

# The Changing Face of News

## Kevin Sutcliffe

Head of News Programming, EU, VICE News

## Jim Waterson

Deputy Editor, BuzzFeed UK

## Sarah Marshall

Social Media Editor, EMEA, Wall Street Journal

## Chair: Charlie Beckett

Director, POLIS, LSE

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710  
[www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Charlie Beckett

Hi, very good evening to you all. Welcome to Chatham House, it's wonderful to see so many people here tonight. I was just saying to Kevin, I suddenly realized that, I mean these guys report on the world, I suddenly realized that there's the people who are supposed to be running it, are in here tonight, or want to run the world anyway. I think you're right to be here because how the world gets run, I think, depends quite a bit on the kind of news media that's out there to inform people and as we've seen increasingly, news media becoming part of the story in quite horrible ways, as we saw in France, but very interesting ways, generally, I think.

So tonight we're going to see how that news industry has changed. Some practical notes, I like this, it's Chatham House, but this isn't Chatham House rules, this is very much on the record. You're very welcome to comment on proceedings on, well anywhere you like really, obviously, but if you're going to comment on Twitter, the hashtag is #CHEvents. Please stick your mobiles on silent and be aware that there's going to be a reception afterwards.

What is the future of news? For me, I should explain that I'm a former journalist. I used to work at places like the BBC and Channel 4 News. I am now a professor at the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE. I also run a think tank, a journalism think tank at the LSE called POLIS that has a big annual conference on March 27<sup>th</sup>, which you're all invited to come to.

So for me, the future of news, it's a business model basically, talking about it at least, but these guys do it. On my left, Kevin Sutcliffe really is one of the most influential and incredibly prolific producers of TV, current affairs over the last time, over the last period. He's either been making or commissioning some really fantastic hard-hitting documentaries, domestic stuff, international stuff at the BBC and Channel 4, but he is now head of programming for VICE in Europe and again producing some amazing, high profile films.

In the middle, Jim Waterson, typical young journalist, ex Oxford, ex City AM, now at BuzzFeed where he writes stuff like, and you're going to hate me for quoting this kind of stuff, where he writes stuff like, '21 Pictures of Politicians in Wellies Staring at Floods'. You're all probably familiar with BuzzFeed. If you're not, you really need to get familiar with it. It's hiring, alongside Jim, some of the finest young journalists in Britain today and you really should prepare yourself for a media *Guardian* headline along the lines of, 'It's going to be a BuzzFeed Election'.

At the end, finally, Sarah Marshall. She works for a bastion, if you like, of old media, which is Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal*. Though she really is a true digital native, before the *Wall Street Journal* she worked at journalism.co.uk and so is a real, real expert on how journalism is made in the digital era as well as making it herself. Again, if you think you know the *Wall Street Journal*, go and have a look at it again. It's in the process of an incredible transformation as it goes online and it goes into social networks.

So the idea tonight, these three are going to explain what they do and what they think's different and perhaps try and project into the future and it will be your chance to ask

questions, so please, get your questions ready for when they've finished. I'm going to kick off, Kevin Sutcliffe, VICE News.

## Kevin Sutcliffe

VICE News launched in March last year. It's the fastest growing news channel on YouTube. We've 1.23 million subscribers and 160 million video views since we launched. We've, in the last couple of months we've been putting out things like Islamic State Documentary, we have dispatches from Ukraine, Syria. We have a form of journalism that is immersive, raw, embedded and authentic. We're still finding our way. We're still trying to work out if that way of reporting is fresh, new and trying to work our way forward through that.

About a year ago I was asked by Shane Smith who runs VICE Media to come along and help launch what turned out to be VICE News. It came out of a notion and it was a notion that was very familiar to me from being in television, that television news, current affairs and often documentary attract an older audience. The sort of logic in editorial meetings I went to, Channel 4 and the BBC, that's because young people, millennials 16 to 35 aren't interested in the world. They are too busy playing computer games or that their interest will last about three minutes.

VICE had started to put out documentaries about very real things – Mali, the coup in Mali, Egypt, the way the Arab Spring was unfolding. These documentaries were incredibly popular. They were long, their engagement times of 20 to 30 minutes and they were getting hundreds of thousands of video views. So VICE decided that actually people are wrong. There's a great interest in that age group in the world. It's just that how it was being presented was the issue. If you look across most television at the moment, you'll see formatting that's out of date, it's run its course, it talks down to people, it is not representative of 16 to 35 year olds. They don't come to television news, particularly. It skews very old and that's because it doesn't speak to them.

