

# JOURNALISM

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

FOURTH EDITION

TONY HARCUP



# **JOURNALISM**

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“Journalism still matters. How it’s done, why it’s done, by whom and for whom remain at the heart of this updated edition. Harcup draws on a rich diversity of voices to cast a critical, yet practical eye on journalism now, providing an indispensable resource for all who are interested in news.”

**Dr Margaret Hughes, Chair – Association for Journalism Education**

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“A holistic assessment of what journalism is all about, with plenty of enterprising interpretations of our trade – a word I prefer to ‘profession’. I never met a more ‘unprofessional’ breed than that of my fellow hacks. This book will, I hope, lead our successors both to question and rebel more than we have.”

**Jon Snow, *Channel 4 News***

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“A classic text of journalism education that goes beyond the basics to ask the questions that anyone thinking of becoming a journalist really needs to consider. An ethical, entertaining and enduring read – highly recommended.”

**Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary, National Union of Journalists**

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# JOURNALISM

Principles and Practice

Fourth Edition

**Tony Harcup**



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In memory of my mum, Beth, and my dad, Fred.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Harcup

is an Emeritus Fellow of the University of Sheffield whose writing about journalism can be found on reading lists around the world and has been translated into Chinese, Korean and Polish, among other languages.

Before moving into journalism education, Tony spent many years working as a staff and freelance journalist on alternative and mainstream media ranging from small local weekly publications to national newspapers, magazines and websites.

Tony has researched extensively in the fields of news values, journalistic ethics, alternative journalism and journalism education, and his work has appeared in a range of leading journals, encyclopedias and edited collections. In addition to *Journalism: Principles and Practice* (4th edition, Sage, 2022), his solo-authored books include *The Ethical Journalist* (Sage, 2007), *Alternative Journalism*, *Alternative Voices* (Routledge, 2013) and *What's the Point of News?* (Palgrave, 2020).

He is a longstanding and active member of both the National Union of Journalists and the Association for Journalism Education.

Tony occasionally tweets as @writerlytone.

# PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

This book can be used as a textbook and a “how to” guide although I hope it offers much more. The idea is to introduce the voices of a range of practising journalists, as well as scholars from the field of journalism studies and beyond, and get them to talk to each other. Chapters can be read in a number of ways: by reading the left-hand side *practice* section first, followed by the more theoretical section; by reversing the order; or by flitting between the two, following the bold words in the initial text to the relevant accompanying *principles* entries. This will provide useful preparation for the journalistic art of keeping an eye on a number of things at once, and should also mean that the book will repay repeated visits.

Since publication of the third edition, each chapter has been fully revised and updated. Every word has been reviewed several times, with many insights added courtesy of a fresh round of interviews. In addition to lots of new content, chapters have been slightly reorganised: discussion of social media engagement with the audience is now integrated into the whole book rather than concentrated in a specific chapter, and the sample style guide has been moved from the expanded [Chapter 12](#) into a standalone appendix. As before, every chapter includes a scenario to help readers think through the practical implications of the ideas discussed; also see related videos on the accompanying website. There is a guide to further reading at the end of every chapter, including top tips for what to read next.

For the benefit of anyone unfamiliar with the Harvard style of academic referencing, when you see something like (Bloggs, 2015: 10) in brackets in the text it means that you can easily find out the source by turning to the alphabetical list of references at the back and looking up the name Bloggs, followed by the year of publication, in this case 2015. The number 10 in the above example refers to the relevant page number in the original source. Also listed in the references are all those journalists interviewed for this book, some of whom will be introduced in [Chapter 1](#), and others when they first

appear in the text. Heartfelt thanks to them all: the book would not be the same without them.

Sadly, two of the original interviewees are no longer with us. Paul Foot died at the age of 66 in July 2004, not long after publication of the first edition, and his funeral was attended by an estimated 2,000 people (Ingrams, 2005: 6). The Paul Foot Award is awarded in his memory each year, and three winners of the award have now been interviewed for this book: Emma Youle, Deborah Wain and Andrew Norfolk.

Brian Whittle, who started out on a local paper as a 17-year-old, was a very different type of journalist from the Oxford-educated Foot. They may have had different backgrounds and attitudes but they were both cracking reporters and were equally generous with their time, willingly discussing their craft with me for the benefit of future generations of journalists. When I later bumped into Brian at a press do, he told me he had finally got around to reading the book and had enjoyed it – rather to his surprise, I suspected. Not long afterwards, in December 2005, he collapsed and died at a party held to mark the departure of the *Express* and *Star* national titles from Manchester. As his former colleague Peter Reece (2005) said: “It was fitting that he was in the company of journalists, for tabloid ink ran through Brian’s veins.” He was aged just 59.

Neither Paul Foot nor Brian Whittle lived long enough to be able to send a tweet or make a podcast, even if they had been so inclined. But the fact that so many of their thoughts quoted in these pages remain as pertinent today as when they were spoken suggests that the fundamental principles and practices of journalism might not have changed quite as much as some people would have us believe.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all the journalists, sources, students, teachers, colleagues, friends and acquaintances who have helped in one way or another over the years, whether you realise it or not. Special thanks to all the interviewees for giving your time and your stories; to James Whitworth for the cartoons; to the team at SAGE for making this book a reality; and to Julia Hall, Mila Steele and Michael Ainsley for believing in it.

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## GUIDED TOUR OF FOURTH EDITION

### KEY TERMS

Agency; Churnalism; Communication; Fourth estate; Free press; Ideology; Education; Journalism studies; Profession; Public interest; Public sphere;

When Susie Beever got her first front page byline on the *Yorkshire Post*, she tweeted: “My late grandfather to me, aged nine, as I handed him another hand-written magazine stapled together from my dad’s printer paper: ‘So young lady, how long before we see your name on the front of the *Yorkshire Post*?’ 18 years, Gramps.” (@SusieMayJourno, October 7 2019.) Even in the digital age, a page one splash is something to be celebrated. Especially by someone who knew from a very early age she wanted to grow up to be a journalist. It was not just hard news that captivated young Beever, either, as she explained in

### COMMUNICATION

The basic questions of journalism in this chapter – Who? What? Why? – are echoed in an early journalism text, Lasswell, analysis of the “Who says what to whom and with what effect?” (McQuail, a “transmission” model of communication, essentially one way, from sender to receiver.)

**Key Terms:** Each chapter begins by highlighting key terms that are discussed in the chapter.

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**“Journalism, like acting  
and prostitution, is  
not a profession but a  
vocation.”  
– Louis Heren.**

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**Soundbites:** Each chapter includes a selection of pertinent quotes from relevant interviews, speeches, publications, films, tweets or podcasts.

## SUMMARY

Journalism is not simply another product but a process, not a one-way or linear process. Journalism is said to play a role in bridging the gap between the real world and the media world. There is a gap of knowledge and understanding between the two. This book will describe the practices and principles that inform both practice and analysis. Concepts will reappear at various points throughout this book.

**Chapter Summaries:** At the end of each chapter, you will find a review of the main concepts and issues covered in the chapter to reinforce the key points.

Journalism is not simply another product but a process, not a one-way or linear process. Journalism is said to play a role in bridging the gap between the real world and the media world. There is a gap of knowledge and understanding between the two. This book will describe the practices and principles that inform both practice and analysis. Concepts will reappear at various points throughout this book.

## QUESTIONS

- If journalism is not a profession, what exactly is it?
- What role does journalism play in society?
- Why are journalists apparently so mistrusted by the public?
- Do you think you need a degree to be a good journalist?
- Why does media studies get such a bad press?

**Questions:** Chapter summaries are followed by questions, which build your understanding of the chapter and extend your learning.

## QUESTIONS

- If journalism is not a profession, what exactly is it?
- What role does journalism play in society?
- Why are journalists apparently so mistrusted by the public?
- Do you think you need a degree to be a good journalist?
- Why does media studies get such a bad press?

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You work for a news organisation that expects you personally to write 12 stories every day; to push those stories out via social media; to engage with readers and others who make comments on your work. How do you face such demands, and what would you do?

## FURTHER READING

**What Would You Do?:** Each chapter concludes with a scenario of a common problem in journalism practice. These are designed to ensure you reflect on key issues and concepts covered in each chapter.

## FURTHER READING

Read the news, itself, obviously; *really* read it. Then get your own copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*. Useful alphabetically organised accompaniments to dip into include *Journalism Studies: The Key Concepts*, by Bob Franklin (2018); *News and Journalism Studies*, by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2018); and *The Universal Journalist*, now in its sixth edition and covering the digital age of Media. Other useful introductions – these ones from journalism studies – are by Sheridan Burns (2018), Keeble (2006) and Sissons (2006). Sissons (2018) has written an engaging memoir that discusses journalism alongside the transition from print to online. The edited volume *Journalism: A History* includes valuable historical material that ought to be of interest to all of journalism alike. McQuail (2000) is a comprehensive

**Further Reading:** All chapters end with a section highlighting further reading relating to the chapter. Tony details what each text provides, and how you will benefit from reading it.

(2019) *Global Journalism*. Finally, for now, if you wish to explore the ways in which journalists tend to be portrayed in the media, the works of McNair (2010) and Sarah Lonsdale (2016) are highly recommended. Further reading next will be made at the end of every chapter.

### **TOP THREE TO TRY NEXT**

The news – from a variety of media and platforms, ever-changing and often controversial. See Tony Harcup (2014a) *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism* and David Randall with Jemma Crew (2021) *The Universal*.

### **SOURCES FOR SOUNDBITES**

Heren, 1973: 187–188; Chesterton, 1981: 246; Newman, 1981: 10; Delane, quoted in Wheen, 2002: xi.

**Top Three to Try Next:** Following on from each chapter, this is a suggestion as to where you might venture next.

# ONLINE RESOURCES

## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR LECTURERS

*Journalism: Principles and Practice* (Fourth Edition) is accompanied by online resources to support your teaching. Find them at: <https://study.sagepub.com/harcup4e>. Here lecturers can log in to access teaching notes providing suggestions for exercises and activities tied to each chapter.

### Introductory videos to the three parts

Newly filmed and designed to be watched before reading the relevant chapters. These are introductions for:



[Part One](#): What is Journalism?

[Part Two](#): How To Do Journalism

[Part Three](#): What Now for Journalism?

### Video:

Each chapter is accompanied by a video, discussing the *What Would You Do?* scenarios in the book, which can be found at the end of each chapter. There is also a bonus scenario and video exploring the issue of the abuse of journalists on social media.

### Weblinks:

Each chapter has a set of links which can be shared with students. These include links to SAGE Journal Articles, and examples of journalism in

action.

## **ONLINE RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS**

### **Style Guide:**

A free-to-download style guide for journalists developed by Tony Harcup, including clichés to avoid.

# PART ONE WHAT IS JOURNALISM?

People make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing, as someone once said (Karl Marx, actually). So it is with journalism. *Part One* of this book explores scholarly and practitioner accounts of journalism in the context of the real-life conditions under which journalists operate: that includes looking at the aspirations and actions of individuals as well as the constraints that can limit journalistic autonomy. The concept of ethics is introduced here and will be a recurring theme throughout the book. The seven chapters comprising *Part One* examine some of the key roles played by journalists as newsgatherers, witnesses, reporters, investigators and entertainers, the last of which is often overlooked in the academic literature. Journalism can be fun and there is nothing wrong with that. It can also be harrowing. Together this blend of light and dark is what makes the cocktail of journalism so intoxicating, and the opening chapters of this book describe and discuss the necessary ingredients. The aim is to help readers not only produce better quality journalism but also to understand journalism better.



# CHAPTER 1 THE WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY AND HOW OF JOURNALISM

## Key terms

Agency; Churnalism; Communication; Fourth estate; Free press; Ideology; Journalism; Journalism education; Journalism studies; Profession; Public interest; Public sphere; Social media; Trade

When Susie Beever got her first front page byline on the *Yorkshire Post*, she tweeted: “My late grandfather to me, aged nine, as I handed him another hand-written magazine stapled together from my dad’s printer paper: ‘So young lady, how long before we see your name on the front of the *Yorkshire Post*?’ 18 years, Gramps.” (@SusieMayJourno, October 7 2019.) Even in the digital age, a page one splash is something to be celebrated. Especially by someone who knew from a very early age she wanted to grow up to be a journalist. It was not just hard news that captivated young Beever, either, as she explained in her Twitter thread: “My magazines included expert life advice from a nine-year-old child and my mum’s nail polishes sellotaped to the front as a ‘free gift’. I make no apologies.”

Not everyone has their life planned out quite so clearly. Some develop a passion for journalism a little later than Susie did, while some just seem to stumble into it. If there is one thing that most can agree on, though, it is that few (if any) journalists do it for the money. Not *primarily* for the money, anyway, although everyone needs to eat and pay the rent (a fact of which some employers in the media industry occasionally need reminding). Journalists are motivated by all sorts of things, from enjoying meeting people to enjoying telling stories; from wanting to inform their fellow citizens to wanting to

change the world; and from a worthy desire to do something of genuine social value to a no less heartfelt desire to do a job in which no two days are exactly the same.

## **“IT DOESN’T HAVE AN ACCEPTED CAREER STRUCTURE”**

It is true that the life of a journalist can sometimes be harrowing. It is equally true that the job can sometimes be hilarious. Sharon Marshall described her former colleagues on assorted redtop tabloids as “mad, drunken, immoral, sex-crazed chancers”. And those were just their good points, judging by her confession that “deep down I love every double-crossing, slippery, two-faced little one of them” (Marshall, 2010: 269). We can see something of the mythology of journalism at work here. There has long been a tendency among journalists to portray themselves as slightly roguish, verging on the disreputable: ever-present members of society’s awkward squad, except when they are sucking up to the editor, proprietor or proprietor’s spouse. As the BBC’s Andrew Marr once put it:

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Journalism is a chaotic form of earning, ragged at the edges, full of snakes, con artists and even the occasional misunderstood martyr. It doesn’t have an accepted career structure, necessary entry requirement or an effective system of self-policing. Outside organised crime, it is the most powerful and enjoyable of the anti-professions. (Marr, 2005: 3)

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His phrase “outside organised crime” pre-dated the revelations of organised criminality in what became known as the phone-hacking scandal in parts of the UK national press, but the point still stands that journalism can be powerful and infuriating and full of contradictions. Journalists routinely juggle complex intellectual, legal, commercial and ethical issues every day, simultaneously and at high speed, all while giving the impression of being little deeper than a puddle.

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“Journalism, like acting and prostitution, is not a profession but a vocation.”

– *Louis Heren.*

---

In western, liberal democracies, at least, each of us is at liberty to commit acts of journalism if we so choose. That is because journalism is a trade, or a craft, rather than a “proper” profession along the lines of medicine or the law. It’s not complete liberty hall – in [Chapter 2](#) we will consider some of the constraints that limit the behaviour of journalists – but it does mean that journalists are not required to seek anyone’s permission to practise journalism. That, in turn, means that nobody can be denied permission to practise journalism, even if they turn out to be a con artist or a sex-crazed chancer.

So what is it all *for*? Journalism is a form of **communication** based on asking, and answering, the questions Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Journalism is also a job, and journalists have been known to refer to their workplaces as “word factories”. Yet being a journalist is not the same as working in other types of factory because journalists play a social role that goes beyond the production of commodities to sell in the marketplace. Imperfect though it might be, **journalism** informs society about itself and makes public much that would otherwise be private. Journalists have been described as a **fourth estate** of the realm, the eyes and ears of the people, acting in the **public interest**. Rather an important job, you might think, but “the people” don’t always agree.

Public opinion polls routinely remind journalists that we vie for bottom place with politicians and estate agents in the league table of trustworthiness. As Jemima Kiss explains:

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It seems pretty much anyone outside the industry takes a sharp intake of breath when you say you’re a journalist, which means I often feel the need to say, “I’m not *that* kind of journalist.” The assumption is the cliché of a ruthless,

doorstepping tabloid hack, I suspect, the type perpetuated in cheesy TV dramas.

---

That is only part of the story, though, because in reality many people *do* trust journalists, to quite a surprising extent, when they meet them. “It’s so weird as a journalist to make those quick relationships and get people to trust you so quickly,” says TV reporter Ayshah Tull. “It’s a weird thing having a camera shoved in your face and telling the world your story, it’s a very odd thing to do, and I’m always really grateful when people do it, but also quite shocked that people allow us.”

It is this opportunity to ask people questions that attracts some to the idea of becoming a journalist in the first place, whereas others prefer one of the more backroom roles that journalism also offers. Either way, it seems that a never-ending stream of bright young and not-so-young people are eager to become journalists. Why? Because you go into work not necessarily knowing what you are going to be doing that day; or you *think* you know, but that might all change following one call, direct message or alert. You might get the chance to meet powerful people, interesting people, inspiring people, heroes, villains and victims. You get the chance to ask stupid questions; to be one of the first to know something and to tell the world about it; you may get to travel, or to become an expert in a particular field; you might seek truth and campaign for justice; even, if that’s your thing, to hang out with celebrities. You might do none of those things yet still be a journalist, quietly using your way with words, images, sounds, coding or design to craft, edit and improve stories that might be important, entertaining or both.

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“Journalism largely consists in saying ‘Lord Jones Dead’ to people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive.”

– GK Chesterton.

---

There can also be the thrill of seeing your byline or watching your own footage; and the odd experience of hearing your voice on a piece of audio. You can watch people share and discuss it on social media, which might be a mixed blessing but still counts for *something*. Then you can do it all over again. And again. Little wonder, perhaps, that so many people are prepared to make sacrifices for a career in journalism. Sacrifices such as paying for your own training before even being considered for a job, unless you are either extremely lucky or are the offspring of a powerful figure in the industry; then being paid less than many of the people whose own complaints about low pay might make news stories. As Susie Beever says:

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It's seen as a white-collar profession in a way, and maybe that's an outdated term, but the vast majority of journalists have degrees, and if you don't have a degree it does hold you back. But people on weeklies, like trainees, are being paid about £17,000 [in 2020], it's absolutely nuts. For people to be "paid their age" is really rare. And you could be a self-employed electrician and be earning a lot more than that, not that that's an unskilled job at all by any means, but you don't need a degree to be an electrician or a builder.

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You didn't always need a degree to become a journalist, either.

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And I still think you don't, it's just one of those barriers they put in to filter people. You don't need a degree to be someone who empathises with people, and to know what a good story is, and to know how to talk to people in a way that makes them feel comfortable to tell you their life experiences.

---

There *are* journalists in the UK without degrees, but since the 1990s they have been becoming an increasingly rare breed.

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“Some of my most memorable pieces have been interviewing ordinary people in extraordinary situations.”

– Cathy Newman.

---

## JOURNALISM MATTERS

If some wannabe journalists are put off when they discover the truth about pay, others become disillusioned by work experience in news organisations, observing that too many journalists seem to be chained to their desks in a culture of “presenteeism”, processing copy and checking things out – if at all – via social media or Google. It was when he was working as a business journalist with BBC Scotland that Waseem Zakir came up with the word **churnalism** to describe this process:

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Ten or 15 years ago you would go out and find your own stories and it was proactive journalism. It’s become reactive now. You get copy coming in on the wires and reporters churn it out, processing stuff and maybe adding the odd local quote. It’s affecting every newsroom in the country and reporters are becoming churnalists.

---

That comment itself is now getting a little old, having been said in an interview conducted for the first edition of this book, published as long ago as 2004, but it remains pertinent, perhaps even more so than when he said it. There is often little time even to add “the odd local quote” these days, and a seemingly ever-increasing workload can reduce the chances of journalists being able to do the very things that made journalism seem so attractive in the first place. Young journalists have always had to endure more experienced hacks telling them that “it wasn’t like this in my day”. The old-timers may have a point, but it is interesting to note that even the journalists

of 100 years ago or more looked back fondly on a supposed “golden age” of journalism circa 1870 (Tunstall, 2002: 238).

Despite everything that is often said to be wrong with it, journalism still *matters*. Anyone who doubts that ought to consider the fact that it has been journalists rather than politicians or conspiracy theorists who have done the most since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic to keep people informed, to expose errors and scandals, and to tell the stories of the human lives – and deaths – at the heart of it all. Journalists have used evidence and sources to do this, yet still find themselves abused online by trolls who believe the coronavirus to be a hoax or “fake news”.

Explanations of *how* and *why* journalism matters depend, like so many things, on *who* is speaking. Journalism is variously said to form part of a **public sphere**, to support a **free press** or to inculcate us with the **ideology** of the ruling class. Journalism is probably all those things and more because there is not really just *one* journalism. Many journalists around the world pay with their lives precisely because journalism matters to someone, as we shall see in [Chapter 2](#).

## WHAT’S IN THIS BOOK?

Individual journalists have their own tales to tell, their own beliefs about what they do, their own reasons for pursuing a career in whatever field of journalism they work in. For each edition of this book I have interviewed a range of journalists from different generations, different backgrounds and different media, some of them several times. Their comments are taken from these interviews unless otherwise indicated. Here are just some of those you will hear from in subsequent chapters:

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“The heroes of journalism are reporters.”

– *David Randall*.

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- Susie Beever, whose tweet was quoted in the intro to this chapter. She has worked as a senior reporter at the *Yorkshire Post* regional newspaper and website, having worked her way up from producing a home-made magazine as a nine-year-old via getting involved with student media while studying English Literature at university, and then taking her National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) qualifications on a scheme run by the Press Association in Newcastle. Armed with her NCTJ diploma and bags of work experience, Susie got a job with a news agency before moving on to the *Huddersfield Examiner* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, on both of which she was primarily reporting live news online, then eventually the *YP* – just as her late grandfather had predicted. As this book went to press she joined Hull Live. She tweets as @susiemayjourno.
- Ayshah Tull is a news correspondent for *Channel 4 News*, working on the main television bulletin alongside the newsroom's output on Facebook and Instagram. She also co-hosts the *Fourcast* podcast. Ayshah was named Journalist of the Year in the Drum Online Media Awards in 2020, just a decade after graduating from City University in London with a Master's in Broadcast Journalism. In the intervening period, she joined the BBC's production trainee scheme, which included a stint at Radio 5 Live, before being talent spotted and whisked off to present *Newsround*, a TV news programme aimed at children. She tweets as @ayshahtull.
- Cathy Newman is the first woman to be one of the main presenters on *Channel 4 News*. As well as presenting, she also reports on stories herself, including investigations for the *Dispatches* current affairs strand. Before switching to television in 2006, initially as a political correspondent, she worked for the *Independent* and *Financial Times*, specialising first in media, then in politics. As well as appearing on screen, Cathy helped create the *FactCheck* blog on the C4News website, she is a newspaper columnist and also presents a show on *Times Radio*. She tweets as @cathynewman.
- Paul Foot joined the *Daily Mirror* after university and also worked on the *Daily Record* in Glasgow before moving on to *Private Eye* and then *Socialist Worker*. He returned to the *Mirror* when he was offered his own page but eventually lost his job for writing about the newspaper's owners. When interviewed for this



book he was back on the staff of *Private Eye* as well as being a columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, a freelance contributor to a range of other publications, and an occasional broadcaster. He died shortly after the first edition appeared in 2004 but is commemorated every year in the Paul Foot Award for investigative journalism, organised by the *Eye*: [www.private-eye.co.uk/paul-foot-award](http://www.private-eye.co.uk/paul-foot-award). Continuing his legacy, several winners of the award have since been interviewed for this book.

- Emma Youle became a special correspondent for the online *HuffPost UK* after working for the investigations unit of the Archant group of local newspapers in London. Emma took a one-year postgraduate journalism course after studying English as an undergraduate. She joined Archant as a trainee and obtained her NCTJ qualifications by distance learning. In 2017 Emma won the Paul Foot Award for a series of stories in the *Hackney Gazette* that exposed the borough's "hidden homeless" problem; she was also shortlisted for the award (jointly with Nadine White) three years later, by which time she had moved to *HuffPost*. She tweets as @emmayoule.
- Nadine White became the first race correspondent in the UK national press when she joined the *Independent* in 2021. Still in her 20s, she had already spent two years at *HuffPost UK*, during which time she was shortlisted (jointly with Emma Youle) for the Paul Foot Award. Nadine's journalism career grew from volunteering at her local internet radio station, *PlayVybz* in "pre-gentrification" Brixton, London, via freelancing for the black newspaper and website *The Voice* and the Jamaican *Gleaner*, gaining an NCTJ multimedia diploma after university. She tweets as @nadine\_writes.
- Andrew Norfolk is chief investigations reporter for the *Times*, having previously worked for the *Evening News* in Scarborough and then the *Yorkshire Post*, where he was a member of a team that exposed the "Donnygate" corruption scandal in Doncaster. In 2012 he won the Paul Foot Award (among others) for an investigation into the reluctance of police and care agencies to protect vulnerable young girls in Rochdale and elsewhere from being groomed for sexual exploitation. His series of *Times* stories prompted two government-ordered inquiries, a parliamentary inquiry and a new national action plan on child sexual exploitation.

- Nada Farhoud is the environment editor of the *Daily Mirror*. After studying history and politics at university, Nada got a job as a reporter on the regional tabloid *Bedfordshire on Sunday*, where she also trained for her NCTJ exams. After brief stints in magazines and television, she joined the *Sunday People* as features editor before moving across to the *Sunday Mirror* and then the daily. Nada was consumer editor for the *Daily Mirror* before becoming environment editor in 2018, since when she has helped push the climate emergency up the news agenda of the tabloid newspaper and its website, even on one occasion turning its famous redtop masthead green. Among other honours, she was named Environment Journalist of the Year in the Society of Editors' National Press Awards in 2020. Nada tweets as @nadafarhoud.
- Caroline Crampton creates and edits podcasts as well as writing about the craft of podcasting, among many other things (including a book about the River Thames, but that's another story). She went to *New Statesman* magazine for work experience while on a postgraduate journalism course, that placement became a job, and she went on to help produce the magazine's first podcasts. Now a freelance writer and podcaster, Caroline runs her own show, *Sheddunnit*, produces audio for other organisations, has written for *Hot Pod*, the trade publication for the podcast industry, and tweets as @c\_crampton.
- Lindsay Eastwood, for many years a staff reporter on ITV Yorkshire's *Calendar* news programme, is now a freelance multimedia journalist and trainer. After working on her local newspaper (the *Craven Herald*) straight after leaving school, she moved to the *Watford Observer* and worked shifts on the nationals before returning north to the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Lindsay later switched to news and documentary television, and journalism education, and can be found tweeting as @lindsayeastwood.
- Neal Mann was multimedia innovations editor at the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) in New York at the time he was interviewed for this book, before he went on to work on digital strategies for News Corp in Australia and then moving into the world of brand, marketing and technological change via Anomaly. He trained in Sheffield as a broadcast journalist before working at *Sky News*

as researcher, field producer, deputy news editor and digital news editor. After *Sky* he went to the *WSJ*, initially as social media editor, before developing the multimedia innovations editor role, which he described as “looking at how we can change the way we do journalism, to deliver content to the audience on a variety of different platforms, and create experiences”. In his spare time he also helps run *The Project Magazine*, an online publication that focuses on rock-climbing and lifestyle. Neal tweets as @fieldproducer.

- Jane Merrick became policy editor at the *i* newspaper after working for the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Mail*, the Mercury news agency in Liverpool, and the Press Association (for whom she was working when interviewed for this book). She has also freelanced, and blogs about her allotment too. Jane tweets as @janemerrick23.

Among the many other journalists featured in this book are Jemima Kiss, who was interviewed while head of technology at the *Guardian*; Martin Wainwright, for many years northern editor of the *Guardian*; freelance Sarah Hartley, formerly in charge of online at *Manchester Evening News*; Trevor Gibbons of BBC online; David Helliwell, who was interviewed while assistant editor of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*; consumer affairs reporter Kevin Peachey, who was interviewed while working for the *Nottingham Evening Post*; Abul Taher, a former news editor of *Eastern Eye* who was interviewed while working for the *Sunday Times*; Deborah Wain, who was a joint winner of the Paul Foot Award while working for an under-resourced local weekly newspaper, the *Doncaster Free Press*; and, last but certainly not least, the late Brian Whittle. Brian, who died not long after the first edition of this book was published, started on the weekly *Harrogate Herald* at the age of 17 and went on to work for the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, the *Northern Echo*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Sketch*, the *Sunday People*, the *National Enquirer* and the *Daily Star* before launching his successful Cavendish Press news agency in Manchester. The agency lives on and tweets as @cavendishpress.

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“The business of the press is disclosure.”

– John Thaddeus Delane.

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Another presence felt throughout this book will be that of the author. As a journalist or journalism educator for more than four decades, and as a longstanding member of the National Union of Journalists, I have engaged with the ethics and social role of journalism as well as the industrial issues that impact upon the working lives of journalists. As someone who has taught on vocational courses accredited by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) along with the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) and the Professional Publishers Association (PPA) – formerly the Periodicals Training Council (PTC) – I have first-hand experience of practical journalism training. I have also tried my hand at research and am aware of the gap of understanding that too often separates those who *study* media from those who *produce* media. In the UK, as Richard Keeble (2006: 260) notes with regret, “mutual suspicion persists between the press and academia. ... Scepticism about the value of theoretical studies for aspiring reporters remains widespread”. Similarly, in the USA, Barbie Zelizer highlights this disconnection:

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As a former journalist who gradually made her way from wire-service reporting to the academy I am continually wrestling with how best to approach journalism from a scholarly point of view. When I arrived at the university – “freshly expert” from the world of journalism – I felt like I’d entered a parallel universe. Nothing I had read as a graduate student reflected the working world I had just left... My discomfort was shared by many other journalists I knew, who felt uneasy with the journalism scholarship that was fervently putting their world under a microscope. (Zelizer, 2004: 2–3)

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Under a microscope is not the most comfortable place to be, which might explain why so many who earn their livings within journalism feel the need to ignore or attack those looking down the lens. As David Walker (2000: 236–237) notes: “The academic literature of sociology, media studies or cognate disciplines nowadays goes almost entirely unread by journalists.” Many journalists seem happy

to cover stories about the work of academic researchers on a vast range of subjects, from the health effects of drinking coffee to the psychology of sexual attraction, but when journalism itself comes under scrutiny, such academic study is suddenly deemed to be a waste of time and money. “It’s difficult to think of another field ... in which practitioners believe that the study of what they do is irrelevant to their practice,” observe Simon Frith and Peter Meech (2007: 141 and 144): “If journalists look at university journalism courses and find evidence that academics simply don’t understand the realities of journalism, so academics look at journalists’ accounts of themselves and find evidence of a striking amount of myth-making.”

The press “is fearful of being dissected,” in the words of one national newspaper reporter (Journalism Training Forum, 2002: 46). Yet surely there are *some* insights to be gained from such dissection and from what has been described as “the melding of theory and practice in a judicious mix of skills and experience along with scholarly study” (Errigo and Franklin, 2004: 46)? I believe there are, and I think that journalists and academics alike have something useful to contribute to the process of understanding; hence this book.

The aim is to help bridge the conceptual divide between those journalists (practitioners) who feel academics have little to teach them, and those academics whose focus on theory is in danger of denying journalists any degree of autonomy (or **agency**). This book makes explicit some of these different ways of exploring the principles and practices of journalism. In a dialogic approach, each chapter begins from a practitioner viewpoint but includes a parallel analysis from a more academic perspective. These two ways of seeing are not to be read in isolation, as each engages in dialogue with the other; they talk to each other, as do the best journalists and the best scholars.

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“All human life is there.”

– *old News of the World motto.*

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This book does not attempt to go into all the specifics of, for example, being a foreign correspondent, a war reporter, a celebrity blogger, a courtroom tweeter, a sub, a sports commentator, a showbiz diarist, a presenter, a motoring correspondent, or most of the other specialisms that all have their own rules and folklore; that is because the fundamentals of journalism must be grasped before more specialised roles can be carried out effectively or understood at more than a superficial level. The experience of Edward Behr rings a bell that echoes down the years. As a young reporter, Behr went to work for the Reuters agency in Paris:

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In London, Agence France-Presse (AFP) correspondents rewrote Reuters' copy, as fast as they could, and the finished product ended up as part of the AFP news service. In Paris we shamelessly rewrote Agence France-Presse copy, serving it up as Reuters' fare. All over the world lesser news agencies were writing up *their* versions of Reuters' stories and serving them up as authentic Indian, Spanish, or Brazilian news agency stories. Somewhere, at the bottom of this inverted pyramid, someone was getting a story at first hand. But who was he, and how did he set about it? (Behr, 1992: 72)

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He may not be a "he", of course, but it is this reporter who will be the focus throughout this book: the reporter who goes out, whether physically or virtually or both, and gets a story at first hand.

## **JOURNALISM EDUCATION**

This book is designed to help readers produce such reporting, with a necessary emphasis on the basics that remain a solid foundation for a career in journalism that today embraces online, television, radio, magazine, mobile, podcasting and social media as well those newspapers that linger on in print. The practical emphasis will be on *core* journalistic skills that will be part of good training courses covering journalism in any – or all – media. Such skills will not diminish in importance, even as new delivery platforms emerge.

This book goes beyond practical instruction in skills to encourage understanding of, and critical reflection upon, our practice. Media employers have been accused of wanting cheap young journalists to be schooled in the routines of work through “basic skills, relevant knowledge and an unquestioning attitude”, unencumbered by engagement with ideas from critical theory (Curran, 2000: 42). This book is certainly aimed at supporting journalism students and trainees in the acquisition and application of reporting and writing skills to complement the other necessary elements of journalism training, such as shorthand, media law, and knowledge of public affairs. Yet, at the same time, it will introduce and engage with some of the more academic analysis that aids our understanding of how journalism works. To this end, the book is aimed at supporting *journalism studies* as well as *journalism training*. Taken together, the two elements can be said to constitute *journalism education* (Bromley, 1997: 339). By asking Why journalists do certain things – as well as the Who, What, Where, When and How – the study of journalism can offer insights that complement journalism training and encourage a questioning attitude and a more reflective practice.

Much of the material discussed in these pages may be seen as culturally and historically specific to the UK in the third decade of the 21st century, but there are many points of wider relevance. Each chapter will raise questions that could form the basis of individual reflection and/or group discussion. Each chapter also suggests further readings that, together with the references listed in the extensive bibliography, will provide a wealth of stimulating material to encourage further exploration of the issues discussed here. Ethics are addressed specifically in [Chapters 2](#) and [13](#) but – because ethical issues crop up throughout a journalist’s working life, often when least expected – they will also crop up throughout the text.

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“Get it right. Get it fast. But get it right.”

– *old Press Association motto.*

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Journalism is sometimes said to be a mirror, reflecting society back at itself. It is also sometimes said to be a distorting mirror. Journalism

cannot be a simple *reflection* of everyday reality because it is both selective and organised (up to a point). As Walter Lippmann observed as long ago as 1922, reporting is not “the simple recovery of obvious facts”, because facts “do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody” (quoted in McNair, 2000: 71). That’s where journalists come in. Journalism is not simply fact-gathering. It involves dealing with sources, selecting information and opinion, and telling and editing stories – all within the framework of the constraints, routines, principles, practices and ethics that will be discussed in the following chapters.

## Summary

Journalism is not simply another product but a process of communication, although not necessarily a one-way or linear process. Journalism is said to play a social role in informing society about itself, yet there is a gap of knowledge and understanding between vocational journalism training and academic journalism study. This book will describe the practices of practitioners while engaging with the principles that inform both practice and analysis. Concepts and interviewees introduced in this chapter will reappear at various points throughout this book.

## Questions

If journalism is not a profession, what exactly is it?

What role does journalism play in society?

Why are journalists apparently so mistrusted by the public?

Do you think you need a degree to be a good journalist?

Why does media studies get such a bad press?



## What would you do?

You work for a news organisation that expects you personally to find, write, edit and publish around 12 stories every day; to push those stories out via social media to drive traffic to the website; and to engage with readers and others who make comments on the stories. What do you think journalists faced with such demands do, and what would you do?

## Further reading

Read the news, itself, obviously; *really* read it. Then, no journalism student should be without their own copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism* (Harcup, 2014a), even if I say so myself. Useful alphabetically organised accompaniments to dip into alongside the dictionary include *Digital Journalism Studies: The Key Concepts*, by Bob Franklin and Lily Canter (2019), and *Keywords in News and Journalism Studies*, by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2010). One of the more thoughtful introductions to journalism from the perspective of a reflective practitioner is David Randall's (2021) *The Universal Journalist*, now in its sixth edition and updated with the help of Jemma Crew of PA Media. Other useful introductions – these ones from journalists-turned-academics – include those by Sheridan Burns (2018), Keeble (2006) and Sissons (2006). Former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger (2018) has written an engaging memoir that discusses the importance of public interest journalism alongside the transition from print to online. The edited collection by Bromley and O'Malley (1997) includes valuable historical material that ought to be of interest to students, producers and consumers of journalism alike. McQuail (2000) is a comprehensive and largely comprehensible introduction to media and mass communication theories, while McQuail (2013) explores arguments about the importance of journalism to society. For further exploration of journalism studies scholarship, see Zelizer (2004) and Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2020). The different ways in which journalism is produced, and theorised, across countries and continents are considered in Bromley and Slavtcheva-Petkova's (2019) *Global Journalism*.

Finally, for now, if you wish to explore how reality measures up against the ways in which journalists tend to be portrayed in the movies and/or in fiction, the books by Brian McNair (2010) and Sarah Lonsdale (2016) are highly recommended. More suggestions on what to read next will be made at the end of every chapter.

## Top three to try next

The news – from a variety of media and platforms, every day

Tony Harcup (2014a) *Oxford Dictionary of Journalism*

David Randall with Jemma Crew (2021) *The Universal Journalist* (sixth edition)

## Sources for soundbites

Heren, 1973: 187–188; Chesterton, 1981: 246; Newman, interview with the author; Randall, 2011: 1; Delane, quoted in Wheen, 2002: xi.

## Communication

The basic questions of journalism highlighted in the title of this chapter – Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? – are echoed in an early model of the mass communication process, formulated by Harold Lasswell in 1948. For Lasswell, analysis of the media begins with the question: “Who says what to whom, through what channel and with what effect?” (McQuail, 2000: 52–53). This has been termed a “transmission” model of communication, because it is essentially one way, from sender to receiver. This and later versions of the transmission model have been challenged in recent decades as too simplistic, too linear, too mono-

directional to explain the complexities of communication. It has been argued that an “active audience” can filter messages through our own experiences and understandings, sometimes producing readings “against the grain”, or even suggesting multiple meanings. Increasingly, too, audiences are contributing to journalism directly via social media and user-generated content. The ways in which journalists engage positively with members of the audience on social media will be cropping up throughout the book, as will one of the more negative forms of communication endured by journalists today: trolling.

## Journalism

Journalists may indeed inform society about itself but such a formulation falls far short of an adequate definition. Journalism is defined by Denis McQuail as “paid writing (and the audiovisual equivalent) for public media with reference to actual and ongoing events of public relevance” (McQuail, 2000: 340). Like all such definitions, this raises many questions – Can journalism never be unpaid? Can media be other than public? Who decides what is of public relevance? – but it remains a reasonable starting point for any analysis of the principles and practices of journalism. McQuail goes on to differentiate between different types of journalism: “prestige” (or quality) journalism, tabloid journalism, local journalism, specialist journalism, “new” (personal and committed) journalism, civic journalism, development journalism, investigative journalism, journalism of record, advocacy journalism, alternative journalism, and gossip journalism (McQuail, 2000: 340).

Such differentiation is rejected by David Randall, who recognises only the division between *good* and *bad* journalism:

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The bad is practised by those who rush faster to judgement than they do to find out, indulge themselves rather than the reader, write between the lines rather than on them, write and think in the

dead terms of the formula, stereotype and cliché, regard accuracy as a bonus and exaggeration as a tool and prefer vagueness to precision, comment to information and cynicism to ideals. The good is intelligent, entertaining, reliably informative, properly set in context, honest in intent and effect, expressed in fresh language and serves no cause but the discernible truth. Whatever the audience. Whatever the culture. Whatever the language. Whatever the circumstances. (Randall, 2011: viii)

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Whether it is as simple as that is a question we will explore further in this and subsequent chapters. For now, let's stick with defining journalism as:

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A set of practices through which information is found out and communicated, often involving making public what would otherwise be private, and which is typically published or broadcast in a format such as a newspaper, magazine, bulletin, documentary, website, or blog. Journalism entails discovering or uncovering fresh, topical, factual material and making it publicly available, but it goes beyond that to include amplifying, contextualising, or commenting on facts and comments that have already been made public... (Harcup, 2014a: 148)

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## **Fourth estate**

The notion of the press as a “fourth estate of the realm” – alongside the Lords, the House of Commons, and the established Church – appears to have first been used by Edmund Burke in the 18th century. Recalling this usage in 1840, in what is believed to be the first time it appeared in print, Thomas Carlyle had no doubt of its meaning:

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Burke said there were three estates in parliament; but, in the reporters' gallery yonder, there sat a fourth estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact, very momentous to us in these times. Literature is our parliament too. Printing, which comes necessarily out of writing, I say often, is equivalent to democracy: invent writing, democracy is inevitable. (Carlyle, 1840: 194)

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Ideas about democracy and a free press have to a large extent grown alongside each other and come together in the concept of the fourth estate. Although initially referring specifically to the parliamentary press gallery, the term has become a more general label for journalism, locating journalists in the quasi-constitutional role of “watchdog” on the workings of government. This is central to the liberal concept of press freedom, as Tom O'Malley notes:

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At the centre of this theory was the idea that the press played a central, if unofficial, role in the constitution. A diverse press helped to inform the public of issues. It could, through the articulation of public opinion, guide, and act as a check on, government... The press could only fulfil this function if it were free from pre-publication censorship and were independent of the government. (O'Malley, 1997: 127)

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In the UK, the fourth estate might perhaps be visualised as that assembly of journalists who gathered on a sunny May Bank Holiday afternoon during 2020 in the garden of 10 Downing Street to take turns at firing a barrage of questions at the Prime Minister's then chief adviser Dominic Cummings about how and why he “drove a coach and horses” (as the *Daily Mail's* Jason Groves put it) through the Covid-19 lockdown rules that the rest of the population had been required to follow. The press conference was broadcast live

on television and you can still watch the video on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGLRBwYZEHs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGLRBwYZEHs). What you won't see on the video is that the event was accompanied by instant reaction on social media, where the wider public had its say; but you will see members of the fourth estate playing their quasi-constitutional role of scrutinising those in power. In this case, unelected power in the shape of Cummings. At the time Cummings was the right-hand man of Boris Johnson, who had himself been a member of the fourth estate before becoming Prime Minister; Cummings would eventually conclude that Johnson was unfit for office; that, as they say, is another story.

The political press pack in full cry may be a useful visual representation of the fourth estate in action, but that is not the only way it works. It had been diligent and time-consuming reporting by *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* journalists that had forced Cummings to try to explain himself at that infamous press conference, and such investigations are also part of the news media's fourth estate function. In other words, members of the fourth estate may be at work even when they are out of sight.

## Public interest

The public interest is often mentioned in debates about journalism but it has not proved easy to define. For former *News of the World* journalist Paul McMullan, the public interest simply means what people are interested in, as he told the Leveson inquiry:

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I mean, circulation defines what is the public interest. I see no distinction between what the public is interested in and the public interest. Surely they're clever enough to make a decision whether or not they want to put their hand in their pocket and bring out a pound and buy it. I don't see it's the job – our job or anybody else – to force the public to be able to choose that you must read this, you can't read that. (McMullan, 2011)

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The public interest will be considered in more depth later in this book, particularly in [Chapters 2](#) and [13](#).

## Churnalism

The portmanteau word “churnalism” was first published in the original edition of this book way back in 2004, credited to Waseem Zakir; so it is worth keeping in mind that, when he refers to “10 or 15 years ago”, that would now be more like 30 years ago. Churnalism later took on a new life when Nick Davies (2008: 56) referred to “what some now call ‘churnalism’” in his book *Flat Earth News*, having been informed of the term by one of my ex-students who was helping with his research. Since then countless academics, journalists and other commentators have told their readers – seemingly without bothering to check – that Davies coined the term; he did not, nor did he ever claim to have done so. The funny thing is that most of those erroneously crediting him with the coinage have done so in the very process of criticising journalists for recycling material without checking. The word “ironic” is both overused and frequently misused but it might just fit here.

Churnalism, meanwhile, is alive and well in the digital age, judging by one study of public relations in the field of science, which quoted a press officer explaining how it works: “You send out a press release and it gets picked up by a newswire and you can see it on 80 different websites. And for me it’s brilliant” (Williams and Gajevic, 2013: 516). It is maybe not so brilliant for the rest of us, though.

## Public sphere

The idea of the public sphere rests on the existence of a space in which informed citizens can engage with one another in debate and critical reflection; hence its relevance to discussions of the media. Jürgen Habermas traces the rise of the public sphere in Europe in the late 17th and early 18th

centuries and argues that increasing commercialisation led subsequently to the decline of the public sphere and the press as a space that enabled “the people to reflect critically upon itself and on the practices of the state” (Stevenson, 2002: 49). Today, according to this analysis, such reasoned public discussion has largely been replaced by “the progressive privatisation of the citizenry and the trivialisation ... of questions of public concern” (Stevenson, 2002: 50). But, in turn, Habermas has been accused of idealising “a bygone and elitist form of political life” (McQuail, 2000: 158). As with many topics introduced in this chapter, this is not the last you will read of the public sphere.

## Free press

“Freedom of the press was not handed to the British people on a plate by enlightened rulers,” as journalist and historian Peter Fryer reminds us. “It was fought for and won by the working class radicals of the early nineteenth century, a number of whom served prison sentences for publishing opinions, on religious and other matters, which challenged the ideas of the ruling class” (Fryer, 1984: 220). In many countries people are still being sent to prison – or worse – for such “crimes”, while in democracies such as the UK the “free press” model has long been embraced by commercial proprietors as a means to make money. Editors and media owners alike are often heard extolling the virtues of this idea that everyone is free to publish a newspaper without having to be licensed by those in power. Although publishers must act within the constraints of laws ranging from defamation to phone-hacking, they do not have to submit to censorship in advance nor does anyone except broadcasters need to seek anyone’s permission to publish. Through the democracy of the capitalist free market, so the argument goes, we get the press we both desire and deserve. However, this concept of a press selflessly serving the public does not go unchallenged. Colin Sparks, for example, points to increasing concentration of ownership and to economic barriers on entry, keeping out competitors. He argues:



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Newspapers in Britain are first and foremost businesses. They do not exist to report the news, to act as watchdogs for the public, to be a check on the doings of government, to defend the ordinary citizen against abuses of power, to unearth scandals or to do any of the other fine and noble things that are sometimes claimed for the press. They exist to make money, just as any other business does. To the extent that they discharge any of their public functions, they do so in order to succeed as businesses. (Sparks, 1999: 45–46)

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For Sparks, a truly free press – presenting objective information and a range of informed opinions while acting as a public forum – is actually “an impossibility in a free market” (Sparks, 1999: 59).

## Ideology

By ideology is meant “some organised belief system or set of values that is disseminated or reinforced by communication” (McQuail, 2000: 497). Marxists believe that a ruling-class ideology is propagated throughout western, capitalist societies with the help of the mass media. Ideology may be slippery and contested, but it is argued that the principle remains essentially as expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels more than 170 years ago:

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The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: ie, the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material

relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas... (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1965: 61)

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Ideological power has been described as “the power to signify events in a particular way”, although ideology is also “a site of struggle” between competing definitions (Hall, 1982: 69–70).

Viewed from this perspective, the “news values” employed by journalists in the selection and construction of stories can be seen, not as the neutral expression of professional practice, but as ideologically loaded (Hall et al, 1978: 54). Thus, for all the apparent diversity of the media, and taking into account various exceptions, the routines and practices of journalists *tend to* privilege the explanations of the powerful and to foreclose discussion before it strays too far beyond the boundaries of the dominant ideology (Hall et al, 1978: 118). However, an emphasis on the ideological content of journalism is frequently challenged for downplaying the agency of journalists themselves and/or for failing to take account of the complex ways in which audiences may actually “read” media texts.

## Agency

Within the study of journalism, agency – or autonomy – means the extent to which individual journalists can *make a difference* to media practices and content: “To have agency is defined by the ability to be able to actively intervene” (Stevenson, 2002: 226). To say that journalists have agency is not to deny that journalists operate in a world of constraints (see [Chapter 2](#)), nor to ignore the political and economic pressures to replace journalism with churnalism and/or user-generated content; it is to argue that structural forces do not totally determine all the actions of individuals. Yet many academic critics of the media seem to allow little room for agency and to downplay the role of journalists, preferring to concentrate on structural or market issues, as Angela Phillips (2015: 139) points out. Take Sparks’ explanation for the “lurid,

sensational and sometimes offensive material” he finds in much of the media:

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None of these elements can be traced to the shortcomings of individuals. Newspaper proprietors may be, in the main, bullying reactionary bigots who force their editors to print politically biased material. But even if they were self-denying liberal paragons, it would still make sense for editors to act in the same way, because that is the best business model available to them. Again, editors and journalists may well be moral defectives with no sense of their responsibility to society and to the people upon whose lives they so pruriently report. But even if they were saintly ascetics, it would still make sense for them to publish the same sorts of material, because that is what best secures the competitive position of their newspapers. (Sparks, 1999: 59)

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Little sense there of the flesh-and-blood journalists we will hear from in these pages. Yet, if journalism matters – as is argued in this book – then the actions of individual journalists must matter too.

# CHAPTER 2 CONSTRAINTS AND INFLUENCES ON JOURNALISTS

## Key terms

Advertising; Analytics; Audience; Bullying; Censorship; Chilling effect; Class; Clickbait; Codes of conduct; Constraints; Digital economy; Ethics; Free press; Laws; 90-9-1 rule; Ownership; Privacy; Propaganda model; Pseudo-events; Public interest; Public relations; Racism; Regulation; Representation; Routines; Self-censorship; Self-regulation; Sexism; Social composition; Socialisation; Structural inequality; Trolling; Violence

Veteran reporters, newbie journalists and journalism students all faced the same new constraint on their activities as the Covid-19 pandemic spread around the world during 2020: how to continue working under conditions of physical distancing, empty newsrooms and Zoom interviews (with or without the additional constraint of dodgy wifi). Journalists continued to do journalism, setting up home offices, using two-metre microphone poles when necessary, and even sharing handy shorthand outlines for terms such as coronavirus and quarantine (@stephspyro; see Spyro, 2020).

Journalism is always conducted under a range of **constraints**, some more severe than others. Every year grim lists appear of the number of journalists and media workers killed in the course of their work. There were 66 such deaths in 2020, 49 in 2019 and 95 in 2018 ([www.ifj.org/what/safety.html](http://www.ifj.org/what/safety.html)). For every journalist attacked or threatened with violence, there may be countless others who stick to safer stories as a consequence; this is what is meant by the phrase self-censorship. It is often journalists operating in their home countries who are most at risk, not necessarily those arriving from overseas. In November 2020 the owner of small Scottish magazine the *Digger*, which specialises in investigating organised crime, had

his car firebombed in Glasgow. It was the latest in a series of attacks, prompting Michelle Stanistreet, general secretary of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), to observe that “crime reporters are often at the sharp end when it comes to threats, intimidation, and acts of aggression” (Carrell, 2020).

More official forms of censorship and constraint include the prosecution and jailing of journalists, the deportation of troublesome foreign correspondents, the banning of particular outlets, police raids on TV studios and newspaper offices, attempts to close down internet or social media connections, and the confiscation of equipment. All these things and more are happening somewhere in the 21st century.

## THE LAW

Even the UK, which boasts of having a “free press”, constrains journalists’ activities with hundreds of pieces of legislation or statutory legal instruments (Petley, 1999: 143), so anybody wishing to work as a journalist in the UK really needs to study *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists* (Hanna and Dodd, 2020; make sure you get the latest edition, and also be aware that Scotland and Northern Ireland have some different laws from those in England and Wales). Wherever you work, you need to take the law into consideration. Even journalists who are never sent to cover a court case and who do not intend to investigate organised crime or state secrets still need to understand what the law does and doesn’t allow; that includes criminal and civil law, custom and precedent, statute and statutory instruments, and the differences between jurisdictions. Such knowledge is one of the (many) things that distinguish the trained journalist from the uninformed randomer talking out of their backside on Facebook or Twitter.

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“I don’t like to go into print without checking my facts.”

– Francis Wheen.

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One of the ever-present legal risks for all journalists is defamation, which, if it is written, broadcast or put online, is known as libel. It applies to *any* kind of journalism because even sports stars and fashion divas can sue too. Publishing something about somebody can be deemed to be defamatory if the statement tends to do any of the following:

- expose the person to hatred, ridicule, or contempt;
- cause the person to be shunned or avoided;
- lower the person in the estimation of right-thinking members of society generally; or
- disparage the person in his/her business, trade, office or profession. (Hanna and Dodd, 2020: 288)

There are a number of defences open to journalists and publishers, which include that the statement can be proved to be true; that it is an honest opinion based on what are believed to be the facts; or that the statement is protected by legal privilege, for example because it is a quote from an MP's speech to parliament or the evidence of a witness in a court case. But, because of the costs involved in defending libel actions, there has sometimes been a tendency to settle actions rather than defend them in court, or even to avoid reporting allegations against individuals known to be rich and litigious enough to cause trouble. This is sometimes referred to as the "chilling effect". *Private Eye's* Francis Wheen (2002: xi) suggests a simple way of reducing the risks of defamation, which is to check the facts – *before* publishing. That's a pretty sound starting point for any journalist.

Journalists sometimes find themselves in court not because somebody wants to extract money or an apology, but because somebody wants to know the identity of a confidential source of information. As Dodd and Hanna (2014: 404) warn: "A journalist protecting a source's identity must be ready for a long and tortuous legal battle." That's precisely what happened to Bill Goodwin after he took a phone call just three months into his first job as a trainee reporter with *The Engineer* magazine. A source told him about a

company in financial difficulties. He called the firm for a response and the reply was a faxed injunction ordering the magazine not to publish anything about the company. Two days later he was in court facing an order to disclose the identity of his source or be sent to prison (Goodwin, 1996).

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“If one journalist betrays a source, others will be less willing to come forward in the future.”

– *Bill Goodwin.*

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Goodwin refused, citing the principle enshrined in the NUJ code of conduct (see [Chapter 13](#)) that a journalist should protect a confidential source of information otherwise other sources might not come forward; this is another form of “chilling effect”. Over the following seven years the case went before a succession of courts before he won at the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled that an order to disclose a source could not be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights without an overriding **public interest** (Welsh and Greenwood, 2001: 286).

## Box 2.1

### How the editors’ code of practice defines the public interest

1. The public interest includes, but is not confined to:
  - i. Detecting or exposing crime, or the threat of crime, or serious impropriety.
  - ii. Protecting public health or safety.
  - iii. Protecting the public from being misled by an action or statement of an individual or organisation.

- iv. Disclosing a person or organisation's failure or likely failure to comply with any obligation to which they are subject.
  - v. Disclosing a miscarriage of justice.
  - vi. Raising or contributing to a matter of public debate, including serious cases of impropriety, unethical conduct or incompetence concerning the public.
  - vii. Disclosing concealment, or likely concealment, of any of the above.
2. There is a public interest in freedom of expression itself...
  3. An exceptional public interest would need to be demonstrated to over-ride the normally paramount interests of children under 16.

(Ipsos, 2021)

## Box 2.2

### How the National Union of Journalists defines the public interest

1. The public interest includes:
  - i. Detecting or exposing crime or a serious misdemeanour;
  - ii. Protecting public health and safety;
  - iii. Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation;
  - iv. Exposing misuse of public funds or other forms of corruption by public bodies;
  - v. Revealing potential conflicts of interest by those in positions of power and influence;
  - vi. Exposing corporate greed;
  - vii. Exposing hypocritical behaviour by those holding high office.
2. There is a public interest in the freedom of expression itself.



3. In cases involving children, journalists must demonstrate an exceptional public interest to over-ride the normally paramount interests of the child.

(NUJ, 2002)

## Box 2.3

### Public interest: the Cooper and Whittle definition

- Citizens in a democratic state have an interest in having access to information about the workings of that state, of its institutions and its officials, both elected and appointed... also to private corporations and to voluntary organisations which require the public's trust.
- When an individual holds an office... which seeks the public's trust, it is in the public interest that that individual's public actions in pursuit of these goals be open for inspection, analysis and investigation by the news media.
- Such an individual is to be judged for his/her public acts, not private ones... The test is always public actions.
- The division between private and public is rarely absolute....

(Cooper and Whittle, 2009: 97–98)

More recently, in 2020 the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland police apologised to journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey who had been arrested in dawn raids two years earlier, and had their

journalistic and personal data seized, after they had produced an investigative documentary called *No Stone Unturned*. Their film, which drew on leaks of confidential documents, alleged that police had not properly investigated a mass killing in Loughinisland. The police response to the film had been “a deliberate and direct attack on press freedom”, said Barry McCaffrey (NUJ, 2020).

Before we leave the powers of the state, let us pause and consider the more refined world of the Defence and Security Media Advisory (DSMA) Committee. That’s where representatives of the UK media meet with Whitehall mandarins and agree to restrain coverage of sensitive military or security issues. From time to time, members of the committee stir themselves to issue a DSMA notice or, more commonly, write a polite letter or make a quiet phone call to an editor, requesting that some matter be ignored or played down. In these days of so-called open government, the committee has its own website with minutes of its meetings: [www.dsma.uk](http://www.dsma.uk). The whole thing is entirely voluntary on the part of the media, operating as “an unofficial system of censorship involving public officials and senior media executives” (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 367). More often than not, an editor will comply with any request; just occasionally an editor will take such an approach as confirmation that a story is actually true, and run it if it merely risks embarrassing the state rather than being a genuine security concern. DSMA notices are, in effect, a system of *self-censorship* and are not to be confused with *self-regulation*, of which more below.

## REGULATION AND SELF-REGULATION

Different systems apply in different countries, with television and radio journalism in the UK subject to what is known as statutory regulation, whereby misdemeanours can be punished by a regulator (Ofcom). Broadcast companies can be fined or even have licences withdrawn. Lindsay Eastwood noticed the difference in regulatory regimes as soon as she switched from print:

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TV is much stricter on things like intrusion, and taste and decency. You can’t have people saying “God” or “Jesus Christ” in a voxpop, because if one person complains and it’s upheld, it counts. They are quite careful at *Calendar* not

to upset people, whereas newspapers are not bothered so much about flak. I think the difference is you can lose your licence with TV. They can shut you down, so there's a bit more at stake really.

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In contrast to the broadcast regime under which licences are at risk, print and online journalism in the UK has a much looser system known as self-regulation, with an editors' code of practice for those publishers who choose to follow it. The code is "policed" by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ips0), although it is perhaps more like a police community support officer, resembling the police from a distance yet with little real clout.

## MEDIA OWNERS

What business model is associated with any particular news outlet will have a direct impact on journalists' work in a number of ways. The sector of the market being targeted will impact both style and subject matter; the number of staff employed will impact on how many stories a reporter is expected to turn around in a day; and so on. Major **proprietors** such as Rupert Murdoch are used to getting their own way and that can act as a further constraint on the journalists they employ. For example, Andrew Neil, former editor of the *Sunday Times*, describes Murdoch's normal methods of control as beginning with choosing editors "like me who are generally on the same wavelength as him... Then he largely left me to get on with it. But you always have to take Rupert into account" (Neil, 1996: 164). He can certainly pick them, as demonstrated by the way the editorial line of all 175 Murdoch-owned newspapers on three continents just happened to agree with his own pro-war stance leading up to the 2003 conflict in Iraq (Greenslade, 2003a). More recently, Murdoch papers have been accused of systematically downplaying the climate emergency, for example when his *The Australian* newspaper relegated to an inside page coverage of huge bushfires that were making headlines around the world for devastating large parts of Australia (Meade, 2020).

