trying to do the same thing, full of the stress, envy and critical comparison that comes with it.

10 years ago that was the only way to do it. But of course, everything has changed…including this.

Whatever it is you want to do with your life: be a BBC News foreign correspondent, edit a magazine, make a documentary about climate change, write a book, be an NPR producer, and every other job in our industry in-between, remember there is no single route. There is no right way.

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There is only your way.

That'll be news to some because most of us think there is a career path of some kind, as if getting your foot on the ladder with an internship is the only way to becoming an editor. But actually there are countless ways – ways that no-one has tried before, because they were too busy working on their CV, slogging it out as a junior reporter, and all of the other things we think we have to do to make it.

It's the same reason people wear suits to work for decades, pull long hours for days on end and work for free when they really shouldn't. What it boils down to is not living your life on your terms.

I haven't worn a suit for near on three years now, and I don't intend to start anytime soon. In the last two and a half years I've left the race to run my career on my terms – at my own speed. I know roughly where I want to get to, and I come up with plans to make that happen. Then I arrange my schedule for the week or month to suit that plan.

Don't get me wrong, it's not easy, and there have been lots of hiccups, false starts and outright failures along the way. But when I look back on my career so far, I know one thing: I've done it in a way that is uniquely me – and no-one could ever do it exactly the same way.

Most of us would probably prefer to follow the path well-trod-

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den, because it seems safer and more sensible. But the real challenges, and the real rewards, lie in straying off the path, exploring your career on your own terms.

Whether you decide to do this is up to you. But whatever direction you take, don't waste time competing in a race with others. Run/sprint/jog/walk your own race, at your own speed.

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Whatever it is you want to do with your life: remember there is no single route. There is no right way.

Click here to tweet this

hard **work** \\

Here is something that it has taken me far too long to realise in my life:

If you want to achieve big things you have to work really, really hard, over a long period of time.

That's success in 20 words. That is all there is to it. And there is no short cut.

This won't sound like anything new. After all, champion athletes, millionaires and successful celebrities, when asked how they got to where they are, all say the same thing: it's about good luck and *lots of hard work*.

The hard work is the bit that we skim over in our minds. We skip straight to the success part.

I write this as a sort of confession. For too long I have tried to avoid hard work, partly as a result of how I was taught at school. If something looks too much like hard work, I find an excuse to quit or look for easier to achieve alternatives.

I chose easy stories over difficult ones, projects I could see the outcome of, over ones which were too ambitious to fully comprehend yet.

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Fine, except things that are easy to achieve are not remarkable.

Fine again, except we live in a world only notices remarkable.

As a result, I haven't achieved anything on the scale to which I aspire to. I could blame bad luck, or I could blame the absence of 'the right opportunity' but they'd both be lies. In fact, the reason I am not successful is because I haven't put the work in.

And I won't be until I do.

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If you create a journalism product, say an online magazine, here's a question for you: is your product finishable?

I once saw Tom Standage, digital editor at The Economist speak in London. He was quite clear that what the Economist sells is 'finishability': that moment of catharthis when you put down the magazine having completed it.

In a world where the stream of information coming into our minds is non-stop (I never seem to keep my Google Reader empty!), providing a product that is 'finishable' could be a simple way to make sure people enjoy it – and therefore come back for more.

Lots of products, such as The Huffington Post, The Guardian or The Atlantic, provide you with almost stupid amounts of content everyday – an unending barrage of choice.

But few seem brave enough to offer less: instead making the content they do make really remarkable.

Finishability is also a valuable asset among the freelancers, starters and entrepreneurs of the journalism world. Coming up with ideas is not good enough. Starting projects is no good either: none of it means anything unless you finish.

And as a tribute to the value of finishability, I am making this article - and this book - decidedly…finishable.

✖

end matter

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