So with that sort of in the back of our minds we sort of tried to start to make what we think is a different form of television news and documentary. So what does that look like? It looks like 'Ambushed in South Sudan', a film where two of our journalists go on a journey with the South Sudanese army to take a town. It's a 25 minute film in which you experience this army trying to take a town and then retreating under fire. It's an experiential documentary where you learn more about Africa, African wars, those people. It's very up close, it's very personal. That's a whole mark of VICE News' journalism that you're in the mix with the story, with the journalist, with the people you're meeting. It's character driven and it's immersive.

That seems to have touched a nerve and certainly attracted large audiences to the work we do. So we started in March with that, with that film. Since then we've embedded with the Islamic State, which for VICE News was a big moment. It was a global moment in terms of media because we remain the only media organization to have got inside and been able to film with the Islamic State and got out. That again showed how we operate, which again is a very raw and unmediated way. If you think about how you see television, it's very marked in the States, but it's also very marked here.

If you see the reporters and the way they're reporting across the BBC, even to some extent Channel 4 and ITN, it's very uniform. You've got journalists talking to journalists often in studios, standing in front of the story, but never in the story. Very occasionally you'll see that they do get involved but it feels like a very old fashioned model. Why I think that is, is because people now want authenticity. News now does not break in a newsroom, it does not break at 10:00 with Fiona Bruce telling you the headlines. News breaks on Twitter. Somebody is always nearer the story than you and somebody has always got a more authentic take on the story.

VICE News acknowledges that and I think what we do is try to get to the authentic part of the story every time. Also, we're very honest and open about, and I think quite democratic about journalism and how journalism now works. So it's not a priesthood. It's not a specialism. What it is is about people telling extraordinary stories in extraordinary places that are trusted. We show you how we go about that, we're very open about that. We're not trying to own things in the way that media organizations traditionally have. We don't package in the same way.

We're online, which gives us different advantages. We can put things out at any length, if we're bored with it, we can cut it down to five minutes. If it's really good it can run into an hour. The audience will still be there for it, they will share it. They're watching a lot of it on mobile or on portable screens. They're not waiting for the news to come on the television. So these are the things we're learning as well, that over 30 per cent of our, I think of our content is now watched on mobile. It's shared, longer films are shared, which is, again, an interesting thing. Not short clips. We'll no doubt talk about the differences between BuzzFeed and VICE.

We are about original content, and that's quite an old fashioned concept. We send people out to go find out about the world and we show them finding out about the world. I think that's, again, something that has maybe sort of disrupted, if you want, the way that television news is now being seen, that it's seen as too controlling and it's too managed. We've tried to show you, and I think our audience, what we picked up from our audience was that they sniff inauthenticity, lack of authenticity. They sniff that and that's why they were not coming to television news.

If you see American television news, it's a sort of, it's like British television news on steroids, it's extraordinary. The people sitting around, talking, talking, talking, and playing in a bit of footage, but talking, talking, talking to each other and the real world is never let in. And I'm hoping that if you go to VICE News site today you'll see a range of stories from reporters who are in the age group of the people who are consuming. So they're 25, 26, 27, they're in Hong Kong, they're in Syria. Today we're putting up something, somebody is in eastern Ukraine.

So you'll see that the journalists also are speaking to the audience in a much closer, more intimate way. The things that are happening now with journalism, they're interesting in what particularly working in the net helps, is this closeness. You're very close to the story, people are very close to the journalism that's going on. I think that's what we've learnt, I think, over the last year, that very quickly people engage with you and they own what you're doing very quickly as well. That's really interesting, so the barriers between

journalism that's presented and journalism that's experienced and journalism that's consumed has absolutely collapsed, so I find those things very interesting for us.

## Charlie Beckett

Quick follow up question. Thinking of the future, you're talking about this fantastic opportunity that you've had, partly because of the internet, and its ability to do things differently. Where do you think VICE goes? Does it stick with this kind of incredible sort of specialist attention to these incredibly impactful stories in a few places? Or have you got your sights on the BBC? Would you like to be more of a kind of comprehensive news service? In a way you're a series of brilliant films, aren't you, rather than some, you don't pretend to be, you're going to cover the world. Where are you headed?

## Kevin Sutcliffe

Well, I think Shane Smith, the VICE founder said we're the CNN of the street, which is a nice image and that's more aimed at the way we report off the street and being amongst, being in and out of the story. I don't think we are a collection of, a series of sort of, you know, noticeable films. We offer an editorial range as well. We're posting a lot of editorial every day, from around the world, from our writers and a range of video. If you actually look across the output for the nine months, there's an incredible range. We're not competing with a BBC or one of the sort of cable news, we don't need to fill, they fill for hours.

