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- S1 00:12 [music] Hello and welcome to another episode of the Moxie Podcast. This is episode 44 recorded on the 23rd of August, 2016. This is the companion web show to the Moxie Sessions, an Internet economy discussion group held once a month in Auckland, New Zealand. The Moxie Sessions bring together a small group of business thinkers every month to discuss how New Zealand can take advantage of the Internet to boost its national competitiveness.
- S1 00:38 I'm Andrew Patterson with you here in Auckland. I'll introduce our guest panel shortly. But first let me tell you a little bit about topic for this session. It's fair to say that media companies are currently engaged in the fight of their lives to survive what has become a very different landscape from that even a decade ago. Gone are what was once described as the advertising rivers of gold. Replaced instead by fragmented audiences, competition from social media, and a vast array of online channels that now compete for the eyeballs and ears that were once the domain of traditional media organisations. Various proposals have been put forward to save mainstream media, but can anything really work long-term? Do we really want to save it, including the celebrity news, or should content creators and assemblers focus on building small motivated crowds that can pay to tend their own little piece of the media landscape?
- S1 01:37 Joining me to discuss this, Dr. Helen Sissons, a senior lecturer and curriculum leader in journalist at AUT University. Before this role, she worked for 17 years as a journalist in the US and the UK, including ten years with the BBC as a television journalist and reporter, and taught at the University of Leeds. Duncan Grieve, the editor and founder of New Zealand culture and journalism website, The Spinoff. He's also a columnist for the New Zealand Herald and a graduate of the AUT Journalism School. And I'm Andrew Patterson. I was also a participant in this discussion. I've spent the last 20 years in broadcast media, both here in New Zealand and Australia with a particular focus on business journalism. Welcome to you all. Dr. Helen Sissons, perhaps to you first, both as a media academic and a former journalist yourself, how would you sum up the problem we've arrived at, and just how broken is the current model?
- S2 02:35 Well, to me the question of how to [?] is how it can survive is closely intertwined with why people should care whether it survives, or support the paying of it. And to be honest, one of the biggest problems we've got is a lot of people aren't clear of the importance or even the role of journalism. So it needs to re-establish its place and its importance in people's minds. And I think it falls to those of us - the three of us, for example, and many others - who believe that journalism matters. And we've got to have a clear argument for the continuing role of public interest journalist or journalism with a big 'J' as we can call it.
- S2 03:13 In a meeting that I was in recently at a conference, it was suggested that journalism needs almost to be rebooted. That if it's actually going to survive, it needs to reconstruct its credibility and it needs to grow trust with the public. And people have got to believe in journalism. And Katharine, I think Katharine Viner in her excellent

Guardian article last month about the post-truth world that we appear to be living in, she wrote, "When voters don't trust the media, everyone begins to believe their own truth." Several things, in my opinion, are driving this so-called post-truth world. The rise of fake news sites, the drive for shares and likes, and significantly, the perceived need by many in news that speed is more important than accuracy. Hence, we're causing a struggle between truth and falsehood, facts and rumour, and in the end between an informed public and a misguided one. It's easier than ever now on the Internet to publish false information, and this is quickly shared and often believed. Alarming also at this conference, it came out that it takes two hours to confirm a true rumour, but 14 hours to debunk a false one on social media.

S2 04:29

And I think a second problem that stands between journalism and the rebuilding of it is a trusted voice in the public's mind. And hence in my opinion its survival, is what's called the filter bubble or the echo chamber. If we the audience want to, we can read only article shared with us by our friends or only those covering topics that we're interested in, thereby hearing only voices that we agree with. And this creates tribes and gangs rather than what journalism is supposed to be doing, and that's strengthening social bonds to understanding and tolerance. However, in my opinion, this isn't the fault of journalism per se, it's a problem of funding it. Journalism, good journalism is expensive, and without a secure funding base it's going to naturally strive to survive. And at the moment it sees its survival linked to the number of clicks and shares a story receives, rather than its impact on political and social debate.

S1 05:29

Duncan Grieve, you're an example of someone who's actually benefited from this disruption, which has allowed you to start your own successful and popular website, The Spinoff. Helen raises a good point there about this issue of journalism needing to re-assess itself. Was that part of the motivation of what you saw in the need or the opportunity to create The Spinoff?