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"I did not come all this way not to interfere."

– Rupert Murdoch.

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Murdoch has long been an easy target for those claiming media owners wield too much power, but it is not only journalists taking the Murdoch shilling who feel proprietorial constraints, explicit or implicit. As one journalist on a rival title confessed: “At the *Independent* I spilled much ink in editorials savaging his [Murdoch’s] power and pricing strategy. But such criticism is vitiated by a lack of honesty about one’s own organisation” (Walker, 2000: 241).

There is nothing new in media owners being accused of using *their* journalists to pursue certain agendas. Back in 1931 Conservative party leader Stanley Baldwin launched his famous attack on press barons Beaverbrook and Rothermere, owners of the then hugely influential *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* respectively:

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The newspapers attacking me are not newspapers in the ordinary sense. They are engines of propaganda for the constantly changing policies, desires, personal wishes, personal dislikes of two men. What are their methods? Their methods are direct falsehood, misrepresentations, half-truths, the alteration of the speaker’s meaning by publishing a sentence apart from the context. ... What the proprietorship of these papers is aiming at is power, and power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages. (Quoted in Griffiths, 2006: 251–252)

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His argument was echoed much more recently by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, who said during one of their battles with the UK press: “When power is enjoyed without responsibility, the trust we all place in this much-needed industry is degraded” (quoted in Waterson, 2020a).

It was in 1949 that Lord Beaverbrook himself told the first Royal Commission on the Press that he ran the *Daily Express* “merely for the purpose of making propaganda and with no other motive”, and in the 1980s Robert Maxwell described the *Daily Mirror* as his personal “megaphone” (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 48 and 76). Former *Mirror*

journalist Paul Foot describes such proprietorial influence on journalism as “absolutely insufferable”. Yet he did suffer it in the shape of Maxwell, and he managed to produce much challenging journalism in spite of it. Foot recalls how he pinned up a list of Maxwell’s business friends and, whenever he was investigating one of them, made sure he had the story copper-bottomed and “legalled” (checked by lawyers) before the subject would be approached for a comment:

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The minute you put it to him – “is this true?” – he rings Maxwell. That happened on several occasions. So you have to have the story sewn up and prepared for when Maxwell says: “Are you sure this is right?” *But we got most of the stuff published.*

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For most journalists in most newsrooms, most of the time, proprietorial interference probably means little more than an editor’s instruction to make sure you don’t crop the owner’s spouse off a photograph or there’ll be hell to pay. Many journalists go about their work without giving the wishes of the owner a second thought. Yet proprietors have influence not just by direct intervention. They set the tone, the size of the editorial budget, they can condemn or condone a culture of bullying, and they hire and fire the editors who are their representatives on Earth. That is as true of media operating within today’s **digital economy** as it was within the analogue news industries of yore.

There are, however, some alternative models of media ownership. The publicly owned BBC enshrines the Reithian principles of public service broadcasting (Briggs and Burke, 2002: 160–163); the *Guardian* is owned by the Scott Trust, with a strict separation between financial and editorial matters (Franklin, 1997: 98); and smaller-scale media may be run by ad-hoc groups, community organisations or workers’ co-operatives (Harcup, 1994 and 2005). Journalists working for such media may escape an owner using them as a personal megaphone, and may even evade the pressure to chase profits or clicks, but they cannot avoid most of the other constraints discussed in this chapter.

## “YOU’RE DOING STUFF SO QUICKLY”

Deadlines, **routines** and the whims of the newsdesk tend to be the most prevalent everyday constraints on journalists. Routines may change as the technology changes, but there are still routines even if online journalism means that a story is now never *finished* (was it ever really finished even in the old days?). The constant pressure to meet deadlines, including the instant deadlines of online and rolling broadcast news, teaches journalists that an average story delivered on time is usually of more value than a perfect story that arrives late. Although the latest technology theoretically means that newspaper deadlines become later, in practice they have moved forward to cope with smaller staff numbers and the fact that, for economic reasons, many “local” titles are now produced many miles from their circulation areas.

Not that the deadline is always bad news. Many journalists welcome deadlines for providing the focus, and the adrenalin rush, necessary to get the job done at all. As more news organisations have become online-first, deadlines have disappeared for some, with instant publishing increasingly becoming the norm. Deadline or no deadline, journalists have always tended to complain that there is not enough time. Time is at a particular premium in the television industry, because of the (relatively) more cumbersome methods and routines involved, as Eastwood discovered when she switched from newspapers to become a TV reporter:

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It takes so long to do everything. You’ve got to set up the story and organise camera crews, and it takes an hour to film a minute’s worth of stuff. There’s just so much faffing about and not actually doing the journalism, which I find very frustrating. You’re still getting a shot of the house while all the newspaper reporters are knocking on the doors of neighbours, and I’m saying to the cameraman, “Come on”. Then you’ve got to get back to the studio to cut it before deadline.

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Faced with a constant shortage of time, journalists make many decisions instantly, almost subliminally. Veteran journalist David Helliwell says of his time as news editor of the *Yorkshire Evening*

*Post* that most of the numerous press releases arriving on the newsdesk would receive just one or two seconds' attention before a decision needed to be made on whether or not it might make something. Spending five minutes pondering each one in detail would quickly bring the routines of the newsroom grinding to a halt.

Time constraints can result in inaccurate journalism, believes Martin Wainwright:

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You're doing stuff so quickly you don't have time to be absolutely sure about things, and more importantly the people you're talking to don't. So they will say things they believe to be true, about a developing situation, which then turn out not to be. It happened in the [Selby] rail crash when for nearly a week everybody said 13 people had been killed. The police said 13 people had been killed. In fact it now turns out to be 10. A central fact of the whole story was wrong for nearly a week, and somebody coming across a newspaper from that week and not checking a week later will not get the truth.

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Lack of time may also lead to journalists falling short of professional standards, as Michael Foley notes: "Much that passes for unethical behaviour takes place because too few journalists are taking too many decisions quickly and without time to reflect. This is because proprietors have not invested in journalism" (Foley, 2000: 49–50). Maybe. But the UK national paper enjoying some of the heaviest editorial investment is the *Daily Mail*, hardly a stranger to complaints of unethical behaviour or inaccurate reporting.

Even on the squeaky-clean *Guardian*, reporters can be constrained by being sent out when somebody at head office has apparently already decided what the story is. Wainwright again:

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During the foot and mouth [disease] crisis the newsdesk said to me: "Can you go shopping and see the meat panic? And we do *want* a meat panic." You're always coming up against that kind of pressure. It's a really pernicious aspect of modern journalism, that they don't trust people like

myself who are here. They think they know what the story is because they've read it in the *Daily Mail* or heard it on the *Today* programme.

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He adds that reporters sometimes feel pressure to deliver the goods simply because the routines of production planning mean that a large space or timeslot has been allocated in expectation of a major story:

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A colleague had it with drug dealers. The story collapsed but they [still] wanted a big thing about drug dealers. The way they'd designed it and thought about it, it had to be *big*. Lots of journalists I know complain about this and say, "they're not really interested in how *I* am seeing this".

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A similar point is made in a telling anecdote from John Kampfner, who recalls a Conservative party meeting he covered for the *Financial Times* during which two politicians outlined their differing views on the UK's relationship with Europe:

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Both had said as much many times before, and I wrote a quiet piece. That evening, the newsdesk at the *FT*, not one usually to follow others' stories, politely enquired if I had been at the same event as my colleagues. They pointed out the screaming "Tories in meltdown" headlines. Somewhat chastened, I ratcheted up my story so as not to feel exposed. I should not have done. It was a non-story. (Kampfner, 2007)

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It is not unknown for a newsdesk to put pressure on a reporter to set aside personal or ethical considerations in the pursuit of a story. Even in organisations publicly committed to following ethical codes of practice, there may be an atmosphere of *if you haven't got the story, don't bother coming back*. For example, journalists returning empty handed from "death knocks" – calls on the recently bereaved to pick up quotes and pictures – may be ridiculed for being insufficiently aggressive. A sports reporter on the *Stoke Sentinel*



once lost his job after refusing to seek an interview with one of his close contacts whose son had just died (Morgan, 1999).

## KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

Traditionally journalists knew relatively little about the ways in which their output was consumed. That is changing with technology being used to monitor the behaviour of online audiences, as Neal Mann explains:

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We have direct feedback – analytics – on how people are engaging and why they're engaging. We never had that on TV so I didn't know why people switched off: did one shot switch them off, was my scripting too slow? You wouldn't know that on TV, whereas online you can see the audience drop off as you get to a certain shot. As a result we can change the way we produce content and retain their attention.

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Such analytics can be a mixed blessing for journalists, especially if the quest for page views prioritises clickbait over more worthwhile content. It can also be dispiriting, so some do their best not to be ruled by the numbers, as the *Yorkshire Post's* Susie Beever explains:

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We get an email every day saying, "These are the stories that did really well yesterday, this is what did well at the weekend", for both news and sport. Weather and traffic, they drive so many page views. I think for most journalists, I don't want to speak for everyone, but I think they're a sort of necessary evil. No-one wants to be writing about traffic all their lives but it does draw people onto the website...

A few weeks ago I did a whole series of interviews with women who'd been raped, and their perpetrator wasn't charged for whatever reason. It was something that I'd invested a lot of time in, it felt quite a personal investment in that story and I'd spent a few weeks on it, and I know it

wasn't going to be top of our page views all day, but it was quite disheartening to see that the top story that day was [department store] Debenhams were closing so many branches and it was, "Here's a list of branches". And it wasn't even any branches locally. I hate using the word "clickbait", because clickbait insinuates that you're not delivering on your headline, but it was a little bit, you know, like, "Oh, OK..."

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Little wonder, perhaps, that she adds: "I try not to worry too much about those figures."

Every now and then journalists will receive instructions or exhortations from on high within a news organisation to produce more aspirational human interest stories, based either on online analytics or on surveys or focus groups of the existing or potential audience. At the same time as (supposedly) attracting new audiences, such lifestyle copy – entertainment, holidays, health, fashion, beauty, consumer stories and so on – has been used to attract (or hold onto) **advertisers**.

Audience input used to mean the letters page and it then expanded to include phone-ins on radio and occasionally on TV too. But it was the emergence of the web followed by blogging, "citizen journalism", users' comments and then social media that really began throwing up different answers to the communication question posed in [Chapter 1](#): *Who says what to whom, through what channel and with what effect?* Blogging, for example, was said to have "reshaped globalised communications and in doing so has demanded that journalists re-evaluate and reform their practices" (Knight, 2008: 118). The result of all this interactive technology and social media is, for Megan Knight and Clare Cook (2013: 3–4), a form of collaborative networked journalism that is creating a media landscape in which distinctions between journalist and audience are fast disappearing, "and the crowd – not journalists – are in control". Other commentators are more guarded about what many regard as the hype around the transformational impact of social and digital media on relations between journalist and audience (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013; Nielsen and Schroder, 2014).

"Commenters are not really typical of the wider audience, thankfully," technology specialist Jemima Kiss tells me. Her point echoes Jakob

Nielsen's so-called *90-9-1 rule* which states that, as a rough rule of thumb: "In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action" (Nielsen, 2006). This also tallies with Cathy Newman's experience of the difference between the online world and real life, when it comes to what people say about her role on *Channel 4 News*:

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It's quite funny because when I walk down the street people are universally lovely, they say how great I am, lovely stuff, you know, "What a role model for women," and so on. And that's really nice. Even if it's not true, I like it. But on Twitter it seems to me, because of the anonymity, that people will say the most vile things that I'm sure they wouldn't dream of saying to your face. There is a lot of misogyny. I very rarely read the comments below a blog for that reason, whereas if it's in a tweet to you, if they're really vile, I can block them.

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Her colleague Ayshah Tull has had similar experiences with trolls:

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With social media, whenever I'm not working, I come off it because a lot of it is going to be toxic. Especially when I started at *Newsround*, because I was presenting, I got a lot of, "You're a bit big to present telly to children", and, "You're not being a very good role model". I still get that to some extent, like comments on what I'm wearing, and that can be hard, but most of the time I just try to ignore it. I try to get through and not worry about it, but it is out there. Unfortunately it's how social media is operating at the moment, in that weird nasty way. I remember someone online picked up on a factual point of my reporting, so I said, "Thank you for pointing that out, yes that was wrong, I completely agree and I apologise". I don't mind when people do that, but when someone's just, "Oh, you look fat today", or, "What were you wearing, are you allowed to wear that on telly?" type of thing...

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Thankfully, as with Newman, the online abuse directed at Tull has not been reflected on the streets: “I’ve never had anyone say anything but nice things when I’ve been out, and even when reporting with a camera. In the real world we’re still very polite, it’s a different world.”

Although some reporters filming on the streets *have* been harassed or abused, such experiences are much less likely than social media trolling. Women seem to be targeted disproportionately, both on- and offline, but Mann points out that any journalist in the public eye ought to be alive to potential dangers:

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If you have a huge following online, you have to be aware of your own personal safety. I always advise journalists with big followings never to tweet where they are in their personal life, for example. You need to be aware of what you’re publishing and your location, which traditionally wouldn’t have been an issue unless you were covering very, very volatile subjects. But people can have an obsession with individuals that publish daily and regularly. That shouldn’t scare journalists off but it should be something that they’re aware of.

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If this all seems very far removed from the traditional one-way communication that earlier generations of journalists enjoyed with their audiences, we might acknowledge that audiences were not always passive, even before the internet, Twitter or Facebook gave them an array of communicative tools. Take the reaction to the *Sun* front page of April 19 1989, concerning the Hillsborough football disaster in which 96 Liverpool fans died. Under the banner headline THE TRUTH, the paper reported anonymous police officers accusing “drunken Liverpool fans” of stealing from the dead and attacking rescue workers. The reaction to that headline on Merseyside was based on the fact that so many people knew – via family, friends or personal experience – a different version of “the truth”. There was nothing passive about the local audience: “All over the city copies of the paper were being ripped up, trampled and spat upon... *Sun* readers in Liverpool had voted spontaneously with their feet and sales of the paper had collapsed” (Chippindale and Horrie, 1992: 289–292). That strength of reaction was notable precisely because it was so unusual, as again in 2011 when public and advertiser

reaction to the revelation that a missing schoolgirl's phone had been hacked led Rupert Murdoch to close the *News of the World* fearing it had become a "toxic" brand.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

"It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury," wrote a British government spin doctor in a soon-to-become notorious email sent at 2.55pm London time on September 11 2001, within an hour of the second hijacked plane hitting New York's World Trade Centre. Her memo, to senior colleagues in the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, continued with the helpful suggestion: "Councillors' expenses?" (Clement and Grice, 2001). The department's press office duly rushed out news release number 388 concerning a new system of allowances for local councillors (DTLR, 2001). As predicted, the councillors' expenses story was ignored by a media concentrating on recounting the rather greater horrors of the twin towers.

When her words were leaked, the press officer became something of a hate figure and subsequently lost her post. But wasn't she only doing her job? Isn't the whole **public relations** (PR) industry designed not simply to promote good news about clients but to bury bad news? Not according to the Institute of Public Relations, which promotes ethical practice and exhorts its members to "deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public" ([www.ipr.org.uk](http://www.ipr.org.uk)). Despite such advice, press officers often time the release of awkward information to minimise coverage; Friday afternoons and the beginning of holiday periods seem to be particularly popular times. Others prefer disguising bad news with apparently good news, so that job losses become a footnote in a piece of puffery about an apparent expansion.

It might seem odd to discuss PR within a chapter concerned largely with *constraints* on journalists. Output from the PR industry is visible in the media every day, and some short-staffed newspapers are only too grateful to be stuffed full of scarcely rewritten news releases. But PR is not just about *releasing* information, it is also about *controlling* information – and access. Many journalists have an ambivalent attitude to PR. On the one hand, they maintain they are too hard-

bitten to listen to PR departments, yet they are also quick to moan about bullying by political spin doctors, demands for copy approval on behalf of celebs, or the freezing out of journalists who don't comply (Helmore, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2001; Morgan, 2002b). Perhaps an ambivalent attitude is only natural. Although many press officers have good working relationships with reporters, based on trust and even grudging respect, the fact remains that the two are *working to different agendas*.

## DIVERSITY IN THE NEWSROOM – OR NOT

If journalists have a social role in informing society about itself, does it matter that journalists are not particularly representative of that society? Editor Jon Grubb clearly believes the issue of representation matters:

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For too long newspaper editorial departments have been dominated by white, middle-class staff. If newspapers want to truly connect with the community they must strive to better reflect the multi-cultural nature of their audience. This issue is not just about colour. We need more journalists with working-class roots. Until papers can understand the problems, hopes, aspirations and fears of all sections of the community they will find it difficult to win their hearts and minds. (Quoted in Keeble, 2001b: 143)

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Peter Cole calls it “shameful and disgraceful” that local papers in places such as Bradford, Oldham and Burnley have so few non-white journalists (quoted in Slattery, 2002). Not just newspapers. Witness the prevalence of Oxbridge types at the BBC, particularly on its more prestigious news and current affairs strands. Research consistently suggests that the **social environment** in which journalists work “does not reflect the diversity of the UK population, either in terms of ethnic mix or social background”: around 20 years ago, 96% of journalists were white with very few from working-class backgrounds (Journalism Training Forum, 2002: 8). More recent figures suggest diversity is only inching forward, with 92% of UK journalists being white in 2020 (Spilsbury, 2021).

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“After counting the number of non-white presenters, reporters and experts over the week I am really shocked by the lack of diversity.”

– Amal Warsame.

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Those ethnic minority journalists who do work in the news industry are sometimes seen almost as *representatives* of the entire black community or of the Muslim community; alternatively, they may be warned against dwelling on race (Younge, 2002). As a black journalist within a majority white industry, Tull relishes the opportunity to report issues that may otherwise not get the attention they deserve, but those are clearly not all she wants to cover. Asked if she feels pressure to be seen as some kind of community representative when she is on TV, she says she actually puts that pressure on herself:

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I did a story a couple of months ago about black mothers being five times as likely to die in childbirth. I felt that was an important story for me to do because I could do it for my community to highlight what was going on, so that was important to me. And with the Black Lives Matter stuff, I wanted to make sure it was portrayed in the right way, so I'd be the one putting my hand up going, “Yes, send me, send me”. So the pressure came from within. ... I think the danger is if you get pigeonholed into doing one thing, “This person only does those stories, or only stories about the black community”. I don't want to be seen like that and I don't think any of my colleagues want to be seen like that either, so I think that's where the danger lies, if the editor thinks, “Oh, you can only do *that* story.” I'm covering the health beat next week... It's not that I'd rather do that, because I like doing all different types of stories, but I really like doing the health ones because it's interesting, it's science-y, I can use all the contacts that I've got, it's really important for me that I'm able to do it.

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“Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

– *African proverb.*

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Nadine White does focus specifically on stories of direct relevance to the black community, of which she is a proud member. She is an example of what is known as “becoming the change you want to see”, having grown up observing the largely negative and unnuanced coverage of Brixton in much of the UK’s national media. By training as a journalist and working for the *HuffPost* and then the *Independent*, complemented by a very active presence on Twitter, she is now in a position to amplify stories and voices that might otherwise be marginalised. To help explain her role, and to stress the importance of greater diversity within news organisations, she quotes an African proverb: “Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” White adds: “It is absolutely relevant to journalism because it’s all about the importance of storytelling and perspectives.”

As well as being very white, newsrooms had quite a blokey atmosphere in the past. However, the increasing proportion of women entering journalism in recent years has resulted in a more even split between the sexes (Spilsbury, 2021), although, as Anne Perkins (2001) notes: “The higher up a newspaper hierarchy you travel, the fewer women there are to be seen.”

Journalists are recruited from an even more limited pool now that so many have to pay for postgraduate journalism courses on top of huge undergraduate debt. Journalism can look like a closed door to outsiders, particular to people with working-class backgrounds, as only an estimated 30% of journalists get their first job after seeing it publicly advertised; others approach employers on spec, are offered a job after work experience, or hear about vacancies through a range of informal means (Journalism Training Forum, 2002: 33). In the words of a Fleet Street sub: “Newspaper journalism fosters a culture of the clique. Anyone who does not fit into the prevailing clique’s clearly defined pigeon-holes tends to be viewed with



suspicion and ends up being marginalised or forced out.” (Quoted in Journalism Training Forum, 2002: 60.)

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“Editors hire in their own image.”

– Gary Younge.

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Journalist colleagues can constrain each other by creating an atmosphere of conformity in which anyone who is a bit different or who challenges the norm is ridiculed, bullied, forced out, marginalised or tolerated as the resident Jeremiah. But colleagues can also support individuals, whether those like Bill Goodwin or Barry McCaffrey who are threatened by the might of the state, or those facing managerial pressure to act in unethical ways. That’s why Paul Foot urges journalists to band together in a trade union rather than stand alone. “You can only have an alternative to the control of the editorial hierarchy and the proprietor if you’ve got the discipline of being in a collective body behind you,” argues Foot.

## **VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION**

Even collective strength is not always sufficient to protect individual journalists, as was demonstrated one Saturday afternoon in Moscow when Anna Politkovskaya took a break from her computer keyboard to go shopping for groceries. On her return she took a couple of bags up to her seventh-floor flat and went back down to collect the others from her car. It was her final journey because, as the lift doors opened at the ground floor, she was shot dead. Anna Politkovskaya may not have been working on the afternoon of October 7 2006, but few doubt that it was her work as a journalist that prompted someone to kill her – or to order her death.

Politkovskaya worked for the relatively small circulation Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and her reports about war, terrorism and their attendant human rights abuses had resulted in countless death threats. Her journalism also won praise from supporters of democracy and free speech around the world, although she was

something of a marginal figure in her own country (Pārfit, 2006). Her death was shocking yet in many ways unsurprising. She was aware of the dangers of making powerful enemies by her reporting, as her sister Elena Kudimova later recalled:

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Anna knew the risks only too well. We all begged her to stop. We begged. My parents. Her editors. Her children. But she always answered the same way: “How could I live with myself if I didn’t write the truth?” (Quoted in Specter, 2007)

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Since Politkovskaya’s death, hundreds of journalists around the world have been killed in the course of their work, many of them seemingly deliberately targeted, including Jamal Khashoggi, murdered in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey in 2018; Daphne Caruana Galizia, blown up in her own car in Malta in 2017; and Miroslava Breach, shot dead also in 2017, as she was driving her son to school in Mexico (Phillips, 2020).

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“I don’t scare easily.”

– *Lydia Cacho.*

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You don’t have to be reporting on war or terrorism to face violence and threats, as Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho can testify. She has specialised in investigating international sex trafficking and prostitution and has described journalism as “a torch that illuminates reality, and our task is to ensure that it continues to burn thanks to professionalism, ethics and the will to give voice to other people” (quoted in IPI, 2010). Despite producing journalism in the public interest – or, more likely, *because* of doing so – Cacho has suffered violence and threats, forcing her to spend time living in exile but not to give up her work. “I don’t believe in heroism,” says Cacho (2009), but she has refused to be intimidated into silence (Saner, 2012). In 2019 she was adopted by human rights campaign PEN International as an #ImprisonedWriter, and she issued a video on Twitter in which she responded to the latest attempts at intimidating her into silence:

“Like many journalists, I focus on human rights, gender equality, feminism, a perspective that embraces the rights of men, women, girls and boys. And I won’t stop. We have to move from indignation to action” (Cacho, 2019).

Among the many groups around the world taking action to stand up for public interest journalism and to demand an end to the culture of impunity around attacks on journalists are:

*Centre for Freedom of the Media:* [www.cfom.org.uk/](http://www.cfom.org.uk/)

*Committee to Protect Journalists:* <https://cpj.org/>

*International Federation of Journalists:* [www.ifj.org/](http://www.ifj.org/)

*Reporters Without Borders:* <https://rsf.org/en>

## Summary

The work of journalists is influenced by a range of structural factors, such as legal constraints, regulatory regimes, the system of media ownership, organisational routines, shortage of time, market forces, advertising considerations, cultural bias, patriotism, professional ethos, personal ethics, structural inequalities and a gender, racial or class imbalance in the workforce. Constraints and conflicting loyalties lead to claims that individuals have little influence on journalistic output, while others argue that constraints can be resisted or negotiated in pursuit of ethical journalism in the public interest. Action is needed to defend journalism and journalists from violence and other attacks on independent reporting.

## Questions

Why do journalists guard their independence so fiercely?

Can journalists have *too much* information about what the audience wants?

Should journalists *always* protect confidential sources?

Are journalism and public relations two sides of the same coin?

Can a journalist's personal or social background influence how they do their job?

## What would you do?

You are a local newspaper reporter sent to the magistrates' court to report the day's cases. Outside the courtroom, immediately following one case involving a local woman convicted of shoplifting, you are approached by a man who says: "I know who you are and if you put any of that in the paper I'll come and break your legs." He then walks off. What do you do?

## Further reading

Nobody practising as a journalist in the UK should be without the latest *McNae* (Hanna and Dodd, 2020), which tends to be updated every two years; and anybody practising as a journalist elsewhere should seek out the equivalent tome. For detailed consideration of the public interest, see Cooper and Whittle (2009). To read what Anna Politkovskaya was working on when she was murdered, see *A Russian Diary* (2008). For a journalist's story with a happier ending, see Alan Johnston's (2007) *Kidnapped*, a gripping and inspiring account of his 114 days in captivity in Gaza. More everyday constraints and ethical considerations are introduced in Harcup (2007) and Frost (2016). Also highly recommended is Knightley's (2004) classic study of journalism and censorship in wartime, *The First Casualty*. For an international discussion of sexism in journalism, and much more, Carter et al's (2019) edited collection *Journalism, Gender and Power* is a must. O'Malley and Soley (2000) offer the historical background to press

regulation and self-regulation; also see Cole and Harcup (2010). *Power Without Responsibility* by James Curran and Jean Seaton (2018) is a longstanding and updated account of the context within which journalism is produced, while *Journalism in Context* by Angela Phillips (2015) examines the extent to which individual journalists have enough autonomy to make a difference. For more details on the Murdoch empire, see McKnight (2013) or Page (2011). For a brief run through the relationship between journalism and PR, see Macnamara (2020). McQuail (2000) reviews a range of relevant theories, while Tumber (1999) includes useful extracts from originals such as Herman and Chomsky on their propaganda model and Golding and Murdock on the influence of economic power. Herman and Chomsky (1988) themselves are worth reading in the original, along with Herman's (2000) later contribution to the debate. Knight and Cook (2013) is probably the best place to start exploring journalists' relationship with the audience via social media, even if you don't buy the argument that distinctions between the two have disappeared. Evidence that digital technology has not necessarily changed everything or liberated everybody can be found in *Misunderstanding the Internet* by Curran et al (2012) and *New Media, Old News*, edited by Natalie Fenton (2010). McChesney (2000) offers a detailed and passionately argued case for journalism being far too important to be left to market forces, as do the various contributors to Williams (2014a).

## Top three to try next

Angela Phillips (2015) *Journalism in Context*

James Curran and Jean Seaton (2018) *Power Without Responsibility*

Mark Hanna and Mike Dodd (2020) *McNae's Essential Law for Journalists*

## Sources for soundbites

Wheen, 2002: xi; Goodwin, 1996; Murdoch, quoted in Bailey and Williams, 1997: 371; Warsame, quoted in *Women in Journalism*, 2020; African proverb, quoted by Nadine White in interview with the author; Younge, quoted in Thomas, 2006; Cacho, quoted in Saner, 2012.

## Constraints

Journalism is not produced in a vacuum. Journalists work within a range of constraints and influences; structural factors that affect their output (McQuail, 2000: 244). Much of this chapter focuses on the UK but similar pressures will apply in all countries to a greater or lesser extent. Media theorists argue that all journalists “have to make decisions at the centre of a field of different constraints, demands or attempted uses of power or influence” (McQuail, 2000: 249). These range from legal constraints and regulatory codes of practice to the less visible influence of proprietors, organisational routines, market forces, cultural bias, patriotism, professional ethos, a personal sense of ethics, and a gender, racial or class imbalance in the workforce. Further constraints – time, sources, subjectivity, audience, style, advertisers – are addressed in David Randall’s suggestion that every newspaper (and, presumably, every news outlet) might consider publishing the following disclaimer:

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This paper, and the hundreds of thousands of words it contains, has been produced in about 15 hours by a group of fallible human beings, working out of cramped offices while trying to find out about what happened in the world from people who are sometimes reluctant to tell us and, at other times, positively obstructive. Its content has been determined by a series of subjective judgements made by reporters and executives, tempered by what they know to be the editor’s, owner’s and

readers' prejudices. Some stories appear here without essential context as this would make them less dramatic or coherent and some of the language employed has been deliberately chosen for its emotional impact, rather than its accuracy. Some features are printed solely to attract certain advertisers. (Randall, 2011: 24)

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Journalists work in a field of conflicting loyalties, all of which have the potential to influence their work. They may feel a sense of duty towards their audience, editors, advertisers, proprietors, the law, regulatory bodies, contacts, colleagues, fellow citizens, and to themselves and their families (Frost, 2000: 61–64; Harcup, 2002b: 103). Denis McQuail highlights “the tension arising from the following oppositions at the heart of media-making”:

- constraint versus autonomy;
- routine production versus creativity;
- commerce versus art;
- profit versus social purpose (McQuail, 2000: 246).

In [Chapter 1](#) we heard the argument that a free press (social purpose) is impossible in a free market, because market forces (profit) work against the objective of supplying the public sphere with the material required for a reasoned discourse. But market forces are not the only pressures at work: “[The] relations between media organisations and their operating environment are governed not solely by naked market forces or political power but also by unwritten social and cultural guidelines” (McQuail, 2000: 249). Even when analysed solely in economic terms, it has been pointed out that although media organisations will “naturally gravitate towards oligopoly and monopoly market structures”, if unchecked this process may have a negative impact on the journalistic product which could hit sales and advertising

income (Doyle, 2002: 125–126). In other words, it sometimes makes business sense to invest in quality journalism even if it is expensive.

The constraints and influences discussed in this chapter need to be understood not as totalising systems imposing on journalists certain ways of doing things; rather, they are a range of sometimes conflicting influences, some more powerful than others and some more powerful at certain times or in certain places, with a *tendency* to influence journalists in certain ways. Constraints on journalists are subject to counter-pressures and can be negotiated and resisted as well as accepted.

## Public interest

The concept of the public interest is implicit and often explicit in the codes and laws that relate to journalism, argue Glenda Cooper and Stephen Whittle (2009), and the public interest defence is often used to justify intrusions of privacy. The editors' code of practice allows certain forms of journalistic behaviour only in relation to stories in the public interest, and for its definition of the public interest see [Box 2.1](#); the NUJ definition in [Box 2.2](#) is subtly different, and a more academic formulation can be seen in [Box 2.3](#). Taken together, the three definitions give a good idea of the kinds of things that tend to be counted as being in the public interest, but doubtless there will continue to be disagreements. Cooper and Whittle (2009: 96) add that journalistic intrusions into privacy ought to be both “proportionate to what is being investigated and clearly targeted”. Keep an eye out for references to the public interest throughout this book.

## Proprietors

Ultimately it is the media owners who, “through their wealth, determine the style of journalism we get”, argues Michael Foley (2000: 51). Media proprietors set the broad lines of policy for their organisations, and the combination of vertical and horizontal integration (synergy) may increase pressures



on journalists to cross-promote other products or to keep their noses out of their company's business. In their "propaganda model" of how (US) media operate, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky identify media owners as the first of five filters through which the wealthy and powerful are able "to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The filters are:

- wealth and concentrated ownership of dominant media firms;
- advertising;
- reliance on information from the powerful;
- punitive action (flak) against transgressors;
- anti-communism. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988)

This model has been dismissed by critics as a conspiracy theory, as too mechanistic, as failing to take account of resistance. Herman counters:

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[The] filters work mainly by independent action of many individuals and organisations. ... [The] propaganda model describes a decentralised and non-conspiratorial market system of control and processing. ... We never claimed that the propaganda model explained everything or that it illustrated media omnipotence and complete effectiveness in manufacturing consent. (Herman, 2000: 102–103)

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Media themselves tend not to draw attention to the potential impact of ownership structure on issues such as editorial content and diversity. Indeed, argues Robert McChesney

(2000: 294–295): “The news media avoid any discussion of media structure, leaving analysis of media ownership and advertising to the business pages and the trade press, where they are covered as issues that concern investors, not workers, consumers, or citizens.”

The situation in public service broadcasting is more complex than in commercial media, involving bureaucratic and budgetary control rather than “naked market forces”; nonetheless, public broadcasters operate in an increasingly competitive environment and are certainly not immune from market pressures (McQuail, 2000: 259–261). Journalists working for the publicly owned BBC may not have to worry about pleasing a profit-hungry or power-mad proprietor, but they do work in the constant knowledge that governments have the power to impose a hostile chairman on the corporation and to limit or even abolish the licence fee that funds it independently(ish) of the commercial marketplace. Crises in the relationship between the BBC and the UK government of the day seem to crop up roughly every decade, with the BBC hierarchy sometimes caving in to pressure and at other times defending the independence of its journalism. Not being sure whether their bosses would back them in a crisis can act as a constraint on BBC journalists covering potentially troublesome stories.

## Digital economy

The people running online businesses, including digital media, sometimes portray their workplaces as some kind of caring, sharing post-hippy idyll. But they are still businesses. Des Freedman (2014) takes issue with those commentators who argue that the digital economy is a fundamentally new, citizen-friendly form of business activity. In reality, he argues, “the structure of the digital economy looks a lot like the structure of the analogue economy and is marked by dominant players in all its main sectors” (Freedman, 2014: 100). According to Robert McChesney (cited in Freedman, 2014: 101):

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The best way to imagine the internet is as a planet where Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and the ISP cartel members each occupy a continent that represents their monopoly base camp. ... The goal of each empire is to conquer the world and prevent getting conquered by someone else.

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What's that got to do with journalism? Quite a lot, argues Granville Williams:

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[T]he oft-repeated neo-liberal argument [is] that the internet will set us free by giving us more news to consume, more diversity, more of everything. The contention is that the internet will disrupt power structures and neutralise traditional gatekeepers, but the reality is very different. The most-visited news websites in Europe, Britain, the US and Australia are the websites of the dominant national news organisations. News aggregation sites on social media are simply reproducing the news stories from these sources and, far from creating different, more diverse sources of news, reinforce the mainstream news agenda. (Williams, 2014a: 19–20)

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## Routines

Journalists traditionally engage in routines, recurrent practices such as working to deadlines, keeping to word or time limits, ensuring that each edition or bulletin is exactly full, conforming to house style, making regular check calls to official sources, and covering diary jobs. If some of the old routines have now broken down as a result of 24-hour news, online journalism and social media, the result is not *no* routines – just *different* routines. That's because there is an occupational pressure on journalists to “bow to the imperative of routine news copy production” (Manning, 2001: 52).

Although the unexpected may happen at any time, disasters and crises develop familiar patterns so that, for journalists, even “the unexpected becomes the predictable” (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 276). Research has consistently found that “content is systematically and distinctively influenced by organisational routines, practices and goals rather than either personal or ideological factors” (McQuail, 2000: 244–245). Or, perhaps, rather than *only* personal or ideological factors.

## Advertisers

Advertising can influence journalistic output, although such influence does not *normally* take the form of advertisers threatening to take their money elsewhere unless they receive favourable editorial coverage. Direct intervention by advertisers happens occasionally but much less often than many people would think. A far more prevalent influence is that the content patterns and style of media are matched to the consumption patterns of target audiences (McQuail, 2000: 261). Commercial media operate in a “dual product market” in which the media product sells *itself* to consumers and at the same time sells its *audience* to advertisers (Sparks, 1999: 53; Doyle, 2002: 12). Mass circulation newspapers demand a mass readership for mass advertising, while the “quality” press depend on delivering smaller target audiences for more niche advertising markets. The quest for these different audiences directly affects the journalism offered in different titles, as Colin Sparks (1999: 59) notes: “The products that serve the richest audience are approximations to the newspaper of democratic mythology. The others are quite different commodities.” Meanwhile, the shift of advertising away from local newspapers has led to decades of editorial closures and cutbacks, with even many surviving titles being scarcely recognisable shadows of their former selves.

## Public relations

At the heart of public relations, according to Daniel Boorstin, is the “pseudo-event”, which he defined in the early 1960s as

something planned rather than spontaneous, arranged for the convenience of the media, with an ambiguous relation to reality (Boorstin, 1963: 22–23). For Boorstin, the pseudo-event blurs the roles of actor and audience, object and subject. For example, a politician can in effect *compose* a news story by “releasing” a speech to the media, while a journalist can *generate* an event by asking an inflammatory question (Boorstin, 1963: 40).

Since Boorstin described the rise of the pseudo-event, “public relations staffs have expanded while journalists have been shrinking, creating news media’s greater editorial reliance on press officers” (Franklin, 1997: 19). Organisations ranging from local charities to multinational corporations have employed press officers to supply journalists with a stream of potential stories, comments and fillers. This process has been described as an “information subsidy” through which media organisations receive a flow of free material that will “favour those, notably business and government, best able to produce strong and effective PR material” (Lewis et al, 2008a: 2 and 18).

Press officers do not just supply information, they also play a role in controlling access. Writing in the context of music journalism, Eamonn Forde argues that the industry press officer has become increasingly powerful as a “buffer zone”, gatekeeping access to artists and screening journalists along the lines of “the Hollywood approach to press management” (Forde, 2001: 36–38). For Bob Franklin, the growing power and journalistic reliance on press officers comes at a price because “they are not detached observers and reporters of the world, but hired prize fighters, advocates and defenders of whichever sectional interest employs them” (Franklin, 1997: 20).

## **Social environment**

New recruits to journalism go through a process of “assimilation of newsroom mythology and socialisation”, and those who survive learn “a way of doing things” that results in “a conformity of production and selection” (Harrison, 2000:

112–113). Robert McChesney argues that most journalists are socialised into internalising their role as “stenographers for official sources”, with the result that: “When a journalist steps outside this range of official debate to provide alternative perspectives, or to raise issues those in power prefer not to discuss, *this is no longer professional*” (McChesney, 2002: 17, my emphasis). However, as Manning warns, the danger of viewing journalism simply as “a production process, shaped by bureaucratic routines and organisational imperatives” is that it leads us to “underestimate the extent to which particular journalists *do* make a difference” (Manning, 2001: 53, emphasis in original).

If agency is a crucial consideration when discussing constraints, so too is the extent to which the social composition of the workforce influences journalistic practice. Not just the composition of the workforce but the make-up of the hierarchy, which is not always as equal as it might be, with society’s structural inequalities often reflected in newsrooms that are not immune to the effects of sexism, racism and class bias. One study of gender and journalism found that:

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In the traditional structures of journalism there are many junior women but still no clear path of advancement. ... A number of exceptional individuals have achieved but this has not transformed the culture. There is a tendency to think that the argument has been won, but the concrete evidence shows a stubborn resistance to change across many western countries. (Franks, 2013: viii)

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Anne Perkins asserts that, because relatively few women rise to the most senior editorial positions, “a distorted image of women’s lives protrudes from the newsstands” (Perkins, 2001). A study in Australian newsrooms found that, even well into the 21st century, women journalists were still covering the bulk of so-called “soft” stories and had “less opportunity to write hard news stories where esteem is gained and the promotion pool is typically delved” (North, 2016: 369).

A snapshot study of representation within UK national newspapers during one week in 2020 found that, of the 174 bylines on front page stories, just four were of women and just six were BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), and of the 111 people quoted in those stories, just 18 were women and four were BAME; and that was at a time of a female BAME Home Secretary and Black Lives Matter protests both featuring in the news (Women in Journalism, 2020). Broadcast news was found to be more representative of the wider population, but there were still imbalances, including the visibility of BAME presenters on TV news not being matched by the numbers of reporters or of experts quoted, except when the latter were invited to comment on what were seen as issues relating specifically to ethnic minority communities. Amal Warsame, a freelance journalist who worked on the research project, says: “I knew the media was white, but after counting the number of non-white presenters, reporters and experts over the week I am really shocked by the lack of diversity” (quoted in Women in Journalism, 2020).

Would a more representative workforce result in more representative news coverage? Not automatically. Some studies suggest that journalists owe more of their relevant attitudes and tendencies to “socialisation from the immediate work environment” than to their personal or social backgrounds (McQuail, 2000: 267–269). “Gender *alone* will not make a difference in changing the culture of newsrooms or in the type of news produced,” found Karen Ross in a study of women journalists in the UK, because “a journalist’s sex is no guarantee that she or he will either embrace sentiments that privilege equality or hold specific values and beliefs that promote a more equitable and non-oppressive practice” (Ross, 2001: 542, my emphasis). However, a later study found that “women reporters were nearly twice as likely as men to write stories which had a central female focus and more likely to feature women sources more generally” (Ross et al, 2018: 839), even though the same study also found continuing evidence that journalists’ “shared understanding” of news had the effect of privileging a male perspective.

A working environment must be influenced, to *some* extent, by the attitudes that individuals bring into it, mustn’t it?  
Having more diverse newsrooms, including more people of

colour in senior editorial roles, would surely make it less likely that a journalism student on work experience would witness what Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff (later of *gal-dem* magazine) observed while on placement at a major UK national newspaper: an excited (white, male) news editor proclaiming that readers would lap up the story of a girl having gone missing because she was pretty, middle class and white (Pantry, 2020). Little wonder, perhaps, that the international growth of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, sparked by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, struck such a chord with so many BAME journalists in particular – and provided an opportunity within news organisations around the world to ask internal as well as external questions.

## Ethics

Within journalism the word “ethics” is often taken to refer both to ideas about right and wrong and to systems under which journalists are policed (or by which they may police themselves). Journalists may follow their own personal sense of conscience, which may be informed by cultural, political, religious, secular, philosophical, family, community or other influences. Journalists may also be required to follow ethical codes, guidelines or rules laid down by their employer and/or by regulatory bodies covering the industry in the country in which they are working; such codes may reflect or differ from their own personal sense of ethics. In addition, many journalists choose to follow the collective code of ethical conduct of a voluntary organisation, such as the NUJ. Some of the major areas of ethical controversy include censorship, self-censorship, privacy, using material posted on social media, coverage of suicide, intrusion into grief, war reporting, bias, harassment, media scrums, stereotyping and the use of discriminatory language. However, arguably, everything a journalist does – or chooses not to do – has potential ethical implications. As with the public interest, ethics will make frequent appearances throughout this book.



## CHAPTER 3 WHAT IS NEWS?

### Key terms

Ambient journalism; Banal news; Civil ideal of news; Construction of news; Events; Framing; Gatekeeping; Ideology; Live news; Manufacture of news; Market-driven news; News factors; News frames; News pegs; News values; Newsworthiness; Relevance; Selection



**Figure 3.1** News values

Source: Courtesy of cartoonist @jameswhitworth.

*South Wales Argus* editor Kevin Ward was particularly satisfied after he composed the front-page splash of his paper one Saturday. The story concerned a court case involving a local man who had been accused of assaulting his partner and her pet. After putting the paper to bed with the headline MAN BITES DOG, Ward tweeted: "I've waited 30 years to write that headline." The headline duly went viral, among journalists and journalism students at least (*Press Gazette*, 2014).

"Dog bites man isn't news, man bites dog is" is an adage perhaps as old as journalism itself. Its place in journalistic folklore is neatly represented in James Whitworth's cartoon about the Queen and a corgi ([Figure 3.1](#)), although in reality any member of the royal family being bitten by any sort of creature would make the news in the UK.

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"I can handle big news and little news, and if there's no news I'll go out and bite a dog."

– Charles Tatum (*Ace in the Hole*).

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Like many sayings, the one about dog bites conceals almost as much as it reveals. True, it tells us something about the value of novelty in news stories. In the opinion of

Harold Evans (2000: 215), man bites dog is not just an interesting tale, “it is also a good headline, in its own right”, as was demonstrated by the *South Wales Argus*. But that is only part of the story when it comes to news, which is – still – the lifeblood of journalism. Man bites dog stories may be unusual but they are not quite as rare as hens’ teeth. Take this headline above a dramatic must-read story in the *Times*: BEAR ATTACK SURVIVOR HAD TO EAT THE DOG THAT SAVED HIM (November 4 2013). Or this: WOMAN BITES DOG IN SAVAGE PIT BULL ATTACK (*Independent on Sunday*, June 17 2001).

Replace the dog with a more exotic creature and a story can travel the world, as in this example: “Gu Gu the panda was bitten by a visitor to Beijing Zoo after attacking the drunken man for attempting to hug him” (MAN BITES PANDA, *Guardian*, September 21 2006). Or this double tragedy: SNAKE BITES MAN IN GUJARAT, MAN BITES IT BACK, BOTH DIE (*News18.com*, July 16 2019). Less tragically, and to show that a bark can sometimes be as newsworthy as a bite, consider this account of a court case that made the national press:

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A teenager who was arrested for barking at two dogs has cleared his name in court in a case that cost the taxpayer £8,000. ... Magistrates fined him £50 with £150 costs in January but the conviction has been quashed by a judge, who remarked: “The law is not an ass.” (MAN WHO BARKED AT DOGS IS CLEARED IN £8,000 CASE, *Daily Telegraph*, April 28 2007)

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It is the (relative) rarity of such stories – the element of novelty, of surprise – that makes them newsworthy.

However, there are times when even stories of dogs biting people are also deemed newsworthy enough for selection, usually because there are additional factors involved. Getting hold of data under the Freedom of Information Act can sometimes be enough for a story, such as these examples: “At least two Greater Manchester posties are attacked and injured by dogs every week, figures reveal” (*Mancunian Matters*, June 13 2013), and: “More than 1,000 people including officers and members of the public have been bitten by police dogs in the past five years in the region” (*Wolverhampton Express & Star*, August 17 2013). Such statistics can be shocking but they do not have the same impact as an individual human interest story, especially one involving a vulnerable victim.

A powerful dog killing a tiny child is rare enough to make national TV news and newspaper front pages, but sadly not so rare that there is ever any shortage of examples with which to update this chapter, as with: THE NEWBORN KILLED BY DOG: FIRST PICTURE OF 12-DAY-OLD BOY AND HIS MOTHER (*Metro*, September 17 2020). It is not just dog attacks on children that can make the headlines; adult victims are most likely to be featured if there are additional noteworthy elements, as in this front-page splash: MUM-OF-FOUR KILLED BY PITBULLS WAS PREGNANT (*Daily Mirror*, December 12 2013). If the dog concerned was on official duty then a dog bites person story is even more likely to become big news, as in another tragic *Mirror* front page: POLICE DOG KILLS GRAN: INNOCENT PENSIONER, 73, MAULED IN HER OWN HOME AFTER COPS CHASE DRUG DEALER (*Daily Mirror*, 18 September 2018). The news can sometimes even shock us with a tragic cat bites man story, as with: BRIT KILLED BY RABIES FROM CAT BITE (*Daily Mirror*, November 13 2018).

Happily, not all news stories involving human–animal interactions are as grim as those above. How about TILL DEATH US DO BARK – MAN WEDS DOG (*Daily Mirror*, November 14 2007), for example; isn’t that a headline that makes you want to read on?

## THE SELECTION OF NEWS

What is it about the above events that makes them news? How is it that so many journalists would instantly have recognised them as stories worth covering and

selecting? By going beyond the simplistic man-bites-dog definition to consider some of the additional elements that can turn even a dog-bites-man story into news, we begin to grasp what are called **news values** or news factors. Exhaustive debates about which stories should be covered and with what prominence tend not to be everyday occurrences in most newsrooms, partly because nothing would ever get done if every decision were discussed in detail and partly because prevailing news values are more likely to be absorbed and reproduced than challenged (Evans, 2000: 3). That does not – or should not – mean that the selection of news is automatic or unthinking. “It just appears to be instinctive because a lot of the calculations that go into deciding a story’s strength have been learnt to the point where they are made very rapidly – sometimes too rapidly,” according to David Randall (2000: 24).

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“For most people starting out in journalism, news is whatever the editor says it is.”

– Lynette Sheridan Burns.

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These calculations involve estimated measurements of relevance and interest to an audience, multiplied by perceptions of importance, subtracting the logistical difficulties in getting the story. Identifying the factors that help journalists make such calculations may help us to answer the question, what is news? Answers will differ according to what type of outlet a journalist is working for, and what role they play within it.

When Susie Beever was working primarily on online live news as a “live content journalist” on the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, for example, she described the role as “reactive rather than proactive”, explaining:

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It’s very, very social media oriented. You get tips from people on Facebook saying, “Oh I’ve just seen some police tape on our street.” That’s how it works now, and on the live team it’s reacting to that, getting something out and showing you’re on the go, you’re aware of what’s happening in Leeds that day. Emergency incidents, or funny quirky stories that are quick to turn around. It’s more like page view driven, so it’s like the breaking news, human interest kind of stories that work well on social media.

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Live coverage of emergency incidents would undoubtedly count as news by most people’s definitions, but what of some of the other items that appear on news websites and social media feeds? Beever sounds realistic, if less than enthusiastic, about such content:

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The things that work well on Facebook are things from a central team based here that do things that are used on all the websites for JPI Media, and it’s things like – they’re not actual paid-for advertorials – but things like, “Greggs is bringing out a new vegan pasty this week”. It’s the kind of things that get put onto Facebook and everyone tags their friends in, so it works really well and everyone will tag everyone they know who likes Greggs, and the more people who get tagged in the comments, the more peoples’ newsfeeds it appears on... I think all news websites push those kind of things just because they work really well, and it can take just 10 or 15 minutes to get up on your website. It’s business talking, it’s easy money, huge page views.

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The UK bakery chain Greggs seems to be a favourite topic for this kind of story, which has been labelled “banal news”. Academic Dave Harte has a nice collection of such items, along with the disdainful tweets or online comments that often accompany them, variations on the theme of: “Imagine doing a journalism degree and

then being asked to write trash like this” (Harte, 2018). He is not so dismissive himself, because if individual readers and communities are interested in the minutiae of everyday life, who are we to say that they are wrong?

A traffic delay, a new shop opening or a pet going missing can all be useful local stories, but it would be a poor news outlet that *only* offered such mundanities. Editors traditionally refer to news as opening a window on the world (or as some kind of mirror) but news is mostly about what does *not* usually happen – that’s why it is news. It is true, as we have seen, that dog bites man stories *can* become news – but most of them don’t. And few news organisations would stay in business if they featured ultra-banal items such as this:

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Police reported no major incidents as traffic flowed fairly smoothly along the M56 this morning. Meanwhile, patients in the casualty departments of the city’s hospitals were treated without having to wait on trolleys in corridors overnight. Of the thousands of children on the streets yesterday, none was abducted. Finally, on the weather front, the Met Office said that rainfall was average for this time of year, no rivers had burst their banks, and people were going about their business with little risk of flooding and no need to be rescued by helicopter.

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Pretty dull stuff, yet that is the kind of thing that happens most days, indicating that news is a highly *selective* view of what happens in the world. And that selection is based on factors that can range from the tragic elements of a story to its potential comedy value.

For Randall (2000: 23), news is “fresh, unpublished, unusual and generally interesting”. As the word itself implies, *news* contains much that is *new*, informing people about something that has just happened. But it ain’t necessarily so. Some stories (the world wars, the President Kennedy assassination, the Yorkshire Ripper murders, Jimmy Savile, Princess Diana, Madeleine McCann, Stephen Lawrence, the Hillsborough disaster) are always with us, it seems. Other stories are freshened up by telling us that so-and-so “spoke last night” or “broke their silence” about some ancient scandal or other; or by the apparent discovery of some new information. Take the first three paragraphs of this news story published 97 years after a hanging, perhaps the ultimate example of the “delayed drop” intro:

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It is one of the most notorious cases in British legal history, the story of an apparently mild-mannered doctor who poisoned and dismembered his showgirl wife, then fled across the Atlantic with his young lover – only to be caught after a sharp-eyed captain recognised him from the newspapers.

Dr Hawley Crippen was hanged in 1910, after an Old Bailey jury took just 27 minutes to find him guilty of murdering his wife, Cora, who had vanished earlier that year.

Nearly a century later, research appears to show that the evidence which sent Crippen to the gallows was mistaken: the human remains discovered under his London house could not be those of Cora. (100 YEARS ON, DNA CASTS DOUBT ON CRIPPEN CASE, *Guardian*, October 17 2007)

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Even older is this newspaper intro, based on a new study in a scientific journal, that was published on page three of the *Times* more than 2,300 years after the death in question:

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Perhaps it was the absence of worlds to conquer that drove Alexander the Great to alcohol. Maybe the pressures on his soul from his complicated love life were salved by the demon drink. What now appears to be known for sure is that it was his love of wine that led to his death. (ALEXANDER THE

GRAPE WAS JUST TOO MUCH OF A SEASONED CAMPAIGNER, *Times*,  
January 13 2014)

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The new element on which such stories are hung is known as the “peg”. Most news is much newer than the two examples given above. But many stories appearing in the national media are already a week or two old, having been passed up the journalistic food chain from the local weekly to a regional daily newspaper, possibly taking in an online news outlet, a local radio station or a regional TV news bulletin and then, maybe via a freelance news agency, on to the national stage – where the “when” of the five Ws will be buried somewhere near the bottom in the hope that any whiff of staleness will be overlooked. The majority of local stories will not make it that far without some additional element to grab attention. That does not mean they are not news; it just means that news values are relative.

With social media, websites, notifications, 24-hour broadcasting, and mass circulation free distribution print titles such as *Metro*, today’s journalists have a lot more time and space to fill with news than ever before. And *fill* is exactly what they often have to do, as one admits: “The amount of air-time that they have to fill with analysing stuff, that 10–15 years ago you wouldn’t have even thought about ... has led to a change in what defines news, what is newsworthy and where hype begins and real news judgement ends” (quoted in Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007: 51). But was there ever a time when “news judgement” could be described accurately as being “real”? Was earlier in-depth reporting of a big criminal trial or parliamentary debate really any more *real* than today’s coverage of a twitterstorm or a viral video?

## A GOOD STORY

If news isn’t necessarily new, and if it isn’t a simple reflection of reality, what exactly is it? News may be about animals, places or the weather, but it is mostly about *people*. People *doing* things. Things such as: building, demolishing, fighting, saving, killing, curing, crashing, burning, looting, robbing, rioting, stealing, stalking, trolling, kidnapping, rescuing, giving, marrying, divorcing, striking, sacking, employing, resigning, conning, suing, investigating, arresting, quizzing, freeing, loving, hating, kissing, bonking, hunting, chasing, escaping, fleeing, creating, destroying, invading, deserting, voting, leading, following, reporting, negotiating, accepting, rejecting, changing, celebrating, commemorating, inventing, making, breaking, selling, buying, treating, operating, comforting, mourning, leaving, arriving, delivering, succeeding, failing, winning, losing, searching, finding, giving birth, surviving, dying, burying, exhuming.

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“News is anything that makes a reader say ‘Gee whiz!’”

– Arthur MacEwen.

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As well as doing, news can be about people *saying* things, whether in tweets, speeches, announcements, publications, accusations, or replies to journalists’ questions. News can also be about somebody being *set to* do something, *set to* say something, or even – surely the most postmodern of conditions – being *set to* react to somebody else who is *set to* say something. Any of the verbs listed above *may* become news if the raw ingredients have the makings of a good story for your audience. It will depend on who is doing or saying something, where, when, and in what circumstances. It will also be influenced by what other stories are around at the same time.

“News stories are what people talk about in the pub, or wherever they gather,” says Brian Whittle. He should know. As the editor of a large regional news agency, his

income depends on spotting stories that his customers – the regional, national and international media – will pay for. He continues:

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Six people killed in a bus crash on the M56, that's hard news. You can't get any bigger hard news story than what happened in America [the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11 2001]. But a lot of other stories are a result of lateral thinking. When a story's been around for a few days, you're looking for where the next development will be – so good instinct will result in a good story.

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Evidence of his eye for a good story can be seen in the framed front-page splashes adorning the office walls of his news agency: CATWOMAN 'SEDUCED' BOY OF 15... PAEDOPHILE WALKS FREE... 18,000 POLICE TO FAIL DRIVING TESTS... BOY, 9, WRECKS TEACHER'S LIFE... and so on, all stories likely to pass the test of being mentioned by people chatting in the pub, gathering next to the water cooler or sharing on social media.

Somebody else who knows a thing or two about telling stories is the writer Michael Frayn, whose career has combined journalism with success as a novelist and playwright. In his first novel, *The Tin Men*, he included the morbid results of fictional market research into what audiences want:

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The crash survey showed that people were not interested in reading about road crashes unless there were at least ten dead. A road crash with ten dead, the majority felt, was slightly less interesting than a rail crash with one dead, unless it had piquant details – the ten dead turning out to be five still virginal honeymoon couples, for example, or pedestrians mown down by the local JP on his way home from a hunt ball. A rail crash was always entertaining, with or without children's toys still lying pathetically among the wreckage. Even a rail crash on the Continent made the grade provided there were at least five dead. If it was in the United States the minimum number of dead rose to 20; in South America 100; in Africa 200; in China 500. (Frayn, [1965] 1995: 69)

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It may have been a spoof but it was informed by Frayn's first-hand knowledge of the ways in which the **construction** of stories, and the placing of events within **news frames**, can render news predictable. As predictable as the annual stories about A-levels allegedly getting easier or the pictures of female tennis players showing their knickers at Wimbledon every summer.

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"News is what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead."

– Evelyn Waugh.

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Formulaic and predictable some output may be, but at least there is usually some connection between journalism and real events featuring real people. Contrary to popular belief, journalists who totally invent stories are very much the exception rather than the rule. An expectation of truthfulness is integral to what Jackie Harrison (2019) refers to as the **civil ideal of the news**; yet, as will be discussed further in [Chapter 5](#), truth itself can be a contested concept. Even though most news stories are not invented, they *are* constructed; that is, the raw material has to be observed, selected and processed into something recognisable to audience and colleagues alike as news. Perhaps that is why seasoned news junkies find so many stories so familiar; we have heard most stories before with just the names and places changed.

## NEWS FACTORS

As might be apparent by now, coming up with a foolproof definition of news is easier said than done. The elements or factors that can be found in published or broadcast news stories – commonly referred to as news values – have been identified, classified and deconstructed by generations of academics, but “usually journalists rely on instinct rather than logic” (Sergeant, 2001: 226). Recruits to journalism tend to pick up a sense of newsworthiness and develop their “nose” for a story by consuming news and by learning prevailing news values from more experienced colleagues. It can be a fairly subjective process, as Martin Wainwright acknowledges when he says he measures a potential story against whether it interests him or “increasingly as I get older, would it interest my children?” These days journalists can get a clearer idea of what interests the public – well, a section of the public – because figures are available on which online stories are the most read and/or the most shared. Trying to make sense of analytics about trending stories and audience engagement can be a bewildering process, partly because it can change by the second and partly because it is not always clear exactly which aspects of particular stories have led to their apparent popularity or why.

### Box 3.1

#### News factors

There will be exceptions, but research suggests that potential items generally satisfy one, and preferably more, of the following requirements to be selected as news stories:

**Exclusivity:** Stories generated by, or available first to, the news organisation as a result of interviews, letters, investigations, surveys, polls, and so on;

**Bad news:** Stories with particularly negative overtones such as death, injury, defeat and loss (of a job, for example);

**Conflict:** Stories concerning conflict such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare;

**Surprise:** Stories that have an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them;

**Audio-visuals:** Stories that have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics;

**Shareability:** Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media;

**Entertainment:** Soft stories concerning sex, showbusiness, sport, lighter human interest, animals, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists;

**Drama:** Stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases;

**Follow-up:** Stories about subjects already in the news;

**The power elite:** Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations, institutions or corporations;

**Relevance:** Stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience;

**Magnitude:** Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behaviour or extreme occurrence;

**Celebrity:** Stories concerning people who are already famous;

**Good news:** Stories with particularly positive overtones such as recoveries, breakthroughs, cures, wins and celebrations;

**News organisation's agenda:** Stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda, whether ideological, commercial or as part of a specific campaign.