If you think about actually the amount of content they're putting out that's original as opposed to what's going in between, well, actually we don't need to do that. So what we've got is an online and YouTube presence which gives you an immense amount of selection of things that we have things to say about. They are on the news agenda. You know, we've got 88 dispatches about Ukraine and three or four huge documentaries within nine months. We commit to things. Syria is another thing, Islamic State. We commit to what we think our big stories are and what we've got things to say about.

Underneath that we've got every day, we are posting what we think is interesting in terms of what you might say is the 'news agenda', but actually we set our own agenda. We look to create our own path.

## Charlie Beckett

Jim, the BuzzFeed story.

## Jim Waterson

Yes, I think we were talking before we came up here about how VICE and BuzzFeed often get lumped together as internet sites 'what are doing news' and people seem to think that somehow because we're on the internet we've miraculously cracked everything and we've created a whole new way of reporting.

I think, aside from what you've heard there and what I want you to take away tonight is that both of them, the only thing in common is a belief that unless you actually invest in

paying journalists to go out and do actual reporting, no one is going to read you. Endless re-writes won't do well online and just sort of spewing out the same old stuff, there's no reason you click on us rather than on the BBC or *The Telegraph* site.

So, I'm just going to quickly run through how we sort of, our business model works. What we're trying to do in terms of shifting from endless lists and into hard news and then sort of where we're going to go from there. So BuzzFeed was started in 2006, just a site to basically capture what's going on on the web, i.e. whatever is trending, before Twitter, before Facebook took off, just what are people on the web talking about. Let's just grab it and put it on the site. So we got very, very good at working out what people were talking about.

Then in about 2010 we had a lot of readers, it was known for sort of, you know, just for daft lists, just for sort of funny pictures. Then they hired a guy called Ben Smith who is the most insider-y political journalist that DC had and everyone thought this was mad. This is, it's the equivalent of Heat hiring Michael Crick or something like that. It's completely mad. What he went about was, I'm going to make sort of a strange modern online tabloid that's going to have fun like daft stuff, and it's also going to have hard-hitting news. And the trick is, try and avoid the middle ground between the two.

So we, in the UK, launched about 18 months ago and I joined when there were about 10 of us. Now there's about 40 or 50 of us and we're looking to hire another 30 or 40 within the next year. So we're aiming to be about 80 journalists, about that, by the end of the year, hopefully. So our entire business model is made, how can we get people to share things? So what can we do to provoke you to get to the end of an article and think that was either brilliant, hilarious, shocking, disgusting, to the extent that you are then going to say, 'Everyone on my Facebook must see this, everyone on Twitter must read this immediately. I am either appalled, amused or something like that from reading this piece.'

That is how, when we get a hit, when we get a story that really goes around, then it really goes viral. It gets insane traffic and when it doesn't take off, then it bombs. There's not much in the middle. So, we start off, and you probably mainly know us still for '21 things you only know if you go to Chatham House lectures,' which, you see, if we got that right, every single person in this room would probably stick that on their Facebook. Then all your friends would click on it and then before you know it, actually, you've done the thing we're trying to do which is we filled a niche there.

So there might not be more than a few hundred of you in the room, but if you all put that on Facebook and then a few friends who are interested also share it, suddenly you've got 10 to 20,000 people who have read that piece. That's then more than a lot of newspaper front pages when they're put on the internet get, even though they've supposedly got far broader appeal. I mean there's some broad sheets, friends who work at national broad sheets who, their front page will go online and it's a big political story and they're getting sort of 10 to 20,000 people reading it because it doesn't actually have mass appeal. It's just that that's what a news editor thinks is important.

So the first thing is that we're all about targeting niches who will then share stuff like mad and with that in mind, so I'm building up politics coverage ahead of the election and we're

going to do either two sorts of stories. One story is the only people, Westminster insiders will care about and they, the idea is that if you break a Westminster scheme, something about X politician is considering a run for Y. You know, it's real insider stuff that everyone in Westminster wants to read it. Maybe no one else outside it will, but within that bubble suddenly that matters.

The other one is, we'd break a story or run a fun thing that has mass appeal and that gets half a million readers. What we don't want to be doing is that sort of classic political journalism thing of 'Vince Cable has today indicated a minor shift to the left on some policy that you've never even heard of', which is what makes up a lot of what goes on the top of the 10:00 news and things like that and which even I as a total politics obsessive find, if I'm honest with myself, a bit dull.