S3 05:53

Yeah. Creating The Spinoff was something that only could have happened in this era, you know, to try and build an audience as large as ours. We're sort of averaging about 380,000 uniques a month at the moment. From scratch with a magazine or a newspaper would have taken years if not decades before. So there are transparently some really great things for aspiring creators and entrepreneurs in about this era. But what Helen diagnoses is the problems or the challenges of the era are very real. And I think that the decoupling of the proximity model of advertising, whereby people pay to be near good journalism and well funded the creation of it, has created just a major dilemma for the entire industry in that when you're only paid by the click, which is still the dominant model of funding journalism online, it incentivizes the production of things that will be clicked rather than things that are important.

S3 07:07

Now I wouldn't say that clicks and shares and likes and so on are irrelevant, I actually think that in some ways - and this has been one of the big lessons for us - thinking about presentation of important stories, really taking care of them and having a plan around their distribution rather than just sort of throwing it out there and hoping, you can get people to care about important stuff. Our growth has come from finding social issues that people care about and writing really strong opinion pieces and getting engagement with them that way. But if you're in a pure volume gain and if your only way, or if the main way that you get paid is by getting extra clicks, then it's going to incentivise the creation of click bait, of sort of celebrity and social media type news, because if you get paid the same for that as you do for a story exposing KiwiSaver Investments and munitions or the spread of campylobacter in Hawkes Bay, then you're to have a lot more stories about a social media fail, for example. And so that's the big thing about The Spinoff that we will never sell a CPM ad on the site. We

think it's a broken model and what we instead want to push is the idea that you fund a platform, you fund a section, you fund a column, and there's a relationship of trust between the client and the creator and the audience. And so far so good for us with that.

S1 08:50

Which is a bit along the lines of that piece I mentioned in the intro about creating a piece of reclamation and then owning it. I'll just throw in a couple of comments from my own perspective as a participant in the discussion. I was interested in a concept that I was introduced to recently - this idea of T-shaped people. That you know traditionally we've had a broad interest in everything and that largely has been dictated to by the media thinking a little bit pre-Internet. And we had relatively lack of depth perhaps on particular topics, because it was hard to go and understand it unless we were prepared to go and spend long hours in the library, which most people can't. Whereas now we live in a world where people can get very deep and very interested in particular topics, and because we only have a limited amount of time, that means the horizontal part of the T is squeezed and the vertical is lengthened, and people only have so much time, so therefore certain amounts of this time gets shrunk. So therefore they drop off the things that they would normally previously be interested in. And I wonder if that's perhaps one way of explaining why we're seeing perhaps a change in the landscape.

S1 10:05

But also this issue too about the fact that perhaps journalists need to become more like entrepreneurs. You know, you have to think like a start-up person. And Helen mentioned this and this idea of rebooting journalism, that we have to think a lot more about the audiences that we're serving and their information requirements, and also the fact that they are very time poor. And traditional ways of serving up media where people had lots of time to sit there and read newspapers or watch television programs, long-formed current affairs and long radio programs, those days are largely gone. So I wonder if part of this is this need for us to transition the way we think of our content as journalists, and the way that we curate it and present it to the audience given their changing needs and demands. And this is, as I see it, this kind of vortex that media is caught in at the moment, where it's trying to transition from one to another - a bit like education is at the moment. I mean, traditionally we've educated kids in particular ways in classrooms and we know that largely that model just doesn't work anymore, but we haven't quite worked out what that new model is.

S1 11:27

So there's a couple of thoughts from my perspective. Helen, as an academic and somebody working with the next generation of journalists, how are students thinking about, firstly, why they want to become journalists in this new age of media, and what are they thinking about the media landscape that they are entering?

S2 11:54

It's quite interesting. A lot of the students that we're getting certainly are undergrads, because we start with the general communications - a couple of years with general communications education and then move into the specialisms in the final year. Whereas we're finding that we have to explain the role of journalism, there is a blurring in the minds of quite a lot of young people between what we would consider public interest journalism and content. Hence, we're actually having to be very clear about what is the traditional role of journalists, what is our place, and how do we explain our authority. And this is something that's quite new and we've only had to do this in the last couple of years, but that I found quite interesting.