(Harcup and O'Neill, 2017: 1482)

Although newsworthiness remains hard to define, we can get a fairly good sense of it by examining stories that *do* make it into the news. A widely cited study of the UK national press (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) suggests that, although there are exceptions to every rule, potential news items must generally contain one or (ideally) more of the elements listed in [Box 3.1](#) to be selected as news stories. Although the list is based on a study of national newspapers in one country, broadly similar considerations are likely to come into play when journalists select stories for broadcast, online, local, regional, and even specialist media, whether in the UK or beyond. There will be differences in the relative importance of different factors, which may change over time as well as between different newsrooms and different countries, but this and similar lists of news factors can nonetheless be used as a reference point when we try to identify patterns of news coverage. Let's see how they operate in practice:

## Exclusivity

Rare indeed is the news editor who does not love an exclusive. That is, a story they can claim to be the first to run. Such items may result from tip-offs, leaks or major investigations, but they are just as likely to be sourced from interviews, surveys, polls, letters to the editor or book serialisations. Exclusives help establish a news organisation's brand identity and a genuine scoop may even force rival media to acknowledge where the story first appeared. Not always, though, because some tabloids have been known to slap a "world exclusive" label on something brazenly lifted from the early edition of a competing title. Whether genuine or bogus, then, organisations place a premium on exclusive stories, meaning that, when considering the relative merits of potential news items, those they can claim to be the first to report will be privileged – even if the content is less than earth-shattering. Occasionally, two (or even more) news organisations might team-up to produce a joint exclusive, as with the *Mirror/Guardian* revelations about Dominic Cummings' ill-advised travels during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. Such collaboration is most likely among outlets that serve different sectors of the market rather than direct competitors.

## Bad news

Horrific stories of dogs killing children are classic examples of bad news. So are fires, explosions, stabbings, shootings, accidents and anything that results in tragedies or injuries. Other examples of somebody's bad news being good news for journalists would include the social – job losses, hospital closures, the decline of the high street – as well as the individual fall from grace. You don't need to study too many headlines before you realise that the biggest news is often bad and the baddest news is often big.



## Conflict

Controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare are often bad news for those involved but, again, they can generate excitement within a newsroom. If there is a shortage of conflict in the air, journalists might sometimes almost *create* it by seeking hostile reaction to an incident or comment in the hope of starting a “row”. Or, if they are really lucky, a “war of words” – with or without a community being “up in arms”. Any reporter short of a story idea can fairly quickly find no end of rows or conflicts during a quick perusal of Twitter; whether or not they are worth reporting as news is another matter.

## Surprise

Who would have thought that? If that’s how a journalist reacts to a piece of information then there is a good chance that their audience might respond similarly, and that means stories with an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them are likely to be selected. This is where the stories of man bites snake – or weds dog – come in, along with other surprising, shocking or unusual events, such as CCTV cameras capturing something unexpected: WOMAN WHO DUMPED CAT IN WHEELIE BIN ‘PROFOUNDLY SORRY’ (BBC, August 25 2010). There is also a great value placed on contrast, as in THIEF STEALS £240 IN LOTTERY TICKETS... BUT WINS ONLY £15 (*Metro*, January 17 2014). Some news organisations even have a separate tag for what *Sky News*’ website labels as “offbeat” or “strange” news, but that rather takes away the surprise element of items such as FOX CAUSES HAVOC AFTER BREAKING INTO PARLIAMENT (*Sky News*, February 7 2020) appearing amid more serious headlines. Of course, surprise can also apply to more serious stories, such as an unexpected rise or fall in the rate of inflation, unemployment or death rates.

## Audio-visuals

The availability of accompanying visuals is today more than ever an important factor, not just in *how* certain news stories are presented but in *whether* or not they are covered at all. Stories that have arresting photographs or video – and, to a lesser extent, audio – tend to be selected more frequently, and reported more prominently, than those without. Visual material can sometimes be created for certain stories – to present data in the form of an infographic, for example – and some stories might be deemed so important that they will be reported either without any audio-visuals or with stock images such as a Town Hall or a line of police tape. But a middling story such as a minor flood might rise higher up the news agenda if there is a dramatic video clip to go with it. It will also be more likely to be shared online by members of the audience.

## Shareability

Social media engagement is regarded by many news organisations as a sign of vitality, so potential news items that are deemed likely to generate clicks, shares, likes, replies and comments via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other forms of social media are highly valued. That often seems to apply even if the topic is trivial, the information content is minimal, and the quality of comment is verging on the vacuous. Expectations about likely online shareability are now factored into selection decisions in much the same way that earlier generations of news editors used to consider whether a story would get people talking down the pub; today’s news editors are armed with analytics to go along with their gut instinct.

## Entertainment

Many editors look favourably on stories and pictures with the capacity to entertain or amuse an audience. Indeed, some stories have little else going for them. Such as the one about the woman who makes miniature movie-themed costumes for her pet,

which took up most of a news page in *Metro* featuring no fewer than five photographs: WHO FRAMED BENJI RABBIT? HAM ACTOR? HE PREFERS LETTUCE (*Metro*, January 17 2014). Or the wildlife photographer's picture of a female elephant who had just fed her baby elephant, which the *Mail* headlined: THE ELEPHANT THAT FORGOT... TO PUT HER BRA ON: MOTHER PUTS ON AN EYE-POPPING DISPLAY IN FRONT OF STUNNED TOURISTS (*Mail Online*, April 25 2016). The entertainment factor can be found in all sorts of "soft news" stories concerning lighter human interest, lifestyle, sex, showbusiness, sport, cuddly or funny animals; and/or stories that offer opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists (aka listicles). There can be a darker side, too; and one reason why court cases or employment tribunals with a sex angle seem to get disproportionate coverage is because audiences are thought to find them the most entertaining. The role of the journalist as entertainer is discussed further in [Chapter 7](#).

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"Imagine going to university for three years studying journalism to then write an article slut-shaming an elephant."

– Saskia Marriott.

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## Drama

Events containing an element of drama or jeopardy seem particularly likely to become news (or to have the most dramatic element emphasised in the storytelling). This is especially likely to be the case with unfolding dramas such as mysteries, cave rescues, hostage escapes, sieges, searches, battles, occupations, races against time and court cases, with plot twists featuring characters we come to feel that we know. For example, there is little suspense or drama about the dozens of children killed on our roads each year, and they receive relatively little media coverage, but there is huge coverage of the intense drama attached to a police hunt for a single missing child: the smiling picture, the plotting of the last movements, the release of CCTV footage, the emotional appeals, perhaps the discovery of a body, the placing of flowers with heartfelt messages, the arrest of a suspect, the howling mob outside court, even the tiny coffin at the funeral. Dramas can also be more individual or family ones, as in: SCHÖFIELD WIFE EXCLUSIVE – I STAND BY MY PHIL – STEPH'S VOW AFTER STAR COMES OUT (*Sun*, February 10 2020).

## Follow-ups

If something has been reported as news, it is quite likely – but not inevitable – that it may be reported again in the form of a follow-up story. As Phillip Knightley (1998: 197) once put it: "News is not news until someone else reports it." Thus, all journalists monitor online news outlets; online and broadcast journalists also scan newspapers and magazines for stories; print and online journalists monitor broadcast bulletins; and all keep an eye on news agency alerts, influential blogs, Twitter timelines, Facebook newsfeeds and the rest. However, depending who you work for, it is not normally enough to repeat the same as everyone else, so journalists typically look to "move the story on"; that is, to discover new information or introduce new angles. Follow-ups have a number of advantages for journalists, including the fact that background material is readily available, contacts may have already been identified, and certain developments may be able to be predicted and therefore planned for. Some stories run and run, some disappear without trace, and others recur every now and then, sometimes for logical reasons but sometimes seemingly explained by luck (what other stories are around?) or a news editor's whim. Stories that score well for *Shareability* are certainly more likely to be followed up, and if there is an *Exclusive* angle, so much the better.

## The power elite

Stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations, institutions or corporations are newsworthy precisely because this group has power so their actions are likely to impact the rest of us. Even so, power is relative. Virtually every action of a country's President or Prime Minister seems to be considered newsworthy, for example, but this tends to become less so the further down the political pecking order you go. Locally, even the most somnolent constituency MP will be considered one of the power elite, as will the leader of the council and/or a directly elected mayor, and many of their comments and actions will be reported in the local media, however dull or routine they may appear, because local people may be affected. As with individuals, some institutions or organisations are deemed to be newsworthy because of their positions of power and/or influence – examples include Nato, the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the Vatican, the European Commission, the Bank of England, Oxbridge universities and Eton. Monitoring the actions of the power elite on behalf of the people is one of the key roles ascribed to journalism as the “fourth estate” (see [Chapter 1](#)); however, in reality, much everyday news coverage of the elite amounts to little more than uncritical public relations.

## Relevance

News stories tend to be about people, groups, locations or nations that are thought to be of interest to the audience. “News lives on a weird globe, distorted so that the local is magnified, and the distant compressed,” observes Andrew Marr (2005: 61). “It’s a question of the impact on people,” says a BBC news editor, explaining why an accident in India did not make the news despite the fact that 60 people had drowned (quoted in Schlesinger, 1987: 117). Stories without much direct relevance might still be reported if there is something else that makes them worth including: sufficient *Magnitude*, for example, or a significant element of *Surprise*. Away from international news, the concept of relevance affects selection about topics. That’s why bulletins on BBC Radio One, aimed at young people, have so many news items about drugs or the entertainment industry; why the *Guardian*, which is traditionally read by many teachers (and students), has so many stories about education; and why the *Daily Mail*, aimed at middle-class and “aspirational” working-class readers, features so many stories about mortgages and property prices. Relevance works at a micro-level as well as the national and international level, so a local newspaper in a seaside town might have lots of stories about the menace of seagulls, whereas an equivalent publication in a rural area inland will be more concerned with the price of sheep, and a big city newspaper wouldn’t touch either. Selecting news stories on the basis that they are likely to appeal to a certain type of audience, who in turn might appeal to a certain type of advertiser, is a form of commercial or **market-driven news**. Of course, relevance can sometimes be crowbarred into story, for example by adding a local angle to an international event, as when a Scottish newspaper famously headlined its story about the sinking of the Titanic with around 1,500 deaths: ABERDEEN MAN DROWNS AT SEA. Except that it didn’t; that particular headline is mythical, apparently (Lambourne, 2015), but the fact that people believe it, and it is still talked about more than a century after it wasn’t printed, shows the resilience of the concept of relevance. That apocryphal headline may have been in the heads of the journalists in Scotland who headlined stories about Donald Trump by emphasising the local angle: TURNBERRY HOTELIER TESTS POSITIVE FOR CORONAVIRUS (*Ayr Advertiser*, October 2 2020); and SOUTH AYRSHIRE GOLF CLUB OWNER LOSES 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION (*AyrshireDailyNews.co.uk*, November 7 2020).

## Magnitude

Magnitude refers to the scale of a story’s potential impact, significance or extent; or to the level of extreme behaviour, occurrence or even a forecast of something extreme. Journalists’ rule of thumb is generally the bigger the better. Magnitude comes into play when a journalist rejects a potential story with the words: “Not enough dead” (quoted in Harrison, 2000: 136). Martin Wainwright recalls how he decided to go to the scene of one rail accident: “I heard about that on the news early in the morning and went out there when I knew that there were going to be more than just a couple of people killed. *It’s got to be that level.*” But magnitude is relative, and other news values come into play, perhaps most notably *Relevance* for hard news items and *Entertainment*, *Surprise* or *Celebrity* for softer stories.

## Celebrity

People who are famous, aka celebrities, are newsworthy. It has ever been thus, long before anyone had ever heard of Taylor Swift or Kim Kardashian. The evidence is the fading sign still adorning the wall of the old *Harrogate Advertiser* building in which I once worked – “List of visitors Wednesday” – which dates back to when the local paper began as little more than a weekly list of the rich and famous who came to stay in the North Yorkshire spa town nearly two centuries ago. However, today’s journalists are often heard complaining that good stories are squeezed out by an obsession with celebs on the A, B, C, D and Z-lists. Brian Whittle dismisses many news editors as “daleks who only rate a story if it features a third-rate celebrity”. He recalls one of his former news editors defining a good news story as “ordinary people doing extraordinary things”, before adding with a hint of sadness: “I think some of that’s been lost.” Certainly, if you come up with a story featuring somebody who is already famous, you will have a better chance of it being picked up than you would with a similar story populated entirely by “ordinary” people (aka civilians or muggles). And even a celebrity tweeting an anodyne comment or mundane picture is often enough to generate coverage of a “story” that might simply not have existed in the days before social media. Whole new levels of banality can be found in the *Mail Online*’s endless stream of picture-led “news” items about this celeb wearing shorts in summer, that celeb wearing a coat in winter and the other celeb’s young daughter looking all grown up... yuk. It is not for nothing that scrolling such items on the *Mail* website is known as consulting the “sidebar of shame”, but it remains an open question as to who is really shamed by its existence.

## Good news

Positive stories are far more prevalent than is suggested by the cynical claim that the only good news is bad news. Somebody somewhere always seems to be winning a dream prize, going on the trip of a lifetime, or achieving straight As in their exams. People are frequently hailed as heroes for leaping into action to rescue others from burning houses or to do what one “quick-thinking” bus passenger did and steer the vehicle to safety after the driver collapsed on a steep downhill stretch: STOREMAN STEPS IN TO SAVE THE DAY ON RUNAWAY BUS (*Yorkshire Post*, November 13 2013). Miracle cures or escapes are also more common than their name suggests, and even foreign miracles can make the news in the UK, as in the following tale from California: MIRACLE IN THE DESERT – CRASH GIRL, FIVE, SURVIVES TEN DAYS NEXT TO HER MOTHER’S BODY ON SPORTS DRINK AND DRY NOODLES (*Daily Mail*, April 15 2004). Animals too can have miracle escapes, as in: DOWN BOY! PUP SURVIVES 120FT PLUNGE INTO THE SEA (*Daily Mirror*, March 7 2008). As David Helliwell explains: “Hard news is often bad news so we want to break up the court stuff, the police stuff, industry or whatever with something a little bit lighter – a bit more light and shade among the death and destruction.” What is good news for some might be contested by others, but that does little to detract from the potential of a positive angle, as with: HELSINKI AND OSLO CUT PEDESTRIAN DEATHS TO ZERO BY MAKING LIFE TOUGHER FOR DRIVERS (*Guardian*, March 17 2020).

## News organisation’s agenda

Sometimes news stories seem to be selected less for any intrinsic newsworthiness than because they fit the agenda of the news organisation, whether to promote certain commercial or ideological interests or to engender a sense of audience loyalty and identification. Examples of the former would include BBC-bashing stories in the Murdoch press, while examples of the latter range from local media encouraging people to carry organ donor cards to the *Sun*’s “Honour our VC heroes” campaign to restore and maintain the graves of British soldiers who had won Victoria Cross medals for gallantry. A news organisation’s agenda may change, of course, and the anti-migrant and anti-Muslim news headlines that were once such a feature of the *Daily Express* dramatically reduced after ownership of the paper and website changed hands (Greenslade, 2020a).



“The construction of news simultaneously constructs for audiences a framework of interpretation as it presents the ‘facts’.”

– Maggie Wykes.

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## SELECTION OF NEWS

All the various news factors listed above interact with each other, and the more buttons pressed by a particular event the more likely it is to become news. But even events that satisfy several of the above criteria do not become news by themselves. First, they must be noticed, weighed up, selected and constructed.

This role in selecting the news has led to journalists in general, and those working on newsdesks in particular, being described as **gatekeepers**. The gatekeeper allows some events to pass through to become news while the gate is shut on other events. Since the emergence of the internet, and especially blogging followed by Facebook and Twitter, it has frequently been claimed that journalists can no longer be gatekeepers because people now have direct access to a wider range of information sources. Yet many of the major providers of online news – and of stories shared via social media – were already big players in earlier forms of media (sometimes referred to condescendingly as “legacy media”). Websites such as that of the BBC or the *Guardian* may have been jazzed up with all manner of live-blogging, interactive features and user-generated content, but the primary news services they provide clearly still operate by selecting, filtering and processing information, or gatekeeping; arguably, that is precisely why they have proved so popular, because audiences trust the “brand”.

However, changes to the organisation, production and distribution of journalists’ work *can* impact upon the selection of news because, unlike traditional media, online news has no set deadline and therefore is never full or finished. Trevor Gibbons describes life as an online journalist for the BBC:

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There’s more pressure to get something up immediately. Coming into a story a couple of hours after somebody else has done it is almost so late as to be no use. Writing for a newspaper, you pick one moment in time whereas we sometimes have an evolving story and we might go into a story four or five times in a day. And it’s far easier to put background material *around* the story that you’re doing. An internet site is never full and you never put it to bed.

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This is still recognisably a journalistic process, and Gibbons believes that selection remains key: “What makes a good story makes a good story online, in a newspaper or on the radio.”

Which does not mean there are not different priorities. When Carla Buzasi was editing *HuffPost*, I asked her what made a good story for the site. “It’s one that makes me sit up and go, ‘Wow, I haven’t heard that before’,” she said. “Or perhaps a new take on something, if it is something I’ve heard of before. Obviously we’re all about starting conversations and kickstarting debates, so it doesn’t have to be a story that’s finished.” Does that mean an unfolding story is actually better for online journalism than one with a neat ending?

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Yes possibly, that’s a good way of looking at it. If it’s something that can run and run then we like that. When we find something that we believe in or that our readers are interested in then we’ll cover it obsessively, whereas what you see in the old media is they’ll cover that story once and then drop it. We

look at audience data and if we see something start to gain traction we will continue to cover that story.

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## “TRY TO MAKE IT AS HUMAN AS POSSIBLE”

The digital age may have hugely increased the amount of audience data available to the media, and made it easier for people to access alternative sources of information, but for most people, most of the time, “the news” remains something that was at some stage selected and filtered by journalists (even if it has subsequently been forwarded or shared by a friend). Traditional skills live on alongside the new. From a newsdesk perspective, David Helliwell explains what he looks for when a reporter brings in a story:

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For a front page story you definitely need some sort of drama, some action or excitement, and you need something that’s going to draw the reader in. Preferably you would be looking at something that is people-led. If you were looking at a robbery, for example, we would only consider it a good front-page robbery if we had some detail, some colour, so you got to know who was involved, who the victims might be. Not just a flat police statement that “two masked men sped off in a westerly direction with an undisclosed sum”. Whatever it is – be it crime, industry, business, whatever – we would always try to make it as human as possible.

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Take this typical regional newspaper splash about two 18-year-olds jailed for seven years for robbing an elderly woman – YOUNG THUGS CAGED: TERROR ATTACK ON PENSIONER (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, October 6 2001) – illustrated with mugshots of the two robbers. Helliwell says it was getting the photographs that helped elevate that story to page one: “Getting the pictures from the police, always a tricky business, definitely lifts it. People love to see who you’re talking about.”

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“One of the most potent weapons a newspaper has is to totally ignore an issue or a story.”

– David Yelland.

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Just as most crimes reported to the police are not covered by the media, most court cases also pass unreported. This is for logistical reasons as well as ideas of newsworthiness, because newspapers have cut back hugely on court reporters while broadcasting and online media cover only the most high-profile cases. Coverage of the courts often relies on a news agency reporter ducking and diving in and out of several cases looking for one with an interesting line or two, as Jane Merrick explains:

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A murder trial wasn’t enough, it had to have two or three different angles. The agency was geared to the tabloids, because they were the ones who would buy most of our stuff, so it was very much human interest. One of the first court cases I did was a woman who had killed her lover’s wife, but that wasn’t enough to make a good story for the papers. I think she was in the chorus line and the victim was the lead singer in this amateur play, so that was the extra line.

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However, with the right extra ingredients, a relatively trivial offence still has the potential to generate coverage, as in the must-read story headlined HOTEL GUEST

HURLED ABUSE WITH HOSE UP HIS BOTTOM (*Metro*, November 13 2013). And even a court case resulting from a dog-bites-man incident can make the headlines, as in the tabloid tale that begins: “A judge stormed out of court yesterday screaming: ‘It’s a f\*\*\*\*\* travesty’ after she was found guilty of failing to control her dog” (JUDGE’S \*!@X RANT, *Sun*, December 15 2010). Yes, that was a swearing judge in the dock – you couldn’t make it up. This being news, you don’t have to make anything up, because people do newsworthy things every day. That’s the point.

## Summary

News is a selective version of events happening in the world, with an emphasis on that which is new and/or unusual. However, not all news is new; much of it is predictable, and some does not concern events at all. Journalists identify, select and produce news items according to occupational norms, including the concept of what will interest a particular target audience. Implicitly or explicitly, journalists measure potential news items against a range of criteria that have become known as news factors or news values. Academics have produced lists of such news values based on studies of journalistic output. Other theoretical models associated with the study of news include news as a social construct; journalists as gatekeepers admitting or excluding events; and news values being framed in familiar ways, often imbued with the dominant ideology of society. It has been claimed that the development of user-generated content and social media may be undermining the traditional role of the journalist as gatekeeper, blurring the boundary between producer and audience, informing and altering (to an extent) considerations of what is considered newsworthy.

## Questions

Where do news values come from?

Have Twitter and Facebook changed what we consider to be news?

In what ways can the news be predictable?

If news is constructed, does that mean it is not true?

Do journalists (still) play a gatekeeping role?

## What would you do?

You edit a news website and have two potential stories from which to select the lead item – that is, the one that will be presented most prominently on the site itself and promoted most heavily via social media. Both stories have been supplied by reliable and trustworthy reporters and include facts, opinions and quotes from a range of sources. One story concerns a woman who has advised her teenage daughter to have a baby and live on welfare benefits rather than try to find a job. The other story concerns a reported 160% increase in the number of people using emergency food banks over the past year. Which story would you select as your lead item? What factors might influence your choice?

## Further reading

Ethical issues arising out of the way in which news is selected or excluded are discussed in *What’s the Point of News?* (Harcup, 2020), *The Ethical Journalist*

(Harcup, 2007) and *Understanding Journalism* (Sheridan Burns with Matthews, 2018), while a critique of news values from the perspective of alternative journalists can be found in Whitaker (1981), Harcup (2013) and Forde (2011). Both Randall with Crew (2021) and Hudson and Rowlands (2012) have useful chapters discussing the practicalities of finding and identifying news from the point of view of print and broadcast journalists respectively, while Canter (2018) examines how news values work in “digital native” news websites. Harcup and O’Neill (2017) present the results of an updated content analysis of news values at work in the UK national press; also see Palmer (2000) on news values as a system transcending individual judgements. An overview of scholarly approaches to the study of news values can be found in a paper by Helen Caple and Monika Bednarek (2013), while the same authors subject the news to linguistic and visual analysis in their book *The Discourse of News Values* (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). Angela Phillips (2015) has a reader-friendly chapter discussing academic definitions of news, Harrison’s (2006) *News* is another readable explanation of academic analysis of the news process, and extracts from many studies – including Galtung and Ruge, Schlesinger, Shoemaker, and Gans – can be found in Tumber (1999). Stuart Hall’s classic analysis of news values as ideology is also extracted in Tumber, but it is worth seeking out the full version from the original, [Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) of Hall et al (1978, 2013). Framing analysis of the news is explored in a useful article by Pan and Kosicki (1993). Finally, news is considered afresh from the point of view of readers, viewers and listeners by contributors to *News Values from an Audience Perspective*, edited by Martina Temmerman and Jelle Mast (2021).

### Top three to try next

Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (1965) ‘The structure of foreign news’, *Journal of International Peace Research*

Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’Neill (2017) ‘What is news? News values revisited (again)’, *Journalism Studies*

Tony Harcup (2020) ‘Contextualising news values: a review of the literature’, [Chapter 2](#) of *What’s the Point of News? A Study in Ethical Journalism*

### Sources for soundbites

Tatum, quoted in Salas, 2007; Sheridan Burns, 2013: 54; MacEwen, quoted in Boorstin, 1963: 20; Waugh, 1943: 66; Marriott, 2016; Wykes, 2001: 187; Yelland, 2013.

## News values

News values have been described as “an attempt to render the daily, instinctive decisions of professional journalism tangible” (Smith and Higgins, 2013: 22). Lists of news values produced by scholars are aimed at helping explain journalists’ selection of news; the idea is not for such lists to be used as a benchmark by journalists but to help deepen our understanding of how journalism works. The news values in [Box 3.1](#) are an attempt to update and develop an earlier taxonomy of news by Norwegian academics Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge in the 1960s. Galtung and Ruge’s influential list of 12 factors covered: *Frequency; Threshold; Unambiguity; Meaningfulness; Consonance; Unexpectedness; Continuity; Composition; Reference to elite nations; Reference to elite people; Reference to persons; Reference to something negative* (Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 65–71). Various additional news values



have since been suggested by other academics. In their overview of scholarship on news values from Galtung and Ruge onwards, Helen Caple and Monika Bednarek (2013: 18–28) have grouped together definitions of news values according to the size, scale or scope of an event; the level of conflict or negativity involved; the level of positivity involved; the impact, significance or relevance of an event; timing; nearness or proximity; the degree of expectedness or consonance of an event; novelty value; the prominence or elite status of those involved; the personalisation of an event; human interest; sensationalism; factors relating to news writing objectives; factors relating to balance of content; factors relating to the news agenda and news cycle; and external or other factors.

Although the news values identified by Galtung, Ruge and others may be “predictive of a pattern” of which events will be deemed newsworthy, they cannot provide a *complete* explanation of all the irregularities of news composition (McQuail, 2000: 343). While acknowledging that a set of common understandings exists among journalists, Lewis (2006: 309) believes that any rationale for what makes a good story retains an arbitrary quality. For Golding and Elliott (1979: 114–115), stories must fit with the routines of news production as well as the expectations of the audience, and news values “are as much the resultant explanation or justification of necessary procedures as their source. ... They represent a classic case of making a virtue out of necessity.” John Richardson (2005: 174) argues that simply identifying something as “newsworthy” does not explain *why* it is so and, as John Hartley (1982: 79) points out, the concept of news values may tell us more about *how* stories are covered than about why they were chosen in the first place.

It is also argued that most lists of news values fail to address the “ideological structure” within which selection decisions are taken (Hall, 1973: 182):

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“News values” are one of the most opaque structures of meaning in modern society. ... Journalists speak of “the news” as if events select themselves. Further, they speak as if which is the “most significant” news story, and which “news angles” are most salient are divinely inspired. Yet of the millions of events which occur daily in the world, only a tiny proportion ever become visible as “potential news stories”: and of this proportion, only a small fraction are actually produced as the day’s news in the news media. We appear to be dealing, then, with a “deep structure” whose function as a selective device is un-transparent even to those who professionally most know how to operate it. (Hall, 1973: 181)

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Journalistic routines and conceptions of “newsworthiness” have been found to be centred on readily identifiable “events”, or at least on phenomena that can easily be reported as events, with the converse being that what fails to make the news “are often the issues that do not easily constitute themselves as *events*” (Sjovaag and Kvalheim, 2019: 295, emphasis in original). Robert McChesney gives the example of journalists’ emphasis on specific news hooks (or pegs) meaning that “long-term public issues, like racism or suburban sprawl, tend to fall by the wayside, and there is little emphasis on providing the historical and ideological context necessary to bring public issues to life for readers” (McChesney, 2000: 49–50). Furthermore, mainstream news values tend to privilege individualism, regarding it as “natural”, whereas civic or collective values are marginalised (McChesney, 2000: 110). This is what is meant when critical commentators argue that, far from being neutral, news values provide journalists with ideologically loaded “maps of meaning” used to make sense of the world for an audience (Hall et al, 1978: 54).

The news values inherent in mainstream journalism have been critiqued in theory by media commentators and academics and in practice by those citizens who have set up their own forms of alternative media (Harcup, 2005;

2007: 49–66). In fact, in a lesser-quoted part of their classic study, Galtung and Ruge (1965: 84–85) themselves suggested that journalists should be encouraged to counteract prevailing news values by reporting more on long-term issues and less on events, by including more background and contextualising information, by not shying away from complex and ambiguous issues, and by increasing coverage of non-elite people and nations (see Harcup, 2020).

## Construction

As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), Walter Lippmann argued that facts must be given a shape if they are to become news, and this is what academics mean when they refer to the *construction* or even the *manufacture* of news. It is not that facts are invented by journalists (except in rare cases), but that the process of identifying, selecting and presenting facts in a news story is a form of construction and is necessarily viewed through a “cultural prism” (Watson, 1998: 107). According to Nkosi Ndlela, the selection and construction of news represents and simplifies the world rather than reflects it (Ndlela, 2005). Studies suggest that journalists frequently construct news stories within the framework of earlier stories or even through the retelling of enduring myths (Lule, 2001) or “collective narratives” (Phillips, 2007: 8–14).

However, a focus on how events and facts are constructed into news items offers only a partial explanation of the processes at work. The concept of “pseudo-events”, introduced in [Chapter 2](#), suggests that “many items of news are not ‘events’ at all, that is in the sense of occurrences in the real world which take place independently of the media” (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 277). For Jorgen Westerstahl and Folke Johansson (1994: 71), the journalistic processes of news selection and construction are “probably as important or perhaps sometimes more important than what ‘really happens’”. Similarly, Joachim Friedrich Staab (1990: 439) argues that “events do not exist *per se* but are the result of subjective perceptions and definitions”, which is why one “event” might be covered very differently in different media (and some will not cover it at all).

## News frames

Within journalism studies the phrases *news frames* or *framing* are used to mean that journalists tend to simplify events to fit in with ways of thinking and talking that are instantly recognisable to an audience (Niblock and Machin, 2007: 196). The frame might be already familiar to members of an audience, not so much from personal experience as from their previous consumption of news, as Franklin (2005a: 85) observes: “When people have little direct knowledge of events, they become increasingly reliant on news media for information, but also an understanding or interpretation, of those events.” In this way, the same set of facts might be framed by one news outlet as a story about lawlessness on the streets and by another as a story about social inequality; other frames might also be possible. The selection of words and labels to frame a news story “are not trivial matters”, argue Pan and Kosicki (1993: 70), because such choices “hold great power in setting the context for debate”. Arguably, alternative forms of media can play a role in challenging the most familiar frames, just as avant-garde artists might refuse to allow their work to be constrained by a frame or even by the confines of a gallery. Commentators on social media, including other journalists, may challenge the framing of certain stories even as they are being reported.

## Civil ideal of news

There exists a civil ideal of the news, which is that news organisations should serve audiences not merely as passive consumers but as active citizens –

members of “a vibrant civil society” – and that they do this by “truth telling, fact finding and holding to account the powerful”, as Jackie Harrison (2019: 31) argues. A problem with ideals is that they often remain just that: ideals. In the real world, in which journalistic activity takes place against a backdrop of commercial, political and other influences, conditions conducive to the production of ideal types of news coverage wedded to truth-telling and liberal values may “only happen occasionally if at all” (p 31). Yet the ideal retains currency, encouraging many citizens to take journalism seriously – and some even to pay good money for it.

## Market-driven news

Pressure to “monetise” content means that there is a commercial imperative to produce news not so much to inform a broadly defined public sphere, but to fit “particular demographics, which can be used to locate the world of news events in the lives of particular market-segmented groups”, according to the authors of a study of Independent Radio News in the UK (Niblock and Machin, 2007: 191). They found that news stories were selected as much on the basis of their perceived appeal to advertisers’ target audiences – as measured by factors such as age, gender, lifestyle – as on any inherent qualities of importance or newsworthiness. This means that news is sometimes driven by market factors that might be overlooked in academic studies of news values (Niblock and Machin, 2007: 188).

## Gatekeepers

The concept of gatekeeping is associated with a David Manning White study of how a wire editor at a US morning newspaper selected stories during one week in 1949. White concluded that the choices were “highly subjective” and based on the editor’s own “set of experiences, attitudes and expectations” (White, 1950: 72). The gatekeeping theory has been challenged for assuming that there is a given reality out there in the “real world” which newsgatherers will choose to either admit or exclude (McQuail, 2000: 279). A study by Walter Gieber (1964: 219) suggested that the personal attitudes of individual journalists or gatekeepers were less significant than the mechanical and bureaucratic processes involved in producing and editing copy: “News does not have an independent existence; news is a product of men [*sic*] who are members of a news-gathering (or a news-originating) bureaucracy. ... [The] reporter’s individuality is strongly tempered by extrapersonal factors” (Gieber, 1964: 223). Or, as Harrison (2006: 13) puts it, news is that which “is judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense *within the constraints* of the news organisations within which they operate” (my emphasis). The gatekeeping model has subsequently been developed by Pamela Shoemaker to take account of multiple levels of decision-making and wider factors:

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The individual gatekeeper has likes and dislikes... But the gatekeeper is not totally free to follow a personal whim; he or she must operate within the constraints of communication routines to do things this way or that. All of this also must occur within the framework of the communication organisation, which has its own priorities but also is continuously buffeted by influential forces from outside the organisation. And, of course, none of these actors – the individual, the routine, the organisation, or the social institution – can escape the fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system. (Shoemaker, 1991: 75–76)

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Individual gatekeepers may display a degree of agency, then, but they do not operate totally autonomously.

Gatekeeping as a concept has been under threat from the fact that anyone with a smartphone can now be a producer as well as a consumer of vast amounts of content. “As with most media technologies, there is a degree of hyperbole about the potential of Twitter,” observes Alfred Hermida (2010), who nonetheless argues that the growth of social media can indeed undermine journalists’ traditional role as gatekeepers of information. For Hermida, social media can be seen as part of a digital “awareness system” – a form of “ambient journalism” – that creates “new kinds of interactions around the news, ... enabling citizens to maintain a mental model of news and events around them” even if they are not paying full attention all the time (Hermida, 2010). The traditional gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles of journalism may therefore be “at risk” (Hall, 2001: 53), but that does not have to mean the end of *journalists*, according to Cecilia Friend and Jane Singer:

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Journalists can no longer be information gatekeepers in a world in which gates on information no longer exist. Yet the need for sense-makers has never been more urgent. Gatekeeping in this world is not about keeping an item out of circulation; it is about vetting items for their veracity and placing them within the broader context that is easily lost under the daily tidal wave of “new” information. (Friend and Singer, 2007: 218)

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# CHAPTER 4 WHERE DOES NEWS COME FROM?

## Key terms

Access; Beat; Calls; Citizen journalism; Contacts; Crowdsourcing; Facebook; Journalist–source relationship; Passivity; Patch; Power; Primary definers; Search; Secondary definers; Social media; Social networking; Sources; Twitter; User-generated content

Nada Farhoud talks me through how a normal working day begins for a specialist covering the environmental beat for the UK popular tabloid national newspaper and news website, the *Daily Mirror*:

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I start by reading my emails, making sure I've read all the papers as well. This is all 7.30am, 8am, reading the papers, knowing what our competitors are doing, knowing what's in the broadsheets. A lot of my stories come from contacts, and there'll be exclusive stories that I'll be working on, charities, conservationists, universities who have done studies, embargoed reports – I get probably several of those a day – and working out which one is the most important for us, which is the most relevant. A variety of other contacts as well, not just traditional charities, but organisations from further afield, for example I'm speaking to quite a lot at the moment from Africa.

[Then], through Twitter, through WhatsApp, through email, and the phone, trying to have a grip of what's going on in all areas of my field and trying to come up with maybe three maybe four stories each day to list by 10am for news conference. So I'm sort of filtering through everything that's out there in the UK and further afield to give my newsdesk

what I think are the main environment stories that we should be potentially putting in the paper that day. Things that will be really relevant to our readers...

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Not everyone will become the environmental editor of a national news outlet, but the broad outline of the above routine will be familiar to anyone covering crime, health, transport, business, science, education or any of the other specialisms of the news industry. Asked if she has a tip to help aspiring journalists find original stories, Farhoud says: "Take time to cultivate contacts, do it properly and you'll learn to get some good things out of them." That's solid advice, no matter what branch of journalism you end up in, as a general news reporter or a specialist in anything from fashion to football. It is also a hint of the way that, as journalists, we tend to think of people as our contacts and sources. We should try not to forget that they – like us – are people first.

Sometimes you need a contact on the ground where you don't know anybody. What can you do? You might find the answer on social media, as Neal Mann recalls from a time when he was on the foreign desk at *Sky News* in London just as an earthquake shook Pakistan:

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I took the United States Geological Survey information – it's freely available but I was one of the first people to get it – we ran it and immediately I put it on my Twitter feed. People in Pakistan came straight back to me within two to three minutes to say they were there and they'd felt the earthquake. They hadn't searched on Google to find out what was going on, they'd searched on Twitter and mine was one of the top tweets that surfaced, and also they saw that I was from a legitimate news outlet, which is key. Traditionally it would have taken quite a long time to find somebody involved in that situation but I had an immediate response from somebody and the thing is you can put in the checks to make sure they are in that location, but that's pretty easy once you've got their contact details. Traditionally we've always had to find our sources, and now as journalists on social media, by engaging with the audience, people can find us.

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Not only did people who had experienced the earthquake find him, but they did so almost instantly, from thousands of miles away. This was made possible by technology, but it still took Mann's journalistic *use* of the technology to make it happen. So the development of new ways of finding and sourcing stories needs to be seen as adding to the more traditional methods, not replacing them.

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“Sources of news are everywhere.”

– *Brian Whittle.*

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Journalists are surrounded by **sources** of potential stories, and Peter Lazenby – who worked for the *Yorkshire Evening Post* man and boy for 40 years, before becoming northern correspondent for the *Morning Star* – has long been one of the best at keeping his eyes and ears open for them. He's even been known to interview health service workers while he was a patient in hospital. Shopping in a local supermarket one weekend, he spotted a card on the community noticeboard offering a reward of several hundred pounds for the return of a lost parrot. Thinking that it must have been “one hell of a parrot”, he called the number and discovered that it was indeed a rare breed. But it had not just been lost. It turned out that it had been stolen by members of an international smuggling syndicate who were abducting exotic birds to order and delivering them in a private aeroplane to wealthy collectors. Not a bad story to bring home with the groceries on what was supposed to be a day off.

Cathy Newman agrees that stories can be found in the most random ways:

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There's no set routine for a story. My first ever scoop was when I was on the *North Devon Journal*, I was doing work experience, and somebody found blood on a clifftop path. The police launched a murder hunt. Actually it turned out that a marksman had been hired by the council to go and shoot some of the wild goats. They hadn't told the public because they didn't want to upset the animal-lovers, so

they'd done it under cover of darkness and they'd triggered this manhunt. So it was a great story, there were so many different angles to it, some people were angry about it, and there was a bit of a cover-up. And that was just from somebody being observant locally and wondering what the heck this blood was on the clifftop path.

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“Sources of news are everywhere,” explains news agency editor Brian Whittle. Some will be regular points of contact for journalists while others may be one-offs. Some will be proactive, approaching journalists because they want **news access** for their views or information, while other sources may not even be aware that they *are* sources. A good journalist will look for leads from a range of sources and will not rely on being spoon fed by the PR industry.

## HOW TO BUILD YOUR CONTACTS

Details of your own contacts should be kept in what some of us still call a contacts book even if we just mean they are in our phone. Contacts books come in many shapes, sizes and technologies – backed-up in some way, just in case – and they can be the difference between getting the story and missing the boat. Organisations will normally be listed on an alphabetical basis, adding individuals' names, titles, main switchboard telephone numbers, direct lines, mobile numbers, Twitter handles, email addresses, home landline numbers if applicable, and any other information you can get (including their *preferred* method of contact so you are less likely to annoy them). Personal mobile and out-of-hours numbers are particularly important, as you may be working on stories early in the morning or late in the evening when most work numbers are useless. Cross-referencing is advised, to increase your chances of finding the right name and number in a hurry. And don't rely on being able to remember who somebody is and why you have their number stored. Even Mr Memory would struggle to remember all the people a reporter will speak to in an average year, so add titles and a brief note to aid recall.



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“Good reporters keep up a regular relationship with contacts and do not just ring them when they need them.”

– *David Randall.*

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As well as organisations, you will also need to build up a range of individual contacts, people associated with particular interests or issues, many of whom can initially be contacted via Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites. Having such contacts categorised under their job, their hobby or their area of expertise can help you find that vital comment, missing piece of information or fresh angle much more quickly than if you have to start from scratch each time. People listed among your contacts will vary enormously depending on the type of organisation you are working for, the geographical or specialist patch you are covering, whether you work mainly on features or news, and how you develop your own particular niche of interest or expertise.

Wherever you work, useful people contacts are likely to include at least some of the following: academics; activists; actors; administrators; agents; alternative health practitioners; analysts; anglers; architects; artists; astrologers; astronomers; athletes; authors; barristers; biographers; biologists; bloggers; builders; bureaucrats; business people; campaigners; carers; cavers; celebrities; chefs; chemists; clairvoyants; climbers; collectors; comedians; community leaders; councillors; counsellors; criminologists; cultural critics; data crunchers; dentists; designers; detectives; dieticians; disability campaigners; DJs; doctors; economists; eco-warriors; emeritus fellows (whatever *they* might be); engineers; environmentalists; estate agents; experts; explorers; farmers; feminists; film directors; film stars; financial experts; footballers; gardeners; gay rights activists; geeks; golfers; historians; hoteliers; human rights campaigners; imams; influencers; international experts; judges; landlords; lawyers; lesbian rights activists; lobbyists; magistrates; market traders; media tarts (but only if you are really desperate); midwives; millionaires; models; musicians; nurses; patients; pest controllers; pet owners; pilots;

police officers; political activists; politicians; priests; professors; psychiatrists; psychologists; publicans; rabbis; rambler; refugees; researchers; restaurateurs; sailors; scientists; shopkeepers; singers; social workers; sociologists; software developers; soldiers; solicitors; sports people; supporters; surgeons; teachers; tenants; translators; transport experts; trans rights activists; trawler captains; TV stars; twitchers; undertakers; union activists; vegetarians; vets; vicars; victim support groups; victims; writers; YouTubers; zoologists. Also, don't forget to list other journalists with whom you might be able to swap favours. All that means you will hold some private information on people, so in the eyes of the law you may be what's now known as a "data controller", giving you a legal as well as an ethical responsibility to keep such material secure (Hanna and Dodd, 2020: 378).

A contacts book is a living thing, so if you try to call somebody only to be told they are dead or retired, update your listings accordingly. You will also need to feed it by adding fresh contacts from stories on which you are working – even from stories on which you are not yet working, as consumer affairs reporter Kevin Peachey explains:

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I get loads of people ringing me up saying, "My tumble dryer has broken down and the bloke hasn't been round for three days to fix it". And there is an art to talking to these people. Some of the time they just want to talk to somebody about it, get it out of their system and have a good rant, and that's fine. But the bottom line is they are really useful, because if you log all your calls you realise there are trends there.

One story I did as a result of that was when I got loads and loads of calls from people saying, "Something went wrong with my TV, phonenumber, whatever, and it took me days to get through and complain to someone because all I got was a recorded message". So I wrote all these down, we then decided that we would test out 20 companies and find out how long it would be before we could talk to a human being. A lot of the companies we chose were based on the entries I had in my book. If 10 people ring me up about the same company then you know that's something you need to be looking at. In themselves there might not be much in it, but put them together and you can see trends.

I've literally just got a book, the same as my contacts book, and whoever they're complaining about, or the subject, I just stick in the number and a very small explanation if it's needed. Then you can always go back to them. Campaigns are another example. We don't just come up with these ideas off the tops of our heads, they're inspired by readers' letters or by reporters going out on to their patches and people saying, "What about this?"

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Journalists are sometimes accused of **passivity**, of relying on a small number of sources to come to them, but the best reporters are proactive. On a quiet news day, you could simply go through your contacts book and get in touch with some of the people to whom you have not spoken in a while. You might pick up a story or two and, even if you don't, you will have maintained a relationship (of sorts).

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"Have an eye open for what's going on in the world because you can find stories in the most random way."

– *Cathy Newman.*

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## MAKING REGULAR CHECKS

As with Nada Farhoud on the *Mirror* (above), news agency reporters begin each day by getting up to speed with what is happening on their patch, as Brian Whittle explains:

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As far as newsgathering goes, we still do the old-fashioned things. So we get up early and do the calls. By the time I come into the office I've watched the telly, read at least a couple of national papers and a couple of locals. You're immediately tuned in to what's going on and you hit the floor running.

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Unlike Farhoud, Whittle was talking before social media, but that has not replaced the need to carry out the “old-fashioned” jobs, merely added to them. “The calls” – regular inquiries to a range of agencies – were a staple of newsgathering for decades. Time was when calls used to involve journalists gathering at a police station when a police officer would deliver a daily briefing on the latest crimes and misdemeanours by reading from the log of local incidents. Then the phone took over, and a minimum round of calls would be to the police, the fire brigade and the ambulance service (plus coastguard and lifeboats if your patch included the seaside), noting down anything of interest that had happened since the last time the calls were made, including updates to ongoing stories. Actual phone calls have now largely been replaced by regular monitoring of emergency services’ Twitter accounts, apps and other online feeds.

The system of regular checks and routine calls is very much a one-way flow of information. Only a tiny proportion of incidents are made public by the police, for example, as was demonstrated when freelance journalist Nigel Green (2008) used the Freedom of Information Act to find out how many incidents were dealt with by Northumbria police in a two-week period. The answer was 17,261, of which just 27 were publicised to journalists. Although journalists will occasionally find out about crimes from members of the public or personal observation, the vast majority of crime stories that make the news have been supplied by the police. It has been argued that this gives the police a privileged position as one of a number of **primary definers** able to influence how certain issues are reported and debated. This question of **power** relations between journalists and sources has been explored at length by academics, while journalists have been more concerned with the practicalities of getting the story.

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“Journalists are becoming more passive, often merely passing on information to the public that they have been given.”

– Deirdre O’Neill and Catherine O’Connor.

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For journalists, making regular calls to the police and other emergency services – and following them on Twitter – is both a valid and a valuable way of generating copy. It provides a regular supply of stories, ranging from nibs (news in brief) to leads. What's more, it can usually be carried out routinely by any competent reporter even without any relevant personal knowledge or contacts, and it provides some insurance against the ignominy of missing something big happening on your patch. For these reasons, making regular checks and calls will remain an important part of the newsgathering routine even as newer methods are developed.

## SOURCES OF NEWS

### Box 4.1

#### Some common sources of news stories

As an exercise, you can add your own additional sources of news stories and cross out any you think you will never need – but can you be sure?

Academic journals

Adverts

Airports

Alternative media

Ambulance service

Anniversaries

Archives

Armed forces

Arts groups

Blogs

Campaigns

Chambers of Commerce and/or Trade

Charities

Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Temples

Colleagues

Community forums

Community groups

Companies

Consumer groups

Council departments

Council meetings and agendas

Council press officers

Councillors

Court hearings

Cuttings/diary

Email lists and newsletters

Entertainment industry

Ethnic minority media

Eyes and ears

Facebook

Fire and rescue service

Forward planning services

Freedom of Information Act

Google alerts

Government departments

Heritage groups

Hospitals

Hyperlocal news sites

Inquests

Instagram

Lateral thinking

Leaks

Letters

Libraries

LinkedIn

Motoring organisations

MPs and other politicians

News agencies

News releases

NHS Trusts

Noticeboards

Official reports

Other media

Parish newsletters

People

Police

Political parties

Post offices

Posters

PR companies

Press conferences

Pressure groups

Professional bodies

Public inquiries

Pubs and bars

Quangos

Readers/viewers/listeners/users

Reddit

Regeneration projects

Regulatory bodies

Residents' groups

Schools

Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Brownies, Woodcraft Folk

Solicitors



Specialist online forums

Sports organisations

Support groups

Theatres

Thinktanks

TikTok

Trade associations

Trade press

Trades unions

Transport companies

Twitter

Universities

User-generated content

Websites

YouTube

**Space for your own additional sources:**

Organisations on the list for routine checks and calls may be among the most reliable of journalists' sources but they are only a few of the places from which news comes. Common sources, listed in [Box 4.1](#), are introduced below; some are universal while others may be specific to a UK context but can be adapted to different countries. Such sources are likely to form the backbone of any reporter's contacts, but you can adapt it to your own patch, specialism or interests.

## Academic journals

Research by academics, particularly scientists, published in peer-reviewed journals, is a frequent source of news stories. The journalist's job is twofold: to spot a potential story among the qualifications and caveats beloved of academics, and to render the story intelligible and interesting to lay readers. There are almost daily examples, ranging from the quirky to matters of life and death.

## Adverts

An advert for a high-powered job might alert you to the fact that the previous incumbent has left – maybe they resigned or were sacked – and a big advertising campaign based on stereotypes might provoke a row over racism or sexism. Even the small ads can prompt a big story.

## Airports

As well as being arrival and departure points for celebs galore, airports can generate stories both positive (record journey times, new routes) and negative (accidents, noise, cancellation chaos, battles over runway extensions, deportations); they are also a location for protests about the climate emergency.

## Alternative media

Outsider journalism can alert you to stories, sources or perspectives that might be overlooked by more mainstream media. Contemporary local examples in the UK would include the *Bristol Cable* in Bristol (<https://thebristolcable.org/>) and the *Meteor* in Manchester (<https://themetor.org/>), but alternative media come in all shapes and sizes (as well as tending to come and go). But remember that it is not good form to lift their stories without credit or checking.

## Ambulance service

A routine check with the ambulance service may provide early warning of accidents, explosions, and even the occasional birth on

the way to hospital.

## **Anniversaries**

Journalists love anniversaries, especially those with a five or, even better, a zero at the end. Births, marriages, deaths, inventions, disasters, and wars starting or ending are just some of the occasions given the anniversary treatment.

## **Archives**

The release of official records (for example under the UK government's 20- and 30-year rules) can result in a fresh take on an old story.

## **Armed forces**

In peacetime the armed forces can generate stories through manoeuvres, recruitment campaigns and pictures of local boys or girls overseas, plus the occasional mysterious death or case of bullying that comes to light. During times of conflict military briefings become events in their own right and military bases might become a magnet for anti-war protesters.

## **Arts groups**

Apart from providing information about forthcoming events, arts groups can generate rows about funding or controversial subject matter.

## **Blogs**

Blogs can range from expert analysis on a particular topic to the amateurish jottings of people who really should get out more. Many are rubbish but others contain useful tips, insights and contacts.

## **Campaigns**

Campaigners who want to influence public opinion on subjects ranging from animal rights to real ale are likely to come up with opinions or events that might generate news stories.

## **Chambers of commerce and/or trade**

As spokespeople for business, such organisations can be useful sources of stories or comments about anything from interest rates to Christmas shopping.

## **Charities**

Because charities need publicity to generate public donations, many are geared up to the needs of journalists, coming up with heartrending stories complete with photogenic victims (human or animal). Sadly, they also sometimes generate stories of fraud, bullying and sexual assault.

## **Churches, mosques, synagogues, temples**

Religious organisations may make the news by holding events, by having internal rows, by attacking the views of others or being accused of covering up sexual exploitation. But if somebody tells you that a local authority is trying to ban Christmas, it is almost certainly not true.

## **Colleagues**

People you work with are likely to be parents, patients, residents, commuters and consumers, among other things. As such, they may come across events with the potential to become news – whether they recognise it or not.

## **Community forums**

Amid the questions about where to find an emergency plumber, local online discussion forums can alert you to events and controversies on your patch.

## Community groups

A good source for rows, ructions and reactions, especially of the not-in-my-backyard variety.

## Companies

Behind the self-serving PR puffery, genuine business stories involve real products, real jobs, real profits or losses, and real people.

## Consumer groups

Consumer stories range from the mis-selling of pensions to the discovery of a mouse in a sandwich. When groups of consumers band together they can become a valuable (re)source.

## Council departments

You will get some good exclusive stories if you manage to bypass the council press office to establish direct relationships with officers actually doing the work in departments such as housing or highways.

## Council meetings and agendas

Local authority meetings are now rarely covered in the “parliamentary gallery” style of old but they can still provide good copy as well as a chance to hang around and chat to councillors, officers and any members of the public who turn up to lobby on a particular issue. Increasingly, council meetings are webcast and streamed online. The lengthy documents accompanying most agendas (also available online) may have some gems buried deep within. Try to think of meetings and reports as just a *starting point* for stories rather than an end, and aim to speak to the people on the ground who will be on the receiving end of decisions.

## Council press officers

Sizeable local authorities employ teams of press officers, many recruited from local newsrooms. They *react* to journalists' queries, coming up with information, quotes and contacts while acting as a buffer between decision-makers and journalists. And they *proactively* distribute stories in the form of well-written news releases or well-timed telephone calls. David Helliwell says that council press officers with an eye for a good story should be able to get regular coverage in local and regional media because "they know what will turn us on". He adds: "Sometimes they knock out stories *before* the meeting, which is slightly disturbing."

## Councillors

Elected members of local authorities often have something they want to get off their chest, especially in the run-up to an election.

## Court hearings

"You ignore the courts at your peril," explains Brian Whittle, "because you get the best human interest stories from them." Court reporters dip in and out of several courtrooms looking for cases that fit the news values discussed in [Chapter 3](#), hence the importance of good contacts with court staff, police, solicitors, and the Crown Prosecution Service or equivalent. Some reporters, especially those working for agencies, will also gather background material on defendants and "after-match quotes" from victims and relatives.

## Cuttings/diary

One story often leads to another, particularly if reminders are added to the newsdesk diary or electronic calendar. Previous articles are a major source of background information, but beware assuming that everything in a cutting is necessarily accurate. Certain myths seem to be recycled endlessly just because they were published once and other journalists have not bothered to check.

## Email lists and newsletters

Adding your email address to specialist lists might result in spam but it might also generate some story leads.

## Entertainment industry

An increasingly important source for today's media, as discussed in [Chapters 3](#) and [7](#), although the line between puffery and journalism can be dangerously anorexic.

## Ethnic minority media

Paying attention to websites, magazines, radio stations and newspapers produced by and for ethnic minority communities and/or people of different nationalities can reveal a host of stories (and takes on topical issues) that might have bypassed the antennae of your own editor. Contemporary examples in the UK would be *gal-dem* magazine (<https://gal-dem.com/>), the *Irish Post* ([www.irishpost.com/](http://www.irishpost.com/)) and *Eastern Eye* ([www.easterneye.biz](http://www.easterneye.biz)).

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“The good reporter is able to ... find at least two good stories during a twopenny bus ride.”

– *Frederick Mansfield.*

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## Eyes and ears

Keep your eyes and ears open as you go about your life and you will be surprised at how many stories you can spot or overhear.

## Facebook

It is not true that everybody is on Facebook, it just seems like it; but it is certainly a major source of news (and other things), from people setting up pages in support of quirky or grotesque campaigns to announcements of births, deaths and everything between. You might

want to think about how much information about yourself *you* put out there, though.

## Fire and rescue service

One of the staple agencies for journalists' routine checks, the regional fire brigade may provide early warning of house fires, motorway pile-ups, heroic rescues and (yawn) yet another calendar featuring semi-naked firefighters.

## Forward planning services

PA Media (formerly the Press Association) is among the organisations supplying subscribers with details of forthcoming events, searchable by geographic area or specialist interest.

## Freedom of Information Act

"I think FOI is just a brilliant resource," says Emma Youle, who has used it extensively for local newspaper stories and *HuffPost* investigations alike. Obtaining figures from public authorities has become a staple of newsgathering (see [Chapter 6](#) for more on FOI).

## Google alerts

Getting Google to let you know whenever it finds something on the web that uses a specific term (such as the name of your patch or a particular company or individual) helps you keep tabs on what people (including your rivals) are saying. But remember: even Google doesn't find everything.

## Government departments

As for council departments but on a national level.

## Heritage groups



Campaigns to protect everything from historic woods to old gasworks can come up with some lively stories.

## Hospitals

A hospital is not going to tell you about patients left overnight on trolleys, or given inappropriate treatment; those stories will come from other sources. But hospitals – or the NHS Trusts that run them – are a source of “good news” stories about cures, new treatments, and general triumph over tragedy.

## Hyperlocal news sites

Some non-commercial online media produced on a (very) local basis can provide early warning of stories that might have a wider interest.

## Inquests

The coroner’s court provides a regular supply of tragic stories for the local media with the most high-profile or unusual making it into the nationals. A major advantage for journalists is that most inquests are relatively brief encounters compared with criminal trials.

Occasionally, a large number of similar cases might indicate a story that becomes bigger than one immediate tragedy. Inquests and coroners do not exist in Scotland, where the sheriff’s court may hold a fatal accident inquiry.

## Instagram

An essential source for the *Mail Online* “sidebar of shame”, but other journalists also find it useful to follow the accounts of the people or organisations within their geographic or specialist area. It is not all celeb vacuity; in December 2018, for example, footballer Raheem Sterling used Instagram to post a critique of the ways in which young black and white players tend to be covered differently in sections of the press.

## Lateral thinking

Lateral thinking involves making possible connections – between incidents, policies, decisions, statements, organisations, places and people – and having a good memory so that you can dredge up relevant information from the back of your mind. That’s just the start: stories still need to be checked out, however good your memory.

## Leaks

Leaks of information, whether from close contacts or anonymous whistleblowers, can lead to exclusive stories. The protection of such sources is discussed in [Chapter 2](#), while [Chapter 6](#) examines some stories that originated from leaks. Be careful, though: not all leaks are genuine or in the public interest.

## Letters

Letters pages and online comment spaces should not be overlooked as sources of news. They contain opinions, questions, information and allegations that might repay further investigation. Sometimes a letter or email might become a news item in its own right.

## Libraries

Libraries retain a useful role in providing access to hard copies of old reference books, company reports, local history archives, indexes of local societies, community noticeboards and, by no means least, helpful librarians. Campaigns to save libraries from closure also make good stories.

## LinkedIn

The professional networking site and app can be a useful way of finding relevant contacts and, sometimes, stories.

## Motoring organisations

Organisations such as the RAC and the AA are always coming up with comments or surveys that make the news, and they are also

good sources of reaction for anything to do with cars, roads or transport generally. However, given that people join for their recovery service rather than to have a mouthpiece, don't assume they speak for *all* motorists. The Environmental Transport Association (ETA) will provide a "greener" viewpoint.

## MPs and other politicians

MPs, members of regional and national assemblies, directly elected mayors and other politicians all need to maintain their profile with voters, so they can usually be relied upon to make sure journalists know (some of) what they are up to. This means lots of dull statements and pseudo photo opportunities among the more genuinely newsworthy items. At a national level, political correspondents spend a lot of time talking to backbenchers, picking up gossip and gauging feeling; and don't forget that today's backbencher could be tomorrow's cabinet minister and the following day's Prime Minister.

## News agencies

News agencies are the foot soldiers of journalism at a national and international level, allowing media organisations to cover stories in areas where they have few or no staff on the ground. "A lot of our work was actually finding people at the centre of the story," recalls Jane Merrick, "so, rather than just going along to a court case and reporting it, we would find the accused's husband and see if he wanted to talk. You have to do a lot of running around."

## News releases

News releases, aka press releases, can be good, bad or indifferent. Some sections of the media are alarmingly full of scarcely rewritten news releases from councils, businesses, charities, universities and so on. Some news releases are pointers to genuine news but many are a waste of everybody's time. Even the worthwhile ones should be treated more as a *beginning* than an end, and there may well be a better story if you read between the lines and think about what is *not* being said. Also, a simple phone call can avoid the embarrassment of reporting that something has happened just

because a news release said it was going to happen – when it may have been cancelled at the last minute.

## NHS Trusts

Outbreaks of serious disease, funding crises, hospital closures and health promotion initiatives are all examples of news stories that may emanate from the National Health Service (NHS) Trusts that run services in different areas.

## Noticeboards

Notices in shop windows, offices, libraries, colleges and elsewhere may tip you off about public meetings, petitions, planning applications, unusual things for sale or lost parrots.

