**What was missing from the relaunch of Medium**

Everyone is waiting for the next big thing in social media. So when one of the founders of Twitter announces a special event in San Francisco on October 7th, there was bound to be a flurry of excitement. That man, Ev Williams, is now the CEO of [medium.com](http://medium.com): a digital publishing platform which was launched back in 2012. Forget 140 characters: this is promoting long form content. So far Medium has had a relatively low profile in the UK but it does have big ambitions to transform and democratise online publishing and few months ago the company secured $57 million of venture capitalist funding to help relaunch itself.

The event last night was called Medium 2.0 but this was no Apple Product event. The whole thing felt decidedly amateurish: the mics didn’t work, there were distracting sounds coming from outside and there was only a shaky periscope feed for the rest of the world to watch. But perhaps that was the point. Ev Williams started by taking his audience “back 16 years ago” to a time before Twitter, when he was sitting “in a basement” with friends and together they came up with the idea of Blogger. Now with Medium 2.0 he wants to create the same sense of urgency and innovation.

yet this is not a social media site. In fact Williams announced that “social media is not sufficient… it didn’t necessarily make us smarter or more connected”. A slight irony coming from the co-founder of Twitter. Now he wants to create “a better publishing system” which will be the “default place to share perspectives”. In his online blog overnight, Ev Williams wrote that Medium is there to make writing “more powerful, more fun, more democratic, and more essential”. But he also promises to “help good stuff get the attention it deserves, no matter who the author is. Keep it simple; put words first. Enable meaningful feedback. Optimize for substance.” (<https://medium.com/the-story/taking-medium-to-the-next-level-cb7f223fad86>)

However, there appears to be a dilemma here: who decides what the ‘good stuff’ is? How does this “optimisation for substance” happen?” How does Medium keep it’s publishing platform open, fair and democratic whilst maintaining this type of quality control? They appear to be two conflicting aims. If Medium is creating a level of editorial scrutiny, what distinguishes them from any other online publisher?

Much of this is about image. Medium 2.0 has a raft of new features, logos, upgrades and applications. It is about moving slowly away from the desktop site and giving people more tools on their new mobile Android and iOS apps. One of Medium’s writers, Marcin Wichary, emphasised a new “beautiful, simple writing tool” with drop caps and customisable fonts. Contributors can now write, edit and post on the move via their mobile device. There are also new custom domains which puts Medium is close competition with sites like Wordpress and others. They’ve also developed a new feature called “mentions” which involves tagging and linking to individuals mentioned within a text and inviting them to contribute to the conversation. Twitter has been doing something similar for a while now. However, this is about engaging people in a longer, more in-depth online conversation.

Yet something was missing from the Medium 2.0 event. It’s something that many commentators and writers had hoped would be included: a regular way to monetise content and pay ordinary contributors. Intellectual Property (IP) is a contentious area, normally buried down in the depths of the smallprint in the terms and conditions of app downloads. But its something that social media users are increasing becoming wise to. One writer, Andrea Phillips, warned other contributors on Medium back in 2013: “if and when they decide to monetize your content… they’re not under any obligation to give you one red cent of the proceeds.” (<https://medium.com/@andrhia/the-problem-with-medium-336300490cbb>)

It hasn’t quite happened yet, but the Medium 2.0 redesign last night promised to move down the road of user monetisation. As Ev Williams states in his blog, “we are going to be exploring new ways for professional and independent content creators to connect with both brands and their readers. We are committed to facilitating those relationships in a way that helps money flow back to creators so they can sustain themselves doing what they love.” What he is talking about here is turning the amateur blogger, the so-called citizen journalist, into a professional content creator.

James Blake

Edinburgh Napier University