S2 12:40

And why they want to become journalists. Often it's about the storytelling. And I think that links in with what you were saying - the idea that we do have to find new ways of engaging people. And young people are very good at that. We're at the moment just working with the New Zealand Herald on some ways of covering the local elections

that are innovative and that might attract the younger generation. So young people are thinking and are open to new ways of storytelling that when I was training for example, you did the inverted pyramid, you know, story and that's how it always been done and that's what was expected of you.

S1 13:17

And one of the traditional ways, of course, that we know exists in the media landscape is that there's a house style, there's a particular approach, and that journalists are required to fit into that. Is that changing, do you think? Is The Herald, for instance, or other publications open to young journalists coming along with innovative ideas saying, "This is kind of radical but this is how I think we should be presenting this," and being open to that sort of response?

S2 13:45

Yeah, they are. They're much more open and I think that is very clear now. I think the idea that you can just, as I mentioned earlier, shove something up and hope for the best, it doesn't work, I don't think, anymore. And we do have to think of new ways of engaging people. And one of the-- I've seen several articles by journalists out there now saying, "I'll put this article up but you won't read it." And there is this concern that people are just reading the first paragraph or two. But we've got to remember, we can't get too panicky about this. I mean, traditionally, people did only read the first three or four paragraphs of a story--

S1 14:26

It's true.

S2 14:28

--and it was down to the journalist to make sure the important information was in there. And then only the most dedicated would read to the end if it was much longer than that. But the new multi-media - I suppose we could call them snowfall style stories - I think are addressing some of those issues, but they are expensive. And I heard an interview at the weekend by Paula Penfold, who argued that there was a market for this kind of innovative, of investigative style of reporting. So I don't think we have to lose heart, but it does take investment. I think Duncan's-- his way of maybe having very lively and opinionated stories. But we have to be very careful of opinion. It needs to be based on, obviously, knowing what you're talking about.

S1 15:11

Now, Duncan, I mean this really has been the success of The Spinoff that you're willing to try ideas. Do you experiment a lot with the way that you format the online presence of The Spinoff?

S3 15:27

Yeah, I think one of the innovations for us or one of the bedrocks of how we aspire to - which doesn't necessarily mean that we always get there, but we like to think that when a story or an idea or a conversation we'd like to start or continue presents itself, that where possible we think first about what the best medium for it is. And if that's a video, if that's a podcast, if that's a piece of text, if that's predominantly image driven, if it's graphical, and then go and create the thing ourselves. Because we're mostly writers by background, it still means that probably the majority of what we do is text. But we have as many as eight or nine podcasts a week at times being recorded for everything - from business to reality television to film festival or games coverage. And we'll on a weekly basis create pieces of video that will sit on Facebook but also on YouTube and also on the site. So we're very-- while we deliver everything online and we don't have a print publication and likely never will, there is very much a kind of, "What's the best way to tell this story?"

S3 16:54

And Helen's absolutely right that where you have a lot of opinion, you do have to be careful with it. Our opinions are deeply felt and they're sense-checked against other writers and we try and make sure that they're well referenced and so on. It doesn't mean we're always right, but I do think that opinionated news stories they have a resonance and a cut-through. And as long as you don't pretend that you're not hiding

anything, then I don't think there's necessarily a problem with that. To me where certain reporters at The Herald who I might consider have a bias - Bernard Orsman kind of thing - the way they present new stories as completely bias-free, whereas we wear ours proudly. I think that's the-- you know, I think there's a lot of merit there or we certainly seem to think so.

S1 17:56 And is that something that you think is changing in the landscape, Helen, this idea of the traditional approach that the journalist remain neutral and was unbiased that that's changing [chuckles], that that is consigned almost to history now?