## Official reports

When confronted with an official report, don't simply rely on the executive summary. Newsworthy lines may be buried deep in the main text or appendices, demonstrating the value of cultivating friendly experts who will be able to help you understand such documents.

## Other media

All news media monitor other media, all the time. Not that stories will simply be lifted. Not always, anyway. Different outlets require different treatments. To illustrate the point, Brian Whittle spreads on his desk a copy of one of the weekly papers on his patch, the *Knutsford Guardian*. He is excited by the potential of a story about some newts that have held up work on a traffic scheme:

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That's not the story at all. The real story is, this is one of the worst accident blackspots in the country, with a couple of people killed each year or even more, and they can't put this improvement scheme in because of a pond of great crested newts. The way we'll develop that is to go and see

the wife of the latest victim, who will say to us, “Who is more important, my husband or a pond of bloody newts?” And, if you do the pictures properly, you’ve got a page lead in one of the nationals.

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It happens at a political level too, with politicians’ performances on the heavyweight broadcasting programmes being monitored for signs of splits or subtle changes of direction, as well as the latest comment on the controversy of the day. Jane Merrick explains:

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If they say something on TV you can use it. There are probably about four hours of political programmes on a Sunday, for example, and out of that there’ll maybe be two quotes which will make a story. It’s a daily cycle. If you’re on the late shift you wait for the first editions of the newspapers to come in at about 10.30pm. Some newspaper will have been briefed about a story so you phone up the Home Office at 11 o’clock at night and they say yes it’s all true, or no comment.

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And so it goes on, with those newspapers influencing the next morning’s *Today* programme (Radio Four) and the *Today* programming influencing TV news, the national press and online news sites – while all of them follow major sources (and each other) on Twitter.

## Parish newsletters

There may be some spectacular rows lurking within their pages. Failing that, you might find stories ranging from an upcoming fete to a shortage of vicars. But you will have to put up with an awful lot of exclamation marks.

## People

Potential stories can be suggested by people you meet – or even just overhear – while at work, rest and play. This can range from somebody mentioning that they have just seen a police car parked in

their street to rather more substantial fare. As a student journalist on work experience, Abul Taher was researching an education story about the influence of Islam on British campuses when he came across a stronger story:

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The leader of an Islamic extremist group made a passing remark that a lot of British Muslim students had gone to fight jihad in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Kashmir for the cause of Islam. I immediately latched on to that and he provided me with details of three students from Queen Mary and Westfield College abandoning their studies to go to jihad. I checked with the college, and the story made it as an exclusive in the *Guardian* and generated a lot of response from other media. This was two years before September 11th. The source was really a chat with someone.

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## Police

Probably the single most important source for many reporters, particularly in the local and regional media, is the police. Following the police on social media, backed up where necessary with calls to the press office or preferably the investigating officer, between them result in an endless stream of stories about brutal killings, bungling burglars, callous thieves and have-a-go heroes. In addition to providing this rollcall of crimes, the police will sometimes tip-off the media about operations, allowing for dramatic pictures of dawn raids and drugs busts. “Now the emergency services are very vocal on social media because they recognise it’s very important in public engagement,” says Susie Beever. “Obviously the public are paying their wages and have a right to see what they’re doing, and that’s really useful for us.” Experienced crime correspondents will develop their own sources within the police, bypassing the press office where possible. However, there are now frequent complaints that police officers have become reluctant to communicate directly with journalists due to the chilling effect blamed on the Leveson inquiry following the phone-hacking scandal.

## Political parties

Contacts within parties can be a fruitful source of stories about rows, splits and expulsions, while party spokespeople will be more keen to let you know about the selection of candidates or the launch of policy initiatives.

## Post offices

A post office, particularly in a rural area, can be a focus for information and gossip on local people and events. Sadly, your chances of finding a village with its own post office seem to diminish each year. But a campaign to save or reopen one could make a good story too.

## Posters

Posters can be big news, as I found out when my friend Jane once asked me: “Have you seen those awful Harvey Nichols posters?” I hadn’t yet seen the adverts for the opening of a Harvey Nichols shop in Leeds, but she clearly found them offensive. The huge hoardings featured a woman wearing a dog-lead and collar, accompanied by the weak pun, “Harvey Nichols Leeds (not follows)”, and coincidentally had been placed alongside others promoting a local “zero tolerance” campaign to combat violence against women. “I don’t know if you might be able to make it into a story,” Jane added. The answer was yes, it could be a story if somebody complained, particularly because the row involved a high-profile, upmarket store popular with celebs, including the Princess of Wales. Having gathered confirmation of a formal complaint, plus some more outraged comments from locals and councillors and a dismissive response from the store’s PR people, I filed copy to national and local papers. Many gave it a good show the next day accompanied by pictures and obligatory puns such as: HOT UNDER THE COLLAR (*Daily Express*), HARVEY NICKS ‘DOG GIRLS’ UNLEASH A ROW (*Daily Mail*), TOP STORE IN THE DOGHOUSE AS ‘RACIST AND SEXIST’ POSTER UNLEASHES PROTESTS UP NORTH (*Guardian*), and STORE FAILS TO FIND FOLLOWING AMONG LEEDS LADIES WHO LUNCH (*Daily Telegraph*, all October 10 1996). The story was duly followed up by broadcast media before finally becoming the property of columnists, who contributed their philosophical twopenceworth; then it was forgotten, except by me. As every freelance knows, where there is a story there is a potential

follow-up. Three months later, when the advertising watchdog declared the ads to be harmless fun, I dusted off the original story and bashed out fresh copy that was used in several papers – albeit in brief, because TOP STORE CLEARED was less exciting than the original. More recent poster wars broke out in 2016 over pro-Brexit messages that were accused of pandering to racism, and in 2020 when posters advertising the Netflix film *Cuties* were criticised for sexualising pre-pubescent girls.

## PR companies

Journalists and PR people love to hate – or at least poke gentle fun at – each other. But the fruits of the PR industry’s labours are there for all to see in the media every day, so the reality is that PR *is* a major source for many journalists. The role of public relations as “information subsidy” to the media is discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

## Press conferences

Away from the world of professional football clubs announcing new signings, far fewer press conferences take place these days because most journalists are simply too busy to go and collect information that could be emailed. However, the press conference was revived during the Covid-19 pandemic, with mixed results. Journalists get more out of them when they are allowed to ask follow-up questions, and to support each other’s line of questioning, but when the UK government moved its coronavirus press conferences online, the mute button was used to shut down effective questioning. As with news releases, it is sometimes best to read between the lines and remember that the best angle might not even be mentioned from the platform. If the event is held face to face, try to get there early and hang around at the end, talking to other journalists as well as the participants, because you might pick up a useful tip.

## Pressure groups

As with campaigns, except that pressure groups tend to be more long-term. Note how often the English Collective of Prostitutes is referred to in stories about sex workers, not because it necessarily



represents the views of most women on the game, but because it is a quotable source that is easily accessible in a hurry – as it has been for decades.

## Professional bodies

Stories from professional bodies, such as those covering doctors or solicitors, may include disciplinary hearings or criticism of government policy. They are also seen as authoritative sources on anything to do with their profession.

## Public inquiries

Public inquiries can produce good copy but remember to look beneath the surface. It was only by skim-reading hundreds of pages of official documents at a public inquiry into a major drought that reporter Peter Lazenby uncovered an emergency proposal to evacuate the entire city of Bradford because the water supply could not be guaranteed. It was just one line in a set of old minutes towards the bottom of a mountain of paper, but it made that night's headlines. Also, remember that the best sources might be found *outside* the doors of the inquiry, among those who feel their voices are not being heard inside.

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“My experience is that the best stories often come from chats with people.”

– Emma Youle.

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## Pubs and bars

Publicans and regulars can be mines of information about the community and, if you get chatting, they might tell you about anything from charity events to the death of a local character. Peter Lazenby delights in telling young journalists that more cracking news stories started out being scribbled on wet beer mats than will ever be

uncovered by reporters sitting at their desks. Not everyone has the personality to pick up a story in a pub, of course, and many of today's bars are not exactly conducive to chatting with strangers; but the point remains that off-diary stories come from *talking* and *listening* to people. As with post offices, pubs themselves can also be the subject of stories, from licensing rows to whether they are to blame for the spread of a virus.

## Quangos

A quango is a “quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation” operating at arm's length from ministers. Quangos can be sources of news by virtue of the work they do, how they spend public money, and by controversial appointments.

## Readers/viewers/listeners/users

Journalism cannot exist without an audience and many members of the audience will suggest stories by emailing, texting, tweeting and telephoning – even occasionally by popping into the office (assuming your news organisation has such a thing) or by collaring a reporter at some public event. Some will tell you about personal gripes, some will describe impossibly complicated disputes, and some will tell you that government agents are using lamp-posts to beam poison rays into their bedroom at night. But others will come up with excellent stories. How you treat such people will influence whether they come back to you next time. Readers' reactions to stories on social media can also become the basis of follow-up stories.

## Reddit

A social media site built on user-generated content that likes to proclaim itself “the front page of the internet”. It is often monitored by journalists for early warning of potential stories, but watch out for the rubbish and the occasional witch-hunt (as when Reddit users wrongly thought they had identified the Boston marathon bombers in 2013).

## Regeneration projects

A huge amount of public money is spent on regenerating run-down areas or former industrial sites and such projects can provide both “good news” stories and allegations of misspent funds and cronyism.

## **Regulatory bodies**

Ofwat (water and sewerage), Ofgem (energy) and all the rest are regular sources of stories about customer complaints, rising prices, excess profits and directors’ pay. Broadcast regulator Ofcom can also be newsworthy as it adjudicates on complaints from the public on matters such as taste and decency.

## **Residents’ groups**

See community groups.

## **Schools**

Schools can provide good news stories about achievements such as productions, sporting feats and exam passes (with obligatory pictures of teenagers jumping in the air to celebrate). They can also be the focus of tragic news, especially when trips go wrong, and of investigations into allegedly paedophile staff (often dating back many years).

## **Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Brownies, Woodcraft Folk**

As organisations dependent on attracting new members, youth groups are likely to let you know about events, exchange trips and so on. They also make the news because of changes in traditional activities, songs or uniforms.

## **Solicitors**

“Solicitors are very good sources because they represent people who have been done down,” says Paul Foot. It may be in their clients’ interests to gain publicity for an appeal against a miscarriage of justice, a civil action for wrongful arrest, or a compensation claim

for an industrial disease. Solicitors can become valuable long-term contacts, as Jane Merrick explains:

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There are three or four solicitors in Liverpool – and it's probably the same in most other cities – who tend to deal with the big cases. So it's a question of knowing them well enough, keeping them warm so they'll speak to you and contact you about cases. They like to see their names in the paper.

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## **Specialist online forums**

These might alert you to a potential story long before it is visible to more general and/or mainstream media.

## **Sports organisations**

Apart from accounts of the winning, the losing and the taking part, you might also find stories about a lack of facilities, the sale of playing fields, or allegations of racism, sexism, homophobia or financial shenanigans. Every now and then certain news organisations or even individual journalists can find themselves banned by a professional football club that objects to critical reporting.

## **Support groups**

Groups set up to support people with particular conditions or diseases can come up with fascinating human interest stories and case studies.

## **Theatres**

Events, celebs, subject matter, funding and closure are all ways in which a theatre may prompt a news story.

## Thinktanks

A thinktank produces research, usually for paying customers, and often the findings of said research just happen to support the arguments of those paying the bill. Some of the work of thinktanks is valid and thorough; some, not so much. Either way, it frequently makes its way into the news media, so the least that journalists should do is to ask – and inform their audience – where the funding is coming from and whose agenda might be being served.

## TikTok

The latest viral clips of everything from dance crazes to people slicing pizza can be found on the video-sharing social network TikTok and turned into news stories, of sorts, and the company itself is often an item in business news and beyond.

## Trade associations

The views of a particular industry might be newsworthy, particularly if it is calling for a change in government policy to prevent closures and job losses.

## Trade press

As with academic journals, the trade and specialist press contain many stories of potential interest to the general reader, as long as you can identify and translate them. Journalists on specialist publications can also be consulted as authoritative sources; for example, editors of railway or aviation magazines are often interviewed as experts after rail or air crashes.

## Trades unions

Unions can be an excellent source of stories, not just about industrial disputes but everything from pensions scandals and corporate greed to sexual harassment or health and safety at work. For example, in the early weeks of the UK's first Covid-19 lockdown, Emma Youle of *HuffPost* covered a story about staff at a giant retail warehouse

complaining that their conditions were unsafe, with a lack of physical distancing and proper hand sanitising for the thousands of workers on site. Where did that story come from? “The testimony from workers had come through a union and an MP,” says Youle, adding that unions are “a classic way to get information from the ground in terms of sourcing, especially when you need it quickly.” The bigger unions have well-resourced research departments able to provide journalists with useful background material and sometimes case studies.

## Transport companies

Cancellations, strikes, fares increases, punctuality figures, franchise bids, “journeys from hell” and crashes are all obvious news stories. Once in a blue moon you might even come across the occasional good news story from a transport company – an announcement of new investment, perhaps, or the opening of a new route.

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“I’ve had stories where people have specifically come to me because of my social media profile to give me a story.”

– *Neal Mann.*

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## Twitter

Twitter has been described as – among many other things – the “canary in the news coalmine” (Jarvis, 2008), providing early indications that something might be happening. Journalists of a certain vintage might lament the fact that somebody tweeting something is now considered news, but it *can* be, depending on who that someone is, what it is they are tweeting, and the context. It is certainly not all about celebrity gossip, as Neal Mann explains:

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Any journalist, particularly younger journalists, needs to understand that social media is a key part of their job, and if done correctly it's a place where they're going to get a lot of stories and a lot of tips. I think one of the key things for a lot of journalists is that, traditionally, they may only be known on their patch, their beat, their area, but what Twitter in particular allows them to do is engage with anybody, worldwide in real time.

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Like Mann, Cathy Newman uses Twitter primarily as a professional journalistic tool. She says:

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I think it's got to be a professional tool because if you start blurring the professional and the personal then you get into trouble. I came off Facebook because it's too time-consuming and I saw it more as a personal tool than a professional tool. But Twitter is almost like an unofficial news service or wire, and you can follow people you respect and get their take on stories... You get the odd gem... I'm quite focused about it. I know a lot of people tweet a lot more than I do, but I have quite a rigid divide between personal and professional life. I can't really live my life by Twitter.

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## Universities

Universities are a source of a huge range of stories, whether it is ground-breaking research, an unusual degree scheme or an ethical argument about accepting funding from a tobacco company. Student protests over fees or complaints about insufficient contact time can sometimes result in stories, as can the tendency for student unions to vote in favour of boycotting things, ranging from sexist songs to Israeli goods. Universities are also where you will find experts in everything from aeronautics to the zodiac, not to mention disgruntled students locked down in their halls of residence during a pandemic.

## User-generated content

This is a fancy name for stuff produced by members of the public, and it can range from someone out for a walk sending in a nice picture of the weather to those embroiled in a terrorist incident uploading videos to YouTube. User-generated content (UGC) is sometimes referred to as **citizen journalism**.

## Websites

In addition to the websites of the types of organisations mentioned in this chapter, there are also countless potential stories lurking on the web on other sites that are unusual, amusing, quirky, informative, provocative, dangerous, disgusting or just plain nasty.

## YouTube

The video-sharing website is now a major source of stories and user-generated videos as members of the public upload footage shot on phones on occasions where no journalists are present, from atrocities filmed in conflict zones to a racist tirade on public transport. Some organisations or individuals now attempt to bypass journalists by posting announcements directly onto YouTube, as when the Olympic diver Tom Daley uploaded his “Something I want to say” video in December 2013 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJwJnoB9EKw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJwJnoB9EKw)), which had been viewed nearly 13 million times when I last checked.

## “GET OUT MORE OFTEN”

The above list cannot be exhaustive but it covers the major sources used by reporters to originate or check stories. How journalists obtain and evaluate information from sources is discussed further in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#). If you keep this list in mind as you watch the TV news, listen to a radio bulletin or read the news online or in print, you should be able to come up with a fairly good idea of where most stories are likely to have come from.

Some sources are less visible than others. There is evidence that the secret intelligence services MI5 and MI6 have attempted – and no doubt succeeded in some cases – to recruit and/or influence



journalists (Keeble, 2001b: 117–119). And former Fleet Street journalist Simon Winchester recalls reporting “the troubles” in Northern Ireland and being given off-the-record briefings by military intelligence which later turned out to be “if not a pure figment of the imagination of some superheated British army intelligence officer, then to a very large degree, wishful thinking” (Winchester, 2001). This underlines the value to a journalist of maintaining a *questioning* attitude – a healthy scepticism, not to be confused with cynicism – no matter with whom you are dealing.

Putting non-attributable briefings with spooks to one side, the strongest news stories come from journalists *talking* to people – and getting people talking to you. Even a story that originates from a tweet or a news release will be improved by talking to people. Making an extra call or knocking on that extra door might make the difference between having the same story as everyone else or coming up with a different angle or a fresh piece of information. In the words of Andrew Marr (2005: 116): “Get out more often.”

There is, then, no substitute for speaking – and listening – to the people directly involved in a story. Getting hold of them may sometimes require you to be persistent, tough and single-minded. But it cannot excuse the behaviour witnessed by Edward Behr in an African conflict zone, as thousands of women and children waited to be airlifted to safety:

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Into the middle of this crowd strode an unmistakably British TV reporter, leading his cameraman and sundry technicians like a platoon commander through hostile territory. At intervals he paused and shouted, in a stentorian but genteel BBC voice, “Anyone here been raped and speaks English?” (Behr, 1992: 136)

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Such insensitivity might get the story, but at what cost? As journalists we have a duty to ourselves, to our sources and to our fellow citizens to pause for reflection from time to time. Without some sense of humanity and empathy, what is the point of our journalism? Lindsay Eastwood recalls one of the most satisfying stories of her career. It wasn’t a big breaking news story produced in an adrenalin rush to deadline, but a television documentary about three women with post-natal depression, filmed over several months:

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I'm really proud of it. The women all wanted to do it because they thought that really serious post-natal depression, where you reject your baby, was swept under the carpet. They were really nervous about coming across as bad mothers or as fruitcakes, basically.

I didn't want to over dramatise it so it was quite tricky and I was really, really anxious that they liked the end product. It went out on air and I was really, really nervous waiting to hear from these three women. They all rang and said, "That was just great, thank you so much." I wasn't bothered about what anybody else thought, it was just the women involved, it was really important that they all liked it.

It's nice to get your teeth into something. You breeze in and out of people's lives on a daily basis and you ask them to do these things in front of camera, and do interviews and stuff, and they do it remarkably well. And you think, "I've only spent half an hour with you", so it was nice to get to know these people a bit more.

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We might think of the people we meet as potential sources and of their lives in terms of potential stories, but a sense of humanity and a concern for ethics need not be in conflict with good journalism. Quite the reverse.

## Summary

Journalists need sources to provide information that may be turned into news, and also to check information provided by other sources. Journalists tend to evaluate sources based on their previous experience of them, categorising some as reliable and others as less so. Reporters are surrounded by sources of potential news stories and will develop networks of contacts. However, many academic studies have suggested that a high proportion of stories come from a relatively narrow range of sources, with journalists accused of being too passive. Some sources, such as the police, provide a steady

supply of potential news stories. Although it has been suggested that some sources have the power to virtually guarantee access to the news and to frame debate on social issues, journalists are also sometimes accused of being too proactive – even manipulative – by creating news such as controversies.

## Questions

Why do journalists need sources?

Why do sources need journalists?

Why do some people or organisations get in the news more than others?

Are journalists in danger of becoming irrelevant if people in the public eye use social media to communicate directly?

Can you think of additional sources not listed in [Box 4.1](#)?

## What would you do?

You are on a bus on the way to work (you are a reporter for a local radio station) when you overhear a teenage passenger talking loudly into a mobile phone. You start paying attention when you hear the word “riot” mentioned, and it gradually sounds to you as if the phone conversation might be some kind of plan for a group of youths to gather in the town centre that evening in the hope of causing a disturbance on the streets. What would you do?

## Further reading

Randall with Crew (2021) offers a wealth of good advice on sourcing stories, and Keeble (2006) and Sheridan Burns with

Matthews (2018) are both worth dipping into. Dick (2013) has a useful chapter on “developing an online beat”, and tips on sourcing stories via social media can also be found in Knight and Cook (2013). A starting point for ethical discussion about sources is Harcup (2007), which has one chapter introducing journalist–source relations and another discussing the ways in which victims’ relatives are sometimes (mis)treated by journalists; the sourcing practices of alternative media are considered in Harcup (2013) and Whitaker (1981). Manning (2001) is a good introduction to research and theoretical frameworks on journalist–source relationships, while Tumber (1999) offers useful extracts and Hall et al (1978, 2013) are worth reading for the concept of primary definers. The results of detailed academic research into the sometimes limited range of sources in the news can be found in studies by Lewis et al (2008a and 2008b) and O’Neill and O’Connor (2008) that make uncomfortable reading for anyone who believes journalists should be the eyes and ears of the public.

## Top three to try next

David Randall with Jemma Crew (2021) ‘Where do good stories come from?’, Chapter 5 of *The Universal Journalist* (sixth edition)

Deirdre O’Neill and Catherine O’Connor (2008) ‘The passive journalist: how sources dominate local news’, *Journalism Practice*

Paul Manning (2001) *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction*

## Sources for soundbites

Whittle, interview with the author; Randall, 2016: 48; Newman, interview with the author; O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008: 498; Mansfield, 1936: 82; Youle, interview with the author; Mann, interview with the author.

## Sources

Sources are central to journalism. “In sum, the work of a journalist becomes an everyday task of scheduling,” according to Dan Berkowitz (2020: 167), and “sources are what must be scheduled.” Sources are the people, places or organisations from whom most potential news stories originate; and the people, places or organisations to whom journalists turn when checking potential stories. Bell argues that “the ideal news source is also a news actor, someone whose own words make news” (Bell, 1991: 193–194). He lists the following as major sources: political figures, officials, celebrities, sportspeople, professionals, criminals, human interest figures, and participants such as victims or witnesses (Bell, 1991: 194).

When assessing sources, a journalist’s overriding consideration is *efficiency*, according to Herbert Gans: “Reporters who have only a short time to gather information must therefore attempt to obtain the most suitable news from the fewest number of sources as quickly and easily as possible” (Gans, 1980: 128). He identifies six interrelated “source considerations” used by journalists to evaluate sources of news. They may be summarised as follows:

*Past suitability*: sources whose information has led to stories in the past are likely to be chosen again and to become regular sources (although journalists or audiences might eventually tire of them).

*Productivity*: sources will be favoured if they are able to supply a lot of information with minimum effort by the journalist.

*Reliability*: journalists want reliable sources whose information requires the least amount of checking.

*Trustworthiness*: journalists evaluate sources’ trustworthiness over time and look favourably on those

they have found to be honest and who do not limit themselves to giving self-serving information.

*Authoritativeness*: everything else being equal, a journalist will prefer a source in an official position of authority.

*Articulateness*: sources capable of expressing themselves in articulate, concise and dramatic soundbites or quotes will be favoured when journalists need somebody to be interviewed. (Gans, 1980: 129–131)

For Gans, this process means that “journalists are repeatedly brought into contact with a limited number of the same types of sources” (Gans, 1980: 144). This apparent homogeneity of sources is reinforced by the fact that journalists use other journalists and other media as some of their main sources of ideas and validation. Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 23–24) refers to this as the “circular circulation of information” and suggests it can lead to “mental closure”, which sounds a bit harsh. Are reporters’ sources really drawn from as narrow a range as suggested by many scholars of news? If journalism *does* tend to privilege a narrow range of “resource-rich institutions” (Cottle, 2000: 433), then it does not *have to* do so. Studies of the alternative press suggest that it may not be the routines of news production themselves that determine the choice of sources but the ethos of the organisation, thus allowing for alternative – and ethnic minority – media to follow different routines allowing them to select “a different cast” of sources and voices (Cottle, 2000: 434–435). Even within mainstream media and understaffed newsrooms, individual journalists retain some agency over which sources to approach, trust, return to and rely upon.

## News access

The question of who appears in the news is important to considerations of the public sphere, and journalists’ tendency to rely on official sources is frequently said to benefit the

powerful (Cottle, 2000: 427; McChesney, 2000: 49; McQuail, 2000: 288). Unequal access to the news has damaging social effects, argues Stuart Hall:

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Some things, people, events, relationships *always* get represented: always centre-stage, always in the position to define, to set the agenda, to establish the terms of the conversation. Some others sometimes get represented – but always at the margin, always responding to a question whose terms and conditions have been defined elsewhere: never “centred”. Still others are always “represented” only by their eloquent absence, their silences: or refracted through the glance or the gaze of others. If you are white, male, a businessman or politician or a professional or a celebrity, your chances of getting represented will be very high. If you are black, or a woman without social status, or poor or working class or gay or powerless because you are marginal, you will always have to fight to get heard or seen. This does not mean that no one from the latter groups will ever find their way into the media. But it *does* mean that the structure of access to the media is systematically skewed in relation to certain social categories. (Hall, 1986: 9, emphasis in original)

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Representations do not necessarily remain unchanged over time (Schudson, 1989: 280), and female, black and gay voices are now heard much more frequently than when Hall wrote the above words. And the development of social media and formats such as live-blogging on online news sites is often said to have led to a wider range of non-elite sources being used by journalists, although research to date does not support assertions of a disruptive shift towards “diversifying the balance of news sourcing” within digital media (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018: 863).

Relationships between journalists and sources may be complex and subject to change over time – and there are some occasions when the voices of the powerless *do* take

centre stage, for a short while – but there remains a tendency for the powerful to enjoy “routine advantages” in news access (Manning, 2001: 139). For example, Gary Younge notes that black “community leaders” tend to be regarded as authoritative sources only when troubling events such as inner-city riots occur: “While rarely summoned to the microphone in more peaceful times, they are in great demand when it comes to condemning wayward members of their community” (Younge, 2001).

## Passivity

Journalists may like to say that sources are everywhere but much of the time they use a narrow range of sources and are often accused of being too passive or even lazy – although perhaps the fault lies more with those employers who have cut staff numbers so much that reporters often do not have the time to be proactive. One study of the UK provincial press found that most stories appeared to be based on a single source and often amounted to little more than “free advertising and propaganda” for those organisations with the resources to run slick PR operations (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2008: 498). Similarly, Bell points to a series of studies suggesting that, to a very large extent, “news is what an authoritative source tells a journalist”; alternative sources, including minorities and the socially disadvantaged, “tend to be ignored” (Bell, 1991: 191–192). A major study of UK national media found that a vast number of stories originated from some kind of public relations activity: “even in a sample based on the UK’s most prestigious news outlets, journalists are heavily reliant on prepackaged information, either from the PR industry or other media,” according to Lewis et al (2008a: 14). The consequence of this information subsidy is that “corporate and governmental voices speak loudly while public opinion is worryingly mute” (Lewis et al, 2008b: 30). Adding to such concerns, there is evidence that many journalists now treat random tweets as being newsworthy “even though they did not contain other attributes by which journalists assess news value” (McGregor and Molyneux, 2020: 608).



## Primary definers

Politicians, employers, the police and so-called experts are said to be the “primary definers” of events within the public sphere, setting “the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is” (Hall et al, 1978: 59). According to this analysis, journalists are “secondary definers”, circulating the interpretations of the most socially powerful not because of a conspiracy to do so, but because that’s how “the hierarchy of credibility” tends to work (Manning, 2001: 138). Journalist George Monbiot (2020) is particularly critical of the UK’s publicly funded broadcaster, the BBC, for providing a largely “unchallenged platform to those who promote this power,” such as “lobbyists, trade associations, opaquely funded thinktanks”. The concept of primary and secondary definition has been criticised for neglecting the potential of media *themselves* to become primary definers (Cricher, 2002: 529) and for downplaying some of the complexities of journalist–source relationships (Schlesinger, 1990: 66–67; Manning, 2001: 15–17 and 137–139; Kuhn, 2002: 52–58).

## Power

The journalist–source relationship is “a dynamic phenomenon, depending on the context of a specific occurrence as well as the perceived power that each party brings to the relationship” (Berkowitz, 2020: 168). This relationship has been described as resembling both a dance and a tug-of-war (Gans, 1980: 116–117). McQuail says that the power of PR means that “it has probably become harder for the media to make any independent assessment of their own of the value of information provided to them in such volume” (McQuail, 2000: 291). Larsake Larsson’s study of relationships between reporters and local politicians found an interplay based on “the exchange of information for media exposure”, in which sometimes the journalist would have the upper hand and at other times the politician (Larsson, 2002: 27).

It ought not to be forgotten that, within the context of the constraints discussed in [Chapter 2](#), journalists themselves retain some power to *choose* between sources and to include or exclude certain perspectives or people. I remember covering a hospice visit by Princess Diana when Jimmy Savile turned up, unannounced, and the press photographers on the job unilaterally decided simply to ignore his attention-seeking presence. Fair play to them.

## Citizen journalism

Blogging, tweeting, posting comments, uploading videos and other forms of communication have all been labelled as forms of “citizen journalism” when done by those not employed in the news industry. Although it can be difficult to discern quite what some of this user-generated content has to do with either citizenship or journalism, some of it clearly does draw on traditional journalistic attributes such as reporting and verification. Much theorising on the subject of the internet in general, and so-called citizen journalism in particular, seems to assume that it has changed *everything*; others counter that nothing *fundamental* has changed. For Jackie Harrison: “[T]he availability of greater sources of news does not guarantee an engaged or enlightened citizenry (any more than anything else does), and earlier claims to this effect about the internet and the digital citizen now seem exaggerated” (Harrison, 2006: 206). As Natalie Fenton (2012: 142) argues, networking via social media is neither “inherently liberatory” nor “necessarily democratising for society”. Most important may not be the technologies themselves but the uses to which they are put. Members of the audience do not necessarily always want to be active, it seems; or maybe they *are* being active, just not in ways predicted or desired by some of the more enthusiastic advocates of social change. And perhaps the label “citizen journalism” might be more appropriately applied to dissident or alternative forms of news media than to people uploading images of their latest cupcakes (Harcup, 2013).

## CHAPTER 5 “THE BEST OBTAINABLE VERSION OF THE TRUTH”: JOURNALISTS AS OBJECTIVE REPORTERS?

### Key terms

Accuracy; Agenda setting; Alternative journalism; Balance; Bias; Common sense; Corrections; Emotionality; Fact-checking; Facts; Fake news; Hegemony; Impartiality; Journalism of attachment; Moral panic; Neutrality; Objectivity; Opinion; Pragmatic objectivity; Science reporting; Strategic ritual; Subjectivity; Three-source rule; Truth; Verification



**Figure 5.1** The truth

Source: Courtesy of cartoonist @jameswhitworth.

“Examine your words well,” wrote George Eliot in the novel *Adam Bede*, “and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth” (Eliot, 1859: 151). Journalists have more reason than most to examine their words well, because they are in the **truth** business as well as the words business; yet the **accuracy** of Eliot’s observation is demonstrated by the frequency with which journalists manage to get things wrong. How wrong? As wrong as when, some years back, the *Daily Mirror* proclaimed on its front page the exciting news of a new addition to the family of ex-Beatle Paul McCartney and his then wife, Heather Mills: IT’S A BOY! EXCLUSIVE: MACCA BABY A MONTH EARLY (October 30 2003), only to follow it up the next day with: ER...IT’S A GIRL! AND SHE’S CALLED BEATRICE – NOT JOSEPH, accompanied by the tongue-in-cheek claim that “our baby scoop was half right” (*Daily Mirror*, October 31 2003).

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“Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.”

– George Eliot.

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Hmmm, perhaps. But, as former BBC director of news Richard Sambrook (2004) once put it, in a somewhat different context: “In journalism ‘mainly right’ is like being half pregnant – it’s an unsustainable condition.” Yet journalists frequently get things wrong and we are not the only ones. On the day that Jean Charles de Menezes was killed by police officers at Stockwell tube station in London I watched the unfolding news on television. Witness after witness told us what they had seen, which was essentially an Asian man in a bulky coat – maybe wearing a baseball cap, maybe carrying a rucksack – jump the ticket barrier, run like the wind, and be chased onto a tube train before being challenged and shot dead. There is no reason to believe they made any of this up and I am sure the journalists broadcasting such accounts did so in good faith, especially as this version of events seemed to match the initial impression being given by official sources. The next day’s newspapers carried the same sort of material. The *Times*, for example, (mis)-informed readers: “The suspect, described as being of Asian appearance and wearing a thick, bulky jacket, vaulted over a ticket barrier when challenged by police and ran down the escalator and along the platform of the Northern Line” (Fresco et al, 2005).

It emerged within days that he had not behaved in any such way (Honigsbaum, 2005). As the *Times* pointed out in a subsequent leader column:

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At the time of the shooting, Scotland Yard said that Mr de Menezes’ clothing and his behaviour at the station were suspicious. This claim was buttressed by witnesses who claimed that he was wearing a bulky jacket on a hot day and that he leapt over the ticket barrier at Stockwell station. Now, it turns out that he was wearing only a light denim jacket at the time of his death: perfectly appropriate garb for the time of year. Nor was he carrying a bag or rucksack. There is apparently CCTV footage that shows him walking normally into the station, picking up a free newspaper and using his Oyster card to pass through the barrier. He allegedly began to run only when he saw a train pulling into the station, after which he boarded it and sat down in an ordinary fashion. (*Times*, 2005)

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So, although the witnesses who spoke to journalists may have seen what they saw, they may not have seen what they subsequently *thought* they saw. It turns out that a man did vault the ticket barrier and run at high speed towards the train, for example; it was not Mr de Menezes, but a police officer. Corrections may be unfortunate, but in an imperfect world in which journalists – and others – sometimes get things wrong, a correction at least puts the record straight to an extent, even if it might not stop some people still believing the first version. Acknowledging and correcting errors is probably a better way for a news organisation to become trusted, in the long term, than pretending mistakes never happen.

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“Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?”

– *Chico Marx*.

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## OBJECTIVE REPORTING

Inaccuracies might be labelled as “fake news”, but that is a terribly simplistic term to apply to complex phenomena, ranging from political propaganda and wild rumours on Facebook to clickbaity headlines over spurious news items. If it ever had much meaning, the phrase surely lost it when Donald Trump became US President and began labelling any independent and critical reporting of him as fake. Yet it cannot be denied that untruths do make their way into news coverage, as with the de Menezes

example cited above, even without any intention to deceive. It is entirely understandable that people who witness a traumatic event might put two and two together in a retrospective attempt to make sense of it, and that in the process they might make some assumptions that are wrong. As Eliot said, it can be very hard to say the exact truth. Yet the truth – sometimes referred to as the “objective truth” – is what journalists are aiming at; something that can be backed up with evidence, verified and demonstrated to be the case.

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“Reporting is not stenography. It is the best obtainable version of the truth.”

– Carl Bernstein.

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Journalists strive to give not necessarily the absolute truth, but the most truthful version of events that can be obtained at the time. **Objectivity** for journalists has been defined as even-handedness, separating facts from opinion, and minimising the journalist’s own views or prejudices (Boyer 1981, cited in Watson, 1998: 98). Furthermore, broadcast journalists in the UK have a statutory requirement to be impartial. According to the BBC, **impartiality** entails “a mixture of accuracy, balance, context, distance, evenhandedness, fairness, objectivity, open-mindedness, rigour, self-awareness, transparency and truth”. That’s not all, because impartiality also requires “breadth of view and completeness” (BBC Trust, 2007a: 5–6). A survey of 2,000 people in the UK found 84% of them agreeing – half of them “strongly” – with the statement “impartiality is difficult to achieve, but broadcasters must try very hard to do so”; only 3% disagreed. However, this view is itself a partial one, because there was noticeably less support for impartiality among younger people, black people, and working-class people (BBC Trust, 2007a: 19); perhaps some respondents felt that what is called impartiality is sometimes rather too partial to viewing the world through white, middle-aged and middle-class eyes?

Unlike broadcasting organisations, journalists working for newspapers, magazines or online media have no statutory requirement to be impartial, and elections would not be the same without blatant **agenda setting** headlines such as DON’T TRUST MARXIST LABOUR – BORIS TICKS ALL THE BOXES (*Sun*, December 11 2019), LABOUR’S TAX LIES EXPOSED (*Daily Express*, March 23 1992), A LABOUR GOVERNMENT WILL LEAD TO HIGHER MORTGAGE PAYMENTS (*Daily Mail*, April 7 1992), and SAVE BREXIT – SAVE BRITAIN: IF BORIS WINS TODAY, A BRIGHT FUTURE BEGINS TOMORROW... BUT IF RED JEZ GETS IN, THE LIGHTS WILL GO OUT FOR GOOD (*Sun*, December 12 2019).

TV and radio’s more impartial election coverage can still be influenced by an aggressive press agenda focusing on certain issues (tax, immigration, crime, benefits) to the exclusion of others (the climate emergency, food banks, homelessness, poverty, jobs, low wages, high rents, social exclusion). This process has been labelled “inter-media agenda setting” (McKnight, 2013: 70). And experienced broadcast political editors can still be spun for party political purposes, as during the 2019 general election campaign when the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg and Robert Peston of ITV both later apologised for tweeting a false claim about a Labour activist supposedly punching a Conservative adviser outside a hospital (Mayhew, 2019), which deflected attention from other news that was damaging for the Conservatives.

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“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

– Oscar Wilde.

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## OBJECTIVITY IN WARTIME?

If objective reporting of elections (and referendums) is problematic – the country being divided – what of objective reporting of warfare, when a country is supposedly united against a common enemy? That truth is the first casualty of war has become a truism, but objective reporting has repeatedly gone to the wall in the name of national unity. Research suggests that tabloid headlines such as GO GET HIM BOYS (*Daily Star*, January 16 1991) and the obsession of TV news with “smart bombs” and “star wars” technology painted a very partial picture of the 1991 Gulf war, rendering invisible some of the salient issues (including oil supplies), not to mention Iraqi civilian casualties (Philo and McLaughlin, 1993: 146–155). Reflecting shortly after that war, the BBC’s John Simpson identified a gap in UK television’s saturation coverage of the conflict: “As for the human casualties, tens of thousands of them, or the brutal effect the war had on millions of others ... we didn’t see so much of that” (quoted in Philo and McLaughlin, 1993: 155). Nor did we hear very much about the “undeclared war” waged against Iraq in the decade that followed, except when sections of the press awoke to cheer on occasional spectacles with headlines such as WE BOMB BAGHDAD (*Sun*, February 17 2001). Note the use of “we” in the latter example – a tiny word with huge implications.

“The way wars are reported in the western media follows a depressingly predictable pattern,” wrote Phillip Knightley as US and UK forces were gearing up to invade Afghanistan in 2001, following the September 11 attacks in the USA: “Stage one, the crisis; stage two, the demonisation of the enemy’s leader; stage three, the demonisation of the enemy as individuals; and stage four, ... the atrocity story” (Knightley, 2001). Such coverage prepares the public for battle “by showing that the enemy is evil, mad and a danger to the civilised world” (Knightley, 2002).

What Paul Foot called “war fever” seemed to infect many UK and US newsrooms before and during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (with some notable exceptions). When the *Sun* reported the start of the Iraq war with the headline SHOW THEM NO PITY... THEY HAVE STAINS ON THEIR SOULS (*Sun*, March 20 2003), staff journalist Katy Weitz resigned because, as she explained, “I want to be proud of the work I help to produce, not shudder in shame at its front-page blood lust” (Weitz, 2003). Just as Weitz was walking out of her job, some other journalists were becoming “embedded” with the military as one way of reporting from the front: living with the military, travelling with them, coming under their protection, and reporting under military restrictions. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, embedded reporters tended to adopt the perspective of their hosts and minders, with US journalist Gordon Dillow later admitting that the Marines’ version of the truth “had also become my truth” (quoted in Brandenburg, 2007: 957). The US novelist John Steinbeck worked as a war correspondent during the Second World War, after which he reflected that he felt he and others had gone along with “the war effort”, adding: “I don’t mean that the correspondents were liars ... [but] it is in the things not mentioned that the untruth lies” (Steinbeck, 1958).

It is not only those who move in military circles or who support their own government’s war efforts who sometimes discard the cloak of objectivity. Reflecting on his own role in reporting conflicts around the world, including the Vietnam war, James Cameron wrote:

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[O]bjectivity in some circumstances is both meaningless and impossible. I still do not see how a reporter attempting to define a situation involving some sort of ethical conflict can do it with sufficient demonstrable neutrality to fulfil some arbitrary concept of “objectivity”. It never occurred to me, in such a situation, to be other than subjective, and as obviously as I could manage to be. (Cameron, 1968: 72)

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Cameron felt that **subjectivity** could be important and that a journalist’s attitude should be up front and, therefore, open to scrutiny or counter-argument. Similarly, George Orwell argued that readers could be freed of the influence of a journalist’s “bias” only if readers were *made aware* of it (cited in Pilger, 1998: 525). After ITN

reporter Michael Nicholson adopted an orphaned girl he met while covering the Bosnian war, he said: "No, I don't believe in this so-called objectivity. You can still report the facts. You can still be as close to the truth as any person can be and still show a commitment, an emotional anguish. I don't see them to be contradictory" (quoted in McLaughlin, 2002b: 154).

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"The more one is aware of political bias, the more one can be independent of it and the more one claims to be impartial, the more one is biased."

– George Orwell.

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Former BBC correspondent Martin Bell has called for what he labels "a **journalism of attachment**" when it comes to reporting some armed conflicts, in recognition of the fact that journalists have the power to *affect* the events on which they are reporting. He explains:

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I am no longer sure about the notion of objectivity, which seems to me now to be something of an illusion and a shibboleth. When I have reported from the war zones, or anywhere else, I have done so with all the fairness and impartiality I could muster, and a scrupulous attention to the facts, but using my eyes and ears and mind and accumulated experience, which are surely the very essence of the subjective. (Bell, 1998: 16)

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Christiane Amanpour of CNN has reflected along similar lines without necessarily rejecting the concept of objectivity itself as entirely illusory:

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I have come to believe that objectivity means giving all sides a fair hearing, but not treating all sides equally. Once you treat all sides the same in a case such as Bosnia, you are drawing a moral equivalence between victim and aggressor. And from there it is a short step toward being neutral. And from there it's an even shorter step to becoming an accessory to all manners of evil; in Bosnia's case, genocide. So objectivity must go hand in hand with morality. (Quoted in Seib, 2002: 53)

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Taking such arguments a stage further are the few journalists who step aside from their reporting role and agree to appear as formal witnesses, for example at international war crimes tribunals. BBC correspondent Jacky Rowland, who testified at the Hague about events in Kosovo, later explained why she felt prepared to defy colleagues' arguments that such an apparent compromise of journalistic independence might pose a threat to future war correspondents:

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I believe that journalists are essentially witnesses to the events they report on. My testimony to the Hague tribunal was an extension of this. ... When I met the witness who was due to take the stand after me – a woman who had lost eight members of her family in an alleged massacre by Serbian police – I felt that a journalist's arguments for not testifying looked rather weak. (Rowland, 2002)

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As Rowland's case suggests, adhering to traditional journalistic objectivity while remaining true to a sense of moral responsibility can be a difficult ethical balancing act. It is not an issue faced only by those who report on conflicts in faraway places.

## OBJECTIVITY AND “THE ENEMY WITHIN”

From enemies without to “the enemy within”, which was how Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Fleet Street cheerleaders characterised the coal miners who staged a year-long strike against job losses in 1984–1985. Much mainstream media coverage of the miners’ strike was framed by a few key themes, with three phrases being repeated throughout the dispute: uneconomic pits, picket line violence, the drift back to work (Hollingsworth, 1986: 242–285; Philo, 1991: 37–42; Williams, 2009 and 2014b). In contrast, later groups of workers have often found their battles simply ignored. When more than 300 Liverpool dockers were sacked for refusing to cross a picket line, one of the dockers told me matter-of-factly that the UK government had imposed a “news blackout” on the story – it was the only explanation he could come up with for the dearth of coverage of their two-year campaign to get their jobs back. But most editors do not need to be *told* to ignore “boring” industrial disputes in favour of sexy news or celebrity gossip, as John Pilger notes: “Because the myths of the ‘market’ have become received wisdom throughout the media, with millions of trade unionists dismissed as ‘dinosaurs’, the dockers’ story has been seen as a flickering curiosity of a bygone era ... not considered *real news*” (Pilger, 1998: 354, my emphasis).

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“It is in the things not mentioned that the untruth lies.”

– John Steinbeck.

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Objectivity, then, is not simply concerned with *how* a particular story is covered, but also with *what* is selected as a potential story, what is either ignored or amplified. Issues sometimes seem to come from nowhere to dominate headlines for a few weeks before disappearing again; knife crime, “devil dogs”, drill music, “county lines”, single mothers, paedophiles, obesity, violent video games, “benefit tourists”, “health tourists”, “cancel culture” and asylum seekers are just some examples of people or phenomena that have suddenly become the subject of **moral panics**. There was a memorable example when, after more than a year of hostile press coverage claiming that asylum seekers had brought a crime wave to parts of Kent, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, now the National Police Chiefs’ Council) felt the need to point out that:

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In Dover, continual interest from the media, locally and nationally, has been focused on the “apparent” *increase* in crime since asylum seekers have been in the town. In line with general trends in Kent, the local commander was able to report an actual *reduction* in all aspects of reported crime over a three year period. This generally resulted in the national media not reporting anything as this was not what they had been told by some locals and was *not what their editors wanted*. (ACPO, 2001, my emphasis)

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A brief news item about the publication of a new dictionary was once headlined: NOW ASYLUM SEEKERS INVADE OUR DICTIONARY (*Daily Express*, September 26 2002). Similar themes have frequently been found in the *Daily Mail*: ASYLUM: YES, BRITAIN IS A SOFT TOUCH! (February 1 2001) and QUEUE HERE TO WORK IN BRITAIN (November 2 2013) being just two of countless front-page splashes about the UK being overrun by foreigners. The *Mail* has long had an agenda of moral outrage and is often accused of abandoning notions of objectivity in favour of peddling a particular “Middle England” world view. In the words of one of the title’s former journalists: “You kind of know what the obsessions are, and you very much know you’ve got to do a story in a specific way” (quoted in Beckett, 2001). Those with different opinions run the risk of being portrayed as unhinged or, worse, anti-British.



## OBJECTIVITY AS A “STRATEGIC RITUAL”

The above examples might suggest that objective reporting is honoured more in the breach than in the actuality. But in my experience, *most* journalists, *most* of the time, *do* attempt to be objective, even if they don't use that word much (in the UK, anyway) and even though their objectivity can be very different depending on the culture, market and ownership of the news organisation employing them. According to Gaye Tuchman, objectivity can be seen as a **strategic ritual** that journalists use as a form of defence mechanism. She identified four routine procedures that allow journalists to claim objectivity for their work:

- The presentation of conflicting possibilities;
- The presentation of supporting evidence;
- The judicious use of quotation marks;
- The structuring of information in an appropriate sequence (Tuchman, 1972: 299–301).

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“To journalists, like social scientists, the term ‘objectivity’ stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics.”

– Gaye Tuchman.

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In this way journalists may regard themselves as fulfilling a professional commitment to objectivity by taking the following steps before publishing:

- Looking at both sides of a story;
- Assessing conflicting claims;
- Assessing the credibility of sources;
- Looking for evidence;
- Not publishing anything believed to be untrue;
- In short, seeing if the story stands up.

In the light of the above, let's revisit the Harvey Nichols story that was mentioned in [Chapter 4](#). The initial source was known to me as someone reliable, so I immediately took her call seriously. My experience (or “nose for news” as old hands might call it) informed me it was a potentially newsworthy story because of the high-profile nature of the Harvey Nichols store at the time. After looking at the offending posters to confirm what I had been told, I suggested to my source that there might be a story if someone were to make a formal complaint. So, from her I obtained copies of several letters of complaint sent to the company and the Advertising Standards Agency. I also spoke to Harvey Nichols' PR people to get their side of the story and consulted cuttings for background on the firm. I approached a senior elected member of the local council's women's committee to check whether or not she would be proposing that the council itself might lodge a complaint. She gave some strong quotes and said that she would indeed be proposing such a course of action. So I had some complainants, meaning the Advertising Standards Authority would have to investigate the issue; I had opinion from someone in a position of some authority; I had

background information on the company involved; and I had a comment from the company, disputing claims that the posters were offensive. In other words, the story stood up.

If a story stands up it will be written with the journalist taking care to give both sides. The journalist will make it clear when claims are disputed, will attribute information and opinion to external sources, and will not mix what appear to be facts with the journalist's own comments. At least, that is what mostly happens. Things are not always quite that simple. For a start, aren't there often more than *two* sides to a story?

Even looking at "both sides" is not always strictly adhered to. One of my early assignments on a local paper was to report on residents' complaints about a group of Gypsies – allegations of theft, defecation and general lowering of the value of property. Eyebrows were raised in the newsroom when I said I was going out to ask the Gypsies themselves for their version of events. It seemed that a comment from the police or local authority was thought sufficient to balance the story. But speaking to the people involved not only got a better story – the Gypsies threatening to move their caravans onto hallowed town-centre grassland if they continued to be hounded from pillar to post – but also revealed that many of them were more local than some of the "locals" who objected to them, having actually been born in the area (*Harrogate Advertiser*, September 23 1989). It was nothing special, it was just reporting. But, several decades on, in large parts of the news media, it remains relatively unusual to see Gypsies (or asylum seekers, for that matter) quoted in response to allegations against them. There are exceptions, of course, but as a rule such communities tend to be rendered voiceless in mainstream media. Given widespread social prejudice against outsiders ("them"), is it not *more* rather than *less* important for journalists to get their side(s) of the story?

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"Between elections, if you're relevant and intelligent and know how to popularise an issue, you can help set the agenda."

– Rupert Murdoch.

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## **"WE BELIEVE THE SCIENCE"**

Sometimes journalists make a conscious decision *not* to put the other side of a story. For example, unlike with most of her stories, when Nada Farhoud covers the climate emergency for the *Daily Mirror*, she does not routinely seek a quote from a maverick voice who can be relied upon to disparage the environmental cause. Why not?

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Because we feel that we've got a responsibility to educate people that climate change is real, that there's no doubt, we believe the science. We've signed up. We genuinely believe that this is a problem, and we're not going to air climate change deniers' points.

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She points out that such an approach is only taken on certain issues, and that well resourced lobbying groups still get their chance to attack the science by trolling her online after such stories appear.

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"Comment is free, but facts are sacred."

– CP Scott.

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The complexities of reporting scientific stories in general news media were addressed by the science journal *The Lancet* in an editorial column a few years ago, which is worth journalists reflecting upon today in the light of the coronavirus pandemic, the anti-vaxxer movement and other health issues as well as climate change:

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Unbiased media often try to present a balanced argument in a story, and, although this impartiality sounds good in principle, and is appropriate for many subjects, it can misrepresent science, unless genuine equipoise exists. At the crux of the matter is the nature of scientific knowledge, in which a body of high-quality evidence develops over time, allowing scientists to come to a consensus and to make statements with a good degree of certainty. Challenges to scientific orthodoxy are welcome when high-quality new evidence comes to light and opinion is fine when stated as such, but the media also have a duty to the public to report science accurately, in a manner that fairly represents the weight of evidence. This is no easy feat when deadlines and editorial pressures loom. (The Lancet, 2011)

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It may not be easy but it *is* necessary.

## CHECKING THE FACTS

On most stories, reporters routinely assess conflicting claims, weigh the credibility of sources and check the facts by looking for evidence and seeking **verification**. But sources are not equal. If the police say that three people have been killed in a road accident, then journalists will report that “fact” without first feeling the need to drive to the scene, count the bodies and feel for a pulse. But if a motorist calls the newsroom with the same story, then a good reporter will check it out – by calling the police – before reporting it. Checking the facts of a story begins with comparing what we have been told with what we “know” of the world; with our knowledge and experience; asking whether, at a **common sense** level, it has the ring of truth about it. If it doesn’t, a potential story might be dropped at the outset as not being worth further effort.

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“What they call ‘objectivity’ usually is seeing things the way everybody else sees them.”

– Izzy Stone.

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If a potential story survives this first informal credibility test, we might check the facts further by looking at published sources, by observing matters at first hand, by talking to people involved and/or by consulting independent observers or experts. If the story involves an allegation or a hint of some kind of wrongdoing, it becomes even more important to seek independent verification. During their Watergate investigation in the 1970s, *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward developed “an unwritten rule” whereby the newspaper would not publish an allegation of criminal activity unless two additional sources confirmed what they were told by their secret whistleblower, Deep Throat (Bernstein and Woodward, [1974] 2005: 79). Their rule-of-thumb has passed into journalistic terminology as the “three-source rule” (Brennan, 2003: 123).

However, despite checking facts with one, two, three or even more sources, journalists surprisingly frequently publish things that turn out to be untrue. Inaccuracies might appear because sources do not (yet) know the full story. Check out early coverage of one of the biggest news stories of the 21st century, the attack

on the World Trade Centre on September 11 2001. Initial reports suggested that 10,000 people had been killed (*Sun*, September 12 2001; *Daily Mail*, September 13 2001). For weeks the news media were still reporting that up to 7,000 people had died, but by November that year New York police had put the death toll at 3,702 (Lipton, 2001). A year after the attack the official death toll had been reduced to 2,801 (Lipton, 2002) and in 2003 the tally was revised down further to 2,752 (BBC, 2003). By the fifth anniversary of the attack the official death toll was put at 2,749 and doubts were expressed about whether the precise number would ever be known for certain (Tutek, 2006). That was a story on which countless journalists were working and about which the authorities were more than willing to speak to the media; how many more inaccuracies might creep into coverage if newsrooms are understaffed and/or if the authorities keep silent?

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“Comment is free. Facts cost money.”

– *Anonymous Guardian journalists.*

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## VERIFICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Sometimes people try to trick journalists by deliberately supplying false information, whether for reasons of propaganda, mischief or simply for the fun of it, and the media’s increasing use of user-generated content has opened up new channels by which misinformation can enter the public sphere. The websites of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* were just two of the news outlets that embarrassed themselves by falsely reporting that former high street chain Woolworths was making a comeback in 2020, all based on a spoof tweet sent by a 17-year-old on a digital marketing course (Waterson, 2020b). Many journalists have been caught out by reproducing such erroneous “facts”, and pictures from disaster movies are often sent to TV news channels by viewers pretending to have witnessed a major breaking event. When it comes to verifying such material, social media can be a help as well as a hindrance, argues Neal Mann:

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People have always tried to fool news organisations and the prevalence of social media has really increased that, but we actually have more tools at our disposal to cross-reference and check if it’s legitimate or not. You’re looking for, is there any potential here for geolocation to find out a bit more information about where they are, can you cross-reference any images they’ve posted with Google Earth or Google Street View, and simple things like what’s the weather like and does the clothing fit?

There is a danger of being fooled but with new media you can do more verification than you would traditionally have been able to do. And the great thing about Twitter over traditional sources is that you can see who they’ve engaged with over time. Who are the people they follow and who follow them? Are they people you trust? How long have they been on Twitter? What other social media platforms are they on? Are there links to them from legitimate places? There’s a lot of simple checks that you can put in place and you can have those done in under a minute or two minutes.

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Speed may be vital in today’s journalism, says Mann, but even speed is not as crucial as accuracy:

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Fast is unbelievably important on Twitter as a journalist, but you have to be fast and be right. You will lose trust immediately if you aren’t right. You need to engage with a conversation in a 24-hour news world that’s going at an

incredible speed, and be one of the main voices in it, and to do that you have to be quick – but you have to be accurate.

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“If you could take him out of my ear please.”

– Shephard Smith.

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Jemima Kiss also puts accuracy at the top of her list of the core requirements of a journalist working in any form of media, online or offline: “Accuracy, research, respecting sources, clarity, understanding an audience, knowing which questions to ask, using your initiative and being extremely persistent.” Getting a reputation for producing thorough, verified journalism in this way can help journalists carve out a continuing role for themselves and to distinguish their output from that of the online shouters and trolls: “They need to focus on proper original journalism, which includes verifying information and skilfully explaining and summarising a breaking news event by writing and reporting their own stories,” adds Kiss.

## “SITUATIONS ARE ALWAYS COMPLICATED”

Sometimes a journalist might have accurate information about something but will still question whether or not it ought to be published. Information about somebody’s private life, for example, might be objectively and verifiably true; but is it always in the public interest to reveal it? What if that somebody is a friend, a family member, a colleague or your boss? Someone of whom you think highly? Or the opposite? Journalists might be in the truth business, but truth is rarely the *only* consideration.

At other times journalists might come under pressure to *make* a story stand up even if there is little or no evidence other than an editor’s hunch or wish. I once came across a tabloid hack trying desperately to find non-existent irate white parents to condemn a local authority serving curry for school dinner, just because his editor had apparently already thought up a possible headline: WE’LL HAVE NAAN OF THAT! Mercifully, I don’t think that particular story ever appeared; it had just been a passing fancy at morning conference, later overtaken by the day’s real events. Pure invention remains the exception in journalism, although Abul Taher warns: “A lot of people end up doctoring the truth for a good story. It’s a job that is a daily ritual of moral and intellectual compromise.”

A compromise it may be but, however imperfectly, most reporters seem to retain *some* sense of objectivity in their everyday routines. Jane Merrick gives a not untypical journalist’s response when asked about objective reporting:

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When I sit down to write a story I never think, “Is this objective?” But I’m always aware of being fair and balanced and having both sides of a story. I’m not sure you *can* be objective. I’ve never really thought about it, to be honest.

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Martin Wainwright *has* thought about it, and for him objectivity means approaching stories with an open mind, giving all sides their say, including as much contextual information as you can squeeze in, and trying as far possible to show what underlies people’s actions:

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All my experience as a journalist teaches me that situations are always complicated, and there very seldom is *one* source of evil. Very emotional journalism has some limited use in waking people up to a bad situation, but

when it comes to actually telling people what's going on and why it's happened I do think you need to be as dispassionate as possible. The less of the journalist the better, I think. Some people say it's more dangerous to pretend to be objective and actually not be, and they say nobody is objective because you can't be. That's all true. But *you can have a very good shot at being objective*, I'm sure you can. It's a counsel of despair to say we've all got to be subjective.

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"I believe that we need to start calling politicians out as liars when they lie."

– Dorothy Byrne.

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One solution to the conundrum, according to Stephen Ward (2010), may be to develop a more **pragmatic objectivity**, which puts aside philosophical debate about absolute truth in favour of journalistic organisations developing practical working methods to test facts and limit inaccurate, harmful reporting. One of the best ways of guarding against inaccurate reporting is to acknowledge how easy it is to make errors, as Anna McKane (2006: 86) suggests: "Probably a general assumption that you have got it wrong, rather than a general assumption that you have got it right, would help. So develop the habit of checking everything three times."

That is advice that would no doubt have appealed to George "examine your words well" Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans ... until she changed the Mary Ann to Marian, apparently (Drabble and Stringer, 1990: 176). One of the very first things that journalists must learn is to get people's names right; the fact that one person might have several different names only emphasises how tricky even such a seemingly simple task can be. As US journalism professor Thomas Patterson (2012) puts it, "knowledge does not always yield precise answers" because our research might reveal how much we still don't know, meaning that: "Sometimes, the effect of knowledge is to unearth new questions or uncertainties." Only sometimes? As the late Johnny Nash sang, there are more questions than answers. Keep asking them.