So there's that and then there's the... and so just to give you an idea, so while we are known for the sort of fun stuff, we're separating the company out as we grow into people who do this stuff, people who do fun videos, people who do hard news. Our foreign reporting team, so we had one of the first reporters on the ground for the MH17 crash who did just some amazing reporting from there. Unlike VICE, we're not really going into video news because we're trying to get you... I imagine our typical reader being that person who has got five minutes, they're waiting around for a bus, they want to check out something, their mates put this thing on Twitter and have you seen this dispatch from, have you seen this shocking story and you can read it in a couple of minutes or you may be reading that amazing long form piece.

The idea is something that grabs your attention, but without sort of, without taking too long. Video, for us, we don't really see that as where we're going to go with the news side of things. So we're hiring LGBT editors, we're hiring, we've just hired someone to come cover young Muslim in Britain issues, the idea of what's it like to be a young Muslim in Britain actually reporting within the community. We've also got Heidi Blake from the *Sunday Times* who runs our insight team coming to run investigations. The idea is that all of these things will create stuff that really, really appeals to a certain sector of people and prompts them to share it like mad and it doesn't matter that it's not got universal appeal because there will be something else for the people who are turned off by that, elsewhere on the site.

So there's that, there's also the tone thing. We are known for, you know, I flip between the two, when there was the floods last year and I couldn't think of anything to write because the story was politicians look at water and there's nothing they can do about it. Everyone else is just reporting, 'Cameron pledges more money for water', whatever, there's nothing there. So we just did a daft roundup of, you know 'Kim Jong Il looking at things', but instead it was British politicians just pointing at water and looking concerned. So weirdly that captured the futility of it all more than a straight news report, but if there was an exclusive news report that we'd had on it, we'd have run that instead.

So, and the trick is to avoid falling down the middle and sort of imagining the people want '17 things that you didn't know about Ed Miliband's speech,' because you either want to know Ed Miliband's speech or you want to be amused. You don't want something in the middle.

That sort of leads onto the final point I'll just make quickly which is not to... we have a young audience, we've got 20 million unique visitors a month, which is a dubious measure used by, unique visitors, it's very boring to get into now, but it's a measure that's always a bit dubious, but it's the one that everyone uses. So that puts us sort of at a national newspaper group level about Mirror Group.

We reckon we've got pretty good coverage among 20 to 35 year olds, a lot of them are clicking on us a month in the UK and there's a lot of people who at least once a month are clicking on BuzzFeed in the UK and we reckon we've pretty much got most people in their 20s going on us once a month. The issue with that is that the BBC are, they often tend to sort of dumb things down a bit and say, 'Here's the news for young people,' and the one thing we find is that people hate that. They might be clicking onto us because there's a hilarious list that they've seen on Facebook, but when they see the news in the right-hand column, if it's patronizing, if it's dumbed down, they won't click on it and they won't share it.

If it's clever and interesting and different, then they will. So that's the thing. So we're obsessed with trying to get people to share stuff, we're investing in sort of niche reporting because weirdly we think that can make us reach a bigger audience and just don't patronize people. That's how we see the future of the news going.

### Charlie Beckett

Sarah, slightly different perspective, obviously with your, well, they've both got global reach as well, but you're actually, you know, the top people are headquartered elsewhere, so, how you, as Europe boss, how does it work?

### Sarah Marshall

I'm not quite Europe boss. So, yes, I work for the *Wall Street Journal* which probably for 110 years of its existence was probably speaking to mainly people in New York. You know, I think it's fair to say rather than the US in general and of a certain sector and now with digital, everything's changed and it's a very global audience. So, I've been asked to talk a little bit about how social media has changed that in particular and of course Kevin and Jim have alluded to the fact that, yes, of course, audiences are growing, people are sharing things that they feel affinity with or whatever.

So I think really social media does kind of four things for certainly us and most other people. One is that it kind of drives traffic and what's kind of interesting for a site like the *[Wall Street] Journal* which is probably, it's a skewed male, it's what you'd expect, it's a skewed male audience, it's a skewed older audience, it's a skewed affluent audience, but of course social media brings a very global audience. It brings a very, a much younger audience. So for example, people who share stuff from the *Wall Street Journal* tend to be much younger. So 26 per cent of people who share stuff on Facebook, the *Wall Street Journal* content, on Facebook are in that 18 to 24 age category and 33 per cent are in that 25 to 34 category.