S2 18:15 Yeah, and I don't mourn it. I think the idea that anybody can be neutral is wrong in the first place. Objectivity was always problematic in my mind, and it was more about a journalistic distance that you were fair and you were accurate. And I think that we need to-- nowadays, moving forward, if we're going to rebuild that trust that I think is crucial to journalism retaining its place or at least a place in the public discourse is this idea of transparency. And Duncan's absolutely right. You know, people should be open about where they're coming from, and transparent about their sources and about what they're basing their story on. And the Internet allows for this. You can link back to your interviews, you could link back to your source documents. And that's something where we're definitely working on in educating the journalists at AUT. This idea that they're transparent. We can't kid ourselves about objectivity. I think that was always flawed and could lead to a lot of people being misled. You know, the idea that you can cover anything and not care. And this came out very clearly of course with a lot of broadcast journalists in the Bosnian conflict. And there was arguments back then for journalism of attachment. I think most people were a bit worried about that, but I do think we need to be much more transparent and let people know where we're coming from.

S1 19:43 Let's focus a bit on journalism itself and its value, because we've seen for instance in the proposed Fairfax-NZME merger only 40 submission to the Commerce Commission about that. Is journalism in danger of not being valued anymore? That people are quite happy just to go and find the information that they want and they don't feel journalism has a place anymore, Duncan?

S3 20:13 Yeah, I think there's been this profound shift. Like I doubt that society, behaviourally, in terms of how it finds and consumes information has ever changed so quickly as it has over the past ten years, probably five years.

S1 20:30 From a societal point of view.

S3 20:31 From a societal point of view. You know, you put iPhones in our pockets and Facebook on those iPhones, and that just so radically changed the way that we found information. It democratised it. It also put it in the hands of a regime in Palo Alto that we have no sort of appeal to. And that's one of the-- there's a thousand scary things going on with journalism, but one of the scariest for me is the fact that Mark Zuckerberg sneezes, journalism can catch pneumonia and die [laughter]. So you know, that's almost a side issue, which just shows how many fronts we're fighting this war on.

S3 21:14 But I think that we're still struggling to figure out what that means and how to confront it. One of the big things for me is that with the funding mechanism decoupled, it doesn't mean that because people won't pay for it that it doesn't have value. And you only have to look at Brexit and the rise of Trump to show what a sort of misinformed or ill-informed population can do when there is an irresponsible journalism or an inaccessible responsible journalism. And the thing about that, there is a school of thought that says people are actively seeking out sources which confirm

their biases - and they should be free to do that. And I buy that to an extent, but I also say, well, if you're running a-- and I do say this to people who are running big businesses here. When something like Brexit happens that has a shattering impact on the economy that everyone bears the cost of. So if you want to live in a country where that's a plausible outcome and that you have to just grapple with that for years on end, then fine. Let's let the market take care of it. But if you think that the opportunity cost of letting journalism fall away is too great, then we as a society - whether that's through NZ On Air or through a bunch of corporations getting together and saying, "Well, we'll fund this in the public good because we also think it's in our interest," however it gets done, I think it must get done. And however it gets done, I think we have to say clicks aren't the only measure of success. We have to figure out alternate ways to do that. I think that can be done. You know, as Hayden Glass, Moxie's organiser, said afterwards that even though these are the most sort of it's the darkest night for journalism, we all came away perversely optimistic. And I still feel that way everyday about the forum.

- S1 23:27 Which is interesting, Helen, because journalists traditionally are notoriously perhaps lacking in optimism often [laughter], so it's interesting that they still have a good outlook on their own profession. But do you share those views about the value of journalism, and therefore what those forms of journalism will have to be in the future?
- S2 23:51 Yeah, [inaudible].
- S1 23:58 Helen, this happens occasionally with the thing. Can you just start that piece again?
- S2 24:07 Yeah, sure.
- S1 24:07 We just lost you momentarily. Okay.
- S2 24:10 Yeah, of course. Just tell me when to go.
- S1 24:12 Okay, away you go.
- S2 24:14 I'd just like to hear, hear! everything that Duncan has just said. I think one of journalism's biggest problems is that the industry isn't a great advocate for itself and its product. Very rarely do journalists really explain to the public why journalism is so important. We kind of have always expected people to understand, and that's something as I mentioned earlier we found at AUT, so you tend to understand it. But journalism is a public good. We can't just be giving people what they want. We need very much to be able to present people with what they need in a way that they will actually accept it. Because as Duncan said the cost of having an uninformed public can be catastrophic, and as a Brit, I feel that very strongly.
- S1 25:06 Do you think though, collectively, do we feel that maybe it's going to take something that's going to have to occur in the world where somebody said, "Oh, if we'd had good journalists [chuckles] that wouldn't have happened. We would have known about that." I wonder if it's one of those institutions that you actually don't realise the value of until something happens when you realise it's gone.
- S2 25:33 The problem is I think a lot of people believe - and this is again Duncan mentioned earlier - that they can go and find information when they want it. And the control of that, us getting information, is in their hands. But what they don't realise is where really good information comes from, and very sadly most of it, really good information about events and ideas, I think, comes a lot of times from local journalism. Local journalism has suffered the biggest cuts of any type of journalism. It's just been more than decimated. There's hardly any of it left, and yet good national