## Summary

Objective reporting is commonly understood to involve separating verifiable facts from subjective feelings. Journalists' use of objectivity has been described as a "strategic ritual" to distance themselves from that on which they are reporting; a pre-emptive defence against the possibility of being accused of bias or lack of professionalism. This formula involves presenting conflicting possibilities and supporting evidence, with attributed opinion and information, in an appropriate sequence. The objectivity norm and the related concept of impartiality have been challenged for being impossible to achieve; for ignoring the existence of multiple perspectives; and even for being undesirable in conflicts between right and wrong. Nonetheless, while acknowledging that absolute objectivity may be as elusive as absolute truth, most journalists appear to retain some sense of objectivity when assessing whether or not a story stands up. Procedures established within newsrooms for such verification have been described as a form of "pragmatic objectivity" and must be updated to take account of new technological tools available to audiences and journalists alike.

## Questions

If objectivity is impossible, does it make any sense to aim for it?

Is biased reporting always inaccurate?

How would broadcast-style impartiality alter UK newspapers, magazines and online journalism?

How could reporting include multiple perspectives rather than just two sides?

Are objectivity and impartiality now outdated concepts?

## What would you do?

You are a reporter and are sent by your news organisation to cover a speech by a senior politician; or, more likely, you are given the text of the speech and are asked to cover it from your desk. The bulk of the speech is concerned with technical or procedural issues of little or no interest to anyone not directly involved in the party political system. However, it includes a passage in which one section of the population (members of a particular religious or ethnic minority community, for example) is accused of being responsible for most anti-social behaviour in an area and of fuelling inter-communal tension and even violence. You happen to live in the area in question (and/or have family and friends who do so) and you have reason to believe that the situation is far more complicated than is suggested in the speech on which you have been asked to report. What would you do?

## Further reading

Worth reading in their original forms are Tuchman (1972) on objectivity as a strategic ritual, Bell (1998) on the journalism of attachment, Ward (2010) on pragmatic objectivity and Figdor (2010) on whether objective news is even possible. Edited academic collections with readable contributions covering objectivity include Kieran (1998), Bromley and O'Malley (1997) and Tumber (1999). McLaughlin (2002b) has an interesting discussion of objectivity, conflict and the "journalism of attachment", based in part on interviews with war correspondents; also see Tumber (2020). Stevenson (2002) explores various Marxist explanations of the media – touching on objectivity, hegemony and moral panics – as well as the postmodernist challenge to the concept of the truth. Critcher (2002) subjects the concepts of moral panic and agenda setting to critical scrutiny within the context of the *News of the World's* infamous "name and shame" campaign on paedophilia. Frost (2010) provides a brief practical account of the basics of reporting and fact-checking. Handy hints on reporting accurately on – and questioning – anything to do with numbers, statistics and averages can be found in the entertaining book *The Tiger That Isn't* by Blastland and Dilnot (2007); Randall with Crew (2021) and McKane (2014) also have useful sections on the subject, and Tim Harford's podcast/radio series *More or Less* is always worth a listen: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00msxf1](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00msxf1). Dick (2013) offers pointers on verifying online sources. Pilger's (1998) eloquent if occasionally holier-than-thou critique of the world amounts to a sustained challenge to most of what passes for objective journalism in the mainstream media, and Davies (2008) offers a similarly bleak view of how much of the fourth estate fails to get to the truth of many issues. Finally, for an illuminating discussion of the relationship between emotions and objectivity, see Wahl-Jorgensen (2019).

## Top three to try next

Gaye Tuchman (1972) 'Objectivity as a strategic ritual...', *American Journal of Sociology*

Stephen Ward (2010) 'Inventing objectivity...', *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*

Martin Bell (1998) 'The journalism of attachment', *Media Ethics*

## Sources for soundbites

Eliot, 1859: 150; Marx, *Duck Soup*; Bernstein, 1992: 24; Wilde, *Importance of Being Earnest*, Act 1; Orwell, quoted in Pilger, 1998: 525; Steinbeck, 1958; Tuchman, 1972: 297; Murdoch, Channel 4, 1998; Scott, quoted in O'Malley and Soley, 2000: 23; Stone, quoted in Guttenplan, 2012: 473; Anonymous Guardian journalists, quoted in *Private Eye* April 2 2021; Smith, 2020; Byrne, 2019.

## Truth

Truth is slippery and has arguably become increasingly so in recent decades as many of the apparent certainties of modernity have come under challenge, with terms such as "fake news", "alternative facts" and "post-truth" being thrown around (see [Figure 5.1](#)). Yet for most journalists, most of the time, the truth is still out there in the shape of "facts that are verified and explained" (Seib, 2002: 4); either you can get to this truth or you can't, and if you can't it's probably because somebody is trying to stop you. True, such "general truth claims" have been replaced in much cultural analysis by a foregrounding of more subjective experience (Dovey, 2000: 25) or by a wider claim that the concept of there being a truth is merely a monologic *version* of truth produced from within a discourse that tends to be white, male and elitist (Allan, 1998: 124–126). Even reporters witnessing an event for themselves may be carrying all sorts of personal or cultural baggage that can impact on what they see as true and what they recognise as facts (Keeble, 1998: 182). Yet, despite such claims, truth is not *that* difficult a concept to grasp, argues Matthew Kieran:

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In journalism, as distinct from fiction, there is a truth of the matter and this is what objectivity in journalism aims at. ... Where reporting turns away from the goal of truth and journalists treat events as open to many interpretations, according to their prejudices, assumptions, news agenda or the commercial drive toward entertainment, the justification and self-confessed rationale of journalism threatens to disappear. (Kieran, 1998: 34–35)

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Social media fundamentally changes the relationship between journalism and the truth, argues Neal Mann:

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Traditionally, journalists only dealt in the truth. The thing with social media is that there's a lot out there that isn't true, but we have to understand that it's being published, and actually engage with that now. If everybody's talking about a news event, we've got to respect the fact that we know they're talking about it, and if they're not right then we have to engage with that. It's changed the way that we work with an audience. We don't just deal in truths any more, we actually knock things down. We're the ones who [sometimes have to] say: "That's not true." You gain even more respect if you do that.

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So, whereas journalists may once have ignored rumours or conspiracy theories they knew to be untrue, their job in the age of social media entails acknowledging such rumours and showing in what ways they are false – all without giving untruths even wider circulation. A slippery business indeed. Fact-checking sites specialising in this work include *Full Fact* in the UK (<https://fullfact.org/>) and *PolitiFact* in the USA ([www.politifact.com/](http://www.politifact.com/)), and an international fact-checking network from different countries is hosted by the Poynter Institute ([www.poynter.org/ifcn](http://www.poynter.org/ifcn)). Ideally, though, checking facts and debunking myths would be an integral part of every journalist's job, wouldn't it?

This journalistic responsibility to not spread untruths reached its zenith as votes were still being counted in the 2020 US presidential election, when several US TV networks took the unprecedented decision to cut away from live coverage of a White House briefing, informing viewers there was no evidence to back Donald Trump's claims about widespread voting fraud. With Trump still talking, presenter Shephard Smith told viewers on the financial news network, CNBC: "There's only words here, no truth," before pointing to his earpiece and asking colleagues in the TV gallery: "If you could take him out of my ear please" (Smith, 2020). The journalist in this and similar cases during those tense days may not have stuck rigidly to the "strategic ritual" of objectivity, but there are many who feel that they got closer to the truth than would have been the case had they just allowed the live feed to run unchecked.

## Accuracy

Accuracy is frequently described as the single most important element of journalism because, without it, nothing else matters that much. By accuracy is meant everything from the correct spelling of a name or attribution of opinion to evidence-based, in-depth coverage of complex or contentious issues. The pursuit of accuracy entails precision and doublechecking but even that is not always enough to prevent inaccurate reporting. A perfectly accurate account of a source's words (a politician's speech, for example), supported by a recording or a good shorthand note, may actually be factually inaccurate if the source is deliberately misleading journalists by exaggeration or omission, or even if the source is honestly mistaken. Therefore, accurately reporting a speech by someone who denies the existence of climate change or Covid-19 could have the effect of circulating inaccuracy. Back in 2002 many journalists and news organisations accurately reported claims by the Blair government in the UK that Iraq was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, some of which could be ready for use within just 45 minutes; when these weapons were neither fired nor found after the 2003 US-led invasion, most experts concluded they had not existed. The worrying implication of such episodes for journalists is that, simply by accurately reporting somebody's words, we might inadvertently end up amplifying an untruth, including on matters of life and death.

Inaccuracies might also appear in the output of news media if a journalist has too little time (or inclination) to check an assumption, an old cutting or a press release. Inaccuracies might appear if a journalist misunderstands statistics or fails to spot that statistics have been misused by a source (Blastland and Dilnot, 2007). Inaccuracies might appear because a source has set out to deceive a journalist (Lagan, 2007; Morris, 2007). And inaccuracies might appear because a foreign correspondent, for example, is under such time pressure to file for multiple outlets and platforms that they cannot go and see things for themselves, relying instead on regurgitating copy fed to them from thousands of miles away in London (Harcup, 1996) or simply recycling what a taxi driver told them on the way to the hotel where all the hacks are staying.

## Objectivity

Objectivity may be seen as an occupational norm for (some) journalists and at the same time a site of “struggle” around who is and is not regarded as a professional journalist (Anderson and Schudson, 2020: 145). Yet objectivity can also be seen as a “myth” that has been “thoroughly unpicked and discredited among the media theorists” (Knight and Cook, 2013: 106). Myth or not, objectivity is a concept with longevity. It hinges on separating independently verifiable facts from subjective values, and is associated with the Enlightenment project of rationality and the pursuit of scientific knowledge (Schudson, 1978: 293). Such grand thinking has been challenged, with some postmodernist theorists dismissing as naïve empiricism the idea that there is a truth that exists “out there” in the world, independent of discourse, just waiting to be discovered. A commitment to objectivity in journalism can be defined as meaning that “a person’s statements about the world can be trusted if they are submitted to established rules deemed legitimate by a professional community” (Schudson, 1978: 294). Michael Schudson further explains:

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The objectivity norm guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts. Objective reporting is supposed to be cool, rather than emotional, in tone. Objective reporting takes pains to represent fairly each leading side in a political controversy. According to the objectivity norm, the journalist’s job consists of reporting something called “news” without commenting on it, slanting it, or shaping its formulation in any way. (Schudson, 2001: 150)

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Journalism was not always expected to be that way, and the above norm was not central to 18th-century publications that helped establish the press as “a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate” (Habermas, 1992: 60). Early newspapers and periodicals were often expected to be partisan and “objectivity was not an issue” (Schudson, 1978: 291), until, in the USA, “a self-conscious, articulate ideology of objectivity” emerged around 100 years ago (Schudson, 2001: 159–160). In the UK, as Chris Frost (2000: 159) notes, calls for a less partisan style of reporting in the early 20th century culminated in the imposition of a statutory obligation to be impartial on the broadcasting industry when it emerged as an alternative to print.

## Impartiality

The words “impartiality” and “objectivity” are sometimes used interchangeably, but impartial reporting is generally defined as being neutral (up to a point), while objective reporting is taken to be the reporting of verifiable facts. According to McQuail, impartiality means “balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect different points of view, and also neutrality in the presentation of news – separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language or pictures” (McQuail, 2000: 321). Advocates of impartial reporting are often at pains to point out that it does not mean treating every argument as equally valid; if the evidence points overwhelmingly to two plus two equalling four, “due impartiality” would not require equal representation of anyone asserting that the answer is three or five. However, there are plenty of grey areas and less clear-cut cases, and the BBC in particular subjects itself to frequent bouts of agonising over whether it is fulfilling its duty to be impartial. After years of being accused of “false balance” by giving airtime to climate change deniers in the name of impartiality, BBC news director Fran Unsworth told the corporation’s journalists in a 2018 memo: “To achieve impartiality, you do not need to include outright deniers of climate change in BBC coverage, in the same way you would not have someone denying that Manchester United won 2–0 last Saturday. The referee has spoken” (Carrington, 2018).

Balance and neutrality have themselves been questioned (or problematised, in academic-speak) by some journalists who advocate their abandonment in

situations where to be impartial would mean standing “neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor” (Bell, 1998: 16). This raises inevitable questions about *who* defines good and evil and whether journalists who *do* take sides automatically abandon any claims to be able to report events *objectively*. It could be argued, for example, that journalism unencumbered by neutrality might actually be *more* objective because the audience knows where the journalist is coming from. Viewed this way, the *Canary* or the *Morning Star* would be more objective than *BBC News* or *Sky News* because the political and cultural assumptions of the first two are made explicit – and can therefore be taken into account by audiences – whereas any political or cultural assumptions involved in the last two remain implicit or hidden.

For Frost, impartial reporting means that a journalist is *aiming* at the truth, whereas true objectivity would require giving the *whole* picture – a task as impossible for the journalist as it is (in an analogy borrowed from Hartley) for the cartographer (Frost, 2000: 38). That is because, like a map, a news report is still a selective, simplified and *mediated* representation of reality, rather than the reality itself.

## Agenda setting

The term “agenda setting” is associated with a study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw of media coverage and voter attitudes in the 1968 US presidential election campaign. They found that the media exerted a considerable impact on voters’ judgements of what were the salient issues of the campaign (McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 323–324). On the basis of this and similar studies, it is argued that, although the media might not be able to tell us what to *think*, they have an influence on what we think *about*. Media coverage can impact upon other media coverage in a process of “inter-media agenda setting”, according to David McKnight, who has analysed the way in which the relentless pursuit of certain hobbyhorses by some journalists working for Rupert Murdoch’s empire can influence the tone of debate in the wider public sphere:

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The high pitched nature of Murdoch’s tabloid media, and its overtly conservative stance, has skewed the country’s terms of debate much further to the right than would otherwise be the case. This process of setting an agenda for competing news media is one of the secrets behind Murdoch’s ability to influence politics in the US, Britain and Australia. (McKnight, 2013: 70)

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However, McQuail argues that the direction of flow in the agenda setting model could perhaps be reversed, raising the possibility that, rather than *setting* the agenda, the media merely *reflect* the attitudes of voters. For him, agenda setting remains a “plausible but unproven idea” (McQuail, 2000: 456). Much the same could perhaps be said about other theories of media effects and about the postmodern tendency to shift attention away from media production and on to media consumption, thereby privileging “the instability of meaning and the interpretative horizons of the audience” (Stevenson, 2002: 29).

## Subjectivity

Personalisation, or the foregrounding of subjective experience – it’s all about *me* – may have become increasingly fashionable in parts of the mainstream media (Dovey, 2000) as well as on social media, but for the most part traditional news reporting remains a bastion of the authoritative-sounding “objective” approach. This is a deeply undesirable state of affairs for cultural

theorist John Fiske, who argues that journalists would better reflect the messiness of reality if they became more open, more like the writers of TV soaps, for example:

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Objectivity discourages audience activity and participation. Rather than being “objective”, therefore, TV news should present *multiple perspectives* that, like those of soap opera, have as unclear a hierarchy as possible. ... So, too, they should not disguise their processes of selection and editing, but should open them up to reveal news as a production, not as transparent reportage. (Fiske, 1989: 194)

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The argument that what is called objective journalism tends to support the status quo echoes the comment of the radical US journalist IF (Izzy) Stone, who regarded objectivity largely as simply going along with the safe or majority view (Guttenplan, 2012: 473). His personal solution was to establish his own alternative media precisely to challenge the “common sense” that he felt was too uncritically reproduced in much mainstream journalism. The oppositional reporting of Stone and others typically rejects objectivity in favour of taking sides, but that should not necessarily be seen as abandoning the quest for the best available version of the truth.

## Journalism of attachment

Martin Bell’s “journalism of attachment” idea has been dismissed as naïvety for apparently being based on a belief that different sides in war zones can be divided into “goodies and baddies”. However, Bell himself did not see it necessarily as promoting anybody as a goodie; he argued that it was more about having the freedom to report on conflicts where there was a clear aggressor without resorting to the formulaic balance of the “On the one hand this, on the other hand that” approach that so frustrated him when covering fighting in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. But will the public really be better informed if journalists have leeway to emote all over the place – or by journalists reporting the facts they have been able to ascertain, attributing information and opinion, and being honest about how much we don’t know?

## Moral panics

Moral panics can be thought of as those periodic almost hysterical responses to someone or something perceived as “other”. Stanley Cohen researched the Mods and Rockers youth subcultures of the 1960s, and defined a moral panic as when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”, which is reported in “stereotypical fashion by the mass media” while “the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people” (Cohen, 1972: 9). Building on this with their classic study of social responses to mugging in the 1970s, Stuart Hall and colleagues concluded that the panic about what was reported as a race-specific crime was created by a mutually reinforcing circle between powerful “primary definers” (police, judges, politicians and so on) and the media to effect “an ideological closure of the topic” (Hall et al, 1978: 75). This shorthand equation of black youths with mugging was echoed decades later in the media’s readiness to associate Muslims with terrorism (Richardson, 2001: 229; Karim, 2002: 102; Seib, 2002: 114). However, as with agenda setting, it is possible that media coverage of a “moral panic” *reflects* rather than *creates* a public demonisation of a particular social grouping at a particular time. Or is it a more circular process of mutual reinforcement of so-called “common sense” assumptions?

In the 21st-century UK, asylum seekers have joined “a long list of convenient scapegoats including the unemployed, those claiming benefits and those registered as disabled,” according to a study by Philo et al (2013: 164–165) which traces how media coverage can have “a crucial impact in legitimising the hostility toward and bullying of the new arrivals”. As with other targets of moral panics, asylum seekers are rarely given the opportunity of speaking for themselves, it seems. Researchers found that, in a sample of 69 major media reports on asylum in 2011, there were a total of 146 people or organisations quoted, of whom just five were the people at the centre of the story: asylum seekers themselves (Philo et al, 2013: 94). Such findings prompted the conclusion that, by effectively denying “the right of the stigmatised and excluded to be heard”, much media coverage was encouraging the authorities to adopt a punitive rather than a humane approach to refugees and other marginalised groups (Philo et al, 2013: 169).

## Strategic ritual

Tuchman’s strategic ritual of objectivity is perhaps more concerned with ritual than with objectivity, given that the journalist retains the power to select who to quote and what evidence to include. Similarly, while writing this book, I have chosen who to interview, which publications to cite, and what issues to address. But I have not acted in a vacuum and, just as journalists act under the influence of constraints discussed in [Chapter 2](#), so my editorial choices were made within a wider context that includes input from the book’s publisher, feedback from members of the “audience” and an evaluation of the wants and needs of the “market” (that’s you, dear reader). In the Harvey Nichols story discussed in this book, it could be argued that I followed the strategic ritual and that the story was true. It could also be argued that the story had little independent objective existence, because most of the opinions or actions that helped stand the story up were *solicited* by me following the initial tip-off. My fingerprints were all over the story that appeared in the next day’s papers, even if they could not be detected with the naked eye.

The formula of presenting conflicting versions in a story means that journalists – who are rarely themselves experts in a particular subject – do not normally have to decide between competing truth claims. As Keeble notes, reporters use sources to distance themselves from stories (Keeble, 2001a: 44). Sometimes journalists *do* privilege one source, or truth claim, over another. For example, in this chapter I have quoted police chiefs as giving “the facts” about crime and asylum seekers. But is their account more objectively true than the lurid press headlines? Yes, in the sense that it is based on crime statistics. But can such figures be regarded as objective when they are based only on *reported* rather than *actual* crime? By following the strategic ritual and stating from where information comes, and when it is disputed, journalists can absolve themselves from the responsibility of deciding who is right and who is wrong on such issues. As one journalist put it rather candidly: “We don’t deal in facts but in attributed opinions” (quoted in Gans, 1980: 246).

Following Tuchman, the concept of the “strategic ritual” has subsequently been applied by academics as a way of helping to explain other facets of journalistic practice, including verification (Shapiro et al, 2013); see below. There also exists a strategic ritual of “emotionality”, according to Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2013: 141), whereby emotional expression is allowed to appear in journalistic accounts but only within certain parameters, being largely “outsourced” and attributed to the protagonists within stories rather than the journalists themselves.

## Verification

To establish the veracity (or otherwise) of a potential story, journalists are expected to make a series of checks for accuracy. Such checks might include

consulting official documents, seeking expert opinion, verifying the authenticity of a Twitter account, asking people if they have really made the comments they are said to have made and doublechecking how to spell their name. However, according to research by Shapiro et al (2013), journalistic attempts at verification can be seen – rather like objectivity itself – as a form of “strategic ritual”, in which journalists take certain steps to check certain facts more to deflect potential criticism than to achieve absolute truth. Their study concludes that the journalistic commitment to accuracy and verification is in reality a compromised professional norm, whereby:

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A small, easily checkable, fact needs to be checked; a larger but greyer assertion, not so much – unless it is defamatory. Thus, verification for a journalist is a rather different animal from verification in scientific method, which would hold every piece of data subject to a consistent standard of observation and replication. (Shapiro et al, 2013: 668–669)

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Despite such limitations, verification remains central to the concept of objective reporting, as Carrie Figdor puts it:

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The ultimate aim of an objective news report is, of course, truth, but many statements in objective news reports may turn out to be false, despite our best efforts to verify. This is why it is not necessary for an objective news report to consist entirely of *true* statements. What is necessary is that it consist entirely of *objectively verified* statements. ... It follows that the inclusion of a statement in an objective news report implies it is supported by sufficient objective evidence: it's not there because the reporter made a lucky guess or wishes it were true. (Figdor, 2010: 154; emphasis in original)

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This perhaps hints at some of the in-built limitations and tensions within the journalistic field when it comes to establishing *the* truth of a matter. For Anderson and Schudson:

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Journalism seems to simultaneously make a grandiose knowledge claim (that it possesses the ability to isolate, transmit, and interpret the most publicly relevant aspects of social reality) and an incredibly modest one (that really, most journalists are not experts at all but are simply question-asking generalists). (Anderson and Schudson, 2020: 145)

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Is it not possible to be an expert question-asker, then?

## Common sense

Journalists use their common sense to assess whether something has the ring of truth about it. But common sense itself can be seen as socially, culturally and historically constructed, rendering it highly questionable as any sort of “objective” test. Useful here is the concept of hegemony, the way in which a dominant class is said not merely to rule a society at an economic and political level but also to exert moral and intellectual leadership, albeit contested (Gramsci, 1971: 57). Hegemony goes beyond mere manipulation of opinion to saturate society and become regarded as “common sense” (Williams, 1980: 37–38). This does not mean that common sense contains *no* truths; rather, that common sense is “an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept,

and to refer to common sense as a confirmation of truth is a nonsense” (Gramsci, 1971: 423).

## **Pragmatic objectivity**

For Stephen Ward (2010: 145), “traditional objectivity is a spent ethical force, doubted by journalist and academic”. In response, he has developed the concept of pragmatic objectivity by which, although acknowledging that a “perfect knowledge of reality” may not be possible, we can see the benefit of “imperfect journalists” being required to test information and justify their selection and interpretation (p 149). In this sense, the task of pragmatic objectivity within journalism is to check things before publication and develop working methods “that detect bias, challenge alleged facts and viewpoints, ask for evidence, and prevent reckless, uncritical reporting” (Ward, 2010: 147). A form of reporting, in other words, that goes beyond the back-covering stance of the “strategic ritual”, while recognising that it may still not be possible to ascertain the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In articulating this as a new philosophical approach to objectivity, many journalists might feel that Ward is simply describing (in more academic language) what a good newsroom strives to do anyway, every day.

## CHAPTER 6 “BE CURIOUS AND SCEPTICAL”: JOURNALISTS AS INVESTIGATORS

### Key terms

Constraints; Crowdsourcing; Dark arts; Data journalism; Democracy; Entertainment; Facts; Freedom of information; Investigative journalism; Persistence; Public interest; Shoe leather; Social media; Structural forces; Stunts; Teamwork; Time; Undercover journalism; Whistleblowers; Wrongdoing



**Figure 6.1** Emma Youle’s #HiddenHomeless investigation

Source: Emma Youle’s #HiddenHomeless investigation ran for several weeks and had its own logo ([www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/the-hidden-homeless-campaign](http://www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/the-hidden-homeless-campaign)).

The story began with somebody phoning the *Hackney Gazette* to complain that a dead body had just been found in their homeless hostel, and it ended with Emma Youle winning the Paul Foot Award for investigative journalism. Along the way it brought public awareness to the issue of the “hidden homeless” within our midst and secured commitments from the authorities to help the thousands of local people forced to live in temporary accommodation. The investigation was not Watergate: it was not conducted by a high-profile and well-resourced news outfit such as the *Washington Post*; it did not bring down the most powerful man in the world. But it showed that, contrary to premature reports of its death, investigative journalism is alive well into the 21st century, including in some of the little local newsrooms that play a vital if unglamorous role in scrutinising the actions of those in power.

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“The best stories come from the ground.”

– Emma Youle.

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It was 2017 and Emma Youle was working at a new investigations unit set up by the Archant stable of local weekly newspapers and websites across London. She talks me through what became several weeks of coverage and even had its own #HiddenHomeless logo ([Figure 6.1](#)) and hashtag:

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The story came about because we had a call-in from someone in a hostel in Hackney saying that a body had been discovered in one of the rooms and it had really sent shockwaves through the rest of the people living there because the guy had, they thought, been in his room for three or four days, dead, before anyone found him. It was a hot summer and the reason that the body was discovered was because of the smell. They were really, really freaked out, and I think it told a story about how they felt forgotten by society and how it could easily have been anyone who was dead and not noticed.

One brave person got me in to have a look around and get a picture of the hazmat team taking stuff out of the guy's room, and I spoke to lots and lots of people there and we did some immediate reporting on the conditions in the hostel and the death. As a result of that, to me, it seemed disgraceful that the council would be paying the amount of money it was for the quality of rooms that we saw there. Also, the people that were living there – I would have thought at that point that hostel housing meant you would go in for a couple of months and then move on somewhere else, but there were people that had been living there for years.

So I went away and put in quite a simple FOI [Freedom of Information request] to Hackney Council, just asking for how much they spent on temporary accommodation providers over five years, and also the numbers of people. When that came back, it was £35 million they'd spent in the previous year on temporary accommodation, and that number had gone up significantly over the five years as well. And then we went back and found some other hostels and did some reporting around them, and who owned those hostels. And later when I looked again we found that one owner of a really notorious hostel also had a second company that was developing high-end luxury flats literally down the road. There were examples of owners that were quite willing to have what I would term slum accommodation and also to be really profiting from the building boom.

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As well as reporting the figures from FOI requests and other data sources, the published articles also told the human stories of the people who can end up living in such places. This combination of data with human sources lies at the heart of much investigative journalism, whether conducted at a local, national or international scale, says Youle:

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The hidden homeless is a perfect example of how good stories come from the ground in regional journalism, because it was about how much councils were paying to keep people in hostels, not just the people you imagine as street homeless, but a broad range of people. The potential for great investigations within local news, as anyone who's ever worked there knows, is huge – because you've got such deep connections with the community, and the best stories come from the ground, I strongly believe that. So the potential to do it is there. I think the issue, both with national and regional newsrooms, is time – it's tough.

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Time. There's just never enough of it. Then again, there never was. Despite that, generations of journalists have managed to find some to investigate matters of genuine public concern, and **investigative journalism** remains a flame that burns in many of our hearts.

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“Remember, *All the President’s Men* was so unusual they had to make a movie out of it.”

– Greg Palast.

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

When the UK’s freedom of information legislation came into force, I had a go at seeing how effective it would prove in shining light into some dark corners. While some journalists targeted state secrets concerning wars and rumours of wars, and others went straight for the juicy scandal of politicians’ expenses, I embarked on a more modest project: to find out how much of our money was spent on corporate hospitality by the unelected people running one of the country’s numerous quangos (quasi-autonomous non-government organisations). Quangoland is a place populated by the great and the good who sit on each other’s boards and spend billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money every year without the hindrance of elections or democratic accountability. So I used FOI to ask one such quango (a regional development agency called Yorkshire Forward, since disbanded) how much of our cash it was spending on corporate hospitality – wining, dining, hosting guests in boxes at big sporting events, that kind of thing – and for the names of the recipients of such generosity. It took me three years (!) to get the data, including appeals to the Information Commissioner and the Information Tribunal. In the end, the information turned out to be underwhelming, but it was still a useful exercise. I got a couple of stories out of it about how they spend our money, including the £19,641 they gave to lawyers in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to stop me getting the information: QUANGO SPENDING IS A WELL-KEPT SECRET (*Guardian*, February 20 2008) and PUBLIC PRICED OUT OF GETTING THE FACTS (*Guardian*, March 5 2008).

Not all requests take so long and, in any event, even old stories can sometimes become news, especially with a combination of lateral thinking and careful timing. For example, knowing that March 2014 would be 30 years since the start of the 1984–1985 miners’ strike, several months earlier I used FOI to get hold of some internal BBC documents about controversial coverage of the dispute on TV news, allowing time for the material to be obtained, analysed, and written up for a book chapter (Harcup, 2014b) and a news story that were both hung on the peg of the 30th anniversary: DOCUMENTS REVEAL BBC CONCERN AT ‘IMBALANCE’ OVER COVERAGE OF MINERS’ STRIKE ‘BATTLE OF ORGREAVE’ (*Press Gazette*, March 4 2014).

The raw content of such material does not normally make a story on its own because it still needs to be contextualised, meaning that FOI has not so much replaced other forms of investigative journalism as become an additional method. Use of FOI has not reduced the importance of human sources of information, nor does it mean there is no need for friendly relations with a press officer; after all, if you are using the Act to uncover a scoop, you don’t really want the requested material suddenly released to all your rivals at the same time as you get it, do you? So FOI is not a cure-all, but it is a useful tool that is available for all journalists (and other citizens) to use; believe me, if I can use it, so can you.

FOI has been used to make public otherwise private information at a national, regional and local level. This can range from how many police officers have been arrested for various offences (a favourite of the regional press, and always a worryingly large number each year) to the number of times a locksmith was called because MPs had locked themselves out of their parliamentary offices (MPs NEEDED LOCKSMITHS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OFFICES 382 TIMES IN A YEAR, *HuffPost*, November 6 2013).

Rather more serious use of official figures can be seen in “data journalism”, which involves the collection and manipulation of data from existing or specially created databases or spreadsheets, looking for patterns, trends, mistakes or missing information that might make interesting items, and often using visualisation and/or

interactive techniques to display the resulting stories. “They have been there all the time, sitting in the data,” observes Mike Ward. “It’s just needed a journalist to ask the right questions, run the right sequence of numbers” (Ward, 2002: 69). The *Guardian*, for example, has not only invested in a collaborative team of journalists and developers with data expertise, but also in the high-powered computer software and hardware that “allows us to search and cross-search massive databases in quick time,” said Nick Hopkins (2019), then head of investigations there. Getting hold of such information is easier thanks to FOI legislation in the UK, USA and elsewhere, but it still requires people’s time, skill and nous to analyse it; also, as with all journalism, it needs to be borne in mind that some apparent connections *may* just be coincidence.

## “THERE’S SOMETHING IN THIS”

One journalist who used FOI to great effect, despite not being a data specialist nor working for a well-resourced publisher, is Deborah Wain. During her time on the weekly *Doncaster Free Press* she revealed how one of the UK’s biggest education projects had spent vast sums of public money on luxury travel, hospitality, consultants’ bills, a huge salary hike for the chief executive, and even a personalised number plate for a subsidised BMW X5 car – all in one of the poorest parts of the UK. “I don’t think I really saw it as an investigation as such at the start, I saw it as a story and follow-ups,” says Wain, about her probe into Doncaster Education City, a £100 million partnership between a council and a further education college. Over an 18-month period she wrote between 20 and 30 stories, gradually uncovering the reality that lay behind the scheme’s big budgets and grandiose promises, and eventually picking up one of the best awards that a journalist can win. We will come to that, but first: where did the story come from?

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We had an anonymous letter from an insider at the college, pages and pages of allegations. I was quite shocked by it. The temptation is to file it away in a desk somewhere, but I was also hearing snippets of information from other sources that made me think, “There’s something in this”. It was just a question of where to start.

I got wind of the fact there was a report by the Learning and Skills Council into the deficit at the college, and that was the tangible thing I was looking for. So I used FOI to request that report, which confirmed that the college had gone from being very robust financially into being significantly in the red, and the purpose of the report was to look into financial problems.

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Having got hold of official confirmation that questions were being asked about the project’s finances, Wain’s story was not just standing up – it was running. One thing led to another:

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The thing about the investigation is that there were so many different strands to it. After the initial couple of stories were published people came to me from the inside, again with lots of extreme allegations. You can’t always use what your sources are giving you because the information is too specific and you might betray the source. But the same things kept coming up.

FOI is the key; I probably put in half a dozen requests to the council, the college and the Learning and Skills Council. I managed to firm up most of the stuff from official sources through FOI, getting the **facts** and figures.

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Parallel with this, she was also speaking off-the-record to employees and on-the-record to their trade union officials, who were usually more willing to speak out publicly about staff unrest. That was not all:

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I also spent quite a lot of time going through the college board's papers in the college library. The papers are available but nobody ever goes. They had to hunt them out for me and I got a frosty reception. I had to sit in the basement, it was the middle of summer and I was sweltering, and at one point I thought I was going to be locked in overnight, I thought they might forget I was down there.

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How did she manage to find the time, given that she was only working part-time and already had other responsibilities within a small, understaffed newsroom owned by Johnston Press (later JPIMedia), a publisher not renowned for investing seriously in labour-intensive journalism?

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On Wednesday afternoons when the paper had been put to bed I would go and do my research. I'm quite used to multi-tasking and juggling numerous stories, and fitting in research as and when, really. I think as you get more experienced you can bash out quite a few stories on a day-to-day basis and create time for stuff that you are particularly interested in.

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"You have to be really tenacious and thorough, and just not give up."

– Deborah Wain.

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Working under a supportive news editor who had an interest in the mechanics of local government also helped, and Wain was motivated by discovering a lack of public accountability as well as by her love of a good story:

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The thing that struck me was these huge sums of money. I think the college's spending was quite unaccounted for. There are people within the council and the college who have pooh-poohed the work that I've done because they don't get it. They don't get why people are asking questions, because they are so used to talking about these huge sums of money, £10 million here, £1 million there.

I like to come at a story from all angles. I found it really fascinating once I got into it, it became a challenge to try and peel back the layers. I think you have to be really tenacious and thorough, and just not give up. I enjoy storytelling so I really wanted to get to the story. I still do really, because I think there's still more to come.

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There may indeed be more to come, but she had already done enough to be declared the joint winner of the 2007 Paul Foot Award for investigative journalism, the same award that Emma Yule would win a decade later.

## IT'S NOT LIKE THE MOVIES

As a quietly spoken woman working part-time on a small local weekly rag, Deborah Wain fits none of the stereotypes of pushy investigative journalists as portrayed in movies such as *All the President's Men*, *Spotlight*, *Defence of the Realm* and *The Insider*, although she certainly has what Duncan Campbell (2011: 228) describes as investigative journalism's essential tools: "an inquiring mind, a lack of deference and great patience". As it happens, Paul Foot himself had watched *The Insider* the night before I turned up at his home to interview him for the first edition of this book. That film's portrayal of the intense relationship between journalist and source clearly struck

a chord. “That’s the key to all this, the source,” he told me almost as soon as I walked through the door.

Investigative journalists in movies are often shady characters who meet shadowy whistleblowers in dimly lit car parks, risking life and limb to establish the truth. The reality is often more mundane. Most investigative journalism would not make for dramatic footage – the meticulous cross-referencing of information strands, the days phoning people with similar names and trawling Facebook or the electoral roll to track somebody down, and the hours poring over obscure documents or computer databases. It is true that, compared with other forms of reporting, investigative journalism may involve more time, more money and more risk (Palast, 2002: 9) and there is the occasional threat or even act of violence. But journalists in the UK are more likely to face legal or commercial **constraints** – not the least of which is understaffing – than to receive an invitation to sleep with the fishes.

Although investigative journalism remains an integral part of journalism’s sense of self-worth and professional standing, in reality it is a minority pursuit. Whenever the topic of investigative journalism is discussed, somebody can be relied upon to say that *all* journalism is supposed to be investigative. But much journalism, as it is practised, is reportage. It is descriptive and/or based on attribution. Such everyday journalism proceeds on the basis of a reporter seeing or being told something and then passing that on to an audience in the form of a story, as Martin Wainwright explains:

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I’m not like a detective, I’m more of a describer. Somebody rang me up the other day and said he had a scandal which involved everybody from the Prime Minister downwards, and you think, “Oh God...” It’s terribly difficult and you don’t have very much time.

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What is commonly labelled investigative journalism goes beyond Wainwright’s modest description of his role as that of a “describer”. For David Randall, investigative reporting differs substantially from other reporting because it involves *original* research into *wrongdoing*, because someone is trying to keep the information *secret*, and because the *stakes* tend to be higher (Randall, 2000: 99–100). Although some investigations, including many in the Sunday redtop tabloids, expose nothing more than the personal predilections of a minor celeb, the credo of investigative journalism rests on its role in uncovering information that is in the **public interest**.

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“Don’t expose people who earn less than you do.”

– Paul Foot.

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Classic investigative journalism in the public interest is often said to be on the wane, following a high point in the 1970s (Doig, 1997: 189; Northmore, 2001: 183). As with all discussions about journalism, there is a long-established tendency to bestow “golden age” status on earlier periods; yet the sheer breadth of entries to the aforementioned Paul Foot Award each year demonstrates that reports of the death of investigative journalism are greatly exaggerated. Before moving on to examine some more examples of investigative reporting, though, let’s briefly consider a cautionary note sounded by Martin Wainwright, who believes that investigative journalists may sometimes be tempted to ignore shades of grey: “I’m always a bit suspicious of them, because often if you go into a story carefully you find there’s another side to it, and it’s not quite what it seems.” That’s a point worth keeping in mind – the need to retain your own sense of scepticism, even when consuming the work of journalists who have built their entire reputations on being sceptics.

## METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

When consumer affairs correspondent Kevin Peachey finds himself investigating dodgy companies and such like, how does he set about checking a story?

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First you look in the files, the archives, because the same issues crop up sometimes. Then the internet, to see if somebody else has written about them. Then it's contacts. Consumer stories are no different from any other specialism – if you've got good contacts that's half the battle. I've got enough people now who I can ring up and they can tell me whether there's something in it or not. I can see if there's a news angle in something, but as far as the law is concerned you need someone to explain it to you. So my most important contacts are in the trading standards service, in the same way as a crime reporter's best contacts are in the police.

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It sounds simple. That is the point. There is no need for the mystique that too often surrounds the subject. Paul Foot insists there are dangers in treating investigative journalism as a separate genre carried out by "grand" journalists:

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It's a complete fraud, the idea that there is a race apart called investigative journalists. An ordinary reporter doing a perfectly ordinary story carries out these functions, the difference would be the enthusiasm and the scepticism with which you approach something.

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Another difference might be the time you have available. Reporters required to churn out numerous stories every day will simply find life impossible if they question absolutely everything. On the other hand, journalists who invest their own time in working on their own stories can become known in the trade as "self-starters"; if they are lucky and skilled, they may be able to earn themselves the rare luxury of being given a specifically investigative brief. That was how Foot was able to spend so much time at both the *Daily Mirror* and *Private Eye* "piling fact on fact to present a picture of cock-up or conspiracy" (Foot, 1999: 82). He talks me through one of his most celebrated investigations, concerning the case of four men wrongly jailed for the murder of newspaper delivery boy Carl Bridgewater:

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Ann Whelan, whose son was convicted, wrote to me at the *Mirror* a very moving letter. My initial feeling was, "What mother wouldn't say that her son was innocent?" So it was some time before I went up there. But I went up to Birmingham and met her and her family. I wasn't convinced to begin with because it was a horrible murder and there was *some* evidence against them, there was a confession. It took quite a lot of time before I became in any way convinced, but I did become absolutely convinced, and as I did so I wrote with more and more certainty.

Ann found witnesses who said, "I told a pack of lies, I didn't realise how important it was". But mostly it was just going over the evidence that had been presented in court against them, reading depositions, the judge's summing up and so on, talking to everyone involved. There were things showing they were somewhere else at the time, that somebody else had done the murder, it just went on and on. I must have written at least 30 articles in the *Mirror*.

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By the time the men were eventually released, Foot had been writing about the case for more than a decade and a half. Apart from his forensic skill and the willingness to immerse himself in countless legal documents, what is immediately apparent from Foot's account is this *repetition* of stories over a long period of time:

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The *Mirror* subs would joke, “Here comes the man who supports the murder of newspaper boys”, and occasionally the editor would say, “Oh Christ, you’re not doing this again are you?” But the repetition is absolutely crucial because it encourages other sources to come forward.

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## “NOT ANOTHER FUCKING STORY ABOUT CHILD SEX GROOMING”

Persisting with an issue over a long period of time was also crucial in Andrew Norfolk’s ground-breaking and harrowing investigation for the *Times* into the grooming of girls for sexual exploitation in Rochdale, Rotherham and elsewhere. As a story involving sexual abuse and violence against under-age victims who did not all necessarily see themselves as victims, with the girls overwhelmingly white and English and the men overwhelmingly from the Pakistani Muslim community, it was fraught with difficult ethical issues (see [Chapter 13](#)).

Norfolk admits holding back at first because he knew it would be a “dream story” for racist and far-right organisations. “That acted as a break when it shouldn’t have done,” he explains. “It was not knowing how to report that in a way that didn’t pander to that racist picture of innocent white victims and evil Muslim perpetrators.” The issue gnawed away at him for several years:

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I had a growing sense of unease as from time to time a story would come through from an agency or a local newspaper about a court case, with a pattern that seemed to be girls of 12 to 15 where the first point of contact is in a public place. It wasn’t online, it wasn’t in the family, they weren’t schoolteachers, but it was in a public place like a train station or a shopping mall. And the names were overwhelmingly Muslim men who had been convicted.

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Eventually, on hearing a radio news bulletin mention that nine men had just been convicted of abusing a 14-year-old girl, he approached his home news editor and said: “Look, I’ve let this go far, far too long, will you give me some time to look at it?” Having been granted some time, he explains what happened next:

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I thought the only way we’re ever going to be able to write about this is on the basis of evidence and the first three months were trawling for information about convictions. Searches [on a database at the *Times*] for things like “crown court”, words like “convicted”, “girl”, “sex offences”, then narrow it down so it was not online, and there had to be at least two people convicted, so it wasn’t a lone offender. We also looked at libraries, back issues of local newspapers, all that sort of thing. And we came up with, I think, 17 cases in 13 different towns and cities over a 13 year period, 1997 to 2010: 56 men had been convicted in those 17 cases, three of them were white, but there were less than half a dozen non-Muslim names. When I then looked into it I realised that the vast majority of the Muslims were from the Pakistani community as opposed to the Bangladeshi community or any other Muslim community.

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Finding evidence of so many cases, Norfolk tried to do what any decent journalist would do in the circumstances: seek explanations from agencies and experts, in an effort to understand what’s going on and why. So he approached police, the Home Office, other government departments, local authorities, children’s charities, all to little avail:

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That's when we tried to talk to people and that's when I hit a brick wall like I've never hit a brick wall. They were terrified about what they knew and hadn't done anything about. I said, "On or off the record, I now know there's a specific problem here, I want to understand why", and they just point blank refused to speak.

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But he stuck with it and eventually "two little doors opened": an investigating police officer agreed to talk about a case, and a support group put him in contact with some victims' families. The result was a front-page splash headlined REVEALED: CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE ON UK SEX GANGS (*Times*, January 5 2011) with four full pages inside. "There really was an extraordinary reaction," he recalls. "Within three days of our story the government had ordered a national scoping exercise to discover the scale of the problem, there was a parliamentary inquiry, and suddenly all the doors that had been shut started to open."

Job done, or so he thought. But *Times* editor James Harding (who later moved to the BBC and then *Tortoise*) had other ideas, as Norfolk recalls:

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I genuinely thought, "That's it, done." It had been three months of research and another month of trying to speak to people and putting it together. And then James Harding called me down to London, I'd never had a one-to-one with him before, and he said: "You are going to carry on writing this story until every single colleague of yours on the *Times* opens the paper and says, 'Oh my god, not another fucking story about child sex grooming', because that's the day we'll know we're making a difference. That is now your full-time job." I found him an inspirational editor. There were several points when I was at a really low ebb because it was all so horrible, and there were several points when I felt now we've done this, surely this is it – and I would walk into his office thinking, "Please, no more". And somehow in the space of 10 minutes he'd turn me around so that I wanted to carry on doing it. Now that's a real gift. He would send me emails saying, "Keep on keeping on".

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Story followed story as the paper revealed the extent to which, not only had extremely vulnerable girls been systematically groomed and abused by groups of men, but the victims had then been let down by the authorities that ignored their plight. As with Foot's investigations (above), the publication of each story increased the chances of more sources coming forward as people who had not seen the original coverage gradually caught up. Not only official sources, who suddenly felt able to talk, but victims and their families too. Norfolk again:

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A victim in Rotherham, she hadn't really recognised what had happened to her until she read a story we did, she came to us. They didn't necessarily see themselves as victims at the start, and the guilt that they have that it's somehow their fault – they nearly all went back to their perpetrators because that's part of the grooming process.

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The result of this victim coming forward was GROOMING SCANDAL OF CHILD SEX TOWN, which opened:

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A child in the care of social services was allowed extensive daily contact with a violent sexual offender who was suspected of grooming more than a dozen young teenagers to use and sell for sex, it is revealed today. (*Times*, August 23 2013)

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On the front page and three inside pages Norfolk told the truly shocking story of the girl – who was twice made pregnant by the man while she was still a child – and of the authorities' truly shocking failure to protect her. She was quoted in the piece as saying, "I didn't think of myself as being groomed, but now I realise it was an abusive relationship". She also expressed the hope that other young women would read her story, reflect on their own experiences as teenagers, and find the courage to speak out (*Times*, August 23 2013).

## **“NOW I’M READY TO TALK”**

Speaking out was exactly what Cathy Newman’s sources did for her *Channel 4 News* investigation into allegations made by women within the Liberal Democrats that they had been sexually harassed by a senior figure in the political party – but they did not do it immediately. Newman explains that getting people to appear on camera is the big hurdle for TV investigations, and you have to be patient:

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I'd been in contact with her a few years before and she didn't want to speak about it at that point, and she then came to me out of the blue and said, "Now I'm ready to talk". We didn't rush them into making a decision about whether they wanted to appear on camera. Once we had one it became easier to persuade the others to speak. We just built a really trusting relationship with the women. You can't just go in there and stick a camera under their nose and expect them to speak. You've got to be very gentle. Also I think it is about track record as well, I've been nearly 20 years as a journalist now, they can see what I've done. I've protected my sources and I've protected people.

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Another TV investigator, Christopher Hird, describes his own modus operandi as: first, check what is already in the public domain, then establish a chronology and look for connections, and then systematically look up anyone who might know anything (quoted in Spark, 1999: 53). Maybe some of them will be ready to talk; maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but some day. These activities will often overlap: checking the details of a company under investigation might give you some more names to contact; contacting those people might give you some more companies to check out; doing that might throw up other connections; and so on. That's why Randall (2000: 108) advises "throw nothing away", because you never know when it might be useful.

During the Watergate investigation, Woodward and Bernstein filled several filing cabinets with all their notes, memos and early drafts of stories; periodically they would review their files and make lists of previously unexplored angles (Bernstein and Woodward, [1974] 2005: 50 and 330). The careful filing and storage of potentially useful material is now more likely to be in electronic form than on hard copy, although a combination of both is common. Backing-up files and saving emails and screenshots from websites and social media may also be required; it's safer not to assume that something you have found online will still be there unchanged the next time you look, so save it if you might need it.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHOE LEATHER**

The spread of mobile phones and the growth of social media have greatly added to the toolkit available for journalists, as shown by the way the *Guardian's* Paul Lewis harnessed so-called user-generated content to debunk the official version of how newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson met his death in 2009. At the time the streets of central London were the scene of clashes between riot police and people protesting against the policies of the world's major economies (known as the G20), and it was amid such chaos that Tomlinson collapsed and died on his way home from working outside Monument tube station. Police told the media he had simply suffered a heart attack, that no officers had encountered him before his collapse and that protesters

had even hindered medics who attempted to save his life. This version of events was faithfully reported in much of the media but Lewis smelled a rat and followed his suspicions that that there might be more to the story.

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“I tried to get my stuff from the horse’s mouth – or the other end, at any rate.”

– Izzy Stone.

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He combined the old-fashioned “shoe leather” approach of tracking down and talking to anyone who might have been in the area with scouring social media including Twitter, Flickr and YouTube for relevant material and leads, all while asking questions and openly sharing information. Lewis explains the idea behind such online sharing and also the importance of taking steps to verify material:

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Internet contact usually does not suffice for verification, and so I regularly met with sources. I asked the most important witnesses to meet me at the scene of Tomlinson’s death, near the Bank of England, to walk and talk me through what they had seen. We only published images and video that we had retrieved directly from the source and later verified. ... The break, though, as with most scoops, was partly the result of good luck, but not unrelated to the fact that our journalism had acquired credibility in the online crowd. (Lewis, 2011: 34–35)

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That scoop arrived when New York-based investment fund manager Chris La Jaunie sent the *Guardian* a video clip he had recorded on his digital camera on the day in question, when he happened to be in London for a business conference. His footage showed Tomlinson shuffling along, hands in pockets, being struck from behind with a baton and pushed to the ground by a masked police officer; a visibly shocked Tomlinson then sits on the pavement as a protester comes to his aid while a group of police officers stand and watch. Together with photographs and witness accounts gathered by Lewis, this chance piece of user-generated content totally contradicted the official account of what happened, and the story culminated two years later when an inquest jury found that Tomlinson had been unlawfully killed.

It may have been fortuitous that a citizen had been filming in the right place at the right time, but it was no mere chance that he sent the result to the *Guardian*, as Lewis explains:

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He knew the footage he had was potentially explosive. The options available to Mr La Jaunie were limited. Fearing a police cover-up, he did not trust handing over the footage. An alternative would have been to release the video onto YouTube, where it would lack context, might go unnoticed for days and even then could not have been reliably verified. He said he chose to contact me after coming to the conclusion that ours was the news organisation which had most effectively interrogated the police version of events. (Lewis, 2011: 35–36)

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Let’s not forget that the investigation began with little more than a hunch that the authorities had not told the full story. As that arch-sceptic from an earlier age, Claud Cockburn (1967: 97), wrote in his memoirs, it is a useful journalistic rule of thumb to “believe nothing until it has been officially denied”. The case was echoed in a very different context when the first official statement about the police killing of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street in 2020 referred only to him suffering “medical distress” (McCarthy, 2021). A teenager’s video of the incident told a very different story when

she shared it on Facebook, and a year later the police officer who had knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes was convicted of murder.

## JOURNALISTIC NOUS

Social media also played a part in a *HuffPost* investigation that took six months to put together and which, as with the Tomlinson story (above), began with little more than a sense that something did not feel quite right. It was about how some pastors in a high-profile, primarily black church, SPAC Nation, were accused of funding lavish lifestyles at the expense of vulnerable members of their congregation. As the award-winning investigations specialist who by this time had moved to *HuffPost* from Archant, Emma Youle worked on the story alongside the reporter who actually found it: a young journalist called Nadine White. Youle is white and an experienced investigator; White is black and, although she may have been the less experienced investigator, she brought insights and contacts that were just as vital. Together they made a good team, as Youle explains:

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Nadine had gone out to a church that was getting a lot of positive press for its response to knife crime in young black communities, and she had been covering the knife crime issue and was going into this as a positive piece looking at how they were managing it. But her journalistic nous came through, and her instincts were raised when she started asking about how they were funding the stuff they were doing. They'd have pastors from the church going out onto estates in very flash sports cars, and designer clothing, and they said they'd needed to do this to connect with the kids in the gang and get them to join the church. But when Nadine started asking where the money was coming from to fund all of this, they got very tetchy and closed her down quite quickly.

She realised that something just wasn't quite sitting right, so she came back to the office and we had a chat with our editor – I had a history of doing investigations and was there to pick up things that need an intense focus over a longer time period – and we both started working on it. It was a really old-fashioned investigation in some ways because it relied really heavily on sources and just finding people in the church who were willing to talk to us. And Nadine, who has really strong connections within the black community and has done a lot of work around reporting on race, was able to persuade people that I think might not consider talking to journalists, to put their trust in us and tell us about what had happened to them.

The picture that emerged was that lots of young people from the church were taking out loans and giving that money to pastors, and there was some evidence that they were in some cases being pressured to do this, and then we had to think about how can we get this published. So we did a lot of work around trying to find evidence of what the people were saying – so, did they have bank statements, any paperwork that would prove they were taking loans, or that they hadn't fully understood the situation? Things like WhatsApp chats and social media timelines are really useful; one of our key sources was a long timeline of WhatsApp chats ... which all became really key when we needed to get it past the lawyers.

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After careful gathering of evidence, the story was equally carefully written to make clear that the allegations were about the actions of certain individuals rather than everyone within the church, and published as: SPAC NATION SCANDAL: CHURCH FIGHTING KNIFE CRIME FAILS TO ACT ON ROGUE PASTORS FLOURISHING IN ITS RANKS (*HuffPost*, November 8 2019). As a result, questions were asked in parliament and official inquiries were launched.

Looking back on the story, which was shortlisted for the Paul Foot Award in 2020, Nadine White feels it was an important one on multiple levels:

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Through the investigation I was reminded of the importance of journalism in uncovering the truth and holding power to account. It was also apparent that the media's relationship with black communities is fragmented, largely owing to lack of representation across the industry which results in important cases like SPAC Nation going unreported. This only serves to further erode trust.

Following the publication of the SPAC investigation, the Charity Commission and Met police launched investigations into individuals associated with the church. Both are ongoing. A former SPAC Nation member contacted me and thanked me for working on the expose. She wasn't overly optimistic that the police investigation would see justice, as she put it, due to a lack of confidence in the police from within black communities. However, the former member was encouraged that steps were being taken to look into the allegations of exploitation taking place within the organisation. She said: "Thanks for not giving up. No one else cared – no one ever cares about black people – but you did. You're actually so sick." By the way, "sick" is a slang term for "good" or "inspiring".

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Caring enough to listen to the marginalised or silenced lies at the heart of much investigative journalism, as does caring enough to see behind the headlines. Although many journalists had previously covered the church, it was mostly as a "good news" story about a black church being feted by the Conservative party for helping to solve knife crime. "There hadn't been deeper research," recalls Emma Youle, as she looks back on what else the story may have to say about the wider journalism industry:

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It was a really interesting investigation and I think an unusual one and the group that it focused on, in that almost all our sources were young black people, who are less quoted in the mainstream press. ... Media that perhaps don't have a young black journalist that's connected to the community in that way wouldn't be hearing that side of the story. Our editor [Jess Brammar at the time] talks a lot about diversity in the newsroom being important, and it's for exactly those types of reasons – hearing stories and chancing on stories that wouldn't necessarily be available to me as an older, white journalist. ... I think we were a good partnership in that sense, because I was able to bring experience of what we would need to get the story to press and Nadine had absolutely amazing contacts and was able to build brilliant trust with sources, so it worked really well...

It didn't come from a tip-off, it came from Nadine being out on the ground and meeting people, really digging into an issue that she was interested in and feeling that something wasn't quite right and following up on that instinct. ... It really was an old-fashioned investigation but I think with some new stuff creeping in, like the fact that WhatsApp chats and social media history can be a valuable record to back up what people are saying.

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## **GOING UNDERGROUND: UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATIONS**

Harnessing social media for evidence is a relatively new form of investigation, but one of the oldest methods also remains in use: undercover journalism. That's when a reporter pretends to be somebody other than a journalist, with a view to discovering the truth behind a public facade. It can be a tricky, even dangerous thing to do. It can also be immensely satisfying when it comes off, especially if the story is then picked up by other media. Abul Taher recalls going undercover in France as one of his most rewarding assignments for the *Sunday Times*:

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The story came from a simple idea that we should look at the migrant situation in Calais again, as there were reports that the situation was worsening. I went there posing as an illegal immigrant from Bangladesh, trying to get to the UK. It was a good exercise in information and intelligence gathering, which I did over a period of two weeks. I spoke to fellow illegal immigrants, charity workers and actual people smugglers – in the guise of an illegal immigrant – and managed to put together a good picture of the migrant problem in Calais, as well as giving a picture of the routes the migrants took from Asia to get to Calais.

The story line we got from it – that the French were building a new Sangatte refugee camp in Calais – caused a political uproar, with the Home Secretary making comments on it. Nicolas Sarkozy, by then president-elect of France, also condemned the plan. The story ran in the national papers for about a month.

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Such deception is typically justified by reference to the public interest, although that does not always prevent undercover journalists being accused of everything from entrapment to engaging in worthless stunts.

One of the pioneers of undercover reporting was Nellie Bly, whose lengthy list of exploits began in 1887 when she feigned mental illness and spent “ten days in a mad-house” for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, emerging to expose the harsh reality of life for inmates in asylums – and to boost the newspaper’s circulation. According to biographer Brooke Kroeger, Bly did not engage in “fishing expeditions” but “targeted specific situations or individuals in an effort to right wrongs, to explain the unexplored, to satisfy curiosity about the intriguing, to expose unfairness, or to catch a thief” (Kroeger, 1994: 206–207). However, her success sparked a “decade of girl reporter derring-do” involving ever more sensational “stunts”, such as young female journalists standing in the street posing as flower-sellers in the hope of exposing any married men who propositioned them (Kroeger, 1994: 87–88 and 206).

The spirit of Nellie Bly lives on, judging by the impact of *Financial Times* reporter Madison Marriage (2018a, 2018b, 2018c) going undercover to expose the “grotesque” behaviour of many rich and powerful men towards young women at a charity fund-raising dinner in London. It was believed to have been the *FT*’s first ever undercover investigation (Murphy, 2018: 25), and it was soon followed up by the rest of the media, with questions being asked in parliament and future such events being cancelled (Harcup, 2020: 117). Marriage used deception during her 10-hour shift as a hostess at the offending dinner, while in France, freelance journalist Valentin Gendrot spent two whole years undercover as a police officer, investigating allegations of brutality and racism within the police for his book *Flic* (BBC, 2020a).

## OTHER METHODS ARE AVAILABLE

In addition to the approaches already discussed in this chapter – from the straightforward and open to the controversial and clandestine – other investigative techniques used by some journalists have included:

- Rummaging through targets’ dustbins (aka “binology”);
- The rather more sophisticated encryption of digital communication to prevent the security services knowing who you are talking to or what stories you are working on;
- Setting up secure digital “drop boxes” to allow whistleblowers to supply information in confidence;

- Using unregistered pay-as-you-go mobile phones (“burners”) for talking to sensitive sources;
- Paying cash-only for hotel rooms, meals and so on to avoid leaving trails that might lead back to a source;
- Hiring private investigators to track people down;
- Tricking organisations into handing over private information about individuals (“blagging”), which may involve a breach of data protection law;
- Paying sources for information (which can also be illegal in some circumstances);
- And finally, the illegal hacking of voicemails, emails and computers (which may result in an unwelcome appearance at the Old Bailey).

These and similar techniques are sometimes referred to as the “dark arts” of journalism (Davies, 2008). Quite apart from the legal and ethical considerations involved, it is in the interests of novice journalists to steer well clear of the dark arts. The good news is that investigative journalism is still possible without resorting to them.

## LEGWORX AND LATERAL THINKING

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“Get off your asses and knock on doors.”

– *LA Times newsroom sign.*

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Targeted use of freedom of information and social media may have added to the investigator’s armoury, but that does not mean there is no need to get out on the streets, as Paul Lewis’s probe into the death of Ian Tomlinson demonstrates (above). And it was a combination of “legwork” and “lateral thinking” that allowed Brian Whittle’s freelance agency to break a number of stories about the popular family doctor who turned out to be Britain’s biggest serial killer, mostly of elderly women. After Dr Harold Shipman was convicted, the agency’s reporters revisited the small town in which he had embarked on his murderous medical career a quarter-of-a-century previously. They investigated deaths for which Shipman had not even been charged, as Whittle explains:

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Before anybody else thought of it we obtained all the death certificates for the 22 people he’d signed while he was practising in Todmorden. Just looking at the death certificates told you that three people died in one day. We then went round all the addresses. A third of the houses no longer existed, and in another third the people had moved away and weren’t contactable. But we did find relatives of the three people who died in one day, and we found relatives of the first male victim.

