

# What makes a journalist want to become a tech CEO? Interview with James Flint, Hospify

He covered technology before the internet even existed for the Independent, Mute and WIRED. But then, several years ago, James Flint decided to seek new pastures at the sharp end of the cyber universe. Why?

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Maddyness spoke to James, CEO of Hospify – a communications network for healthcare professionals which, unlike other messaging platforms, holds data privacy at its heart – about why he upped sticks and crossed the rapidly shrinking barrier between tech and media.

He gave us the lowdown on his latest endeavour, which involves stopping NHS practitioners from talking about their patients over WhatsApp – as well as covering the Track and Trace data controversy, the ethics of monetising patient data, and why ‘tech news’ is now just ‘news’.

[Maddyness] Could you introduce yourself and talk about your background

# leading up to the genesis of Hospify?

[James] I've been involved with Hospify for about five or six years; my cofounder is Neville Dastur, a vascular surgeon and developer. So his background is tech and medicine; mine is tech and media. I was a journalist and author for many years. I worked at the *Independent*; helped set up a tech magazine called *Mute* back in the early '90s before anyone knew about the internet. Then I worked for *WIRED* in the '90s and learnt a lot about technology. I wrote some novels and a tech drama.

I finally got a proper job in my 30s and 40s – I ended up becoming Head of Digital Development at the *Telegraph*. At that point newspapers were going onto the internet. It was an exciting time and I helped transition the *Telegraph* into a full online product. I then became the editor of the *Telegraph Weekly World* edition, but that closed because it's quite hard to justify a weekly newspaper in a world of Google News, Telegraph Media, etc. – so it went online.

Eventually, I decided I wanted to move on to new pastures. I was introduced to Neville by a mutual friend and I thought Hospify looked really interesting – like somewhere I could bring my media platform skills to bear, but in a place that was a bit more meaningful than what the media had become, which was basically about selling ads and scraping people's data! Here we are five or six years later with a product in market, trying to raise a pre-Series A round and pitching to Imperial and other hospitals.

*See Hospify on NOTWICS Connecting People*

## As someone working in media I'm interested to hear your perspective: how has the way tech has been covered in the media changed over the past 20/30 years?

It's changed a lot. Tech's covered in three ways – the consumer side (the gadget side – tech as a product) and the geeky, hobbyist side and the business side. They were very distinct when I started; consumer tech was just gadgets, the business side just covered normal businesses, and the geeky side was in

hobbyist magazines like *Windows User* and *Mac User*.

The big change is that over the last 25 years those three things have come together and created a mainstream component of news. Tech is not a small vertical anymore – it's core. As these companies have become the biggest companies in the world, the business side has entered the soap opera of news.

*What Google is doing is not just a business, it's a news story. Gadgets have become the most important consumer products in our lives.*

The hands-dirty tech bit doesn't quite come into the mainstream because it's a bit too geeky for most, but the internet is full of that stuff – from Stack Overflow to TechCrunch. There are now millions of developers and they have their own entire culture.

## How do you think the media can survive in some form that isn't just clickbait in the age of the internet?

This is a question I've grappled with my whole career, and it's kind of why I'm doing what I'm doing. I got to the point working in a newspaper where I felt I needed to know more about the sharp end of technology before I was really able to cope with the problems facing the media industry. I was very engaged with trying to work out business models that would help media pay – that's what I did at the *Telegraph*.

It was very difficult; we basically failed. And in those years that I was there, Google and Facebook stripped \$1T out of the traditional news industry. They created their own profits as well – the whole industry grew – but a lot of that money was a pull from advertising that would have gone into TV, newspapers and magazines.

I left the *Telegraph* because, within it, I couldn't act anymore. I felt that the entire business wasn't capable of responding anymore in a sensible way. That has changed a bit; at the time they were very focused on pushing stuff out on

Facebook etc. Paywalls have come in and the press has started to 'niche-ify' itself and try and find its readership and throw paywall around its readership. That has actually started to work.