journalism is often based on the stories that have been unearthed by good local journalists. Hence, I don't think people even understand that there's been an almost-- the carpet has been pulled out from under a lot the people who in the past were gathering that really good information. So people are losing control, they're not gaining control - even if they have this idea that they can go and find good information.

- S1 26:37 And Duncan, that's a good point, isn't it? Because as any journalist knows the information that you gain invariably comes from unearthing it or asking questions. It doesn't just pop up at you and says, "Here's the meat of the story that you've been looking for." Do you think people perhaps misunderstand that?
- S3 26:57 I think Helen's right in that people don't think about journalism a lot. Though I would disagree somewhat about journalism not talking about itself. I think like that's one of the main genres of journalism right now, is journalists talking about journalism in terrified terms just as we are doing right now. Unfortunately, the main audience for that is other journalists who are incredibly informed on that topic in particular.
- S3 27:24 In terms of making our value clear, the problem is that we are living in an era where there are two strands of journalism operating. One is the traditional kind: feature writing, investigative journalism, great [beach?] reporting, business journalism, all of which does have a value. Unfortunately, outside of institutions like the MBR where it is much more rigorously practiced, you know, if you go to the main front pages of journalism - which in New Zealand is The Herald and Stuff - they're seeing that journalism surrounded by all this other stuff. Which is what they call journalism on click bait, and that's been done out of economic necessity, but it's having an incredibly corrosive effect on both the institutions that practice it and the public perception of journalism itself. Because there was a story about an all blacks bad tweet, sits on the same platform, looks exactly the same as Kirsty Johnson reporting on the Ashley Peacock's situation, people think they're one and the same. And because they see a lot more social media or celebrity pieces, they think that journalism itself is falling apart. They don't think about the economics of it. Who thinks about the economics of anything really apart from massive nerds like us [chuckles]? So that's the problem, is that the economic model is poisoning the well. And that's why I think-- you're right, maybe it will take a crisis to resolve it. What is Brexit if not another crisis? What is Trump if not a crisis? Do we need one here? I hope we don't have to, but it might well take it.
- S1 29:17 Let's finish with the remaining time we have available to us to just focus a bit on where we see the future pathways in this area. What are some of the ways that will allow the industry and the profession to survive? Helen, lots of thought has been given in this area. A number of people have documented different ways it could go. Even suggestions that perhaps the creation of public funds that journalists could draw on to conduct their own research investigation, investigative piece, and so forth. Have you distilled that in any sort of way and thought what you believe will be the way forward from here, or the ways forward from here?
- S2 30:03 Yeah, I struggle enormously here. I believe that, as I mentioned before in this debate, that actually quality is what will [inaudible] be the difference between surviving and not surviving. But I can't see a way that we can make people pay for that now that they've been getting it for free for so long, and that you'll always have some organisations that somehow can fund themselves without asking people to pay for it. So I definitely would turn to the public path and to say that it's too important, it's a public service and therefore it does need to be paid for. And I think possibly my background with the BBC has shown me just how that can work, that it actually can

lead to independent really high quality journalism. Yes, the government will try and pressure to some extent, but the BBC has managed, I think, effectively, to defend itself despite relying on a license fee.