This is old-fashioned reporting, it’s knocking on doors, it’s talking to people. If you turn up on the doorstep people will talk to you, if you ring them up it gives them the chance to put the phone down. If you want to find out about somebody you don’t just knock on *their* door and the *next* door, you do the entire street. You do *both sides* of the street – two of you – and you do it again in the evening because people may be out in the daytime. Go to *every* address and ask, “What do you know about this person who lived here 25 years ago?”

You don't know who you're going to find, maybe it's a son or whatever. Out of the 22, six or seven came out with absolutely key stuff. We were totally vindicated when the police started an investigation about a month later and sent various cases to the Crown Prosecution Service.

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This technique of hitting the doorsteps early and often will be familiar to anyone who has worked as an agency reporter on the frontline of domestic news; most would probably not call themselves investigative journalists, but that is (part of) what they are doing.

## GETTING THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

Despite the thrill of the chase – or perhaps precisely *because*, as a reporter, it's so easy to get caught up in the excitement of a pursuit – it is vital to question your *own* expectations and assumptions during any investigation. Then, once you have gathered your material from a range of sources, you must decide if the story still has potential. If it does not stand up, either forget it or file it away for future reference. But if it has substance, sooner or later you must confront your “target” with the allegations. “There are two sides to the story and everybody has a right of reply,” explains Peachey:

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If they choose not to reply then that's fair enough, but we make every effort we can. In some cases we give them a 10 bullet-point letter through their door if we know where they are, saying, “We're thinking of writing a story, these are some of the issues that have been raised, we want your reply”. Give them sufficient time, a couple of days generally. Log your phone calls too, so that you know when you've left messages. A couple of times I've spoken to people who've given me some abuse down the phone – that always makes an interesting line in the story.

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During her investigation in Doncaster, Wain repeatedly contacted the troubled college and its chief executive. “I gave him numerous opportunities to respond but he never did,” she says. But the material she had gathered – official documents plus interviews with other sources, written in shorthand notebooks, dated and filed just in case – was strong enough for publication. In larger newsrooms such stories would probably have been “legalled” by a lawyer beforehand, but Wain relied on her own knowledge of the legal system gained during her NCTJ training: “As a local paper, everything has got to be legally sound, you're not going to take the same risks as the nationals. Knowing the law, knowing what you can publish, is really key – and the stories were all strong enough.”

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“We are trying to open a cupboard and shine a torch around – a feeble torch in a very large cupboard – and we don't know what's in the bits of the cupboard we can't see.”

– Andrew Gilligan.

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## WHAT HAS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM EVER DONE FOR US?

What is achieved by journalists taking on this time-consuming investigative role? Is investigative journalism really a force for **democracy**, as often claimed? Foot never doubted the social benefits of such work, explaining:

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Apart from getting people out of prison who shouldn't be there, there are things like the cancer drugs that were killing people quicker. The publication in *Private Eye* of four or five of those articles and the whole project was exposed. And Frank Wheeler, the busman up in Scotland who kept asking why the government had stolen the pensions surplus of the National Bus Company when it was privatised. That was £300 million. He says the whole thing changed when I went up here and spent a couple of days with him and his wife and wrote a piece for the *Guardian*, and then several things for the *Eye*. That set of articles made a difference to those people in that they got their money back.

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Back at the *Times*, Andrew Norfolk is in no doubt that his grooming investigation (which incidentally also won the Paul Foot Award) was *socially* worthwhile because it placed a hitherto hidden scandal in the public domain:

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Newspapers always like to pat themselves on the back but I definitely think we acted as the trigger for the debate starting, and then because we carried on producing new information about things that were going on in different parts of the country, it's not allowed it to go away. It has transformed the way the authorities approach it, from the terrible early examples – going to a house in the early hours of the morning when there was a 13-year-old-girl with a group of adult Pakistani males and they arrest the girl for being drunk and disorderly and leave the men alone – to now, when specialist training is being offered, every beat bobby is being told the warning signs to look out for, the number of investigations is just exploding. Another example would be the judges. We did a story about a girl who spent 15 days in the witness box, 12 of them under cross-examination from seven defence lawyers, being absolutely shredded and they were being allowed to explore areas that were nothing to do with the offence itself. Within weeks of that, suddenly they're announcing that only judges from a special panel will deal with such cases where there are multiple defendants.

So there has been so much that has changed for the good. We had a guy from the Ramadhan Foundation, he's from Rochdale himself, condemning what was going on, and there's been some brilliant work done by some Islamic scholars. And finally, two and a half years after we started writing about it, the Muslim Council of Great Britain held its first ever conference on child sexual exploitation, which was great. We have been doing for three years something that incontestably is public interest journalism. We probably haven't sold a single extra copy, trying to raise the plight of people who would never buy the *Times* in a million years, and effecting change for the better – it certainly wasn't to make money.

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If it achieves nothing else, investigative journalism at least makes it harder for those in power to excuse themselves by saying they did not know what was going on.

## IT'S ABOUT THE STORY, NOT THE JOURNALIST

Investigative journalism can be seen as more of an attitude than a genre. Just as journalists working on investigations will use many of the techniques they would use on "ordinary" stories – only more so – an inquiring and investigative approach can also inform regular news reporting. Increasingly, for example, journalists are putting in FOI requests to find information on all sorts of subjects. If a public authority is likely to hold information on something – from hygiene inspections of local takeaways to government files on reported UFO sightings – then an FOI request might be worth considering for any journalist working on virtually *any* story.



What are the main attributes necessary for a journalist to become an effective investigator? Foot offers this summary:

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There are certain skills that you learn from experience, but the main point is to be curious and sceptical. You can't be an investigative journalist unless you are both curious and sceptical *all the time*. That, and the ability to ring people up and talk to them all the time, the ability to believe the most absurd things that people tell you – even when perhaps nine times out of 10 they're talking absolute bollocks.

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“Keep digging, the truth is down there somewhere.”

– Harold Evans.

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David Hencke feels that journalists should guard against using deception and secret filming just for the sake of it, or presenting the reporter centre-stage as some kind of avenging angel, whereby: “By the end, as with a John Wayne movie, we can safely go to our beds, knowing that all the villains have had their just deserts and that our hero has fought his way through, against the odds, and emerged victorious” (Hencke, 2001).

For Foot, the crucial thing remains the relationship between journalist and source: “The source is more important than the story. The whistleblowers who break cover and say, ‘I’m not going to continue with this because I’m doing something wrong’ – they are the goldmine. You do not sell them out.” The source may be more important than the story, but both should be more important than the journalist, believes Wain. Referring to the above point from Hencke, which she read in an earlier edition of this book, Wain tells me:

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You talk in your chapter about the notion of the investigative reporter as hero, and I have found that there has been a lot more media interest in the story of me getting that award – people *like* the story of the reporter on the *small* paper – than there ever was in the original story of what was going on in Doncaster with all that money. I think they should have been a bit more interested in that at the time.

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## Summary

Investigative journalism goes beyond description and attributed opinion to uncover information, typically about powerful individuals or organisations, although many investigative skills will be used by “ordinary” journalists every day. There are frequent claims that investigative journalism is in decline, and that some investigations are stunts designed more for entertainment than for uncovering information in the public interest. However, it lives on, and potential stories are typically investigated by combining information already in the public domain with material obtained through Freedom of Information laws, information leaked by whistleblowers, and/or by talking to as many as possible of the people involved. The digital age has seen the creation of new methods of revelation, including the crowdsourcing of user-generated content. Investigative reporting has been explained variously as an essential element of democracy, as favouring a simplistic narrative of “good versus evil” at the expense of questioning structural forces, as an esoteric form of journalism of

little interest to most citizens, and as a tribune of the common people. It is probably all those things and more, and the concept remains a vital part of the self-identity even of journalists who themselves rarely conduct in-depth investigations.

## Questions

- Should all journalism really be investigative?
- What are the main obstacles confronting journalists on investigations?
- Are we living in the golden age of investigative journalism?
- Why is investigative journalism said to be essential to democracy?
- Do investigative reporters create a myth of good versus evil?

## What would you do?

You work for a news organisation that plans to increase the number of original investigations it conducts. Two suggestions for investigations have been suggested at editorial conference. One is to look into the economic and social factors that may help explain a reported 160% increase in the number of people using emergency food banks over the past year. The other is to look into claims that the volunteers running certain charity food banks sometimes hand food parcels out to people who say they are needy without fully checking their “sob stories”. Given that newsroom resources are tight, you are asked which of the two you think ought to be investigated. What factors might influence your choice?

## Further reading

Anybody interested in reading more about journalists as investigators should really start with *All the President's Men* by Bernstein and Woodward ([1974] 2005), which is at least as much about the journalistic process as it is about the scandals of the Nixon presidency. The film of the same name is worth seeing too, as are *The Insider* and *Spotlight*. As ever, Hanna and Dodd (2020) is essential for knowing where you stand in relation to the law, and for practical advice on FOI see Heather Brooke's (2007) *Your Right to Know* and Matthew Burgess' (2015) *Freedom of Information: A Practical Guide for UK Journalists*. Veteran *Guardian* investigator David Leigh (2019) reflects on the craft in general as well as some of his big stories, Lewis (2011) provides a blow-by-blow account of his investigation into the death of Ian Tomlinson, Palast (2002) includes several of his own investigative reports, and Beckett and Ball (2012) and Leigh and Harding (2011) explore the early days of *WikiLeaks*. Contributors to Mair and Keeble (2011) and de Burgh and Lashmar (2021) – as with the earlier editions of the latter (de Burgh, 2000, 2008) – describe a range of investigations and also place investigative journalism within a wider social and academic context. For an account of investigative journalism in China, Tong (2011) is probably the best place to start. Finally, the concept of the public interest is discussed in depth in Harcup (2007), which also includes an interview with the reporter who spent two months undercover in Buckingham Palace working as a footman to the Queen.

## Top three to try next

Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward ([1974] 2005) *All the President's Men*

David Leigh (2019) *Investigative Journalism: A Survival Guide*

Hugo de Burgh and Paul Lashmar (2021) *Investigative Journalism*

## Sources for soundbites

Youle, interviewed by the author; Palast, 2002: 8; Wain, interviewed by the author; Foot, quoted in Knightley, 2011: 23; Stone, quoted in Guttenplan, 2012: xiv; *LA Times*, quoted in Brennen, 2003: 126; Gilligan, quoted in Harcup, 2007: 17; Evans, quoted in Trelford, 2020.

## Investigative journalism

Investigative journalism, the bringing to public attention of “truths about the world that would otherwise be hidden”, has been described as having “iconic status” within western democracies in particular (Leigh, 2019: 1). Beyond the west too, “investigative journalism has been an important part of the process through which Chinese journalists shift from loyal Party propagandists toward professional journalists” (Tong, 2011: 225), although political pressures can also pause or reverse such shifts (Tong, 2020). Investigative journalism is placed at the “most active” extreme of the continuum of journalistic initiative by Denis McQuail (2013: 104), at the opposite end of the scale from churning out scarcely rewritten press releases, regurgitating statements or listing forthcoming events. Yet the very concept can be problematic, as Mark Hanna notes: “The term ‘investigative journalist’ smacks of pretension, and has few ardent adherents among practitioners. But it helps denote the self-motivation, the experience and knowledge, the methodology and the set of skills which sustain a journalist through a complex, lengthy assignment” (Hanna, in Franklin et al, 2005: 122–123).

The term retains some currency among both practitioners and academics as denoting a particular type of journalistic inquiry, defined by John Ullmann and Steve Honeyman as “the reporting, through one’s own work product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organisations wish to keep secret” (quoted in Northmore, 2001: 188). It has been described as being “characterised by in-depth and near-obsessional research, dogged determination, accumulated knowledge, team-effort (though some of our best... have been loners), the crucial support of editors and the space to pursue stories not because of notions of the truth but because it might turn out to be interesting” (Dorril, 2000).

The extent to which investigative skills are those also used by “ordinary” journalists – but with added scepticism – varies according to which practitioner is consulted. Elements of investigation can come into otherwise simple reportage just as many journalists who conduct investigations also find themselves working on relatively straightforward news stories; investigative journalists and ordinary journalists not only inhabit the same universe, they may actually be the same people (as personified in this chapter by Deborah Wain).

## Facts

Investigative reporting provides audiences with “a nonofficial version of reality or ‘truth’ which is fact-based”, as Jingrong Tong (2011: 229) puts it. This approach typically abandons the ritual of allegation-and-denial, or attributed

opinions, in favour of an attempt “to establish facts which, if possible, decide the issue one way or the other” (Spark, 1999: 1). However, facts are far from unproblematic. There does not exist some universally accepted supply of them, and their significance might not be apparent until they are put “into relation with other facts”, according to Cockburn (1967: 147), who continues: “In that sense all stories are written backwards – they are supposed to begin with the facts and develop from there, but in reality they begin from a journalist’s point of view, a conception, and it is the point of view from which the facts are subsequently organised.” Not all journalists would agree, but it is certainly true that the facts are sometimes disputed all the way to the libel courts and even the prison cell. Even when the existence of a specific fact is accepted, its relevance – or the interpretation placed upon it – may not be. Investigative journalists may therefore find themselves piling fact upon fact on what turn out to be shifting sands. Even so, the very pursuit of the facts, and the reporter’s willingness sometimes to adopt the role of accuser, challenges the notions of formal balance and impartiality that are so important to much conventional reporting (Manning, 2001: 70).

## Constraints

For Stephen Dorril, investigative journalism enjoyed “a brief bloom in the sixties, flowered for a short period in the seventies, badly wilted in the eighties and is now effectively dead” (Dorril, 2000). Not dead but clearly in decline, according to Hanna, who blames structural changes within the media since the 1970s for “shrivelling” investigative journalism at its roots; changes such as relentless cost-cutting, understaffing, speed-up and, on television, a ruthless drive for ratings (Hanna, 2000: 2–7). Working in such conditions effectively undermines the “relative autonomy” enjoyed by journalists (Manning, 2001: 105), an autonomy necessary if the time and space are to be made available for investigations. After all, investigative journalists might be seen as mavericks or expensive luxuries even by their colleagues, never mind their employers. It has been claimed that recruits to journalism are “quickly schooled into understanding that investigative journalism is basically a myth and that their success is strongly related to their accuracy and skill in applying journalistic techniques and formulas” (Harrison, 2000: 113). Despite such constraints, investigative journalism survives, as this chapter demonstrates.

## Public interest

Investigative journalism in the public interest has been described as “an indispensable asset to our democracy”, by the official Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life, no less (quoted in Doig, 1997: 210). But it can be difficult to decide what precisely is in the public interest, especially as the phrase can be freely bandied about by those on all sides of a supposed scandal. As McQuail notes:

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The underlying thinking is that freedom to publish, even where it harms individuals, can be justified only where a true public interest can be argued to exist, but not otherwise. ... However, this line is a very difficult one to draw, especially where it concerns political figures, celebrities or others prominent in public life, whose entire private life can have implications for public conduct. (McQuail, 2013: 32)

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It might be time, he suggests, to replace legalistic notions of the public interest with a broader conceptualisation of the “common good” informed by human rights thinking about the benefits of relatively open spaces for public expression and communication (McQuail, 2013: 33).

## Democracy

An investigative journalist is said to play a vital democratic role as “the tribune of the commoner, exerting on her or his behalf the right to know, to examine and to criticise” (de Burgh, 2000: 315). It is a tempting image, but how democratic is it really? Quite apart from legal and economic constraints, there are other limitations on the democratic claims of investigative journalism. *Who* decides what is worthy of investigation, and on what basis? Some stories are undoubtedly seen as more sexy than others, and if there is the possibility of good pictures, film or audio material, then so much the better. Similarly, some people are seen as more deserving of sympathy – again, it helps if they are photogenic – while others are easier to paint as villains. Is that fair? Or very democratic?

Investigative journalism might result in the jailing of a corrupt politician, but maybe that just perpetuates a myth that society is divided into a large number of fundamentally good people and a smaller number of fundamentally bad people. Where is the investigative journalism into *structural* forces in society? Largely notable for its absence. Hanna challenges us to consider whether, rather than exemplifying a democratic spirit, even the heyday of UK investigative journalism in reality offered an “elitist and pompous” form of journalism (Hanna, 2000: 16). More open forms of investigation might help minimise the element of elitism, argues Paul Lewis:

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Investigative journalists traditionally work in the shadows, quietly squirrelling away information until they have garnered enough to stand-up their story. ... But an alternative modus operandi is insurgent. ... Investigating in the open means telling the people what you are looking for and asking them to help search. It means telling them what you have found, too, as you find it. It works because of the ease with which information can be shared via the internet, where social media is enabling collaborative enterprise between paid journalists and citizens who are experts in their realm. (Lewis, 2011: 31–32)

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Despite the stereotyped image of the investigative journalist as a heroic loner, teamwork among journalists has been at least as common, as has the necessary collaboration between reporter and source on the one hand, and reporter and their editor (and sometimes lawyer) on the other. Now, if Lewis is right, crowdsourcing might also open up more possibilities for collaboration between journalists and those citizens with relevant knowledge or expertise. If that becomes (part of) the future of investigative journalism, might it imbue the craft with some democratic practices to match its oft-proclaimed democratic principles? That might be worth investigating.

# CHAPTER 7 “WE ARE IN THE ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS”: JOURNALISTS AS ENTERTAINERS

## Key terms

And finally...; Authority; Celebrity journalism; Clickbait; Dumbing down; Elitism; Emotion; Enjoyment; Entertainment; Fashion journalism; Fun; Human interest; Humour; Infotainment; News values; Redtops; Shareability; Sport; Storytelling; Tabloidisation; User-generated content

In her time as a journalist, Susie Beever has reported on countless serious issues, from child poverty to the threat of far-right terrorism, but none comes close to matching the impact of her Ed Sheeran story. If by impact, we mean page views. It wasn't much of a story, to be honest, and it wasn't actually about the singer himself. It was a social media video clip of a punter at a concert that Beever turned into a little news item by adding a few words of text, including a credit for the person who filmed it. “It was a video of a man slipping and falling in the mud, and it was the most read story I've ever written,” she says.

It was a very wet summer's day in 2019 when Ed Sheeran performed an open-air concert for 80,000 people in a Leeds park, as Beever recalls:

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There'd been a deluge of rain during the day and the whole park became a mudbath. It was something I'd spotted on Twitter, and it was a bit of banking in the park and he was trying to climb up and kept slipping down, it was so funny, it was a bit of slapstick really. That did really well, I think that had about 130,000 page views. People go on it to see the

video, they don't go on it to read the copy, so it's just a few  
pars to say a funny video appeared online, it showed a man  
slipping and falling in the mud.

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She is being modest there, because her copy also included the  
following classical reference: “The man’s heroic efforts were likened  
to a ‘modern-day Sisyphus’, referring to the Greek legend of the man  
forced to carry a large rock to the top of a mountain only for it to roll  
back down.” (VIDEO SHOWS SLAPSTICK MOMENT ED SHEERAN  
CONCERT-GOERS SLIDE DOWN MUDDY BANK AS ROUNDHAY  
PARK TURNS INTO A MUD BATH, Susie Beever, *Yorkshire Evening  
Post*, August 17 2019, [www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/whats-  
on/arts-and-entertainment/video-shows-slapstick-moment-ed-  
sheeran-concert-goers-slide-down-muddy-bank-roundhay-park-  
turns-mud-bath-631043](http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/video-shows-slapstick-moment-ed-sheeran-concert-goers-slide-down-muddy-bank-roundhay-park-turns-mud-bath-631043).) But she is surely correct in thinking that it  
was not for her allusions to Greek mythology that most people  
clicked on the story.

In addition to doing well on the newspaper website and her own  
Twitter account  
(<https://twitter.com/SusieMayJourno/status/1162684278645432320>),  
this piece of **entertainment** was also perfectly suited for sharing on  
Facebook. Again, it is the video itself that contributes most to its  
shareability, but a few imaginatively crafted words can help, as she  
explains:

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When we put stories on Facebook we put a little punchy  
comment and we call it the *sell*, and it might say something  
like, “This is shocking,” that kind of thing. But the *sell* that I  
used for this on Facebook was that first line of one of Ed  
Sheeran’s songs, about when your legs don’t work like they  
used to before. That worked really well on Facebook.

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“We are in the entertainment business.”

– *Rupert Murdoch*.

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Entertaining news items come in many shapes and sizes, and pre-date the possibility of people sharing them on social media. Television news in particular has a long history of featuring humorous “And finally...” items at the end of bulletins, to round off the bad news on a lighter note. TV reporter Lindsay Eastwood made them into something of an artform. Anyone who has seen the film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is likely to remember the scene in which intrepid reporter Bridget concludes a piece-to-camera in a fire station by sliding down a pole with her backside descending directly onto the camera. Well, Eastwood recalled the scene when she was sent out to produce an “And finally...” piece for regional TV news about the growth in popularity of pole dancing:

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Pole dancing is now regarded as a form of exercise rather than a seedy lap-dancing thing. There were all these very attractive women, and I’m not exactly the best example of a pole dancing babe, but I thought I’m going to have to be in this to make it funny, and to poke fun at myself. So I did a Bridget Jones style slide down the pole on to the lens of the camera, which did the trick really. It was just lucky that I had trousers on.

I enjoy doing the “And finally...” stories because you can be creative. I’ve done a giant mushroom story, and a dog that was allergic to grass so they made it these special little red wellies. That was sweet. I did a lollipop man who’d won a “best lollipop man” award and he did a rap, so we got him dancing with some kids. I did a baby boom in a Hull supermarket where everybody on the checkout had had a baby. We got them to do the Marge Simpson thing with the checkout going “ping” when the baby was scanned in. And they’ve even taken a shot of my cleavage for National Cleavage Day.

You can have a lot of fun on TV. When you’ve been doing serious stories like the floods, it’s nice to do the light stuff. The strangest thing I have covered recently was a live report from a naked bike ride in York by protesters trying to highlight environmental issues. On that occasion I think I had a really good excuse to defy the ITN remit of doing a



reporter involvement piece-to-camera. It was a tricky job, since we are under strict guidelines not to show any genitals in our programme and yet the whole story was about naked people. I don't know how, but I managed to pull it off.

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Such “And finally...” pieces are dismissed by some as formulaic trash, demeaning of the journalist's craft, but Eastwood disagrees. “No, I don't think they're formulaic at all. I think news stories are formulaic. You know, you get the scene of the murder, you get eyewitnesses, you try and chase the family. That's formulaic. I think the ‘And finally...’s are a real challenge.”

It is not everyone who can rise to such a challenge, however. I recall working in one newsroom during a heatwave when some bright spark had the idea of testing the legend about it being “hot enough to fry an egg on the pavement”. We rushed outside to put the theory to the test – but the egg steadfastly refused to fry. After half-an-hour we conceded defeat, scraped up the mess, and beat a retreat to the sound of jeers from drinkers who were enjoying the sun and the spectacle outside the pub next door. It was not the best piece of investigative journalism I had ever been involved with. It was just a bit of fun – entertainment.

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“Much of what passes for journalism in this celebrity-ridden era is the 21st century equivalent of bread and circuses.”

– Deirdre O'Neill.

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Some stories are entertaining by virtue of their subject matter. Others can be rendered entertaining by being well written, by holding the attention of the audience, by the use of anecdotes or asides, or by injecting humour. One colleague used to speak of “sprinkling topspin and stardust” onto a news story, brightening it up with that extra bit of colour or drama to make it more entertaining. After all, we call news items *stories* because we adopt many of the conventions of the

storyteller. Entertaining is not a new role for journalists, as this 19th-century verse demonstrates:

Tickle the public, make 'em grin,

The more you tickle, the more you'll win;

Teach the public, you'll never get rich,

You'll live like a beggar and die in a ditch. (Quoted in Engel, 1997: 17)

Even if we *do* want to teach the public, we won't get very far if nobody reads, watches or listens to our work because we have made it too dull. Without an audience there can be no journalism, and we are not likely to gather much of an audience if we do not seek, at least in part, to entertain as well as inform. Difficulties can arise when the distinction appears to be forgotten, as documentary maker Eddie Mirzoeff felt was the case when he asked for his name to be removed from a serious BBC2 series that had been "reversioned", with added music, to make it more zappy (Brown, 2003). As one of those responsible for commissioning television documentaries later explained: "The premium is to find brighter, more entertaining documentary programming. Documentaries can be seen as a rather painful dose of medicine, and I believe we are there to entertain people" (quoted in Brown, 2005).

As with documentaries, so with current affairs broadcasting, where there are recurrent complaints about the lines between journalism and entertainment being blurred and an unhealthy obsession with ratings-friendly subject matter such as sex, drugs, plastic surgery, crime and anything-from-hell. Rather than well-informed talking heads given the time to discuss subjects at length, there has been a reliance on brief soundbites, fast cuts, odd camera angles, secret filming and often gratuitous reconstructions (only sometimes clearly labelled as such). Dramatic mood music accompanies much current affairs journalism on TV, including reconstructions of serious crime, and musical clips are becoming far more common in radio packages and almost ever-present in podcasts. Sometimes all this can make

for gripping, engaging and informative journalism delivered in a style that is popular yet serious, innovative yet appropriate. Sometimes.

## “CRIME, CELEBRITY AND MIRACLE CURES”

Entertaining may not be an entirely new role for journalists, then, but in recent decades many have felt that the balance has tilted too far in that direction. A study by Deirdre O’Neill (2012) contrasted news coverage of the deaths of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson three decades apart, and concluded that celebrity news has grown at an exponential rate, squeezing out other much more consequential material and **dumbing down** the news. A longstanding critic of this process is former BBC war correspondent Martin Bell:

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In hock to the advertisers, ITN set the trend by its decision, early in the 1990s, to promote an agenda of crime, celebrity and miracle cures – and to downgrade foreign news to a couple of slots a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, unless anything more sellable happened closer to home. The judgements were not editorial, but commercial. (Bell, 2002)

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“Dumbing down is a dumb term to describe something far more complex at work in society today.”

– *Alan Rusbridger.*

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Broadcast news may have taken on board elements of the tabloid agenda, but the redtops remain in a league of their own when it comes to the blurring of lines between news and entertainment through their coverage of sex, soaps and celebs. “The relentless push towards entertainment values has meant that the definition of what makes ‘news’ is itself constantly changing,” writes Patricia Holland (1998: 31) in the context of the *Sun* but with wider

resonance. Let's consider a not untypical news page from a copy of the *Sun* picked up at random. Of the four stories on the page, the one that leaps out visually is AMY STEAMS UP THE TUB, featuring one huge photograph and two smaller pictures, all illustrating an item that begins: "TV beauty Amy Willerton flaunts her fabulous bikini body in this steamy photoshoot..." The page lead, KYLIE RATED, concerns "pop princess Kylie Minogue" apparently receiving "a bumper pay rise" for her role as a judge on a TV talent show. The two smaller stories on the page both also concern TV talent shows. Of course, there are more serious items elsewhere in the same day's paper, but most of these are also written and presented in entertaining fashion. That day's splash, revealing that Prince William had gone on a shooting trip just before he launched a campaign to save wildlife, is headlined BAD WILLS HUNTING on the front page, followed inside with THE ROYAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CUDDLY ANIMALS. And a two-page news special on flooding in the south-west of England centres on a dramatic photograph of a house surrounded by water, headlined CANUTE: I'M STAYING PUT and a story about criticism of the head of the Environment Agency, given the startling personalised headline I'LL STICK THAT GIT'S HEAD IN LOO AND FLUSH IT (all from the *Sun*, February 8 2014).

Yet even the *Sun* can appear too po-faced for some, as the *Daily Star's* Dawn Neesom explains:

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The job of a newspaper has changed. Yes, it's important people get news but it's also important that they have fun, that they can open a newspaper and it makes them smile. I think the *Sun* is losing the plot. There is nothing to smile at in there. I don't want to read another campaign about paedophiles. I know they are out there and I know it's a problem but on a Monday morning I don't want to think, "Oh no, it's another week of more doom and gloom". (Quoted in Plunkett, 2003)

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Such tabloid values have been crossing over into the self-styled "quality" press for decades, according to academic commentators such as Bob Franklin (1997: 7–10). The *Times*, for example, has changed almost beyond recognition from the era when it unleashed a highbrow classical music critic to review a Beatles record; the

resulting article about the group's aeolian cadences and pan diatonic clusters baffled fans and Beatles alike. Serious newspapers now have a much "fluffier feel", in the words of one *Daily Telegraph* journalist (quoted in Ponsford, 2006), and have adopted many of the ideas and styles of magazine journalism as well as some from the redtops and social media. But engagement with popular culture, leisure, lifestyle and entertainment does not mean that newspapers necessarily *ignore* more traditionally weighty subject matter while engaging with the lighter; there might be room for both.

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"Arguably, news has become more democratic, reflecting the concerns of a wider population rather than the views of a cultural elite."

– *Mick Temple.*

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Regional media are also part of the entertainment business alongside the information business, according to David Helliwell:

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First and foremost we're there to inform, but in this day and age you've got to do more than that because there's so much competition. There will always be pages in the paper where you are trying to be entertaining, to give people a read – features, the women's supplement, travel pages, reporters trying the latest high street fad, that sort of stuff. It's a balance, but our two big sellers are still local news and local sport.

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Locally and nationally, sports reporting has been moved much higher up the news agenda in recent years, with many stories about sports stars now given a prominence that would have bewildered earlier generations of editors. That's not because football is really more important than matters of life and death, as Bill Shankly used to say (he was joking, by the way). Sport is popular with a big chunk of the audience, because it "is about fantasy and dreams, and these days at least half the population are having them" (Cole and Harcup,

2010: 114). And just as sport itself is a form of entertainment, so is coverage of it.

As with sport journalism, so with fashion journalism, although, in terms of image, the latter has tended to be accorded “a uniquely low status in UK journalism both academically and anecdotally”, argues Julie Bradford (2013: 80), despite the fact that, as one fashion editor told her: “Fashion has everything for a journalist – money, industry, beauty, history, drama, intrigue, big characters.” Certainly, fashion coverage is as important a part of the journalistic mix for some members of the audience as sport is for others; shockingly, some people might even enjoy both.

Other growth areas over recent years have included beauty journalism, food journalism, travel journalism, video games journalism and coverage of anything that relates to our wider cultural lives, from tattoos to Taoism. Some reporting might have a serious public interest purpose, such as discussion of the ethics of throwaway clothing, sweatshop working conditions, the promotion of unhealthy body images or racism in football; and, even if it is not always obviously in the public interest, does that render such forms of journalism worthless?

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“The *Daily Star* is about making people smile.”

– Dawn Neesom.

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## ENTERTAINMENT VALUES

As already noted in [Chapter 3](#), editors tend to look favourably on stories with the capacity to entertain or amuse, to leaven all the bad news. A number of components go together to form the entertainment package that influences news selection in erstwhile “serious” media as well as the more popular end of the market. Stories with interesting or arresting photographs, video or audio may be valued as much for their entertainment value as for their information value, and may also increase their “shareability” factor

among members of the audience using social media (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). Entertainment can be seen in “soft” subject matter concerning sex, showbusiness, sport, lighter human interest, animals, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists; but harder news stories can also be entertaining in the sense that they may include an element of drama or be told as a gripping narrative. As Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 9) notes, “journalists will often ask sources how they *feel*, as a way of generating drama and compassion” (emphasis in original).

Sometimes the facts can do the job themselves, without the need for a reporter to insert drama, emotion, jokes or puns, as with this lighter story from the coronavirus pandemic, SNAKE USED AS FACE MASK ON BUS, with its beautifully strait-laced treatment:

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A man boarded a bus using a snake as a face covering. The commuter and his reptilian mask, which was wrapped around his neck and mouth, were seen on a bus from Swinton to Manchester on Monday.

One passenger said she thought the passenger was wearing a “funky mask” until she spotted it slithering over hand rails. Transport bosses in Greater Manchester confirmed a snake was not a valid face covering...

...Using a face covering on public transport is mandatory, except for children under the age of 11 or those who are exempt for health or disability reasons. A Transport for Greater Manchester spokesperson said: “Government guidance clearly states that this needn’t be a surgical mask, and that passengers can make their own or wear something suitable, such as a scarf or bandana. While there is a small degree of interpretation that can be applied to this, we do not believe it extends to the use of snakeskin – especially when still attached to the snake.” (BBC, 2020b)

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## Humour

The news can often be a laughing matter, and a humorous story such as the snake face mask would be popular with most

newsdesks. When council workers took an unusually long time to mend a streetlamp it became national news not because of any particular significance, but because it echoed jokes about how many people it takes to change a lightbulb: FOUR MONTHS, 16 MEN AND £1,000 TO MEND LAMP (*Sun*, September 16 2002). Sometimes the opportunity for a headline pun is enough to warrant a story's inclusion, as when rock band the Red Hot Chili Peppers were accused of miming at a Super Bowl performance: THE RED NOT CHILI PEPPERS (*Daily Mirror*, February 6 2014). And surely the reason so many people shared Susie Beever's story about the Ed Sheeran concert (above) was that it made them laugh. It fits with certain news organisations' commercial agenda to be seen as somewhere that can put a smile on readers' faces, as with the redtop *Daily Star*, which repeatedly used humour to ridicule the UK government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic with front-page headlines and graphics presenting health secretary Matt Hancock as a circus clown (or, alternatively, as one of the Chuckle Brothers). The paper even superimposed the face of controversial government adviser Dominic Cummings on a free cut-out-and-keep "do whatever the hell you want and sod everybody else mask" (*Daily Star*, May 27 2020). In this, the paper was demonstrating the classic tabloid trait, not just of humour, but of using "a rhetoric of siding with the common sense views of ordinary people" (Conboy, 2006: 26).

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"The focus is on those things which are apt to arouse curiosity but require no analysis."

– *Pierre Bourdieu.*

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## Sex

If there is a sex angle to a story it is regarded as more entertaining and is therefore more likely to be used, with the sex angle emphasised even if it is marginal to the events described (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001: 274). A sex story involving a celeb from showbiz or sport is best, but ordinary civilians' sex lives are also covered at times. For example, court cases and employment tribunals with sex



angles are more likely to be reported, all other things being equal, than are those without.

## Animals

Animals appear in many entertaining stories that feature an element of surprise or unusual behaviour. We have already heard about the snake on a bus, but even a less exotic creature might make a news story. Susie Beever's second most viewed piece of news reporting concerned a dog on a bus seat: HEARTBREAK FOR STRAY DOG AFTER SHE GETS ON WEST YORKSHIRE BUS ON HER OWN (Susie Beever, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, October 18 2019). She takes up the story:

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It was a picture of a dog, either a stray dog or it had been abandoned or whatever, and it had got on a bus somewhere in Bradford. Someone had taken a picture of it and called the [animal welfare charity] RSPCA and they put the dog in a shelter. The RSPCA put the picture out saying, "Does anyone recognise this dog?", and it was just the kind of way it was sat on a bus, just like a person would be. It's emotional impact, isn't it? That did 120,000 page views.

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Human interest can include animal interest, it seems.

## Showbiz

Stories about TV stars and other celebs are rife in the tabloids, but all UK national media – normally with the exception of the *Financial Times* and one or two of the BBC's more austere outlets – now carry showbiz stories and/or compare people in real stories to fictional counterparts. Some are harmless fun and many are PR puffery but others highlight serious concerns as people in the public eye talk about their mental or physical health issues. Such stories can pack a powerful emotional punch at the same time as raising public awareness (and, sometimes, funds). However, if the private lives of troubled celebs are covered in intrusive or hurtful ways, it can feel as if an individual's torment is being served up for public entertainment like an old-fashioned freak show, with little thought seemingly given

to the impact on the target themselves – except, in those cases that end tragically, after it is already too late.

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“The truth has been taken out of my hands and used as entertainment.”

– *Caroline Flack.*

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## Crime

It is now well over 70 years since George Orwell recorded the complaints of newspaper readers that “you never seem to get a good murder nowadays” (Orwell, 1946a: 10). But crime stories continue to fascinate journalists and audiences alike, although the validity of crime news is compromised if journalists put entertaining their audience above reporting the facts or informed analysis, argues David J Krajicek, former crime reporter for the *New York Daily News*:

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[The] bulk of crime coverage amounts to drive-by journalism – a ton of anecdote and graphic detail about individual cases drawn from the police blotter but not an ounce of leavening context to help frame and explain crime. Too many of these reports begin and end with who did what to whom, embellished with the moans of a murder victim’s mother or the sneer of an unrepentant killer in handcuffs. (Krajicek, 1998)

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## Pictures

Most of the specific stories mentioned in this chapter were illustrated with strong, or at least entertaining, pictures. However, some use of pictures is more gratuitous, and not just on the *Mail Online*’s sidebar of shame. *Sunday Express* editor John Junor once remarked that “a beautiful young woman lifts even the dreariest page” (quoted in

McKay, 1999: 188), and his unreconstructed views live on in much of today's media, including broadsheet business pages, where the cleavage count is frequently boosted by pics of lingerie models illustrating stories about profits or losses at high street stores. Former *Daily Telegraph* editor Sarah Sands (2010) admits that “in my time we made it a house rule to run at least one picture of Liz Hurley every day”. See [Chapter 11](#) for further discussion of pictures.

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“News is dependent – for the drama and appeal of its narratives – on explaining the emotions of actors and characters, and engaging the emotions of audiences.”

– Karin Wahl-Jorgensen.

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## ENTERTAINMENT VERSUS ELITISM?

Whenever journalists address “popular” subjects, or report in ways intended to entertain, they run the risk of being accused of dumbing down, peddling trivia or lacking **authority**. And when critics accuse journalists of dumbing down, they in turn tend to be accused of cultural **elitism**. Yet even the most serious news is reported in ways designed to be entertaining, to keep the audience engaged. That is why news is told in the form of stories that usually focus on individual people rather than abstract concepts; why news stories are written in language that is accessible, active and sometimes colourful; why news stories may be presented visually, creatively or even in the form of a list. See [Chapters 9, 10 and 11](#) for more on how to report in ways designed to engage – and retain – the interest of the audience.

A journalist's job, then, is *both* to inform and to entertain. The trick – for journalist and audience alike – is to recognise the difference between the two and to understand that if it fails to inform then it ceases to be journalism. It is also worth remembering that sometimes the facts of a story, simply told, can be the most entertaining of all.

## Summary

Journalists have long sought to entertain as well as to inform, to attract and retain an audience. This takes the form of selecting entertaining subject matter (such as showbiz, sex, animals and crime) and of telling stories in entertaining ways (including humour, drama and pictures). It has been claimed that the lines between information and entertainment – and between serious and popular media – have become blurred in recent decades as part of the process known as “dumbing down”. The dumbing down thesis has in turn been criticised as elitist and dismissed as the harking back to a supposed golden age that probably never existed. As journalism entails entertaining as well as informing an audience, journalists and citizens both need to be able to recognise the distinction between the two.

## Questions

Can journalism be both entertaining and informative at the same time?

Why do journalists tell news as stories?

Why is crime such big news?

Is the concept of an authoritative-sounding news bulletin inherently elitist?

Is *any* news better than *no* news?

## What would you do?

You are on work experience in the newsroom of a popular national newspaper when the picture desk comes up with an

idea of how to cover the fact that a photograph of a member of the royal family and companion, both naked, has just been published overseas. The paper has agreed to a request from Buckingham Palace not to publish the original picture and you are asked if you would be willing to pose in the nude and take part in a humorous recreation of the scene in the controversial snap. The idea is to publish a mocked-up photograph of you with a volunteer from the newsroom (both “tastefully” naked with neither breasts nor genitalia visible), alongside a caption saying that you both decided to “drop everything” to recreate the royal pose for readers’ benefit. You are told it is all a bit of harmless fun. What would you do?

## Further reading

For an entertaining historical account of the press as popular entertainment you can’t do better than Matthew Engel’s (1997) *Tickle the Public*. Anthony Delano’s ([1975] 2008 and 2009) retelling of Fleet Street’s finest in pursuit of Ronnie Biggs and Joyce McKinney, respectively, also help explain how to put the pop into popular journalism. Julie Bradford’s (2020) *Fashion Journalism* is the best place to start for up-to-date accounts and analysis of how and why fashion journalism can be both entertaining and worthwhile, and Phil Andrews (2014) does a similar job for sports journalism. Ben Falk (2018) offers a first-hand account of various aspects of covering the showbiz beat, while Bethany Usher’s (2021) *Journalism and Celebrity* is a more scholarly analysis of the “fuzzy, noisy, contested mess of contradictions” (p 5) that make up celebrity journalism. Dovey (2000) examines the “carnavalesque” excesses of so-called reality TV, raising questions of authority, authorship and the public sphere. Franklin (1997) offers a still relevant critique of the tabloidisation of the print and broadcast media in the UK, countered in part by McNair (2000), who argues that coverage of politics in particular has *not* been dumbed down, and Temple’s (2006) provocatively titled paper, *Dumbing down is good for you*; also see Temple (2008). In contrast, Deirdre O’Neill (2012) insists that dumbing down is very bad for us indeed, and her brief study of the rise and rise of celebrity news is worth reading for the empirical data as well

as the strongly expressed argument. Finally, Bourdieu (1998) sounds a warning note that journalism's increasing focus on human interest stories might have the effect of depoliticising us as citizens.

## Top three to try next

Matthew Engel (1997) *Tickle the Public: One Hundred Years of the Popular Press*

Anthony Delano (2009) *Joyce McKinney and the Case of the Manacled Mormon*

Mick Temple (2006) 'Dumbing down is good for you', *British Politics*

## Sources for soundbites

Murdoch, quoted in O'Neill, 1992: 30n; O'Neill, 2012: 42; Rusbridger, quoted in Cole and Harcup, 2010: 124; Temple, 2006: 262; Neesom, quoted in Plunkett, 2003; Bourdieu, 1998: 51; Flack, quoted in BBC, 2020c; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 9.

## Entertainment

"The entertaining appeal of news is often studied from the assumption that it aims to distract people from the serious side of life by diverting their attention to more trivial issues," observes Irene Costera Meijer (2020: 397) in her discussion of journalism as it is experienced by members of the audience, for whom enjoyment and emotional engagement may be as important a part of the story as whatever information they receive. The word "entertainment" is not even included in the index of such a well-regarded book as

*The Elements of Journalism* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel ([2001] 2003), suggesting the authors do not see it as a particularly important element of the journalist's job. However, it *is* touched on briefly, albeit in the following disparaging way:

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[W]hen you turn your news into entertainment, you are playing to the strengths of other media rather than your own. How can the news ever compete with entertainment on entertainment's terms? Why would it want to? ... The strategy of infotainment, though it may attract an audience in the short run and may be cheap to produce, will build a shallow audience because it is built on form, not substance. (Kovach and Rosenstiel, [2001] 2003: 154–155)

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Maybe. But maybe there can also be substance in news that is presented in entertaining ways. And maybe a shallow audience is better than *no* audience, which might be the most likely alternative. Presenting the news in entertaining ways can open up news discourse to *more* citizens, argues Hartley (2011: 142), who points out that “sex, scandal, disaster and celebrity have been intrinsic to modern journalism since the Enlightenment”.

## Dumbing down

Debate about so-called “dumbing down” extends far beyond journalism to include education, the arts and society in general. Of most direct relevance to journalism is the claim that news has been transformed into “newszak”; that is, “news as a product designed and ‘processed’ for a particular market and delivered in increasingly homogenous ‘snippets’ which make only modest demands on the audience” (Franklin, 1997: 5). Supporters of the dumbing down thesis bemoan the fact that much news has now been “converted into entertainment” (Franklin, 1997: 5), or “infotainment” (Franklin and Canter, 2019: 144), with even the more serious purveyors of quality journalism succumbing to a process of

tabloidisation, whereby journalists face increasing pressure to produce content “that will delight the audience rather than inform, titillate rather than educate” (Frost, 2002: 5). For Pierre Bourdieu, this results in journalists being so terrified of being seen as boring that they increasingly favour:

- confrontation rather than debate
- polemics or polarised views over rigorous argument
- promotion of conflict
- confrontation of individuals rather than their arguments
- discussion of political tactics rather than the substance of policies
- dehistoricised and fragmented versions of events. (Bourdieu, 1998: 3–7)

There is nothing new about the “perennial” complaint that “journalism just recently got worse”, observes Samuel Winch. He argues that the boundary between news and entertainment is “socially constructed” and therefore to an extent arbitrary (Winch, 1997: 6 and 13). Back in the 1960s, the cultural theorist Stuart Hall observed – with little attempt at hiding his disdain – the apparent obsession of some UK newspapers with the private lives of celebrities:

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The marriages, engagements and divorces of celebrities *may* be of real public interest, and, in a general sense, they can help to give a very rough idea of how people other than those with whom most of us are acquainted live. But on the whole they contribute little to the kind of news we need to know to make sense of modern life: they become a species of “tittle-tattle”, the instinct on the journalist’s part for “getting the story” slipping away in the



direction of gossip, scandal and irrelevant social-voyeurism. (Hall, 1967: 111, emphasis in original)

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Not that entertainment and enlightenment need be seen as opposites. Journalism professor Mick Temple has gone so far as to argue that “dumbing down is good for you”. According to his academic paper of that title, political news is no longer the preserve of a cultural elite:

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[T]he so called “dumbing down” of political coverage, referring largely to the simplification and sensationalism of “serious” news by journalists, is an essential part of the process of engaging people in debates about the distribution of resources in modern democratic societies. (Temple, 2006: 257)

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In other words, many of the concerns of journalistic and academic critics voiced in this chapter can be seen as a form of elitism and/or nostalgia for a largely mythical golden age of journalism (Temple, 2006: 260). Similarly, Hartley (2011: 143) argues that “infotainment may not be dumbing down people who’d otherwise be reading the *Financial Times*, but taking information to places it would not otherwise reach”.

## Authority

Journalism and other media output increasingly emphasise – or foreground – the individual subjective experience at the expense of more general and authoritative “truth claims”, argues Jon Dovey (2000: 25). As part of this process of personalisation, it is claimed, the “we” of the bourgeois public sphere – which in any case was a rather narrow and male “we” – has now collapsed into “fragmented individualised subjectivities” (Dovey, 2000: 165). This, he writes, can be seen in the way that authoritative or investigative documentaries are regarded as elitist or boring when compared to so-called “reality TV” (p 4). Such considerations form part of the cultural backdrop against which many

sections of the media now place greater credence on user-generated content and audience comment than on carefully crafted pieces of journalism researched by specialist reporters. Whereas media employers value user-generated content primarily because it is free – many cultural theorists celebrate it for the challenge to traditional hierarchies of authority that they believe it entails.

## Elitism

Critics of the dumbing down thesis argue that it is an elitist concept, far too simplistic to do justice to the complexity of today's journalism – or journalisms. Paul Manning (2001: 7) suggests that there needs to be some entertainment value in journalism because “news audiences are unlikely to warm to a format that has the feel of a sociology seminar”, while Denis McQuail (2013: 9) points out that: “The much criticised news phenomenon of ‘infotainment’ may fail to meet high standards of information quality and is related to ‘commercialisation’, but it is not simply imposed from above on an unsuspecting and vulnerable public.” Rather, it can be seen as giving the public what they *want* as opposed to what an elite feel the public *need*. Although, as Deirdre O’Neill (2012: 37) points out, decisions to feed the masses an unhealthy diet of trivia and celebrity are made by senior figures in the news industry, many of whom themselves had the privilege of an elitist education, typically at private schools and Oxbridge universities.

Nonetheless, for Brian McNair, the blurring of boundaries between elite and popular culture means that journalism is less deferential towards the powerful than it was in the past (McNair, 2000: 59–60). He explains:

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[The] distinction between “serious” and “trivial” information is no longer one which can be taken as the basis for evaluating the public sphere. ... An earlier form of detached, deferential, more or less verbatim political reportage has gone from the print media..., to be replaced by styles and agendas

which, if they are occasionally entertaining, are at the same time more penetrating, more critical, more revealing and demystificatory of power than the polite, status-conscious journalisms of the past. And it is precisely the commercialising influence of the market which has allowed this to happen. (McNair, 2000: 60)

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Even daytime trash TV has been held up as an example of how a more populist approach can “capture and engage an audience who will fail to respond to more conventional coverage of social and ‘political’ issues” (Temple, 2006: 257). Kees Brants similarly argues that a mixture of “entertainment and consciousness raising” could help to “re-establish the popular in politics”, taking in not only “the discursive and decision-making domain of politics but also the vast terrain of domestic life” (Brants, 1998: 332–333). For Gill Ursell, given the multiplicity of media outlets and experiences now available to potential audiences, it may well be that “exposure to *some* kind of news is arguably better than *no* exposure at all” (Ursell, 2001: 192, my emphasis).

In any event, the fact that a journalist files a story about a dog sitting on a bus seat, or about a man slipping in the mud, does not disqualify them from also covering more serious stories. Human interest is not one dimensional – why should journalists be?

## PART TWO HOW TO DO JOURNALISM

In [Part One](#) we looked at what journalism is, at some of the many roles played by journalists and at the constraints under which journalists often have to work. The five chapters in [Part Two](#) go on to explain and explore the range of multimedia skills expected of journalists today as well as the basics that remain essential. The word “skills” may be frowned upon in some academic circles, as if the teaching of them is akin to training an animal to repeat an action of which it has no sophisticated understanding. But good journalism requires skills just as it requires a thinking, questioning approach; it is not unlike good scholarship, in that sense. Whether it be researching the strongest interview questions, writing an intro or editing a video, there are intellectual processes at work. [Part Two](#) may be primarily concerned with explaining *how* to do journalism, but this cannot be done effectively without continuing to think about *why* we do journalism in the first place.

# CHAPTER 8 INTERVIEWING FOR JOURNALISM

## Key terms

Background research; Closed questions; Control; Conversation; Death knocks; Doorstepping; Interviews; Listening; Off-the-record; Open questions; Performance; Pseudo-events; Questions; Quotes; Selection; Soundbites; Victims; Voxpops; Zoom

As a reporter for television news, Ayshah Tull often finds herself interviewing people who are not used to talking about their lives on screen. How does she put inexperienced interviewees at ease?

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It's really, really difficult. You have to get that rapport with someone really quickly. For me, I just use humour a lot, like, "This is a bit of an odd situation, but talk to me like you'd talk to your granddaughter", or, "Talk to me like you would your friends, like we're in the pub, having a bit of a chat, really casual, and you don't have to worry about using fancy words or anything like that, because to be honest, none of us understand what any of that means, so..."

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"You have to get that rapport with someone really quickly."

– *Ayshah Tull.*

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That seems to work as a way of getting ordinary people to describe their own experiences. But there is unlikely to be such chatty rapport when interviewing somebody in a position of power over people's lives; the UK's Health Secretary during the height of the Covid-19 crisis, for example. Tull again:

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Throughout the pandemic, I have interviewed Matt Hancock three times. Each time, I just make sure that I'm prepared. I'm prepared when I speak to members of the public about the topic, but I think I'm more relaxed with them, whereas someone who I know it's their job and they're accountable for something, I make sure I've got all my ducks in a row, I know what I want to ask. I know what they're responsible for – which is really important, especially if you're talking to members of the government, because they won't say, "That's not my department", but they'll say, "Oh, that's what the minister is looking into". But if I know that *you* are the minister responsible and you haven't done this but you said you were going to do it, then I'm going to make sure that I try to get an answer from you, and I'm not going to rest until I do. So it's a little bit of a different mindset.

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Sometimes you might not get an answer, but at least the question is out there – leaving viewers to make up their own minds about what has happened.

The **interview** – the asking of questions and the recording of answers – is a basic ingredient of most news and features. As a way of getting to the truth of a matter, it has its detractors and has even been described as a manufactured encounter or **pseudo-event**. Yet interviewing remains *the* key tool at the disposal of reporters. It is also one of the most enjoyable parts of a journalist's job because it is an exercise in nosiness, allowing us to meet interesting people and ask them pretty much any question we like. As Lynette Sheridan Burns (2013: 91) points out: "You can ask questions of an interviewee you cannot ask a document."

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"A lot of it is play it by ear."

## BE PREPARED

The interview may be a brief encounter over the phone, a lengthy affair over lunch, a setpiece live broadcast, a full kiss-and-tell buy-up or just a few questions answered via email or text. Whatever it is, you should have some idea *why* you are interviewing this particular person: for factual answers, opinions, quotes, emotions, description, scraps of colour, background, whatever. Many journalists stress the importance of meticulous planning to ensure they remain in control, and some work to set questions or even a “script” (Aitchison, 1988: 40–42). Planning anything that resembles a script may encourage a rather stiff and inflexible approach to an interview, but thinking of *some* questions in advance is certainly a good idea; and getting your ducks in a row, as Tull puts it, will be particularly important when questioning anyone in power or accused of wrongdoing (or both). Of course, an interview may take an unexpected turn – and that might be a route you want to follow – but along the way you should make sure you cover all the ground that you really need to.

You will often have time to conduct background research before the interview. You might spend a couple of hours searching news archives about the subject, looking for basic information and useful insights, and possibly thinking of an angle nobody has yet come up with. You might Google them, but remember to read beyond the first page of results and to not rely on Wikipedia as an infallible source; in fact, don't rely on *anything* as an infallible source. You might look in specialist magazines, consult reference books, and talk to colleagues or friends who know something about the subject – or who have something they would like to ask. When Simon Hattenstone told friends he was going to interview film director Woody Allen, for example, one suggested: “Ask him how somebody so ugly gets off with so many beautiful women?” That turned out to be the very question that Allen himself had “obsessed over for most of his adult life” (Hattenstone, 2007). You might even ask your followers on social media what they would like to know, as Cathy Newman sometimes does at *Channel 4 News*: “I can tweet about what story I'm doing, I can ask people what questions they think we

should be covering in an interview.” In which case, be prepared to filter out the ignorant or abusive ones; a reporter should not be a channel for sewage.

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“You won’t get anywhere without being a nosy sod.”

– *Simon Hattenstone.*

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## THE “WINNING GRACE” OF INTERVIEWING

There is plenty of often quite prescriptive advice available on interviewing techniques, although trial and error is the way most trainee journalists feel their way through their first interviews. Experiment with a range of approaches and see what works best for you in different circumstances. Remember that it is rarely a good idea to pretend to have a completely different personality from your own. Nor is it necessarily a good idea for every fledgling hack to try to be the former *Newsnight* griller-in-chief, Jeremy Paxman, who is widely quoted as saying he prepares for interviews by asking himself, “Why is this lying bastard lying to me?” He didn’t actually say that, he just quoted Louis Heren of the *Times* (Wells, 2005), who was in turn repeating some advice he had once received (Robinson, 2012: 219–220). But whoever coined the phrase, the “lying bastard” approach is definitely better suited to the interrogation of an evasive politician than it is to asking a nice old couple how they plan to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary.

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“When a politician tells you something in confidence, always ask yourself ‘*Why is this lying bastard lying to me?*’”

– *Louis Heren.*

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Reporters have to be comfortable speaking to all sorts of people, from homeless people to property developers. This remains as true today as when Frederick Mansfield instructed trainees back in the 1930s:

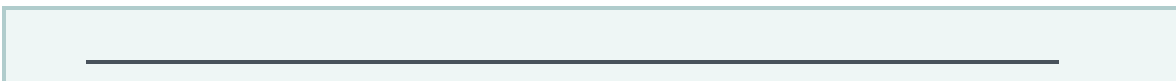
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Personality counts for much... The winning grace that will extract news equally from a Lord Lieutenant and a trade union secretary, is a great asset. A reporter touches life at all points and in his deportment should show respect for the feelings and opinions of others, no matter how much he may be out of sympathy with them. Journalism tends to breed cynicism and a hypercritical attitude, but good manners, and often diplomacy, forbid a display of contempt. (Mansfield, 1936: 87–88)

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The impeccably mannered Martin Wainwright believes that a journalist's main assets during interviews are being *curious* about people and allowing them the time and space to talk: "People can be diffident, so the interesting things sometimes come out only at the very end of an interview." Also, he adds, "people can open up more if you appear a bit naïve". Note the word *appear* in that sentence. Louis Theroux has built a very successful career on just such a shtick.

Conversation is key to good interviewing. Even the briefest interview should involve the techniques of conversation, and that means *listening* as well as talking. Yet the listening part is too often overlooked, according to Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame: "One of the things I've observed having been interviewed so many times is that reporters tend to be terrible listeners. They have usually decided what the story is before they do the interview, and they will choose the one which will manufacture the most controversy" (quoted in Silver, 2007). A good journalist will listen and engage with what is being said, not just wait for a gap to fill with the next pre-planned question. In face-to-face interviews it is important to make eye contact, and in all interviews the interviewee needs to be reassured via sounds or gestures that the interviewer is still awake and, ideally, still interested.



“As a journalist you spend most of your life rushing, but it’s still worth spending as long as you can with people.”

– *Martin Wainwright.*

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## THE VOXPOP

Not long after starting work at a news agency, Susie Beever was sent on a story for one of the UK’s major national newspapers. Hold the front page? Not quite, as she recalls:

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I used to have to go and do all kinds of stupid things. I think some of the worst things were, the *Sun* used to get you to do voxpops all the time as page fillers. I once had to stand on the main street in Headingley, it’s a big student area [in Leeds] with lots of young people walking around, I had to go up to people and ask them about their sex lives for a voxpop for the *Sun* and take pictures of them – well, not me taking pictures, I was with a photographer, but things like that, being thrown in at the deep end...

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She was lucky: there was a photographer with her. Often the reporter has to take care of the pics as well as the words.

Voxpops are those brief quotes or soundbites from random people, usually on the street or a market square, supposedly giving a snapshot of the views of ordinary folk. They are interviews in miniature. Journalists and journalism students alike either love or hate them, but whatever your view you are unlikely to escape doing your fair share; sometimes it will seem a very unfair share, especially when it is raining. Whether on TV, radio, print or online, voxpops tend to have one thing in common: they are usually neither terribly representative nor particularly illuminating. The genre’s nadir can be viewed on lunchtime TV news bulletins, when a desperate reporter has resorted to visiting a pub to gather the views of a few captive

early morning drinkers. Voice of the people? As with social media, always remember that only *some* of the people are being heard.

Despite this, a good voxpop *can* add a variety of different voices and views to other coverage, and might help liven up an otherwise data-heavy story. “I love doing voxpops because you get a range of people and you can see and hear what they’re like,” says Lindsay Eastwood. With an investment of time and resources, the voxpop can even be turned into something more substantial, as with the series of videos produced by John Harris and John Domokos for the *Guardian*, under the label “Anywhere but Westminster” ([www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/anywhere-but-westminster](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/anywhere-but-westminster)), in which people living far from the seat of power are given the space to talk about the politics of their everyday lives. In addition to what the interviewees actually say, “facial expressions, gestures, and the way individual words are emphasised can give you a vivid sense of how people think” (Harris and Domokos, 2019).

## INTERVIEWS OVER THE PHONE

You don’t have the benefit of facial expressions or gestures over the phone, which is the way most journalistic interviews are conducted. Nor can you make eye contact. However, many journalists manage to develop chatty relationships with regular contacts whom they may never have met in the flesh. Tone of voice is obviously important, as is the manner in which you *begin* the call. When somebody answers the phone, you have no idea what they were in the middle of doing when you called – or whose call they might have been hoping for rather than yours – so it is not usually a good idea to launch into a fusillade of questions the second they pick up. Speaking clearly, politely and not too fast, explain who you are and why you are ringing them. Ask for a few minutes of their time – be prepared to call back at a prearranged time if you are not on deadline – and try to sound bright, alert, friendly and non-threatening. It has been suggested that standing up while speaking on the phone exudes extra confidence, and that making facial and arm gestures can help inflect the voice with the appropriate tone (Keeble, 2001a: 63). I’ve also heard advertising reps being urged to “smile while you dial”. That might be the sort of advice to make hardened hacks do the finger-down-the-throat routine, but it is endorsed by Sally Adams,

who adds, “probably the most important thing is to *like* talking on the phone” (Adams with Hicks, 2001: 85, my emphasis).

