



## Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

# On a clear day you can see Apple Corp (in fact, that's pretty much all you can see)

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World's biggest company ... and still growing. Apple Inc.

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Ladies and gentlemen we are fast approaching peak Apple. In recent days we've seen the Steve Jobs biopic starring Michael Fassbender released, heard the current CEO, Tim Cook, tell the *Daily Telegraph* that the government's plans for increased surveillance powers could have "very dire consequences" and been informed that the company is to create a 1,000 new jobs in Cork, Ireland.

Then there was also the extremely unedifying video posted online in which a member of staff in the Apple store in Melbourne, Australia, asked a group of black students to leave because security was "just worried" that they might steal something. That's different all right.



Perhaps this bit of bad PR won't unduly worry Cook, because in October he announced that (the fiscal year) 2015 had been the company's most successful ever, during which revenue grew 28% to nearly US\$234 billion.

### **How do you like them Apples?**

To put Apple's profits in context, according to the Telegraph this is the **biggest annual profit in corporate history**, surpassing the US\$45.2bn made by ExxonMobil in 2008.

Many analysts have reported Apple is the world's most valuable company and this is before, as forecast, China overtakes the US to become its biggest market. Quoting World Bank statistics, **Rupert Neate** wrote in the Guardian that Apple now has more money in the bank than the Czech Republic, Peru and New Zealand make in gross domestic product (GDP) a year.

### **Strength to say 'no'**

There are some who attribute Apple's success to their commitment to a relatively small range of products. Before Apple TVs, there were phones, pads, pods, watches and Macs – that was pretty much it. Compared to the sprawling range of goods offered by Samsung that's a relatively small range and it means that the company's designers and promoters can better channel their resources into areas they are familiar with.

The sayings and aphorisms of Jobs have gained almost Confucian gravitas since his death, but perhaps one of his most famous utterances is relevant here. In an interview with **Business Week** in 2004 he said that innovation comes from:

*Saying no to 1,000 things to make sure we don't get on the wrong track or try to do too much. We're always thinking about new markets we could enter, but it's only by saying no that you can concentrate on the things that are really important.*

That said, Apple is now at the forefront of what James Temperton calls the “battle for control of people’s online reading habits”. In October it also launched Apple News, a service for iPhones and iPads which in the words of Apple’s own publicity: “Collects all the stories you want to read, from top news sources, based on topics you’re most interested in – so you no longer need to move from app to app to stay informed.”



Remember the first Macintosh? No? Us neither. Kevin chen2003 via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

Of course, Apple is not going to be a content provider. Already signed up to do that are TIME, CNN, The Atlantic, The New York Times, Quartz, Vanity Fair and WIRED in the US and, in the UK: BBC, Sky news, the Sun, the Financial Times and the Telegraph, among others.

Apple Pay, the new contactless payment system for iPhones and iWatches, also looks set to make a splash, while the new Apple TV has broadcasters such as the BBC racing to develop apps to suit. Apple, Apple, everywhere.

### **Monopoly of influence**

Which is all well and good, but the consequences of such monopolies of influence have long concerned political economists and cultural theorists. Richard Maxwell and

Toby Miller argue that the digital environment of wearable computers is a place where things relate only to other things. We might imagine otherwise, they say, but we relinquish a little more digital freedom each time we click on “I Agree”.

It’s a world where human agency and compassion become subsumed beneath a desire to own and consume – but of course this depends on those who sweat to make our electric dreams come true. In Apple’s autumn of profit and launch, the *International Business Times* reported on life at a major Apple supplier factory in Shanghai where workers toil “in excess of the tech giant’s self-imposed 60-hour limit per week, putting in 12-hour shifts six days a week”.

There is also the damage to the ecosystem that goes hand-in-hand with our reliance on electronic goods. As Maxwell and Miller point out, around US\$1 trillion a year is spent on electronics. There are more than 14 billion network-enabled electronic devices needing electricity today at a rate equal to 15% of total global residential energy use. Without any changes to this trend, Maxwell and Miller reason, the residential electricity needed to power our digital conveniences will rise to 30% of global consumption by 2022, and 45% by 2030. This includes billions of dollars worth of electricity wasted while these network devices are on standby.



People waiting to buy the new iPhone in New York, 2007. Padraic Ryan via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

And that's before we get on to Apple's record of tax minimisation which reportedly enabled the multinational to pay just £11.8m in British corporation tax last year on profits estimated at almost £2 billion.

The presence of Apple products in our lives continues apace and shows no signs of slowing. And with the company's spending on research and development growing by 35% to more than US\$6 billion in 2014, we can be relatively sure that the Apple car is not too far away.

On reflection, then – peak Apple is nowhere near.

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