- S1 31:13 Duncan, if we look at for instance Australia which has the ABC, Britain which has the BBC - New Zealand's tended to follow largely the American model which is you have PBS - the Public Broadcasting Service in America but you pay for that. Putting Radio New Zealand to onside, which it does receive a relatively small amount of money, do you think New Zealanders would buy into that argument that journalism is a public good and the government should be a contributor towards that?
- S3 31:47 I'm not sure that they would. I mean, I love [Aaron Said?]. I start every morning with Morning Report and when I don't have it, I don't feel like I'm across the issues of the day. When I do, I do. I think it's a terrific product and I think what Paul Thompson has done with that organisation has been pretty revelatory, and about as good a job as you can do with a very difficult situation that he arrived into.
- S3 32:12 All that said, [Aaron's Head?] has an old audience and we--
- S1 32:16 And an aging audience.
- S3 32:17 And an aging audience, and I think that we have a problem in this country in that the behavioural change that we've seen has largely been by the younger half of New Zealand's population. And yet the content we fund and the audience for it has basically become the older half of our population. And I think that goes for journalism too. We don't fund a lot of it but we put \$30 million a year odd into RNZ. We fund a few million dollars worth of shows for various networks that are clearly journalism. The Nation, Q+A being perhaps the most prominent. But I think that we-- and this is a war horse for me, I think that NZ On Air needs to radically alter its strategy. It has become a journalism funder and basically the funder of last resort whether it likes to or not. The great thing about funding journalism online which is where all of that missing kind of half the population is, it's cheap. You know, if you go through Flower Street and you see the studios, the lights, the camera people - just how labour and capital intensive it is to create television products. Or you come into a room like the one you and I are in now - and this is a very good podcast studio [chuckles] I should assure our listeners - but equally, you can do it cheaper than this or even this. Is orders of magnitude cheaper to create than journalism for television or even for full-noise radio. So I think we could be a lot more efficient in both our creation and distribution if we pumped more money into online. It's very self-serving, because I happen to run an online news site, but I also think there's a lot of merit in the argument too.
- S1 34:08 So at the moment for The Spinoff as an online publication, there are no vehicles that you can go to that would give you funding, as compared to TV3 or TVNZ with Q+A and The Nation and so forth?
- S3 34:25 Sort of a funny thing. I mean, just full disclosure. We went to NZ On Air in the funding round which closed about ten days ago with an application for two pieces of programming, one of which would also sit on a network, a broadcast network, one of which was basically us partnering with a very prominent New Zealand content creator. The thing that I found sort of, I guess, perplexing or that I thought about when I was filling the various application forms and putting together the props was that this is very much porting up the program idea of content onto a platform-specific medium. And I think that's probably where one of the big mindset changes needs to come from. We're coming from a world where it's campaigns, it's programs - that they have a beginning a middle and an end, whereas we're moving onto the Internet

where it's all infinite. It's about a platform, you create content, and you sort of spill it out. And that's just quite a different mindset and I think NZ On Air, as it moves into the digital realm, needs to get a lot more platform savvy. We can have a wish-list as long as our arm about whether we should have our own vision of the BBC. To me that sounds like a lot-- you know, it's great but we're a four-and-a-half million strong population. It'd be very expensive to do. I would advocate for a NZ On Air style fund for journalism. Right now it has to be NZ On Air, because there's no way this government is just going to roll out a \$50 million annual contestable fund for it to be criticised. You might see if they ever lose an election - seems unlikely at this point - that the opposition could put something like that together. That'd be great. But you know we've got to do something and we can't just sit around complaining. It's incumbent upon us, as an industry, to go out and figure this thing out.

S1 36:38

So the irony of all of this, isn't it, that we know governments on either side of the political persuasion are never supportive of the media [chuckles] because they know of the potential damage that they create. But on the flip side, they do understand the role that they play, so it's a classic sort of love-hate relationship. So how you get that mindset to turn into making money available is the ultimate challenge perhaps as a profession we face.

S1 37:09

I'm going to leave it there. Obviously as journalists we could to debate this at length [chuckles], but I think we've done very well with the time allocated to this podcast so far, so thank you for joining with us from AUT University. Dr. Helen Sissons who has given us some interesting perspectives particularly as a former journalist and now academic. Duncan Grieve is the owner of a successful online publication as well. Thank you for your contributions and I've enjoyed being part of this certainly as a working journalist myself, and part of NBR Radio which is one of the start-up success stories from traditional media branching into digital. So we've all been party to what is a rapidly changing landscape. And on behalf of our panel, thank you for joining us for this Moxie Podcast. I hope you can join us again for another one very soon.