Not everyone *does* like talking on the phone, of course. At the *Daily Mirror*, Nada Farhoud has noticed that, although many young journalists are glued to their phones, they rarely seem to use them to talk to people:

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I don't see anyone under 25 in our office picking up a phone and actually asking to speak to somebody. They're just taking things from Twitter and social media, and that is such a useful tool that you can get to somebody on the other side of the world, but it's not the whole thing. If you're not confident in using the phone you've got to get past that. I think we're all uncomfortable when you start, and the more you do it, the easier it becomes. I think, meet people face-to-face as well, so you've got a relationship ... meet people for coffee, and then when you do have a telephone relationship with them it's so much easier.

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Beever agrees that phoning people becomes easier with practice, especially if you keep in mind the reason you are making that call in the first place:

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The hardest thing sometimes is just picking up the phone but, in terms of advice to people, it's like with anything you think is difficult, the moment you dial that number and somebody picks up, that's the hardest part over with. Sometimes they don't pick up and you have to ring them back, but you just have to think about the end product. You're doing something with an end goal in mind and you feel so much better when you've written a story and you've got *original* material, and you've spoken to people rather than just copying and pasting something from a press release.

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In any event, she adds, it beats having to stand on a busy street asking people about their sex lives: “That was *really* difficult, so

picking up a phone wasn't so much of a thing. And I think it was my second day that I got sent out on a death knock. Once you've done that, picking up the phone is not intimidating."

Telephone interviews are usually shorter than face-to-face ones, so you tend to get down to details pretty quickly. It is usually worth getting the interviewee talking by asking open questions such as, "What happened to you?", "What did you see?", or "What did you think when...?" Their replies should prompt further questions. This is all well and good when you have called somebody and your research is fresh in your mind. But it's not so easy when *they* call *you* back hours or days later, by which time you may have forgotten who they are or why you wanted to talk to them in the first place. That's one reason why many journalists prefer to keep ringing somebody they need to speak to, rather than rely on a return call that, if it comes at all, will probably be at the least convenient moment for you. Convenient or not, a phone interview is a chance to check things and, as Beaver says, get some original information; try to be grateful for the opportunity.

## VIDEO CALL INTERVIEWS

A halfway house between the phone and face-to-face interview is one conducted via Zoom, Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, Facetime, Skype or any other program or app that facilitates live video pictures as well as sound. We have probably all seen more than enough of these on the news since the physical distancing and lockdown rules of the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically reduced the number of face-to-face interviews, with all the problems of fuzziness, buffering, time delay, talking over each other and distracting backgrounds that quickly became familiar. But even before the pandemic, some journalists chose to interview people in this way if the only alternative was the phone, because at least it allows *some* visual and non-verbal communication. It can be a rather stiff and formal encounter unless the participants are already on friendly terms with each other. There is also the ever-present threat of the interview suddenly ending due to technical problems, which does not make for a relaxed and free-flowing conversation. But it can be better than nothing.

A final word of warning on remote interviews conducted via the phone or other devices. You need to be absolutely clear if the

interviewee is being serious or is joking. Given that you have few or no visual clues you may have to ask, “Are you being serious?” Better to be thought of as lacking a sense of humour than to risk publishing a flippant or ironic remark as if it were a genuine opinion.

## EMAILS, TEXTS AND DIRECT MESSAGES

Phone or video call interviews may be impersonal, but trying to establish a rapport in written communication via email, texting or direct messages on social media can be even trickier. Traditionally, such email or text-based interviews – as with the faxed ones that briefly preceded them – have not been recommended except when they really were the only way of getting through to somebody. That’s mainly because they lack the instantaneous to-ing and fro-ing of spoken conversation, no matter how quick your fingers and thumbs are. Answers via text tend to err on the side of brevity, whereas some email interviewees will write in rather stiff, formal language; also, there is a limit to how many times questions and answers can be batted backwards and forwards before one side or the other gets fed up. Although email encounters tend to be more brisk and businesslike than face-to-face or telephone conversations are, it is possible to establish some kind of rapport so that the exchange becomes semi-conversational. Most of the interviews with journalists featured in this book were conducted face to face, but several were carried out over the phone and one or two via email; can you tell which?

Some people are happier to be interviewed by email because it means they can answer questions at their own convenience. Email may be the most productive way of contacting a range of academic experts all over the world, for example, because your message will be waiting for them when they log on in their different time zones. Also, if you are asking very technical questions, email has the advantage that the interviewee will be putting the answers in writing for you, so your chances of misquoting the answer should be reduced.

Arguably, email has made it harder for people in positions of power to hide from journalists by resorting to the age-old device of never being available. When Paul Foot rang people from his desk at the *Daily Mirror* they tended to take his calls because of the kudos

associated with that title, but when he called from *Private Eye* such people often seemed to be “in meetings” whenever he wanted to speak to them. That can be a frustrating experience when investigating alleged wrongdoing, because you need to put allegations to those involved, as Foot explains:

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Getting information out of the people you’re accusing is absolutely crucial to the whole operation. Just as email has changed our lives, the fax changed our lives. I got in the habit of faxing questions to people. Whereas if you rang them up they would never be available, once you’ve got the fax through, you’re home. Because if you don’t get an answer you can always say, “Well I faxed them with these questions”. With the phone you might never get even to ask the question.

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If you are going to contact an interviewee via email, it is safest to assume they would prefer to be addressed formally rather than informally, with a message that is spelled and punctuated correctly. And remember that you lose control of your email the moment you send it, meaning that anything you have written may be forwarded to anyone to whom the recipient chooses to send it; they might even post it on social media if they don’t like your tone. Keep in mind that your emails or texts may one day be made public, possibly at a future Hutton or Leveson style public inquiry or even in a trial at the Old Bailey – so think before you write or send anything.

## FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

The gold standard of interviewing is the face-to-face encounter. Unless you are accusing the interviewee of some kind of wrongdoing, you will need to establish a *rapport* between the two of you. First impressions are important, so don’t be late. Don’t smell of booze or fags (unless you know that they will too), and do dress appropriately – not as if you are going to a wedding or a funeral, but smartly enough so that your state of dress will not be an issue for the interviewee. Non-verbal communication is important, so show interest by making eye contact without staring, nodding but not nodding off. Give verbal reassurance that the interviewee is not

speaking into a vacuum – laugh at their jokes, sympathise with their troubles, and use phrases such as “Really?”, “Yes”, “uhh-huhh” to demonstrate that you are engaged. But don’t overdo it.

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“Listening is as important as asking the question.”

– *Helen Boaden.*

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Learn to listen, interrupting their flow only if they are digressing too much and you are on deadline. Interrupting a dramatic narrative to check a minor detail – “How do you spell the name of the first boy eaten by the crocodile?” – can irritate the narrator. Make a note and check at the end. But don’t be afraid to interrupt to clarify something you don’t understand or to get some specific examples. Keep your eyes as well as your ears open because you might discover a visual clue to the interviewee’s character (are they obsessively checking their phone, for example?) or a visual prompt for an unusual question. Clothes, hair, tattoos, piercings, pictures on the wall, books on the shelves, a pet, an unusual plant, a view from the window – all might spark a question and lead to the discovery of a different angle.

Chat is more common at the end of an interview conducted in person than one conducted remotely, and sometimes this can result in further information or angles to pursue. Unless you don’t mind risking any future relationship with the interviewee, think twice before quoting something said after a formal interview has finished without asking, “Do you mind if I use that?” See discussion below of “off-the-record” comments.

## **AUDIO AND TV INTERVIEWS**

Interviews for audio and visual use will rely on many of the same techniques as do interviews to be written up, but there are also many differences: most notably the fact that you can use the speaker’s *voice* as well as their words, and that there is usually a greater reliance on the open question to get them talking. Also, broadcast interviews often have more than an element of *performance* about



them. Whereas the questioning is often invisible to the reader of a print interview, it is central to many broadcast interviews. Even if the interviewee does not answer it, getting a question into the public domain can be worthwhile in its own right.

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“The only time I penetrated Tony Blair’s defences over Iraq was by keeping eye contact while telling him he never seemed to be sorry.”

– *Andrew Marr.*

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How does Cathy Newman approach her TV interviews?

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I’m not of the view that the interviewer or presenter should make themselves part of the story. I think you’re there to get the very best answers out of the interviewee. Obviously you’ve got to be an engaging on-screen presence, but my questions can be quite short, whereas sometimes I think some presenters’ longer questions can be self-indulgent. You’re trying to get the best possible information out of the person you’re interviewing. That’s the key challenge. When we do pre-recorded interviews, in some ways it’s easier because you can just meander a little bit and come back to an issue, but the problem with that is that it’s all got to be cut down. It’s very hard to edit it sometimes, to make sense. I think really carefully about the structure of an interview, what issue leads where, and depending on how somebody answers you’ve then got to change tack, and it’s all got to make sense for the viewer. That’s the most important thing, taking the viewer with you.

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Actually listening to an interviewee’s answers can sometimes be surprisingly difficult, as she explains:

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I think that's the most important thing but in some ways it's the hardest thing because you've got people talking in your ear, there might be a problem with the next piece, so there's a crisis going on in the gallery and you're trying to concentrate on what someone is saying. My least favourite interviews are down the line, where there's a delay in the satellite and you can't really get a proper sort of interrogation because you can't really interrupt and that might mean if someone talks for a minute in an answer that's a third of your interview gone and you haven't had a chance to challenge them, so that's very frustrating. And you might not be able to hear them that well because the link might not be that good. So the most frustrating issues are when the technicalities detract from the journalism.

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Not surprisingly, then, the interviews Newman enjoys the most are either with guests in the studio or out on location when there is plenty of time. One of her most memorable and moving interviews was with Tony Nicklinson, a paralysed man with "locked-in syndrome" who was campaigning for the legal right to die. She recalls the tearful encounter that took place over two-and-a-half hours in his home as her longest and saddest interview ever, yet one she feels privileged to have conducted:

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I did the first interview with him and he blinked out every letter of every word via his wife [who held up an alphabet board], which was his means of communicating. So that was the most painstaking interview I've ever done, for him as much as for me. That was really memorable because he felt so passionately about what he wanted to get across in that interview. I think he helped change the culture around the law on right-to-die, he was a seminal figure in that debate.

Obviously in my job I've interviewed prime ministers, presidents, the Dalai Lama, A-list Hollywood stars, but some of my most memorable pieces have been interviewing ordinary people in extraordinary situations, like Tony Nicklinson.

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## ASKING QUESTIONS

The precise nature of the questions you ask in any interview will be determined initially by its purpose and then by whatever research you have done in advance. But it is important that you listen attentively to people's answers and adjust your line of questioning if necessary. It is usually a good idea to get the interviewee talking in an open way at the beginning, even if you intend to end up by accusing them of some skulduggery. So, unless you specifically want a yes or no answer, try to avoid asking *closed* questions such as, "Did you see the accident?" To get them talking opt for more *open* questions such as, "What could you see?" People often stop after a sentence or two, looking for reassurance that this is what you want. You might encourage them to continue by asking, "And then?" or, "What happened next?", but some interviewers prefer the trick of remaining quiet after the initial answer in the hope that the interviewee will go a bit deeper when filling the awkward silence.

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"'Why?' is the question I ask most often."

– *Fiammetta Rocco.*

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Whatever the topic, you are likely to want to know the answers to the five Ws of journalism introduced in [Chapter 1](#): Who? What? Where? When? Why? Plus, of course, How? You will often have to do some lateral thinking while listening. *Who* is that person? *What* is their relationship to so-and-so? *Where* did they meet? *When* did they arrive? *Why* did they go there? *How* did they travel? The answer to any one such question might end up providing you with the most newsworthy angle to a story. But you will never learn about the unknown unknowns unless you ask enough questions. Clarify any vague answers such as "recently" or "about". Getting specific examples by asking, "Such as?" can sometimes bring a dull interview to unexpected life. Do not be afraid to say: "Sorry, I'm not sure I've understood that, could you please explain it again?"

Unless you are transmitting live, it is a good idea to ask towards the end: “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” It is polite, it stops the interviewee feeling annoyed that they didn’t get the chance to talk about their pet subject, and they might just say something far more important and interesting than anything that has gone before. Then, make sure you have checked spellings, especially names, and exchanged contact details. And don’t forget to thank people for their help and time. A little courtesy can go a long way.

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“The eye contact is really important.”

– Victoria Derbyshire.

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## OFF-THE-RECORD

An interviewee may tell a journalist that something is “off-the-record”, meaning that you should not attribute the information to them. That does not mean that you cannot include the information in an unattributed form. Check exactly what information they are referring to. They may have good reason – perhaps they might lose their job if they criticise their employer in public – or they may be feeling paranoid with little justification. As the interview progresses they may begin to trust you more, so you could try suggesting that something said earlier off-the-record might be restored to on-the-record. But if you break your word, having agreed to something being off-the-record, then you will have betrayed a source. Confusion arises if somebody *assumes* that a journalist will treat something as off-the-record without making it explicit. And sometimes people just say things that, with hindsight, they wish they had kept to themselves. A journalist who combines a conversational tone with a keen news sense will sometimes be “lucky” enough to catch an interviewee in just such a mood. Jane Merrick recalls the time that, as a Press Association reporter, she made a routine telephone call to a petrol company press office at the beginning of a series of fuel protests that went on to paralyse the UK:

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It was during the protesters' first blockade of an oil refinery. In London the company's line was that petrol supplies won't be affected. When I called the PR guy in the North-West I got lucky because he was really annoyed and he said: "Don't these people realise we're going to run out of fuel by Sunday night?" I said, like, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah, and it's really peeing me off." I said, "OK, fine", put the phone down and ran the story, "Warning of fuel shortage by Sunday".

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The warning became a national talking point and the panic buying of petrol increased as a result. Merrick continues:

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This guy got into so much trouble. He phoned me on the Monday and said: "It wasn't off-the-record because I didn't say it was off-the-record, but I shouldn't have said that to you because our line was that it was fine." When clearly it wasn't fine.

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## **DOORSTEPS AND DEATH KNOCKS**

Some interviews are fraught with difficulties, ranging from the boredom of hanging around for hours waiting for somebody to emerge through a doorway, to the possibility of a punch in the face. The "doorstep" and the "death knock" bring out differing emotions in journalists and interviewees alike. Doorstepping is a peculiarly British tradition, argues Matthew Engel. And a peculiarly ineffective one, it seems:

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Photographers and reporters descend on the home of a person touched by scandal or tragedy ... and wait, in the hope of a picture of one of the actors in the drama or, far less probably, a comment. It is a tiresome and, for the reporters, almost always a pointless chore, unless they are actually paying to buy the story. (Engel, 1997: 279)

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Not so, according to Nick Davies. He has no time for reporters who bully people, camp outside their homes and peer through their windows, but he argues that arriving unannounced on people's doorsteps remains an integral part of the journalist's armoury: "That's how you get good stories. It is the most exciting and most skilful part of our job" (quoted in Stevens, 2001).

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"O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"

– *Frantz Fanon.*

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When it comes to death knocks – calling on a bereaved family to ask for information, quotes and an old picture – few journalists actually enjoy the task, although some adopt a macho pose and boast of their experiences. Codes of ethical conduct advise reporters to be cautious about intruding on people's grief, and families may be actively hostile to journalists' inquiries at such a difficult time. Others genuinely welcome the chance to talk about the death of somebody close to them, even to a stranger with a notebook, or will co-operate to avoid inaccuracies appearing in the media. Deborah Wain is experienced at talking to victims' families after crimes, accidents or inquests. People usually seem to talk to her, so I asked her why:

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I try to be really straight with people when I interview them. I try to be polite and people respond really. I never give people the impression that I'm doing anything other than what I'm doing. On death knocks, be upfront. Don't try to be over-sympathetic, don't say, "I'm sorry", because you obviously didn't know that person. It's a hard one to get right, a lot of it is play it by ear. Be straight about it, say this story will go in the paper and we want to give you, the family, the chance to say something about your son or whoever as a person. I've often rung people up and asked them if I can come and see them, rather than just turn up. Most people say yes. I'm a great believer that if people want to talk they will, or will ring you back. I know some

people say don't do it over the phone or don't leave a message because they won't ring you back, but I don't think that's the case. If they want to say something they will get back in touch with you if you open that window of opportunity. I think women do better at death knocks. I know it's a bit of a cliché to send women out, but it's for good reason.

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To the non-journalist the death knock might sound callous, even manipulative. But when we hear there has been a murder or a fatal accident, don't we *expect* the news media to tell us about the **victim** – their name, how old they were, and something about their character and interests? This information does not appear by osmosis, not everyone is yet on Facebook (nor is everything on it necessarily accurate), and full details are rarely supplied by the police or other third parties. This information has traditionally been obtained by journalists knocking on the doors or ringing the telephones of relatives, neighbours, friends, schools and workplaces, and a recent study found that many bereaved families can find it a positive experience if conducted sensitively – preferable to finding that personal material has simply been lifted from social media:

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By believing in the value of interviewing the family the surveyed journalists enable the relatives to maintain a level of control over the story, something that is important to the bereaved, which may be denied to them when material is taken predominantly from the deceased's social networking sites, unless of course the journalist seeks consent from the family to reproduce quotes and pictures. (Newton and Duncan, 2012: 214)

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Relatives don't have to be bereaved to be contacted by journalists at times of trauma. Merrick was working for a regional news agency when news came through that the former Beatle George Harrison had been attacked, and that someone was being held by police in connection with the incident. She recalls:

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The name of the man arrested had got through the rumour mill so we contacted all the names in the [phone] book and I got to his mum first. I introduced myself as a journalist and she asked me what had happened. I said, "It's OK, I'll come out and speak to you." She said, "Tell me what's happened, is he OK?" I said, "He's absolutely fine but I need to come and see you in person". Then she got very defensive and said she would put the phone down if I didn't tell her what was going on. So I said, "There's been a bit of an incident that Michael has been involved in, but he's absolutely fine". She put two and two together and shouted to her husband, "Oh my God, Michael's stabbed a Beatle!" And then she put the phone down. In the end I had to go out there. Eventually she invited everyone in, but by then we weren't the only ones.

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Reflecting on the experience, Merrick says:

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I felt terrible because you can't say straight out, "Your son has stabbed someone", and I was quite surprised that the police hadn't contacted her. It was a really difficult way to tell her, and I tried to soften it as much as possible, but you can't just be really mysterious and say, "I need to come and speak to you". With hindsight, I should just have established that she was the mother, and then turned up at the door to speak to her.

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Brian Whittle favours the in-person approach rather than giving anyone the opportunity of putting the phone down on you. But people can still shut the door and tell a journalist to go away. The editors' code of practice instructs journalists that, except in cases in the public interest, they must not persist in questioning or telephoning people after they have been asked to stop.

## **TO QUOTE OR NOT TO QUOTE**



As well as being a means of obtaining information, interviews provide journalists with direct quotes and their audio equivalents, soundbites. **Quotes and soundbites** are a vital ingredient of journalism, adding authority, drama and powerful or colloquial expression to an account. “The key to securing a good soundbite is to frame your question so the answer will sum up the respondent’s position – their view, reaction or account of what they have witnessed,” advise Hudson and Rowlands (2012: 107). Short video or audio clips containing soundbites can then be repackaged for subsequent news bulletins and also sent out via social media channels, in addition to the original report. But it is important not to misrepresent the interviewee in the editing of soundbites or snippets. After all, if you are not going to report somebody’s views *accurately*, what is the point of interviewing them in the first place? (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 295).

Opinions differ a bit more on the editing of written quotes, although all agree that little purpose is served by including excessive repetition of phrases such as “like”, “know what I mean?”, or “um”. David Randall questions the use of quotation marks if what they contain is not “a word for word, syllable by syllable, accurate report of their actual words” (Randall, 2000: 187). But journalists frequently “tidy up” quotes. If they did not, it would be a remarkable coincidence that sources interviewed by tabloid journalists seem to speak in short, sharp sentences, while those quoted by broadsheet reporters speak in more complex sentence structures – even when they are the same people. Whittle defends the practice of editing quotes:

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I think you can put words in people’s mouths in the sense that most people are not particularly literate. That’s perfectly acceptable if you know what you’re doing, but only experience can tell you that. We go over people’s quotes. Don’t misunderstand me on this, we’re pretty careful about it.

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Merrick found contrasting policies at work when she moved from another regional news agency to the Press Association: “At the agency we could paraphrase people almost and still put it in quotes because it would be neater, whereas at PA it’s the *exact* words. Now I have two dictaphones as a back-up and tape everyone as well as

take shorthand notes, to cover my own back really.” Wynford Hicks and Tim Holmes urge a similar caution:

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[You] can always summarise quotes in indirect speech if tidying up causes difficulty – but you must never do the reverse: indirect speech can never be used as the raw material for a concocted quote. In subbing quotes ... the key word is accuracy: the exact meaning of the original must be preserved. In condensing and clarifying a quote ... you must never change the emphasis. So if somebody makes a statement that is qualified in some way, you remove the qualification at your peril. (Hicks and Holmes, 2002: 65)

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The ethical line between tidying and changing can be a very fine one. It can sometimes disappear entirely, especially if a reporter edits somebody’s comments when making notes, then slightly strengthens them when writing up, before passing the story on to a sub who might tidy the quotes a bit more. The published result might end up being wholly unrecognisable to the interviewee, not just in words but in meaning. The golden rule when selecting or shortening quotes, and pruning out repetitions or irrelevancies, is to retain not just the interviewee’s *voice* but the speaker’s *sense*. Otherwise, why bother quoting at all?

## AWKWARD ENCOUNTERS

I remember once being about to interview the then Labour MP Tony Benn in his Chesterfield constituency office when he brought out his own device to record our conversation. It wasn’t personal; he recorded all his interviews, partly to check later if he thought he had been misquoted but mostly to warn journalists not to stitch him up when writing their stories. Profile writer Lynn Barber expresses surprise that so few interviewees make their own recordings to safeguard against being misquoted (Barber, 1999: 201). But Benn’s refusal to accept that journalists should have total **control** of interviews even managed to unsettle seasoned reporter John Sergeant, who recalls arriving at the MP’s home to record an interview during the 1984–1985 miners’ strike:

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When he opened the door, I immediately noticed a small tape recorder, which he thrust forward, with its red light on, showing that it was recording. “Hello,” he said; and I did not know whether to reply to him directly or speak into the tape recorder. I said hello to the machine. He then proceeded to give me a short lecture on the unfairness of the BBC’s coverage of the miners’ dispute. I took this in reasonably good heart, but *knowing that all my remarks were being recorded I said nothing which might be used against me.* (Sergeant, 2001: 236–237, my emphasis)

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It was a rare case of the tables being turned, with the journalist rather than the interviewee having to think twice before saying anything.

Happily, most interviews are less prickly affairs, but awkward encounters do occasionally occur, usually if the interviewee objects to a particular line of questioning. If they want to have a moan, it is probably best to let them get something off their chest before explaining, politely, that it is your job to check the details and to give them the chance to put their side of the story. Sometimes the details of a frosty encounter, particularly with a celeb and their PR minders, can make for an entertaining and illuminating read, but it can also easily become self-indulgent. Therefore, if you are tempted to put yourself in the story in such a way, pause long enough to read Hadley Freeman’s (2020) write-up of her interview with Julie Andrews, available online here: [www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/may/07/julie-andrews-i-was-certainly-aware-of-ales-about-the-casting-couch](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/may/07/julie-andrews-i-was-certainly-aware-of-ales-about-the-casting-couch). Unless you can do it with such panache, maybe you should just leave yourself out of the story?

## YOUR SAFETY

Finally, a note on safety. Going as a pair (ie reporter and photographer/cameraperson) is best, but if you do have to interview somebody face to face on your own, don’t go into a non-public space without first telling somebody you trust where you are going and

when you are expected back. If your gut instinct tells you it is a dodgy situation, just leave. Err on the side of caution. Seriously.

## Summary

Journalists interview sources – on the telephone, in person, by email, text or video call – to obtain information, facts, opinions, analysis, description, emotion, colour, background, direct quotes and soundbites. The interview has been described as an ambivalent encounter in which the interviewee controls what information they disclose but, with the exception of live broadcasts, the interviewer retains control of which bits of the interview are passed on to the audience. Interviews can themselves create news and in this sense can be seen as pseudo-events. Ethical issues associated with interviewing include questions of intrusion into grief, copy approval, selection of material and editing.

## Questions

Why do journalists interview people?

Why do people agree to be interviewed by journalists?

How can a journalist prepare for an interview?

Who's really in charge, the interviewer or interviewee?

Is it ethical to edit quotes and soundbites?

## What would you do?

You are sent to interview a newly elected Mayor face to face to write a profile for your local news organisation. As you get up to leave, the Mayor relaxes, begins to joke, chats about

their student days 20 years ago, boasts about how much alcohol they consumed back then, and hints at a youthful history of sexual promiscuity and occasional use of cannabis – before adding, “Of course, that was all off-the-record,” and bidding you goodbye. What would you do? And would it make any difference if the Mayor was male or female, gay or straight, or what political party they represented?

## Further reading

Start with reading, watching and listening to a range of interviews in today’s media – comparing both style and content. More historical interviews can be found in the mammoth *Penguin Book of Interviews* (Silvester, 1994), which is worth dipping into if you can track down a copy. As for advice on how to do it, despite the sometimes prescriptive tone, there are many good tips and instructive anecdotes to be found in Adams with Hicks (2009), including a chapter on interviewing vulnerable people; also check out the appendix with its hilarious translation of Madonna being interviewed by a magazine, sample question: “Are you a bold hussy-woman that feasts on men who are tops?” (p 209). Hudson and Rowlands (2012) offer guidance on broadcast interviews and Beaman (2011) deals with radio interviewing specifically. Randall with Crew (2021), Sheridan Burns with Matthews (2018), Sissons (2006), and Pape and Featherstone (2005), among others, all have useful general sections on interviewing, while McKay (2019) includes two chapters specifically on magazine interviews. Contributors to Luce (2019) discuss interviews with vulnerable people around a range of sensitive issues, Duncan and Newton (2017) focus more specifically on death knocks and other encounters with the bereaved, and Harcup (2007) includes a chapter on crime reporting based on an interview with a victim’s relative as well as a crime reporter. Last but not least, Ruth Palmer’s (2018) study *Becoming the News* is an illuminating account of what it is like as a regular citizen to be interviewed by a journalist and turned into a news story; based on more than 80 interviews conducted by Palmer in the USA, it is well worth a read and a bit of reflection.

## Top three to try next

Sally Adams with Wynford Hicks (2009) *Interviewing for Journalists* (second edition)

Gary Hudson and Sarah Rowlands (2012) 'The interview', [Chapter 4](#) of *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (second edition)

Ruth Palmer (2018) 'The interview stage, parts 1 and 2', Chapters 3 and 4 of *Becoming the News*

## Sources for soundbites

Tull, interview with the author; Wain, interview with the author; Hattenstone, 2007; Heren, quoted in Robinson, 2012: 220; Wainwright, interview with the author; Boaden, quoted in Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 90; Marr, quoted in Barnicoat, 2007; Rocco, 1999: 50; Derbyshire, quoted in Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 85; Fanon, [1967] 1970: 165.

## Interview

The use of the interview as a tool in reporting has been traced to 19th-century US journalism (Patterson, 2012); journalists previously relied more on commentary and/or observational reportage. Since then, interviewing gradually became a common practice in the press, first in the USA and then in the UK and beyond (Chalaby, 1998: 127). Interviews were seen by some as invasions of privacy, with one editor dismissing interviewing as “the most perfect contrivance yet devised to make journalism an offence, a thing of ill savour in all decent nostrils” (Boorstin, 1963: 26). Today it is hard to imagine journalism without the interview, described by Thomas Patterson (2012) as probably “the handiest reporting tool ever devised”. He continues:

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Interviewing relieves the journalist of having to undertake more demanding forms of investigation, and the interviewee's words can be treated as "fact" insofar as the words were actually said. Yet, the interview is not foolproof. Who is interviewed, what is asked, and even the time and place of the interview can affect the answers. Responses are subject to mistakes of memory or even a source's determination to mislead a reporter. (Patterson, 2012)

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Whether or not interviewing does – or should – relieve journalists of the burdens of further verification or investigation is discussed in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#).

## Pseudo-event

The concept of the pseudo-event was introduced in [Chapter 2](#). Daniel Boorstin (1963: 27) categorises the media interview – alongside the press conference and the press release – as a form of pseudo-event; that is, not so much a way of *gathering* the news, more a way of *making* it. He explains:

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Nowadays a successful reporter must be the midwife – or more often the begetter – of his news. By the interview technique he incites a public figure to make statements which will sound like news. During the 20th century this technique has grown into a devious apparatus which in skilful hands can shape national policy. (Boorstin, 1963: 34)

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Before interviewing became commonplace, notes Michael Schudson (2001: 156), US President Lincoln often spoke with reporters informally "but no reporter ever quoted him directly". Schudson argues that the growth of interviewing on both sides of the Atlantic helped journalists establish themselves as a separate group, brandishing notebooks and practising

something that came to be called objective reporting. Interviewing sources eventually slotted “into a journalism already fact-centred and news-centred rather than devoted primarily to political commentary or preoccupied with literary aspirations” (Schudson, 2001: 157).

Contrived pseudo-events, many interviews may be – but at least they are normally based on the asking of questions, both substantive and supplementary. With some powerful people now preferring to speak in public only via Twitter and suchlike, might future generations of journalists come to look back on the interview as a quaint relic from a bygone age? News coverage of a president’s tweet is perhaps the ultimate pseudo-event, compared to which the cut and thrust of an actual interview feels like reportage of genuine substance.

## Victim

The victim is a familiar character in journalism. Much information on victims comes from interviews with victims themselves if they are still alive, otherwise from interviews with the bereaved. Thoughtful journalists may pause from time to time to consider why reporters and, presumably, readers are so fascinated with details of victims’ lives. “Being the victim of crime is to lay oneself open to having one’s privacy invaded,” argues Chris Frost, who adds:

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Journalists need always to remember that victims of crime are not there by choice and rarely through any fault of their own. If the report will make things worse for the victim, then the journalist should think carefully about how the report should be handled. (Frost, 2000: 146)

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Some critics flinch from the very idea of the “death knock”, but would they not want to know something about the person who was found dead in their neighbourhood last night? Where do they think such information comes from if not by interviewing distressed relatives, friends, neighbours and



workmates? Sallyanne Duncan told fellow lecturers at an Association for Journalism Education seminar that journalism students should be encouraged to think *positively* about death knocks as one of the legitimate ways in which reporters can find things out and help those directly involved in events to have their say. Jackie Newton told the same event that journalists on death knocks should remember that the story on which they are working ultimately belongs not to the reporter or their editor but to the bereaved family – to whom it will always be more than just a story (Harcup, 2008).

The idea of the victim is considered in more detail in [Chapter 9](#) and ethical issues are discussed further in [Chapter 13](#).

## Quotes and soundbites

A good quote or soundbite is highly prized. According to Allan Bell, direct quotation serves three key purposes in journalism:

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First, a quote is valued as a particularly incontrovertible fact because it is the newsmaker's own words. ... A second function is to distance and disown, to absolve journalist and news outlet from endorsement of what the source said. ... The third function of direct quotation is to add to the story the flavour of the newsmaker's own words. (Bell, 1991: 207–209)

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But most of what is said in most interviews will *not* be quoted directly; rather, the bulk of information gleaned from sources will be used as background or turned into reported speech. Bell argues that this power to edit “puts the journalist *in control* of focusing the story, able to combine information and wordings from scattered parts of an interview” (Bell, 1991: 209, my emphasis). Ethical concerns are raised about this role of the journalist in selecting the parts of an interview to quote, the parts to paraphrase, and the parts to discard, as Lynn Barber explains:

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The journalist has *all* the power when it comes to writing the piece: she chooses which quotes to use and which to omit, which to highlight and which to minimise. I use a lot of quotes compared with most other interviewers, but they probably still only amount to at most two pages out of a twenty- or thirty-page transcript. So obviously with this degree of selection, one has almost limitless opportunities for “slanting” the interview, favourably or unfavourably. All I can say is that I don’t aim to do that and I hope I don’t. (Barber, 1999: 202, emphasis in original)

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Similarly, the editing of video or audio interviews gives journalists the potential to mislead viewers and listeners. Any journalist tempted to flam-up a story by giving the impression that the interviewee said something they did not, should resist such temptation – or cease to call themselves a journalist (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 294–295).

## Control

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee has been described by feature writer Fiammetta Rocco (1999: 49) as an “ambivalent coupling”, and John Sergeant’s account of his own ambivalent encounter with Tony Benn hinges on the question of who should have the right to control an interview. There was a time when journalists were deferential to those in power, as exemplified back in 1951 when Prime Minister Clement Attlee could get away with answering even the soft question “Is there anything else you’d like to say about the coming election?” with a terse “No”, without being probed further (Katwala, 2010). Today’s journalistic style is less deferential in part because powerful interviewees are more media-literate and schooled in the arts of spin and obfuscation than were their predecessors. It is not just senior politicians who have teams of spin doctors, minders, schmoozers and enforcers surrounding them. Many celebrities’ PR teams also try to impose tight control on

interviews by setting conditions in return for (limited) access, as Gary Susman explains:

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There's always an army of publicists hovering over our shoulders, some from the studios, some employed by the stars, all making sure we don't ask anything impolite or embarrassing or anything that strays too far from the movie. The threats are never spoken but always implicit – if you ask the star about his ex-wife, he'll walk out, and you'll have ruined the interview for yourself and your colleagues; or worse, you'll be blackballed from future junkets. (Susman, 2001)

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This “increased PR interventionism” in interviews can result in “journalistic passivity and compliance in a sanitised promotional drive”, argues Eamonn Forde (2001: 38). It can even lead to some editors agreeing to give “copy approval” to PR companies acting on behalf of the most highly prized celebs (Morgan, 2002b). Other editors flatly refuse to do what they see as deals with the devil for the sake of a few approved quotes.

See [Chapter 2](#) for more on the ambivalent coupling of journalism and public relations.

# CHAPTER 9 WRITING NEWS

## Key terms

Attribution; Chronology; Critical discourse analysis; Dialogic; Five Ws; Headlines; Intros; Inverted pyramid; KISS and tell; Live-blogging; Myths; Narrative; Polysemy; Search engines; SEO; Stories; Text

How's this for a news story?

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A drunk woman broke a barmaid's nose during an attack in a gastropub after she was told to leave for eating another customer's dessert. (DRUNK PUNCHED BARMAID IN RAGE, Tony Gardner, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, March 21 2020)

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When it comes to the five Ws and an H of news, they are pretty much all there. *Who?* A drunk woman. *What?* A broken nose. *Where?* In a gastropub. *When?* After she was told to leave. *Why?* Because she had eaten someone else's dessert. *How?* A punch. If you want to know the actual names of the people and the pub, they follow in the rest of the story, but names do not need to be in the intro unless they are famous ones. The 24-word sentence quoted above tells us the story in a brief, lively style with no unnecessary adjectives or punctuation to get in the way. That's how you write a news story.

Some news stories write themselves. At least, that is what reporters sometimes say with a good story in which, having established the intro or the top line, the rest flows almost effortlessly from notebook or phone to the finished product. An experienced reporter will be able to rush from a courtroom or a news conference and, seconds later, be filing a perfectly constructed news story. It looks like magic

to the beginner who has to pore over every word, but it can be learned with practice and it is made possible by the fact that journalists already have potential **stories** in their heads. It has even been said of news stories that they are like rewrites of ancient **myths** in contemporary settings. In some ways news can be predictable and repetitive, partly because little happens in the world that hasn't previously happened somewhere, and partly because news is often written in a formulaic way. Not all, though; and even that which is rather formulaic is still the result of *some* choices over language and structure.

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“If you can read your intro in one breath, your reader can probably absorb it very easily in one reading.”

– *Anna McKane.*

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## STRUCTURE: KISS AND TELL

Many news stories follow what has been called the “KISS and tell” formula – KISS standing for either “keep it short and simple”, or “keep it simple, stupid”. Sometimes journalists might be told to imagine they are “writing for your granny”. That may be rather patronising, but it conveys something of the need to get across the facts of a story in a clear and digestible manner. Complexity, abstract notions, ambiguity and unanswered questions tend to be frowned upon and subbed out of news copy, along with anything that seems to be the reporter’s personal opinion. News should be specific, not general; clear, not vague. Telling the five Ws and an H is one way of achieving this, although you are not always able to get all those in the intro in the way that the drunk woman example (above) does so neatly. Most news intros are likely to give us the answers to two or three of the most important questions, with the remainder following fairly quickly afterwards.

A good news story will be important and/or of potential interest to the audience; it will be based on evidence, with sources of information and opinion clearly attributed; and it will be written in plain, precise

and active language. But how will it be structured? Traditionally, trainee journalists have been taught to think of the structure of a news story as a triangle, a pyramid or, more commonly, an **inverted pyramid**. The idea is that the most important information should be at the top, followed by elaboration and detail, ending up with the least important information at the bottom (Hicks et al, 1999: 16). If space is short, the material at the end can be removed, and what's left should stand alone and still make sense. So a 350-word article could swiftly be transformed into a nib (news in brief), a four-paragraph story for a website or, with a bit of tweaking, even a tweet. Combined with the five Ws, the pyramid – or inverted pyramid – is a good way of starting to think about constructing relatively simple news stories. And relatively simple news stories are a good place to start. Read them; unpick them; observe the structural and language choices as well as the angles taken, information included and sources cited; and see how much skill and effort can go into even the simplest story that supposedly “writes itself”.

## THE LANGUAGE OF NEWS

There are some obvious differences in the writing styles of different types of media, with choices being made about the amount of colour, and the number of adjectives, allowed into news copy. For example, when Jane Merrick worked for a regional agency selling mostly to the redtop tabloids, her copy would be sprinkled with words such as “brave”, “pretty” and “tragic”. When she switched to the Press Association she quickly learned that PA's style was to remove all such adjectives.

Although journalists working for different outlets may differ in their news values and their stylistic flourishes, they mostly share a common language – a basic grammar of journalism. Study the language of news stories online or in newspapers and you will find that news is more often than not written in the past tense, reporting on something that has happened or been said; but the present and even future tenses also make appearances. You will find that reporters' sentences are mostly active rather than passive, with somebody *doing* something rather than having something done *to* them; but again, there is some variation. And you will find that concise writing is the norm – journalists never circumambulate the domiciles when they could simply go round the houses. A useful test

is to read a sentence, even your whole story, aloud to yourself, to see how it sounds: does it make sense and can you read it without getting out of breath? If the answer is yes to both, then you are probably along the right lines. If it is no to either, keep working at it.

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“In all cases, abolish the abstract and use the particular.”

– *David Randall.*

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News sentences are made up of active and concise language. They also tend to be short. They generally have a subject and a verb, although the subject may be implied. Paragraphs, too, are much shorter than in most other forms of writing, often just one sentence long, sometimes two or three. Journalists are taught to use short pars because when stories are set in columns long pars look like indigestible and off-putting chunks of text; stories online may not be in such narrow columns but they still require paragraph breaks to make them appear easier to digest on screen. Shorter pars are also thought more likely to keep the attention of readers, although some variety in longer stories is probably a good idea. Wynford Hicks (1998: 43) offers the following advice: “In news a par that goes beyond three sentences ... is likely to be too long; never quote two people in the same par: always start a new one for the second quote; never tack a new subject on to the end of a par.” When you are a beginner you won’t go far wrong if, when in doubt, you start a new par. But first comes the intro.

## THE INTRO

The intro is crucial because it sets the tone for everything that follows. A poorly written intro might confuse, mislead or simply bore the reader; a well written intro will encourage the reader to stay with you on the strength of the information and angle you have provided. As with the pub punch-up example above, a good hard news intro generally conveys a maximum of impact with a minimum of punctuation. Like this:

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A boy of 15 was being quizzed last night after allegedly stabbing to death his teacher in class. (MURDER IN CLASS, Paul Sims, *Sun*, April 29 2014)

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That sentence contains just 18 words and a full stop but it tells a dramatic story in miniature, with the details to follow in subsequent pars. OK, so “quizzed” is a bit of journalese, but everyone knows what it means in this context. Reducing punctuation to a minimum is not a hard and fast rule, though, and sometimes commas can be used for effect as in this equally dramatic intro:

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Two *Times* journalists escaped over the Syrian border yesterday after being double-crossed, kidnapped, beaten and shot by a rebel gang in the north of the country. (*TIMES* JOURNALIST SHOT IN SYRIA BY KIDNAP GANG, Foreign Staff, *Times*, May 15 2014)

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That’s still only 26 words (counting the hyphenated “double-crossed” as one) but the addition of two commas helps convey the impression of the victims’ ordeal being one thing after another. And it’s a hell of a story. As is this example of the insertion of a well-placed dash into a 21-word intro:

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Giant waves driven by 91mph hurricane-force winds swept away sea defences yesterday – and left a vital railway line dangling in mid-air. (91mph STORMS WASH AWAY RAILWAY TRACK, Piers Eady and Richard Smith, *Daily Mirror*, February 6 2014)

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The above intros are quite different from each other but all are based on journalistic decisions about what are the most important and/or most dramatic elements of the stories. None include the names of the people involved, nor precise locations. That’s because, as Lynette Sheridan Burns explains, the news intro is akin to somebody who is in a hurry blurting out the main point of a story:

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News writing always starts with the most important fact. When you report on a football game, you do not start with the kick-off, you begin with the final score. So it is with news. If someone were to blow up the building across the street from where you work today, when you got home you would not start the story by saying, “Today seemed like an ordinary sort of day, little did I know how it would turn out.” You would say, “Someone blew up the building across the street!” In other forms of journalism it is fine for your story to have a beginning, a middle and an end. News stories, in contrast, blurt out something and then explain themselves... (Sheridan Burns, 2002: 112)

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Do a close reading of news intros on any given day and you will see a variety of techniques at work. In the literature of journalism training, these are often given fancy names, such as the “delayed drop”. Here’s an example of the delayed drop:

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It is the world’s most isolated country, a place where the weekly television highlight is *It’s So Funny*, a long-running comedy show in which two uniformed soldiers perform slapstick sketches in between lectures about the greatness of Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un.

Now, however, hope – or at least variety – is at hand for the people of North Korea. After months of negotiations with the British government, the totalitarian dictatorship has finally selected three BBC programmes that the state is willing to consider showing its people: *Dr Who*, *Top Gear* and *Teletubbies*. (NORTH KOREA WANTS OUR *TOP GEAR*, Zander Swinburne, *Independent on Sunday*, April 6 2014)

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Such a delayed drop, in which the point is not immediately apparent, is often used for light or faintly amusing stories such as the one above, but on occasions it can also work for more grim subject matter. As with so much in journalism, there is no strict rule saying that a particular kind of story should have a particular kind of intro. The familiar question, “what works?” is best answered through observation and trying it out.

Let's look at some more intros, this time all concerning the same event:

---

A murder investigation has been launched after a shopkeeper died following an attack, said to have been carried out with a machete, which left another man seriously injured. (MAN ARRESTED AFTER ROTHERHAM SHOPKEEPER DIES IN 'MACHETE ATTACK', *Independent*, October 16 2013)

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With all due respect to the *Independent*, that's rather an underwhelming and very passive intro, the first six words of which could apply to several stories most weeks. Also somewhat staid is this version from another quality newspaper, which leads on a slightly different angle:

---

A man of 27 has been arrested on suspicion of murder after a shopkeeper was killed and a man badly hurt in Rotherham. (SHOPKEEPER KILLED, *Times*, October 16 2013)

---

Contrast those with this:

---

A man wielding a machete carried out a terrifying attack which left one man dead and another seriously injured in a butcher's shop in Rotherham. (MAN KILLED IN BUTCHER'S SHOP MACHETE ATTACK, Helen Pidd, *Guardian*, October 16 2013)

---

Which intro has the most impact? Helen Pidd's version I would suggest, although some might quibble with the adjective "terrifying". Adjectives are disliked by many journalists, but the tabloids are rarely afraid of using them to describe situations or people, as in this intro about the same incident:

---

A shopkeeper was hacked to death yesterday by a crazed attacker wielding a machete. (MACHETE ATTACKER KILLS BUTCHER IN HIS SHOP, *Daily Mail*, October 16 2013)

---

Do we need to tell readers that the attacker was “crazed”? Opinion among journalists will differ on that; but, let’s face it, this did not appear to be an everyday act of violence. It even prompted use of the word “maniac” in the following version, which included additional information about the incident itself:

---

A machete-wielding maniac killed a butcher before going on a mile-long rampage smashing up shop fronts and car windows yesterday afternoon. (MURDER MILE, Stephen White, *Daily Mirror*, October 16 2013)

---

A further angle made it into this intro:

---

A butcher was hacked to death in his shop yesterday by a machete-wielding ex-employee. (MANIAC KILLS BUTCHER IN MACHETE RAMPAGE, Paul Sims, *Sun*, October 16 2013)

---

If that was how the nationals covered the story, what about those closer to the scene? The region’s broadsheet newspaper adopted a sober approach:

---

A shopkeeper was killed in his store and another man seriously injured in a suspected machete attack in South Yorkshire. (STREET TERROR AFTER ‘FAMILY MAN’ KILLED IN FOOD STORE, Rob Parsons, *Yorkshire Post*, October 16 2013)

---

In contrast, the more local daily perhaps got closer to conveying the drama of the incident, and the fear felt by those who witnessed it, with this very active intro:

---

A killer knifed a butcher to death and left a shopworker fighting for his life before wielding a machete on a terrifying rampage through the streets of Rotherham. (COMMUNITY LEFT TO MOURN LOSS OF 'TRUE FAMILY MAN', Nik Brear and Richard Blackledge, *Sheffield Star*, October 16 2013)

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Then, when the even more local weekly published this intro online the following day, it seemed to reflect the fact that by that stage the immediate drama was over and it had become a time for investigation and mourning:

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Investigations are continuing into the death of a “popular” community butcher who was fatally injured in an attack at his shop. (TRIBUTES PAID TO POPULAR SHOPKEEPER AFTER EASTWOOD ATTACK, Tom Sharpe, *Rotherham Advertiser*, October 17 2013)

---

So there we have one horrible but newsworthy event, multiple potential angles and nine variations on the intro. They range from 14 words to 28 words, have just two commas between them (both of which are in the first example) and not one was written by an algorithm or a robot. All the intros have different strengths and weaknesses and all are worthy of study by anyone learning to write news.

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“Names and places change but the story remains essentially the same.”

– Jack Lule.

---

The above intros focus on the incident itself, but sometimes it might be something about the subject's *life* rather than the manner of their *death* that provides the angle, as in:

---

A ten-pin bowling champion who dedicated her life to helping youngsters has died suddenly. (BOWLING CHAMP DIES, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, October 24 2002)

---

Or the focus might be on the bereaved:

---

A grief-stricken mother today told of her shock when her teenage son suddenly collapsed and died after complaining of a swollen throat. (MOTHER'S GRIEF OVER DEATH OF SCOTT, 19, Kim McRae, *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, November 27 2001)

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Some intros manage to combine the victim with grieving loved ones and the act of discovery, as in this example:

---

A property tycoon and his wife found the body of their "sweet and gentle oddball" son lying in a pool of blood at his home. (PROPERTY TYCOON FINDS "GENTLE" SON KILLED AT HOME, Laura Peak, *Times*, October 25 2002)

---

The above intros, and countless other variations, tend to focus on one or two elements. They give us what the journalist has decided is the best news line, and they do it quickly and clearly.

Occasionally you will find an intro that breaks with such conventions of news writing. Here is an example of delaying the most important information even in the most serious of news stories, about police realising they might be dealing with a serial killer. This more narrative approach seems to work in this case, maybe because the particular story was so big that most readers could be assumed to have already heard the headlines by the time they read the following day's front page:

---

The man walking along Old Felixstowe Road, near the village of Levington, could not be sure at first. In the failing light he stepped off the road and approached the darkened form. Only then was he sure. She was naked, lying in the wet scrubland where she had been dumped. It was 3.05pm.

Forty minutes later a police helicopter hovered over the open ground south of Ipswich as detectives sealed off the area and covered the body with tarpaulin. The glare of the helicopter's searchlight lit up the wasteland below and there, 100 metres away from the bustle of police activity, the pilot saw the second body. (SNATCHED, KILLED AND DISCARDED, Sandra Laville, *Guardian*, December 13 2007)

---

Although the style is not conventionally newsy, even the above intro begins its narrative not at the start of a journey but at the moment just before the bodies were discovered. The writing conveys an atmosphere and paints a scene in addition to imparting information.

---

“Lots of facts, plainly stated and grouped with drama and maybe a dash of sentiment – no more. That’s the journalistic cocktail.”

– *James Milne.*

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Sometimes, however, a journalist will delay an obvious news angle simply because they have thought of a more interesting approach, as in this example about a local community campaign:

---

Woe betide anyone who crosses Jade Hudspith when she grows up. For the Bramley schoolgirl has already shown her mettle at the tender age of nine by collecting no less than 100 names on her petition for a zebra crossing outside Sandford Primary in busy Broad Lane. (JADE ON

WARPATH FOR ZEBRA CROSSING, Sophie Hazan,  
*Yorkshire Evening Post*, October 30 2002)

---

Despite the use of the word “less” (shouldn’t it be “fewer”?), it shows that an imaginative intro can lift even a relatively straightforward story.

A device such as the delayed drop that might work in print does not necessarily work so well online, warns Emma Youle:

---

You have to have a much more instant hook and it has to be quickly obvious to the reader why they should continue reading. It’s much more tricky, for example, to do a great drop intro on an online investigation, because it might be that some readers don’t get to find what the story is. ... You have to hook them quick, and we do a lot of summaries of the key points near the top, which gives the readers that tease to carry on reading. Leading with the human story is often a great way to pull people in. I think if you can hook them with an emotional punch of why it’s affecting people’s lives, then quite often they’ll be more willing to give up their time to read it.

---

But even that is not a hard and fast rule, so you still need to ask yourself in relation to each specific story: *what works?*

## THE REST OF THE STORY

After the intro, what comes next? If the pyramid is a basic starting point for thinking about intros and simple news stories, it can seem inadequate for more complex and/or lengthy stories, particularly those based on many different sources. David Randall talks of constructing such stories through “building blocks” which should be linked logically to each other (Randall, 2000: 175). Richard Keeble prefers the concept of stories having a *series* of linked inverted pyramids, whereby “the journalist’s news sense comes into operation not only for the intro but throughout the story” (Keeble, 2001a: 108).

Let's take two examples from the stories introduced earlier. The full *Daily Mirror* story about the 91mph winds consists of 407 words in 20 sentences, giving an average (mean) sentence length of around 20 words. There are 16 paragraphs (pars), 12 of which consist of a single sentence and four of which contain two sentences apiece. After the intro we have details of the numbers of families evacuated from certain locations and some specific examples of damage caused, enlivened by this quote from somebody living in Dawlish, the worst-hit town:

---

Resident Robert Parker, 62, sobbed: "I'm shell-shocked – I feel like I've been in a battle zone. I've lived here 14 years and never seen anything like this." (91mph STORMS WASH AWAY RAILWAY TRACK, Piers Eady and Richard Smith, *Daily Mirror*, February 6 2014)

---

The story ends with the latest weather prediction followed by details of government reaction to the storms and a promise that an extra £100 million would be spent on tackling flooding.

The *Times* story about the property tycoon's "oddball" son is longer and more complex but is still written in a concise news style. It consists of 602 words in 34 sentences and 19 paragraphs, giving a mean sentence length of around 18 words – actually slightly shorter than the average in the tabloid story above. After the intro we are quickly given names, time, location and the information that somebody is being questioned by police. The basic story having been told, we are then given detail, colour, context, attribution and quotes. There are descriptions of the victim based on interviews with neighbours, background on the location, the results of the post mortem examination, and quotes from the police. The continuing police presence at the house is then linked to the fact that the bereaved parents are being comforted by police family liaison officers, which leads in turn to quotes from a statement issued by the family. The story ends with some extra biographical details about the father.

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"Who the hell's gonna read the *second* paragraph?"



This device of blurting out the basic story, and then telling it in more detail, is common in news. In most cases chronology goes out the window when it comes to writing news. But it is important that, in a desire to include all the most important information, you do not end up writing a story that reads like a *list of points*. Ideas, sentences, paragraphs should be linked and follow on in some kind of logical sequence, or series of sequences. Facts, description, context, reported speech and direct quotes must all be *woven* into the text, to achieve a whole. Study the structure of news stories and you will see how neat are the links, how smooth are the transitions, and how additional information is slipped in without disrupting the flow.

Note too the use of quotes and **attribution**. Direct quotes can add authority, drama, immediacy or emotion to an account as well as giving the reader a sense of the quoted person's voice and personality. Direct quotes will normally be outnumbered by reported speech and/or the attribution of facts and opinions to sources. Together, they tell the reader "who says so". Keeble says that clear attribution is particularly important when covering allegations and counter-allegations (Keeble, 2001a: 103). Yet some journalists fail to give adequate attribution in stories for fear of what Randall terms "a certain loss of journalistic virility". He argues: "The reader should never have to ask, 'How does the paper know this?'" (Randall, 2000: 179). As a reporter with the Press Association, Merrick observed this differing attitude at first hand: "There is always attribution in our intros, to prove to our customers that it's properly sourced. We have to say 'police said today...' or 'an inquest heard today...'. Newspapers then get rid of the attribution in their intros." But good journalism retains the attribution somewhere in the story. When writing a story for any news organisation you should always retain the idea that your **text** is to be read – and understood – by others, so try not to give them an excuse to misunderstand your words.

Writing and publishing a news story is not necessarily the end of it. There have always been follow-ups to be getting on with, but for online news outlets a story can continue to be rewritten even after its initial publication, as Carla Buzasi explains about *HuffPost*:

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We're all about starting conversations and kickstarting debates. ... Our journalists push stories out every way they can, they're mini-marketeers of their own content. It's not enough just to write that story. The journey of that story is a lot longer and they should be looking at it during the day, is it performing well, do we need to give it another push, can we get a different angle on it? It's about taking responsibility for that too.

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“Words are facts. Check them (spelling and meaning) as you would any other.”

– Keith Waterhouse.

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Not forgetting your responsibility to correct anything that you might have got wrong earlier.

## LIVE-BLOGGING AND LIVE-TWEETING

Writing a new story about an event that has happened is one thing; writing about something *as it unfolds* is something else. Carefully crafting your news stories is well and good if you have hours in which to write them, or even if you have at least a few minutes. But what if you are reporting instantly on a live blog? “Blogs are not the same as conventional news reports,” says Andrew Sparrow (2014), for many years the linchpin of the *Guardian's* daily *Politics Live* blog:

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Blogging is a different form of storytelling, which evolved with the web. You could write a blog like an old-fashioned news report, but that would be like having the ability to broadcast a TV news bulletin and just using it to show someone reading out a radio news script (which is what TV did in the early days, before they worked out how to use the medium properly). The key point about the web is that it is

interactive; readers can contact you in real time, and they expect you to reply. As a result, all the best blogs have an authorial voice. ... Readers also accept this because the author's subjective voice is just one of many in the blog. Blogs like mine use a lot of aggregation, and that means that if someone like David Cameron gives a speech, I may well include dozens of different voices, in the form of tweets, quotes and blogposts, from journalists, commentators or politicians expressing an opinion about what Cameron said. In this respect, in being open to multiple viewpoints, blogging is an inherently liberal medium. (Sparrow, 2014)

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Live blogs have worked particularly well in politics and sport, and in 2020 the *Guardian* launched its coronavirus live blog that within weeks was attracting 7 million page views daily. The format has also been used to cover lighter stories such as solar eclipses and Oscar ceremonies (Weaver, 2020). In essence, although the live blog incorporates opinion and input from social media and beyond, it is still *reporting*, informed by news values and a sense of what makes a strong story. Above all, it is informed by the journalistic duty to be accurate and ethical, not just speedy, opinionated or entertaining.

Similar considerations apply to live-tweeting from an event, where the fact that the professional and trained journalist may be only one voice among many has raised the possibility of new forms of storytelling:

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Emerging research suggests new paradigms of collaborative and collective newsgathering, production and management at play, facilitated by the sociotechnical dynamics of Twitter. The result may be journalism but not as we know it, breaking with classic narrative structures and deviating from long-held and fiercely defended norms. (Hermida, 2013)

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That *may* be the result. Or maybe it won't. If it wasn't on the list of clichés (see the [Appendix](#)), I'd be tempted to write: only time will tell. Either way, a journalist tweeting live from a football match, a fashion

show, a political rally or a court case needs to think beyond what might get the most likes or retweets. Unless live-tweeting also demonstrates care for accuracy, attribution, ethics and any legal constraints that might apply, is it journalism at all?

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“Find yourself writing ‘it is believed’? Don’t. Explain who thinks what, and why.”

– David Holmes (@spikefodder).

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## “HAVING A GOOD EYE FOR TELLING A STORY”

Being a live online content reporter on a local newspaper is akin to being “a live blogger kind of journalist”, but on a local level, says Susie Beever. As we saw in [Chapter 7](#), it is a job in which it is possible to have a bit of fun, alongside having to cover the important stuff such as breaking news of major incidents. But for someone who enjoys writing, turning out snippets and updates may not be totally fulfilling. “I’ve always enjoyed doing a bit more in-depth stuff as well,” she says, “so I’ve been trying to branch out, not necessarily pull away because I do still really enjoy live reporting, but I don’t *only* want to do that or be pigeonholed.” Moving over to the *Yorkshire Post* gave her the opportunity to write in more depth, but she points out that you need to put in the effort:

---

I got sent a press release yesterday that at first I thought it was going to be boring because it was from a care home company, and I was reading through it and there was something about a sensory garden inside the care home for people who have dementia, to evoke memories and help comfort them. It was like an old fashioned park, and music playing like it was from a bandstand, that kind of thing. Right at the bottom, buried, there was a really nice quote from an old lady, they’d put on like an arts and crafts

afternoon and she said it helped her get back in touch with the person she used to be. I'd rather read that than read the generic quote from the manager of the care home or whatever. I always try to see the human, the person side of things, because people connect with people, they don't connect with brands or companies or organisations.

We got sent a story on the PA wire a few weeks ago about the rising cost of rent, and the cities in the UK that have the biggest rises in rent, and two of them were Leeds and York, perfect for the *Yorkshire Post*, so we did that. All the quotes in that PA story were from corporations, businesses, ministers, and I just thought – this is affecting human beings, all the people quoted are not actually affected by this, so I did a bit of digging around just on Facebook and found a single mum with two children who was basically having to take money from her kids' food budget every week to meet the rent, which is just horribly unfair, and I thought that was more evocative than a quote from the Chamber of Commerce.

---

Turning a policy story into a people story in such a way demonstrates the value of original reporting and seeking out the people who will be affected, as Beever continues: "It's a combination of that and having a good eye for telling a story as well, because sometimes a story just needs a bit of imagination." Also having a bit of pride in your work and taking care? Exactly:

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Taking a bit of care over things and it not just being cut and paste. I would feel like a bit of a hypocrite saying the *Yorkshire Post* is all about original hard-hitting journalism and holding the powerful to account and everything – which it *is* – if you're just taking other people's journalism and dressing it up as your own. I mean, we all do it, but we can do better. It's just putting a little twist on it so it's not the same as all the other titles are doing.