Newspapers have lost their position as the arbiters of our culture to the tech companies. News networks are still holding forth – mainly the ones owned by Murdoch, because he's had the money and the subscriber base to keep them going. They've managed to keep their position in culture – as has the BBC. But they're now being challenged by Netflix and so on.

The challenge, in my view, is not so much to protect the newspapers; it's to make the new companies behave more like the newspapers used to do.

*It's about regulating them and making them behave more responsibly as publishers, because newspaper models won't cope with communicating on a daily basis with 2 billion people. They are now a part of a media scene; it's understandable they've gone for a subscription model because actually they are a niche product.*

For me, Hospify isn't so much a medical product as a data privacy product. I'm very interested in data privacy and data compliance – as someone from the press world. The whole point of a health communications network is that it has to be compliant, because the data is too sensitive to muck around with. The challenge of Hospify is to try and build a mass-market product that's not based on data scraping and advertising, but still gives the convenience and the benefits technology can bring.

Why is it so important that patient data is kept private? Do we end up with a

# situation where those that are already medically vulnerable become more vulnerable?

There's lots that surrounds that but that's the core of the problem. It's one thing to know that I'm surfing the web to look for a washing machine, and I'm getting sent ads for washing machines. It's another thing to know that I'm talking to my doctor about a medical condition – and that that information is getting packaged and sold to people who might be interested. That could include insurers, employers, people trying to sell me medicine. When it comes to medical conditions, we think 'I have to choose who knows about this; this is personal to me'.

One of the things that's had a big impact on Hospify this year is the level of debate that's gone on in the country and in the world about what it means to have COVID-19 Track and Trace. Where do we put this privacy line? Suddenly people are very aware that you do have to draw a line.

There is a unique kind of vulnerability that comes with health data, and the kind of privacy you need just doesn't exist on a public network like Facebook, WhatsApp or email.

Eventually you might find that your credit rating's affected because you've been talking to an oncologist; there's no human in the loop. You've had a conversation – it doesn't matter what you've said, the fact that you've spoken could be construed by AI as something that needs to be factored in.

## Unlike Facebook and WhatsApp, you have a 'premium features' pricing model. How's that been to run?

The insight behind Hospify was that we looked at tools like WhatsApp and asked ourselves what the big running costs and problems were. Big problem: it stores all the data; big running cost: writing the tech, but also storing the data. By deleting data we remove a whole raft of potential liability, and we also don't have loads of servers full of data (and a big team running them) that we have to pay for.

That really changes things economically because all we need to do is write the app, move the data across, and then delete it. I no longer have to monetise

your data to pay for data storage!

So now, you might come to me and say “I don’t want my data deleted after 30 days – I need it for longer”. That’s when you pay. We store it for you – I know that you’re paying it, so I know what my profit margin is. Effectively, we tried to design something that only brings money into the equation when you want it. That covers the storage and also identity verification. We make a bit of a loss on the free one, but we make our profits when people come to us wanting more data storage – because they know we give them the data privacy they need.

## How has COVID impacted your business and that business model in general?

It’s been transformative for us. I’d been making this case that I’ve been making to you for several years, and it’s basically fallen on deaf ears. It’s very hard to sell into the NHS; things have moved very slowly, and in the world at large everyone’s like “yeah yeah, whatever, we’ll just use WhatsApp”.

*COVID has made people realise that we need good digital tools. A lot of patients are elderly and they always thought digital tools were second best, but that has really changed; they FaceTime their grandchildren, why not their doctor?*

We saw our user base quadruple between March and July. Running a newspaper is an 80-hour week, every week, but I’ve never worked as hard as I worked in March, April, May this year trying to scale Hospify as we suddenly found ourselves in real demand after years of telling people about it and trying to get people interested.

And as I said earlier, we had Track and Trace. And we’ve also seen as a culture the way data privacy can influence elections. Those two things have really come to a head: the data privacy argument, and remote working and the need for better digital tools.

Now the question for me is: can we do it and can we deliver a good product?  
It's not about why that product is needed.

*Discover Hospify*

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