So, it kind of helps us reach future reader, well, current readers, but future readers and really kind of take serious journalism out to new audiences. It also, the second thing



social does, it kind of helps our brand to get out there. This we saw, a good example would be the weekend, Obama's visit to India where we've got, you know, like probably, you find that both VICE and BuzzFeed, I imagine you've got quite big audiences in India, you know there's, what, 300 million affluent, middle class English speaking Indians and suddenly a story like that on Facebook will really kind of take off for us.

There was one post that we posted on Saturday or Sunday that it had got a reach on Facebook of 4.8 million people and actually 4.2 million of those were new readers. So taking the *Wall Street Journal's* brand to kind of new places and from one post we put on Facebook it had 74,000 clicks, which, that's quite a lot of traffic coming from new places and kind of potential new readers in the future. So social is very good about introducing people and of course there's a big engagement thing. People, we've gone from being these kind of newspapers that get published overnight and you've moved onto the next story by then, anyway, to places where we're in conversation with the audience and we're talking to people and listening to them and getting stories from them. It's a two-way conversation now.

We realize that people really like to speak to our journalists, for example or our experts, so when oil prices go down we will put a couple of our journalists up so people can ask them specific questions and they might be really kind of niche, one key subjects that people, that really engage with those niche communities, those core audiences to the *Wall Street Journal*. Of course, you probably would know the *Wall Street Journal* for business news and finance news and probably world news which are the things it's really known for, but it's kind of, we do a lot of lifestyle and lots of other things as well.

Then, I guess, one of the things that always excites me about social media is the potential for news gathering. So if you just think about the stories that have happened in 2015, that we've got the Charlie Hebdo stuff and the Paris hostage attacks and then the way Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina is kind of responding to criticism about the prosecutor who did or didn't kill himself. Then the story of the death of the King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia who, interestingly from a social media perspective, had died, I think three times the previous week because there was a lot of kind of... You know, he'd been hospital, of course and there was some various people trying to kind of, you know, put out news that he'd died. I saw that quite a prominent journalist had tweeted that because they hadn't checked that this was a brand new account that somebody had set up and pretending to be a Saudi minister.

So that kind of, Saudi Arabia, I think there are more Twitter users in Saudi Arabia per capita of online population than anywhere else in the world, so of course that's kind of an interesting story that plays out. Then you've got the Greek elections and acceptance speeches going out on Twitter in real time. So I think from a news gathering perspective, just thinking about those things this year, it's amazing how we as the *Wall Street Journal* now news gather, there is always someone closer to the story. I sit next to somebody who is from an organization called Storyful. Storyful started probably four or five years ago. It started out of Ireland, set up by a previous news anchor from RTE, I think he was at. It essentially has built really good technology on top of social media.

So they've got all sorts of bits of technology that every time certain key words are mentioned within certain Twitter lists based on different countries, you will get an alert.

So therefore they're really, really fast at getting breaking news from social media and getting pictures and being able to verify those pictures and being able to check. So being as we kind of sit together and work very closely together, actually that kind of news gathering aspect in the way that social media has changed journalism is really, we're able to report from Raqqa without ever going to Raqqa, the ISIS stronghold because we are able to get this kind of, that horrible term that you might have heard of 'user generated content' with people kind of uploading footage filmed on a mobile phone that then we, along with Storyful check and then we're able to report in kind of a really new, well not that new anymore, but a really different way.

So that's how I think it's certainly changed the way, a very traditional organization like the *Wall Street Journal* breaks news.

## Charlie Beckett

Follow up question, as you say it was a very traditional organization with an incredibly distinctive clientele or readership, how have they reacted? You talked about the new clientele, you were digging out people in India etc, but what about that core audience? Are they now buzzing with your groovy Twitter stuff, or are they writing you hate mail?

## Sarah Marshall

They're not writing us hate mail, certainly. I mean I often think that social media is really about getting new audiences and younger audiences, but that's actually complete rubbish. We quite often do Facebook Q&As or whatever and you will find that we did something on, before the Greek election about what happens if there's, one of our columnists had written about this, an accidental Grexit, an exit from the Eurozone by Greece. You basically open up a columnist or a commentator and Simon Nixon and put him on Facebook and essentially our core audience, those kind of, you know, like I say, slightly older, will come on and actually ask really detailed questions about really... in a way that surprised me when I joined.

One of the first ones we did was on, just ahead of the Scottish referendum and I thought, you know, does our global audience care? Have they found out everything they need to know about the Scottish referendum, is the Facebook audience really just going to ask about what's going to happen to the flag? But no. They were asking really smart questions and it led to a much richer experience all round. So I think, obviously not everybody is interacting in that way, but it's been very pleasantly surprising how much you are kind of core paying, traditional, older, affluent audience actually wants to do this stuff, talk to journalists.