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**“YOU WON'T HEAR ME SPEAK HIS NAME”**

Just sometimes, the regular five Ws and inverted pyramid ways of telling stories might need to be abandoned in favour of an even more thoughtful approach to writing news. That's what much of the news media in New Zealand decided after the mass murders at mosques in Christchurch in 2019. Echoing the response of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who said, "You won't hear me speak his name", news outlets downplayed coverage of the killer and his beliefs, focusing more on the human interest stories of the victims and survivors, as with the video, text and still photographs that make up this one example among many: CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE SHOOTINGS: THE FACES OF THE VICTIMS (*New Zealand Herald*, March 16 2019, [www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/christchurch-mosque-shootings-the-faces-of-the-victims/B737BPTMURJRU3XMKDSQAWPOCU/](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/christchurch-mosque-shootings-the-faces-of-the-victims/B737BPTMURJRU3XMKDSQAWPOCU/)). The killer's name and photograph were not censored; that information was covered in a restrained style when it was first revealed, but was not shoved in people's faces online, on TV or on the newsstands every day afterwards. Similarly, news coverage of the subsequent trial was framed in a way so as not to give a propaganda platform to the killer (Roy, 2020).

Such conscious decisions by news journalists reflect the suggestions by the No Notoriety campaign, which was founded by the parents of a victim of a mass shooting in the USA. "The quest for notoriety and infamy is a well known motivating factor in rampage mass killings and violent copycat crimes," according to the campaign, which urges journalists to report such events in a more responsible way, "thereby depriving violent like minded individuals the media celebrity and media spotlight they so crave" (<https://nonotoriety.com/>). Because it goes against the "natural" instincts of news journalists as to how to tell a story, this way of reporting major incidents requires a reflective rather than reflex approach. That can be hard when the adrenalin is flowing. All the more reason to acknowledge that fact, pause for reflection, and try to learn from coverage of previous such incidents.

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"Always, always, tell the news through people."

– Arthur Christiansen.

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## HEADLINE NEWS

At the end comes the writing of the headline, increasingly by the reporter but occasionally by a sub-editor where they have not been culled. Although the headline appears at the top of the story it should be written at the end of the process because ethical journalism means doing the research first. Thinking up a headline and then going out to find a story to fit is a dubious (although not unknown) practice. Ideally the headline placed above an item will accurately reflect the gist of the story, but it should not repeat the precise wording of the intro because that can annoy readers (and will certainly annoy other journalists, who notice such things).

Print headlines can be cryptic or humorous, but online ones are more self-explanatory, using key words to increase the prominence of the story when people search for information on particular topics; this is what is known in the trade as search engine optimisation (SEO). It means avoiding a word such as “local”, for example, because people interested in news about a particular place will search for that place by name. Online stories are sometimes posted several times with different headlines, to see which works best. If you have any self-respect, though, you will avoid clickbait headlines such as: YOU WILL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAPPENED NEXT.

## ONE MORE THING

I've read enough beginners' news stories in my time to know that there is a real temptation to end a story with a payoff that either tries to sum up what has gone before or that passes comment on it. Do not give in to this temptation. The major point should already be in your intro anyway and, if you have also written the rest of story clearly, there should be no need to sum up at the end. Nor do we need a news story to end by you wishing somebody luck, expressing commiserations or offering any other kind of opinion, thank you very much. Just report the facts and allow readers to decide how to react when they read it. Save your payoff endings for features (see [Chapter 10](#)) – or book chapters.

## Summary

News is told in the form of stories but these stories are not normally recounted in a chronological order. News is structured with the most newsworthy information first. It is written in active and concise language with an emphasis on short sentences and short paragraphs. Reading your story aloud can be a useful way of testing if it makes sense and flows well. Journalists may have storylines already in mind when approaching events and this may affect how those stories are constructed. It has been suggested by some scholars that many news stories are the re-telling of ancient myths in contemporary settings. Although readers may interpret news stories in different ways, their interpretations will be based, at least in part, on what the journalist has written.

## Questions

Why are news reports called stories?

Can a story ever really “write itself”?

Is it true that the news is populated by familiar characters?

Why is attribution so important when writing news?

What’s wrong with thinking of a headline *before* researching a story?

## What would you do?

You hear from the police that a local 10-year-old girl (Jane Doe) has been reported missing, having last been seen



around 4 pm yesterday in the vicinity of the school that she attends, Green Grange Junior. Jane is described as white, slim and about 4ft 3in tall, with blue eyes, freckles and shoulder-length, blonde hair. She wears spectacles with silver-coloured frames. She was wearing a black jumper with a school logo on it, a white cotton T-shirt, black trousers and a black, waist-length coat. Police say she did not return home after school and has not been seen since. The family home was searched overnight but there was no sign of her. Jane has a mobile phone but does not take it to school with her. It was in her bedroom and police officers have taken it away for examination. Her parents and their friends and neighbours joined police in searching for her overnight and the search is continuing today. Police say they are becoming increasingly concerned for the girl's welfare. How would you write an intro of between 14 and 28 words for a news story based on the above scenario? Which angle/s would you emphasise and why?

## Further reading

Read lots of news stories and compare the styles of different media and individual journalists. The books by Randall with Crew (2021) and McKane (2014) both contain a wealth of good advice on writing news, and also worth consulting are any of Sheridan Burns with Matthews (2018), Phillips (2007), Pape and Featherstone (2005), Sissons (2006) and Keeble (2006). Hudson and Rowlands (2012) and Bradshaw and Rohumaa (2011) have useful chapters on writing for broadcast and online journalism respectively. Reah (1998) offers an introduction to the textual study of news stories, while Smith and Higgins (2013), Bell (1991), Conboy (2007) and Richardson (2006) all subject the language of news to detailed linguistic analysis. Lule's (2001) thought-provoking work on news as myth provides a different way of looking at news construction.

## Top three to try next

*The news itself*: read, watch and listen to a wide range of news stories from a wide range of media, paying close attention to the writing and structure.

Anna McKane (2014) *News Writing* (second edition)

David Randall with Jemma Crew (2021) 'Writing news and features', Chapter 14 of *The Universal Journalist* (sixth edition)

## Sources for soundbites

McKane, 2014: 31; Randall, 2011: 169; Lule, 2001: 54; Milne, quoted in Mansfield, 1936: 221; *The FrontPage*, from Hecht and MacArthur, 1974; Waterhouse, 1993: 249; Holmes, tweet by @spikefodder, May 16 2014; Christiansen, quoted in Williams, 1959: 191.

## Stories

Journalists do not so much write articles as *stories*, argues Allan Bell: "Journalists are professional storytellers of our age. The fairytale starts: 'Once upon a time.' The news story begins: 'Fifteen people were injured today when a bus plunged...'" (Bell, 1991: 147). Ruth Palmer's (2018: 4) study of ordinary people who become subjects of news stories found that they invariably "give up control over their stories to journalists". According to Dan Berkowitz, journalists develop "a mental catalogue of news story themes, including how the 'plot' will actually unravel and who the key actors are likely to be" (quoted in Cottle, 2000: 438). Traditional non-journalistic stories start at the beginning and continue to some sort of resolution at the end, but news stories often start with the end – or at the moment when the main action occurs. As Bell notes, the central action of news stories is told in a non-chronological order, "with result presented first followed by a complex recycling through various time zones" (Bell, 1991:

155). So a typical news story “moves backwards and forwards in time” (p 153). Then, rather than being resolved neatly, news stories often finish in “mid-air” (p 154). This is not simply because news values and journalists’ training dictate that the least important material be left to the end, but also because many stories are ongoing. The version of events given in the newspaper has always been merely a snapshot taken at deadline time; the advent of online news and 24-hour broadcasting without fixed deadlines allows stories to be constantly updated, but no update is ever guaranteed to be the *final* word.

In a recent study of the relationship between news and civil society, Jackie Harrison (2019: 129–133) has identified three different styles of reporting news stories. There is the *discursive* style that tends to be serious, well sourced and evidenced, often incorporating expert analysis; there is the *descriptive* style that focuses on telling the essential facts in a clear and unambiguous manner; and there is the *tendentious* style, which appeals more to emotions and feelings, and sometimes breaks out into overt campaigning on an issue. The output of one news organisation might include all three styles, sometimes even in coverage of the same issue, although there is a tendency for a certain style or tone to predominate in line with an outlet’s brand identity.

## Myths

Simon Cottle argues that storytelling has long been used by society to “tell and re-tell its basic myths to itself”, thereby reaffirming society as (after Anderson) an “imagined community”. Viewed in this way, “news becomes a symbolic system in which the informational content of particular ‘stories’ becomes less important than the rehearsal of mythic ‘truths’ embodied within the story form itself” (Cottle, 2000: 438). For Jack Lule (2001: 15), journalists repeatedly write the news in terms of myth; that is, stories that draw on “archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life”. Not every news story is written in such terms, but many are. Why? Because stories can have a form of pre-existence *before* they are written:

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Journalists approach events with stories already in mind. They employ common understandings. They borrow from shared narratives. They draw upon familiar story forms. They come to the news story *with* stories. Sometimes the story changes as the journalist gathers more information. But the story doesn't change into something completely new and never before seen. The story changes into ... another story. (Lule, 2001: 29, emphasis and ellipsis in original)

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He identifies seven enduring myths that are told and retold by journalists through supposedly fresh news stories. They are:

- The victim – transforming death into sacrifice.
- The scapegoat – what happens to those who challenge or ignore social beliefs.
- The hero – the humble birth, the quest, the triumph and the return.
- The good mother – models of goodness.
- The trickster – crude, stupid, governed by animal instincts.
- The other world – the contrast between “our” way of life and the “other”.
- The flood – the humbling power of nature (Lule, 2001: 22–25).

Consider the crime stories that make up such a large proportion of our news, particularly at a local and regional level. Journalists can predict that there will be a reasonably steady supply of crime news and how many of various types of crime are likely to occur on their patch. A murder will be a

shock in a rural village but almost expected to occur in an inner-city area (though it may still come as a shock to those who live in nearby streets). It does not take long for recruits to journalism to absorb how particular crimes tend to be covered. Murder victims, for example, might be innocent (wouldn't hurt a fly), heroic (have-a-go-hero) or tainted (gunned down in a drugs turf war), and this approach helps determine how much effort is expended on painting a sympathetic picture of their lives by means of comments from family, friends and neighbours, duly illustrated by snaps from the family album or lifted from Facebook. Should victims be treated so differently, though? In 2020 West Yorkshire police apologised for the language its senior officers had used more than four decades earlier about some of the women who had been murdered by the Yorkshire Ripper – a distinction between “innocent” and not-so-innocent victims that was also reflected in much contemporary press coverage and “was as wrong then as it is now” (Topping and Pidd, 2020).

Angela Phillips has reduced Lule's list of myths to five basic narratives that influence news stories “by selection and exclusion” and which “can overwhelm, or completely change the emphasis and interpretation of the information”. Her list of familiar narratives is:

- Overcoming evil.
- Transformation.
- Tragedy.
- Romance.
- Coming of age, aka rags to riches (Phillips, 2007: 13–20).

For Lule, the telling of news stories as myth usually helps to “manufacture consent” towards the existing social order. However, such ideological power is not predetermined because news is “messy and complicated” and is “a site of

personal, social, and political struggle from its conception by a reporter to its understanding by a reader”. Therefore, mythic stories might potentially be used to offer alternative perspectives on society (Lule, 2001: 192). Phillips welcomes this potential to see things differently:

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Myth and metaphor are not, by definition, conservative and uncritical. They can also be used to challenge the status quo and to break down conventions. Transgressive stories are often more arresting than those that operate within conventional normative boundaries. When we read sympathetic stories about people who have, conventionally, been treated as pariahs, they challenge our assumptions. ... The challenge is to understand the power of myth, to know how to use it, but also how to subvert it. (Phillips, 2007: 23–24)

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## Inverted pyramid

Although the image of the inverted pyramid is commonly used in journalism training, it also has its critics. Don Fry of the US-based Poynter Institute, for example, argues that readers will not be able to fully comprehend a news story written according to the inverted pyramid model because “the background goes at the bottom, somewhere between ‘boring’ and ‘dull’. Without background, readers cannot understand the story, and simply give up before they get to the information they need.” He prefers the idea of a “stack of blocks” consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end, in which: “The beginning predicts the middle in form and content, and the ending cements the main points into the readers’ memories” (Fry, 2004). The concept of the inverted pyramid and the order in which more or less important information is placed also raises the question of *who* decides what is more or less important, and on what basis. This is where the writing of news depends on an understanding of the news values discussed in [Chapter 3](#), so the order in which a story is told will largely be determined by the news

values that operate in a particular newsroom at a particular time (Smith and Higgins, 2013: 77).

The inverted pyramid model is not simply a technical method to follow or a neutral means of storytelling, according to Daniel Hallin. He argues that *where* information appears in a story, and *how* it is inflected, can have an ideological effect by emphasising some views or voices and by marginalising others. To illustrate the point, he suggests that reporting of the Vietnam war saw a “reverse inverted pyramid” in operation, whereby the nearer the information was to the truth, the further down the news story it would be placed (cited in Schudson, 1991: 148–149). Then again, as we have seen, the truth itself is not always a simple matter.

In digital media the inverted pyramid style of news reporting is sometimes said to be losing out to longer-form narratives, because “online presentation of news ends the scarcity of space that was so important in shaping (literally) the format of news into an inverted pyramid” (Franklin and Canter, 2019: 149). However, although space may not be in short supply on online news sites and apps, the attention span of readers might be. So the punchy style of news reporting that hits you with the best bit first is likely to be with us for a while yet.

## Attribution

One of the primary questions of journalism is, “Who says?”, argues Bell, who suggests that, as a lot of news is based on *somebody saying something*, a pertinent question for journalists and readers is to ask what credentials the source has. Attribution “reminds the audience that this is an account which originated with certain persons and organisations,” writes Bell (1991: 190). “It is not an unchallengeable gospel.” Attribution of sources is a way for journalists to distance themselves from points being made in a story, allowing them to “appear to remain objective and neutral”, argues Keeble (2001a: 44).

Good attribution is necessary but insufficient to produce good journalism, writes Nick Davies in his critical examination of

the news industry, *Flat Earth News*. He quotes a Press Association editor explaining: “What we do is report what people say accurately. Our role is attributable journalism – what someone has got to say. What is important is in quote marks.” For Davies (2008: 83), this approach renders such journalists incapable of discovering the truth because: “Whether what is said is itself a truthful account of the world is simply not their business. ... If the Prime Minister says there are chemical weapons in Iraq, that is what the good news agency will report” – even if the truth turns out to be somewhat different. This is where the so-called “strategic ritual” of objective reporting comes in, as discussed in [Chapter 5](#).

## Text

Many words have been written in recent decades analysing media output from a perspective that says a text is not simply a collection of words and/or images, but “the meaningful outcome of the *encounter* between content and reader” (McQuail, 2000: 349, my emphasis). In other words, the work of the journalist only becomes a *text* when it is read by somebody. And, given that we bring our own knowledge, experience, expectations and prejudices into play whenever we read something, the same news story may be capable of multiple meanings (this tends to be known in academic circles as *polysemy*). Of interest here is the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who spoke of language as *dialogic*, that is, everything we say or write is in some sense both *responding* to things that have already been said and *anticipating* future responses: “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (Bakhtin, 1935: 76).

Where does the journalist figure in all of this? Critical analysis of texts sometimes gives the impression that the work of the journalist is almost irrelevant to the production of meaning by the audience. Just because a text is *capable* of being interpreted in many ways does not mean it necessarily *will* be, though, and “many media genres are understood by most



of their receivers most of the time in predictable ways” (McQuail, 2000: 485). According to Colin Sparks:

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To acknowledge that any text is polysemic is not the same thing as to say that it is capable of *any* interpretation whatsoever. Put more concretely, the sense which people can make of newspapers depends at least in part in *what the journalists have actually written in them in the first place*. (Sparks, 1992: 37, my emphasis)

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Media texts are sometimes subjected to what is described by academics as “critical discourse analysis”, a method of textual, linguistic analysis that aims “to reveal what kinds of social relations of power are present in texts both explicitly and implicitly” (Machin and Niblock, 2008: 246). However, although such analysis may tell us what can be read into a text, it may be more limited in explaining how and why a particular piece of work came to be the way it is. As David Machin and Sarah Niblock point out, a discourse analyst may believe that a photograph has been selected to convey a particular ideological message, yet it may turn out that the picture was chosen primarily because it was cheap (or free) and handy. “Simply, we cannot understand a text in isolation from its production” (Machin and Niblock, 2008: 246–247).

McQuail (2000: 485) notes that there is “a power of the text that it is foolish to ignore”; journalists will presumably be relieved to be told that their work is not always rendered redundant by the role of active audiences. The language used in news texts will be discussed further in [Chapter 12](#).

# CHAPTER 10 WRITING FEATURES

## Key terms

Analysis; Anecdotes; Backgrounders; Blogging; Columnists; Commentariat; Confessional journalism; Conversation; Description; Facts; Feature writing; IHTM; Intro; Linking words; Long-form journalism; Opinion; Payoff; Personalisation; Profiles; Quotes; Standfirst; Subject matter; Subjective experience; TOT; Voice

It begins like this. A short sentence followed by another. Maybe even another. Nothing is explained, not even what *it* might be, let alone what *this* is. In this case it is an example of the way in which a feature article might start. But it could start in an entirely different way. Because, unlike hard news stories, a feature intro might make a diversion up what appears to be a dead end, it might beat about the bush, and it might take a leisurely, scenic route to its destination. Just make sure there *is* a destination and that you encourage the reader to come along for the ride too.

The word **features** typically covers all editorial content apart from news, sports news, reports of sporting fixtures, letters, users' comments and live-blogging of news or sport. Features tend to take longer to read than news items and, as a result, their days are sometimes said to be numbered in an age of short attention spans and fast-moving online and social media. More specifically, serious in-depth features and long-form journalism are thought at risk, not least from a perceived shift towards lighter and more list-based feature material or "it happened to me" (IHTM) horror stories. But in-depth and long-form journalism "is undergoing something of a revival," believes Jemima Kiss, precisely because "the snatchy web has reinforced how important reflection, research and a considered article should be".

## “I WROTE ABOUT HOW THE REST OF US FELT”

The traditional difference between news and features has been described by Nell McCafferty in the following terms, based on her own experience on the ground (literally):

---

It is the modest ambition of every journalist to write a front-page story. ... The front-page story tells what happened, where, when, and gives the explanation usually of the person in charge. If you want to know how the rest of us feel about it, you turn to the inside pages. I discovered, early on, that I'd never be able to write a front-page story. I'd be inclined to argue with the person in charge, and feel obliged to give the other version in brackets. I discovered this particularly on Bloody Sunday in Derry when I was lying on the street while people around me got shot dead. I saw everything while the other reporter was at the back. He, rightly, wrote the front-page story, because somebody had to establish the name of the officer in charge, interview him, and provide all the deadly details. Had it been up to me to phone the officer, the row would still be going on and the story would never have been written. My version appeared on the inside pages. I wrote about how the rest of us felt, lying on the ground. (McCafferty, 1984: 14)

---

That's a feature. But such a personal account is just one form of feature. And sometimes a feature *does* end up on the front page, usually because it adds something to a big story that has already been in the news headlines. The line between an information feature, a background feature and a long news story can be a blurry one; as can the line between a comment piece and a news story, on some titles.

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“There is no one correct way to write a feature.”

– Sharon Wheeler.

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Organisationally, a news organisation's features desk usually takes responsibility for opinion columns, reviews, horoscopes, TV listings, advice columns (aka "agony aunts"), gardening tips and so on, as well as news backgrounders, analytical articles, thinkpieces, picture spreads, profiles and celebrity interviews. On most magazines it is the features that define them as "brands", even though many mags also have news sections. And in broadcasting, as Andrew Boyd notes, the term "feature" often means a human interest or "soft news" story:

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The hard news formula calls for the meat of the story in the first line. ... The feature style, which leads the audience into the story rather than presenting them with the facts in the first line, is used more freely wherever greater emphasis is placed on entertainment and a lighter touch than on straightforward and sometimes impersonal, hard news. (Boyd, 2001: 73)

---

Features should not be thought of as synonymous with fluffiness or entertainment, though. They can also deal with serious topical issues at greater length, and in greater depth, than is usually possible in simple news reports (Boyd, 2001: 127).

Opinion **columnists** have proliferated as newspapers and magazines have surrendered much of their traditional breaking news role to broadcast, online and social media, and as publishers seek to distinguish one brand from another. Some columnists are engaged for their knowledge and insight and others because they can turn out an entertaining sentence or two. It might be part of their task to be controversial – to get the publication talked and tweeted about – but *safely* controversial, within the limits of what the target readership (and the editor) will find acceptable. A columnist who steps over this shifting, invisible line might find themselves the target of a twitterstorm and, if the publication's own readers or advertisers join in, looking for a new job.

Whether they represent strong opinion, expert analysis, an individual profile or a piece of descriptive writing, good features require both

content *and* style. They have a beginning, a middle and an end – usually in that order – not to be confused with Philip Larkin’s phrase about a beginning, a *muddle* and an end (cited in Adams, 1999: 50). Features should also have a theme, an idea, something to say. However, some features can be rather formulaic affairs, as Brian Whittle points out:

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If you look at women’s mags, the stories have got to be TOT – triumph over tragedy. There’s got to be a happy ending, otherwise they won’t run them. It’s unbelievable, they’re so formulaic, they’re homogenised. They are the Mills and Boons of today.

---

That is only part of the story. There are also features that illuminate, features that have the power to make us laugh out loud or have a quiet cry, features that impart information or question our assumptions, that make us look at things in different ways or shine a torch into some darkened corner. And features that are simply good writing. The best way to learn about features is to *read*, *write* and *rewrite* lots of features. Also, get other people to read your features because it helps remind you that, like all journalism, features are produced for the *reader* not the *writer*.

## WHERE DO FEATURES COME FROM?

Virtually anything can be the **subject** of a feature, and sources for feature ideas are similar to the news sources discussed in [Chapter 4](#). With features, however, there is a tendency for more ideas to come from the writer’s own experience, a process sometimes called personalisation. For example, Leah Wild wrote a double-page feature about her battle with bureaucracy to get a toilet seat suitable for her daughter, to which a sub added the rather unimaginative headline: THE STORY OF MY DISABLED DAUGHTER’S TOILET SEAT (*Guardian*, March 7 2002). If a lot of your 20-something mates are still hanging around the parental home, you might think of writing a feature on the choices and problems confronting this generation. You might abandon the car and start cycling to work, prompting a feature on how lorry drivers seem to be out to kill you; or you might walk along a canal towpath and discover that some anti-social

cyclists are also pretty dangerous, suggesting another idea. You might be on a postgraduate journalism training course, so you could think of submitting an account of your experiences to the media or education pages of one of the national papers or to a trade website such as *Press Gazette*. If you have an IHTM horror story to tell, or one with a TOT twist, even better.

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“These days so much of what ends up on the front page is a feature. Even when you are covering a war, you want to experience it, the feel of it.”

– *Mary Hadar.*

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Just as news feeds on itself, features are often prompted by other features and by what’s in the news headlines. A common cycle is that one news story is followed up with more news stories, then background features, before it becomes a peg for columnists to hang their personal opinions on. If lots of high-profile columnists (the so-called “commentariat”) get their teeth into a subject, their opinions might in turn influence the news agenda itself, before the topic is rounded off with a “why oh why?” piece in one of the Sunday papers.

Let’s suppose you’ve been tasked with writing a feature and that you’ve done your research along the lines suggested in [Chapters 4, 5, 6](#) and maybe [Chapter 8](#) too. Before you lay a finger on your keyboard, Sally Adams suggests that you consider the results of your research and ask yourself:

What’s

- the most startling fact you’ve discovered?
- the best anecdote unearthed?
- the most astonishing quote?
- the most surprising event?

- the item with the greatest “Hey did you know that...?” factor? (Adams, 1999: 74)

When you’ve done that, you should have a fair idea of the angle you want to take, so it’s time to start writing.

## THE BEGINNING

The feature intro, sometimes known as the lead, is hard to pin down because there are so many different styles. The main purpose of the intro is to make the reader want to read on, so the key question is, as with news: *what works?* The feature intro might focus on a specific place at a specific time, maybe on just one person even if many others are involved, as in this example:

---

As night fell over Page Hall in Sheffield on Thursday evening, Barrie Rees started layering up. Thinsulate hat, gloves, a warm jacket, sturdy trainers, his two walking sticks. He hooked an electronic cigarette on a cord around his neck, and hoped someone else would bring a pen and paper to note down observations. The 64-year-old was ready to go out on patrol.

Rees limped his way lightly down the tightly packed terraced streets of his north Sheffield neighbourhood to the Pakistani Advice Centre on Page Hall Road, where he was meeting other members of the recently formed Page Hall Residents Association.

“They called us vigilantes,” said Rees. “What a joke! Look at me and my sticks. Usually there’s another on a mobility scooter. In summer we had a pregnant lady with us. Vigilantes! Couldn’t be anything further from the truth. We’re just a group of ordinary local people who don’t like being intimidated in our own neighbourhood, trying to make the newcomers understand how life works here.” (Helen Pidd, *Guardian*, November 16 2013)

---

Only after having set the scene and introduced readers to one of her main characters does Pidd go on to explain the context of the events of that Thursday evening: that the local MP had warned of dangerous tensions between locals and Roma and Slovakian migrants. It was not just any local MP but a former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and his comments had been picked up by sections of the national media, excited by talk of riots and vigilante action. Pidd's feature allowed some of those involved to speak for themselves in more measured tones, and we will return to it later.

A different way of opening a feature is with a general statement, as in this exploration of the case of a Texan woman who killed her five children:

---

Mental illness has never been much of a mitigating factor in the great retributive machine that is the US criminal justice system. (Andrew Gumbel, *Independent*, March 14 2002)

---

Gumbel goes on to detail two other cases before getting around to asking why anyone might imagine that one particular "heartbreaking" case might be any different. It seems as though he is taking a long time to give us the "meat" of the story, but we do not read these opening sentences in isolation. They are put in context by the "page furniture" so important to many features; in this case the stark headline IN GOD'S NAME superimposed on a picture of the woman, accompanied by an explanatory standfirst about the "respectable wife and mother, raising a God-fearing family", who drowned her five children: "Why? Only now can the full, dreadful story be told" (Andrew Gumbel, *Independent*, March 14 2002). Such presentation is important to the ways in which journalism is consumed by readers. Features depend more than hard news on being sold to the reader "by means of a complex of headlines, pictures, blurb, standfirst ... caption and significant quotation" drawing out "the mood and underlying substance" of the feature (Hodgson, 1993: 247–248).

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"Our feature pages should be sprinkled with star dust or whatever it is that women wear that catches the light at first nights."



– Arthur Christiansen.

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Pictures can be key (see [Chapter 11](#) for more on this). A famous photograph is absolutely central to a tabloid profile of a South African woman: it is a photograph of the body of her teenage son being carried away from a protest in Soweto 37 years earlier. Not only did the paper display the picture itself on a full page accompanying the feature, but it was the peg on which the intro and the entire piece were hung:

---

She is the woman Nelson Mandela called his hero – the mother of the dead child being carried from a demo in this iconic news photo.

In his Robben Island cell, Mandela was shocked to hear of the appalling killing of 13-year-old Hector Pieteron, Dorothy Molefi's only son.

The forgiveness and dignity shown by this amazing woman in the face of shocking apartheid brutality was a shining example for Mandela. (Andy Lines, *Daily Mirror*, December 9 2013)

---

An awful lot of adjectives there, and “iconic” is a horribly overused word although in the above instance it is probably justified. Do a Google image search for “Hector Pieteron 1976” and judge for yourself.

Whereas news writing tends to concentrate on providing answers, features are usually more open to the unresolved question. Very occasionally you might even begin a feature with a question:

---

What on earth is going on at the National Theatre? We certainly know what is not going on. Previously announced productions of *Alice and Wonderland* and *The Playboy of the Western World* have been postponed indefinitely... (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, October 10 2000)

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Note the double meaning of the phrase “going on”. Billington’s intro gives us a steer that the feature is going to discuss recent events at the National Theatre, and if we want to find out what’s been going on then we will read on.

At other times an intro is designed to draw in the reader with a piece of descriptive writing, as in this example:

---

Drissa takes off his T-shirt. His numerous wounds are deep and open – down to the bone. If it weren’t for the maggots that have nested in his skin, he would surely have succumbed to gangrene.

Drissa was a slave on an Ivory Coast cocoa plantation. Forced to work for 18 hours a day on little or no food, and locked in a small room with his fellow captives at night, he was regularly, systematically, brutally beaten. It is scarcely credible that such cruelty and disregard for human life should be employed in the production of a chocolate bar. (Fiona Morrow, *Independent*, September 27 2000)

---

It is possible to imagine the material in the Drissa intro being rewritten as a news story along the lines of: “Slaves on a cocoa plantation are systematically beaten and denied food, according to...” But the feature intro is effective because of its focus on the individual, because of the rhythm of the writing (“...regularly, systematically, brutally beaten...”), and because of the delayed contrast between the horrors described and the realisation that the purpose of this brutality is the production of a mere chocolate bar.

Personal experience can be incorporated into features in a way that is not normally allowed in news. Look at this lengthy feature intro, which mixes the personal with the political to set up what will be an illuminating examination of life and death in Northern Ireland:

---

They call my generation the “Ceasefire babies”, though I’ve always hated that name. I hated the mocking tone in which it was usually said, as if growing up in the 90s in Belfast

was a stroll. There were still soldiers on the street when I was a kid. I remember them – in uniforms and maroon berets, at checkpoints, on pavements, crouching down on one knee, as if ducking out of sight of an enemy the surrounding civilians couldn't see. I remember walking past one with my sister, then aged about 16, after she had picked me up from school. "Do they wear hats on their heads to stop them from getting cold?" I'd asked. "Yes," she'd replied, smiling, and the pale-skinned recruit I'd gestured to had smiled as well. He looked barely older than her, perhaps 18. That was around the time I learned that the toy gun I used for games of cowboys and Indians could not be brought outside, in case a passing patrol saw it and mistook it for a real one. It didn't matter that it was silver with an orange trumpet-top on the end of the barrel. (Lyra McKee, *Guardian*, March 28 2020)

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Including **the presence of the writer** in this way is a familiar device in feature writing, and it does not always have to be based on the sort of longstanding personal involvement drawn upon by McKee, above. It might foreground the role of the writer *as a journalist*, as in this example:

---

It was a simple assignment: go and interview the editor of *Who's Who*. I duly bunged in a request to Messrs A & C Black, the publishers. "I'm afraid not," the firm's spokeswoman, Charlotte Burrows, informed me sternly. "All the editors have to remain anonymous, to protect them." Protect them from what? "From people wanting to be in *Who's Who*." (Francis Wheen, *Sunday Telegraph*, March 17 1996)

---

This interface between journalist and subject is a popular one with feature writers, not just to attract the reader but also to set the tone for what follows. From the above paragraph, for example, we are left in little doubt that Wheen feels the publishers need to be brought down a peg or two.

Sometimes a little *dramatic licence* is employed, as in this example from a profile of a crime writer:

---

Harry Patterson, aka thriller writer Jack Higgins, is a man of cast iron habits. I find him sitting at his usual table in his favourite Italian restaurant, his perennial glass of champagne in hand. On the table in front of him lie the tinted glasses of unvarying design that make him look like a hit man. (Cassandra Jardine, *Daily Telegraph*, February 25 2000)

---

Or this intriguing opening with the echo of a thousand westerns:

---

A silence descended on the little grassy racing track behind the car park of the Jolly Friar pub in the former pit village of Blidworth, on the border between Nottingham and South Yorkshire, when Mark Pettitt appeared. It was an uncomfortable silence, the kind you get in cowboy films when the gunman walks into the small town. For Mark Pettitt is currently the most unpopular man in whippet racing. (Paul Vallely, *Independent*, August 11 2000)

---

Unlike the who, what, where, when and why of the hard news story, the feature intro sometimes leaves the reader with little clue as to the subject about to be addressed. Consider this anecdotal and colloquial intro:

---

Standing in a night club in Banja Luka in the Republic of Serbska, I'm starting to feel a wee bit nervous. We've bunked out of Nato's vast metal factory base with five pissed squaddies for a Friday night on the town, and the locals have got wise to the fact that we're Brits, mainly because the squaddies are wearing Sheffield United shirts. Three terrifying Serb boneheads are gathering nearby, getting just that bit too close for comfort. No one is talking to us. We stand out like sore thumbs. (Stephen Armstrong, *Guardian*, September 25 2000)

---

It turns out to be a feature about a music radio station in former Yugoslavia, run by the British Army to win the “hearts and minds” of young locals.

Some idea of a target audience can inform the way a feature begins. See, for example, the use of detail, description and cultural references in the following intro that was perfect for the now-defunct *Word* magazine but which may not have been deemed appropriate by other less self-consciously “in the know” publications:

---

The office where Will Self writes gives you the astonishing feeling that you’re sitting inside the writer’s brain. Situated right at the top of his house, there are dictionaries and cigars and pipes and ashtrays. There are spindly steel chairs and a bike. There’s a window with a view of Stockwell. And then there are the Post-It notes. Hundreds of them. They cover each wall in perfect yellow ranks like erudite rising damp, each one bearing a mnemonic phrase in Self’s intense, italic handwriting: “GUIDE TO NON-EXISTENT COUNTRIES” or “CRACK WHORES” or “THE PASSION OF BENNY HILL”. Frankly, Will Self’s office feels very much like the obsessive loony’s inner sanctum in the climactic scenes of a *Seven* or a *Silence Of the Lambs*. (Andrew Harrison, *Word*, May 2008)

---

Freed from the constraints of hard news, feature writers sometimes make use of a more poetic style. Take this extended *metaphor* that, combined with description, anecdote and the presence of the journalist, introduces an analysis of Coca-Cola:

---

There is a slight problem with the front door at Coca-Cola’s European headquarters. It is gleaming and wide, like a movable wall of glass, with the outline of a row of giant Coke bottles gleaming across, but it will not open properly. The lock seems to be broken; visitors must knock to gain the attention of reception. The glass, though, is very thick, and the headquarters is in the middle of a noisy shopping centre, in the middle of perhaps the busiest roundabout in

west London. The receptionists take quite a while to look up, clack across the lobby, and unfasten the door. There is time to take in the lobby's blaze of logos and bright red walls, as if the building were a vast Coca-Cola vending machine, with a malfunction. (Andy Beckett, *Guardian*, October 2 2000)

---

The key phrase comes in the last three words of a 131-word intro, and the feature goes on to explore whether Coca-Cola is indeed malfunctioning as a global corporation.

A slightly less elaborate example of imagery at work comes from a local newspaper feature about inner-city areas of a city that was said to be booming at the time:

---

On a clear day people in parts of Beeston and Holbeck can see the cranes towering over Leeds city centre at yet another multi-million pound development.

For many in the communities north of the Aire, the cranes helping to build the latest upmarket apartments or plush offices are symbols of hope and opportunity.

But for some in poverty-stricken Beeston and Holbeck, they are a depressing reminder of a successful local economy that is largely passing them by. (David Marsh, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, March 20 2002)

---

Rhythmic writing and use of contrast to paint a picture can be as effective on a page as when spoken, as this transcript of the intro from a radio dispatch by Alan Johnston demonstrates:

---

Gaza is battered, poverty-stricken and over-crowded. It's short of money, short of space, short of hope and many other things. But it's not short of guns. There are about a dozen different, official security forces. Alongside the police and the army, there's the Presidential Guard, there's the Preventive Security Unit and so on. There are more security

men here per head of population than almost anywhere on earth, but sadly they deliver very little in the way of security. (Alan Johnston, *From Our Own Correspondent*, BBC Radio Four, October 7 2006)

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The above passage works partly because of the quality of the writing and partly because we know that it has not been composed in a London newsroom far from the action but from “here”, in Gaza itself. It is based on good reporting as much as good prose style.

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“Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.”

– *Dr Samuel Johnson.*

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Feature intros, as we have seen, often focus on something quite specific, something human, some tiny detail – painting the little rather than the big picture. Of course, it can all go horribly wrong. Back in the day when journalists dictated their words of wisdom down the phone, they might be asked by a deeply unimpressed copytaker: “Is there much more of this?” It was a useful reminder that we do not write for ourselves.

## THE MIDDLE

If the beginning is the single most important element in feature writing – because it doesn’t matter how good the rest is if readers never venture beyond a dull intro – then the middle is usually the *point* of it all. Even the best intro in the world can’t salvage a feature with nothing to say, with no substance and little research.

The content and structure of a feature will vary depending on the subject matter, the style of the publication, the perceived interests of the readers, the intentions of the writer, and on the time and energy

available for research. Features cannot “write themselves” in the way that some short news stories are said to; the extra length means they must be worked at so they do not come across as a series of unrelated points or as a meandering but aimless stroll around a topic. That means there must be some thought – some logic – to the order in which subjects are introduced, shifts of emphasis are made, and the tone of writing is altered. It is an internal logic rather than a formula and will differ from feature to feature, publication to publication and journalist to journalist.

A feature will utilise some or all of the following, often overlapping with each other:

- Facts
- Quotes
- Description
- Anecdotes
- Opinions
- Analysis.

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“Nothing wrong with opinions. ... But they need some sort of anchorage in fact.”

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– *Francis Wheen.*

## Facts

All features need facts. Apart from the most personalised “lifestyle” columns, that means research. The process of gathering facts for features is essentially the same as for news – interviewing people,



consulting databases, reading reports, witnessing events, searching social media and so on – with the main difference being that features tend to be written over a longer period of time and tend to contain more words. They may *tend* to be written over a longer period of time but that is not always the case, and much valued is the hack who can turn out a 1,500-word piece in an hour or two without making it read as if it has been cobbled together at the last minute.

Ideally there will be the time to consult a wide range of sources and the space to include a lot of the information gathered during your research. Beckett's feature on Coca-Cola, for example, is full of facts gleaned from a variety of sources, including cuttings, websites and books, as well as a range of interviews with actors and "experts" alike; dates, prices, percentages and ingredients are all introduced to support the analysis, description and anecdote that structure the feature. When you have a lot of facts to include, you may wish to make your feature more digestible by including the facts at appropriate points in the text rather than in off-putting chunks; alternatively, you can separate some into a "factbox" for a sidebar, or even turn them into a mini-quiz. Also, think infographics (see [Chapter 11](#)).

## Quotes

As in news stories, direct quotes can add authority, drama and powerful expression to an account. Pidd's piece about Sheffield residents on patrol, for example, is peppered with quotes from all sorts of locals who give it a sense of real people talking. In contrast, in the Texas mother feature discussed above, the first direct quote is a long time coming, after the writer has already given us a lot of the story in his own words. When it arrives it is worth the wait, being a controversial opinion simply expressed by a credible source, one of the lawyers in the case: "It seems we are still back in the days of the Salem witch trials" (Andrew Gumbel, *Independent*, March 14 2002).

Profiles of individuals will normally include more direct speech because the subject's voice, their use of language, can be as important to the story as what they are saying. This is often where the quietly spoken can be allowed to speak in their understated way, as in the first time we hear directly from Dorothy Molefi, telling the story of the day her son was killed:

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Dorothy, now 70, recalls June 16, 1976, as if it was yesterday.

Speaking exclusively to the *Daily Mirror* in the front room of her Soweto home she said: “I remember it very well. It was a cold day and in the morning Hector asked me if he could wear long trousers to school.

“I said he couldn’t and off he went. The next thing I knew, he had been shot dead. You can see him wearing his short trousers in the photo.” (Andy Lines, *Daily Mirror*, December 9 2013)

---

## Description

There’s an old journalistic maxim: “Show, don’t tell.” In other words, use description to express what you see, and let readers make up their own minds what to think about it. We have already seen many examples of description in the intros quoted above. David Randall advises that descriptive writing can help evoke an atmosphere and bring a scene to life for the reader, as long as it is not treated as “an opportunity to display your latest vocabulary” (Randall, 2000: 182).

## Anecdotes

Anecdotes play a far greater role in features than in news stories, where they are often squeezed out by tight word limits and an emphasis on the facts. As well as sometimes being funny or moving, **anecdotes** can help explain how the actors in a story felt or reacted, tell us something about the human condition, and create a big picture by painting small pictures in sufficient detail. Foreign correspondent Edward Behr says that even the most “trivial, nonsensical anecdote can be made to illustrate a general truth” and may reveal more than the “careful marshalling of facts” (Behr, 1992: x). While interviewing schools’ careers advisers for a background feature on a strike, I took a note of the sort of incident that would not have made it into a hard news story but which helped bring a worthy but potentially dull feature to life:

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Staff first realised something was brewing in the summer, when their leased yucca plants were unceremoniously removed and office supplies of pens and paper suddenly dried up. “One of our managers was telling us there was no financial crisis just as a yucca was wheeled out behind her,” recalls Lisa Cooper. (Tony Harcup, *Guardian*, October 10 1995)

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In a stroke of journalistic genius, a sub came up with the headline **FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE YUCCAS**, a reference to Pastor Niemoller’s famous lament: “First they came for the Jews...”.

## Opinions

Some features make the opinions of the writer clear, others do not – it depends on the style, the subject, the publication, and on whether the writer *has* an opinion. But there is usually more opinion in features than in news, from a greater variety of sources. Rather than the traditional “both sides of a story” adopted in much news, features often allow room for more subtle or nuanced differences of opinion to emerge. And it is not unknown for the stated opinion of the writer to have changed by the time the feature ends.

## Analysis

Again, not all features are analytical, but they have more scope for analysis than do tightly written news stories with a more immediate focus. Beckett’s Coca-Cola feature includes a range of analyses of the company’s performance, based on its historical position, on its product diversification and on its brand image. Apart from the writer’s own analysis of what is going on, he invites Coke’s UK chief and a range of independent experts to put forward their own explanations. In the Texas mother feature, the case is analysed by reference to how a similar case would have been handled in the UK, with a British lawyer explaining that she would probably have been cleared on the grounds of temporary insanity, if she had been tried at all. More likely, she would have been sent to a psychiatric hospital until she was declared fit enough to be discharged. The purpose of such analysis in features is to take journalism beyond reportage and

description; not just to tell us what is going on but to help us *understand* it a little more.

## THE END

As with the intro, the feature ending – known as the “payoff” because it rewards the reader for sticking with you – can come in all shapes and sizes. Whereas news stories typically end on the least important information, allowing copy to be cut from the bottom upwards, features tend to have a more rounded ending. This might mean a summary of what has gone before, a return to the scene of the intro, or a new twist to leave the reader pondering.

Lines’ profile of the grieving mother ends in plaintive, heart-breaking fashion:

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Dorothy has borne her loss stoically saying: “It was God’s will.”

But then she adds sadly: “I used to visit the graveyard a lot – I don’t go quite so much now. He was my only son you know.” (Andy Lines, *Daily Mirror*, December 9 2013)

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Pidd’s account of tensions on the streets also ends on a quote, this one looking forward rather than back:

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Ten-year-old Christian Kandrak had only been in Sheffield since February but had already picked up a South Yorkshire twang as he explained he had dreams of becoming a paid interpreter: “I like to be in England. I want to learn English so that I can get a good job, to make money. That’s why Slovaks come here.” (Helen Pidd, *Guardian*, November 16 2013)

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Gumbel’s story of the mother who drowned her children ends by referring to the unrepentant state prosecutor, leading to the payoff:

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Her conviction is clearly another feather in his cap. Whether it advances the cause of civilisation, however, is another matter. (Andrew Gumbel, *Independent*, March 14 2002)

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So the subject of that feature turns out not to have been the woman who killed her children, but the US justice system itself.

Another form of payoff is the return to the opening scene but with a twist, as in Armstrong's feature about the British Army running a radio station as part of Nato's SFOR force in Bosnia:

---

Back in the club, you could believe there is some hope. The squaddies have split and they're all in the middle of the dance floor, hands in the air as the DJ builds a storming set. There are Croats and Serbs and Bosnians here and people may be slagging off SFOR but they're buying the squaddies rounds of Amstel. The guy on the podium with the lurid green glo-sticks steps down and chats to me about music, always music, and doesn't want to know when I get on to politics, so that just for one, naïve, 1988 Summer Of Love moment you actually do think that music could make a difference. Or maybe that's just the beer talking. (Stephen Armstrong, *Guardian*, September 25 2000)

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We are back in the opening scene but everyone is more relaxed, and we have heard an upbeat story about music promoting peace, love and understanding. Then the final sentence arrives to raise a question mark about the meaning of everything we have just read. Similarly, Beckett's lengthy piece on Coke's problems in Europe is put into perspective by the payoff quote from an analyst:

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"If Coca-Cola get people in China and India to drink one more a year, they needn't give a toss about people like us."  
(Andy Beckett, *Guardian*, October 2 2000)

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Sometimes there is just no alternative to the sombre ending. Lyra McKee's feature about life in post-Troubles Northern Ireland ends

like this:

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Your children, they'd told our parents, will be safe now. With the peace deal, the days of young people disappearing and dying would be gone. Yet this turned out to be a lie, too.  
(Lyra McKee, *Guardian*, March 28 2020)

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It was the last piece McKee worked on before she was shot dead on the streets of Derry; she was just 29. You can read the full published feature here: [www.theguardian.com/news/2020/mar/28/lyra-mckee-last-piece-ceasefire-babies-growing-up-northern-ireland-in-90s](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/mar/28/lyra-mckee-last-piece-ceasefire-babies-growing-up-northern-ireland-in-90s)

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“There’s already a giant slagheap of surplus comment. Where our media – and democracy – suffers a deficit is reporting.”

– *Aditya Chakraborty.*

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## “THE START OF A PROCESS”

When it comes to writing it all up, feature writers typically start by crafting the intro and then working through it from there. But sometimes you might already know how you want to *end* the story, which might mean working backwards to make sure you set up the payoff accordingly. Or you might make a list of the key themes you need to address, or the main people you have interviewed, and use that list as a rough guide to structure. Journalists working on features often use all the time they have available to keep returning to the draft, moving or deleting a chunk of text, changing a word, treblechecking a fact or spelling, and so on – either until they are happy with it or, more likely, until the editor is demanding the copy *now*.

If you are writing a feature for a blog you might well be the editor as well as the writer. Blog style features tend to be more conversational, says Sarah Hartley, and you can keep the conversation going by incorporating audience input after initial publication:

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What you're first putting out there isn't the definitive and isn't the history, it's the start of a *process*. It's all the revisions and the feedback, and the things that come along after, that are probably more important than what you first started with. A good online journalist now will be able to bring that right round, because it is a never-ending story. ... People don't like just to be shouted at, they want to take part...

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It might be a never-ending process, but the writing needs to start somewhere. The starting point can be now because, as with blogs, even features for magazines and newspapers can be written in the present rather than the past tense. Not always, though. The only hard and fast rule on the tense of a feature is to be consistent throughout, and even that rule can occasionally be broken if there is a good reason. Variety is important when it comes to the length of sentences, though, because too many long sentences can become a stodgy read and too many short ones can have a jerky effect.

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“The broader scope ... can seem liberating to someone used to the constraints of hard news, just as they can also seem somewhat bewildering to the beginner.”

– *Jenny McKay.*

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In a good feature the transition between different sections and different ideas should be smooth and easy, with the reader not having to break sweat to find out what you are getting at. Linking words and phrases are therefore essential in good writing. Do not simply give the reader a succession of points apparently unrelated to

each other, and do not leave your quotes flapping in the breeze. Strive to link one idea with the next, one paragraph with the previous one. Linking words and phrases can be as simple as *and* or *but*. Again, variety is important. This chapter, for example, has so far included the following linking words and phrases, among others: in this case... but... because... more specifically... that's... and... as can... though... also... another... however... there are also... for example... although... only after having... a different way... goes on to... whereas... note... at other times... as with... this... or... in this way... it turns out that... take this... a slightly less... the above... that means... rather than... in contrast... this is often... again... so... another... the following...

It is a useful exercise to take a feature that you have enjoyed reading and go back through it highlighting linking words or phrases. If it is well written, you probably didn't notice them on first reading; but if they were not there, it would not have been a very good read.

## Summary

A feature may give background information and analysis on a topical issue; may profile a person, place or organisation; may convey controversial opinion; and may be entertaining in style and/or content. Virtually anything can be the subject for a feature, although subject matter will be selected according to the perceived interests of readers and advertisers. Features tend to be longer than news stories and tend to use more sources. There are many styles of feature writing, and features do not conform to the "inverted pyramid" formula of most news reporting. Journalists working on features sometimes have greater freedom to experiment with style, and the journalist's personal experiences and voice may be included in the story. The "confessional" mode of feature writing has been increasingly prevalent in recent years, and it is argued that this reflects wider social changes that challenge "general truth claims" in society.

## Questions



Are some subjects better suited to features than news?

Columnists tend to be paid more than reporters – why?

Why do we see “I” in features but not usually in news?

Is there a blurring between features and news?

Is long-form journalism just self-indulgent?

## What would you do?

Remember the scenario from [Chapter 9](#)? You hear from the police that a local 10-year-old girl (Jane Doe) has been reported missing, having last been seen around 4 pm yesterday in the vicinity of her school, Green Grange Junior. Police say she did not return home after school and has not been seen since. The family home was searched overnight but there was no sign of her. Jane has a mobile phone but does not take it to school with her. It was in her bedroom and police officers have taken it away for examination. Her parents and their friends and neighbours joined police in searching for her overnight and the search is continuing today. Police say they are becoming increasingly concerned for Jane Doe’s welfare. Let’s suppose somebody else is handling the immediate news story and that you are asked to work on a feature about the efforts to find Jane. How would you go about it and what sort of feature intro might you be able to write?

## Further reading

A good place to start is Angela Phillips’ (2007) excellent *Good Writing for Journalists*, which reproduces and analyses a range of interesting features, providing numerous pointers to better writing. Also worth checking out are Wheeler (2009), Pape and Featherstone (2006), Keeble (2006), and Adams (2016), among others, while McKay (2019) includes a useful chapter specifically on magazine features. For an introduction to the process of writing reviews, see Gilbert (2016). Randall

with Crew (2021) are critical of the strict division between news and features, but their emphasis on reporting is welcome and the writing tips are always thoughtful. Coward (2013) deals specifically with confessional journalism and the so-called “featurisation” and “feminisation” of contemporary journalism, while Dovey (2000) offers an academic analysis of reflexivity within journalism (and beyond). Don’t *just* rely on books, though, no matter how good they are: make sure that you read a wide range of features from a wide range of media.

## Top three to try next

Angela Phillips (2007) *Good Writing for Journalists*

Sharon Wheeler (2009) *Feature Writing for Journalists*

Sally Adams (2016) ‘Writing features’, Chapter 3 of Hicks et al’s *Writing for Journalists* (third edition)

## Sources for soundbites

Wheeler, 2009: 3; Hadar, quoted in Phillips, 2007: 1; Christiansen, quoted in Williams, 1959: 190; Johnson, quoted in Hicks et al, 1999: 124; Wheen, 2002: xiii; Chakraborty, 2020; McKay, 2006: 97.

## Features

The distinction between news and features is widely accepted. However, a different perspective is offered by David Randall, who worries that too many journalists “see the reporter as an earnest collector of ‘facts’ and the feature *writer* as someone who wanders around thinking of fine phrases which save them the trouble of doing much

research” (Randall, 2000: 193, emphasis in original). He continues:

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The truth is that trying to make distinctions between news and features does not get us very far. In fact, it is positively dangerous. It produces narrow thinking which can restrict coverage of news to conventional subjects and puts writing it into the unimaginative straitjacket of a formula. With features, it encourages the insidious idea that normal standards of precision and thorough research don't apply and that they can be a kind of low-fact product. ... The opposite, of course, is the case. Most news pages could benefit from a greater sense of adventure and a more flexible approach to stories. Similarly, most features sections cry out for sharper research and less indulgent writing. There is no great divide between news and features. *Best to think of it all as reporting.* (Randall, 2000: 193–194, my emphasis)

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As Randall argues, in news or features, the quality of the reporting is key, and the writing is one of the means to that end. But is reporting the factual evidence enough on its own? Taking issue with those who emphasise the importance of relying *only* on facts, Angela Phillips points out that features can be an opportunity to show that there is more to life than that by drawing on our own lived experience:

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I agree that journalism must be based on evidence, but that evidence can also be drawn from our own memories and observations of our own emotions, as well as from the experiences, emotions and memories of others. It should be animated by the quest for truth, but tempered by an understanding of how difficult that quest can be. (Phillips, 2007: 4)

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The quest for the truth is considered in [Chapter 5](#).

## Columnists

Reporting may be central to journalism, yet the media marketplace appears to value celebrity columnists more highly than it does the reporters who get their hands dirty actually finding things out. Francis Wheen (2002: xii–xiii) laments this state of affairs: “[The] status of the reporter – as against the lifestyle gusher, or the sad sap who rewrites PR handouts about minor pop stars for a showbiz column – has been dangerously downgraded.” Not all columnists are “lifestyle gushers”, of course; many concentrate on more social and political issues and some base their columns on extensive research. The most high-profile of such columnists and commentators have been described as constituting a “commentariat” that is “taken seriously by most of those who constitute the political class” (Hobsbawm and Lloyd, 2008).

There can often be a disparity between what columnists say about an issue from on high and what news reporters find on the ground; for example, those who had been out on the road reporting the Brexit referendum campaign in the UK in 2016, and the US presidential election the same year, seemed to be much less surprised by the results than were those who had confidently opined on the op-ed pages seemingly without speaking to enough actual voters. Some publications go out of their way to ensure that not *all* their columnists are white, middle-aged, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual males living in the capital city. Some publications don’t seem that bothered.

## Subject

Why is it that features can be about virtually any subject, when news tends to be more restricted? Features need not necessarily conform to the notions of “newsworthiness” discussed in [Chapter 3](#), but how much *agency* do journalists have in choosing subjects and style? Certain subjects will be either *in* or *out* at certain titles or at certain times, and journalists quickly absorb expectations of what is required of them, sharing a set of “formulas, practices, normative values

and journalistic mythology passed down to successive generations” (Harrison, 2000: 108).

Some subjects are selected for feature treatment “solely to attract certain advertisers” (Randall, 2000: 21). This is particularly the case in magazines and magazine-influenced newspaper sections or supplements – covering subjects as diverse as fashion, beauty, finance, education, gadgets, gardening, cars, travel, food and drink – where editorial features act as bait to attract readers to the advertisements that provide the sections with their economic *raison d’être*. For Bob Franklin, advertiser-friendly feature copy can be “crippingly banal” (Franklin, 1997: 7–10). Writing in a US context, Hanno Hardt argues that such business-friendly journalism is anti-democratic in its effects because it speaks to people as consumers rather than as participants or citizens (Hardt, 2000: 218–219). On the other hand, aren’t most of us consumers as well as citizens?

## The presence of the writer

The personal pronoun “I” is absent from “normal printed texts”, according to Roger Fowler (1991: 64). Yet it appears in many features. Jon Dovey notes that “confessional modes of expression” have proliferated in journalism and beyond since the 1990s (Dovey, 2000: 1). Letting the journalist appear as an *actor* in the drama may be driven by a desire to tell stories in more interesting ways, but for Dovey it also reflects a changing cultural climate: “[We] are witnessing the evolution of a new ‘regime of truth’ based upon the foregrounding of individual subjective experience at the expense of more general truth claims” (Dovey, 2000: 25). But how new is this foregrounding of the journalist? Not all that, according to Lynn Barber:

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[This] supposedly new postmodern development of the picaresque interview actually has very long antecedents. Rudyard Kipling’s 1889 interview with Mark Twain starts with a good ten paragraphs about the difficulty of finding Mark Twain’s house, complete

with the statutory cab-driver who doesn't know the way. (Barber, 1999: 199)

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The personal voice of the journalist has always been there, agrees Rosalind Coward (2013), although she adds that it may indeed be becoming louder. If features *have* shifted towards reflexivity in recent years, will this eventually challenge the “regime of truth” represented by the classic “impersonal” method of telling the news? Such questions are discussed in [Chapter 5](#).

## **Anecdotes**

Behr's (1992) argument that an anecdote can illustrate a “general truth” raises the question of what exactly *is* a general truth? In any event, couldn't an anecdote just as easily illustrate a generally held falsehood? Remember: the plural of anecdote is anecdotes, not data.

# CHAPTER 11 TELLING STORIES IN SOUND AND VISION

## Key terms

Active audience; Audio; Breaking news; Broadcast journalism; Cartoons; Digital storytelling; Drones; Facebook; Infographics; Instagram; MoJo; Multi-modal journalism; Performance; Pictures; Pieces to camera; Podcasting; Radio; Rule of thirds; Slideshows; Social media; Subtitles; Television; Twitter; User-generated content; Video

When Caroline Crampton chose to take a postgraduate course in newspaper journalism, she did not expect it to result in her becoming a professional podcaster. But such is life in journalism these days; the job you end up doing might not have yet been invented. Not that the skills needed to be a good print journalist are *wholly* unrelated to those required of the podcaster, the radio journalist or the TV reporter; all are based on an ability to identify, research and tell an interesting story. That's what Caroline Crampton does on her podcast that "unravels the mysteries behind classic detective stories". It is also a good example of the trick of turning a personal interest or hobby into a specialism; and, ultimately, into a way of earning a living from doing something you love. Which is not to say that you don't have to work at it.

## AUDIO STORYTELLING CAN BE "MUCH MORE EVOCATIVE"

After university, Crampton worked at the *New Statesman* and ended up running that magazine's podcasting efforts before going freelance and launching her own fortnightly podcast, *Shedunnit*, in 2018. What does she think is the best thing about telling stories in sound rather than in text? "I think the fact that people can feel a bit transported by it. It is possible to do that with the written word, absolutely, but I think it's more difficult." She points to an episode of *Shedunnit* that tells how a series of real-life "brides in the bath" murders from the early 20th century informed detective stories by Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham and other writers of crime fiction:

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So, for instance, in one of the cases George Joseph Smith, who was a serial bigamist who kept marrying women and kept killing them for their life insurance money, and in one case they were staying in a guest house. The landlady had one of those chamber organs, and they think what happened is that he murdered his wife by drowning her in the bath and then he went and sat and played the organ, and when interviewed afterwards the landlady remembered that he was playing the hymn *Nearer My God To Thee*. So, when I related this story, I found a recording of that hymn played on an organ that I just put very quietly in the background while I was explaining it – and you just can't do that when you're writing. I think that was much more evocative of the sort of mundane horror of what he was doing than just writing it out in words.

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You can judge for yourself by listening to that episode here:  
<https://shedunnitshow.com/bridesinthebath/>

The subject matter of *Shedunnit* may be fiction, but each podcast is a piece of carefully crafted journalism, involving detailed research, often including interviews

with experts on the literature, and the whole thing is scripted before the recording. The same would apply to many traditional radio programmes, so how exactly does podcasting differ?

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The most important way that all podcasts differ from radio, mine included, is that there are no scheduling restrictions. So I picked roughly 20 minutes as about the length that I like to listen to in other podcasts. Also for me, at the pace that I talk at, that's about 3,000 words, and that's about as many words as I can write, once every other week, so that's sort of how the length evolved. Although, because it's not radio, I am absolutely free to make it 30 minutes if I want to, or 18, so I think that's the most important difference. If you're doing a show for Radio 4 it has to be 28 minutes and 40 seconds, and it can't be any less or more than that.

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Does she find that liberating? "Yes, you don't have to think about it at all, which is a nice luxury."

Having done the research, what about finding the right pace and tone for a piece of audio journalism? Crampton says that gets easier with practice, but for her it helps to follow a basic structure:

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I sort of start out with the architecture of an episode. That never changes: there's an outro, there's a break in the middle, there's an introduction. I start with that and then I think about the actual subject and find a beginning, a middle and an end that I want, and then I put those into position and write between those points, if that makes sense. Whereas that's not how I would write an article. I would write an article from the beginning to end. But once I've got that process ingrained in my mind I don't really have to think about it too much any more. It's only occasionally I will get too involved as I'm writing something that's meant to be in the first third of the episode, and I'll realise that I've written way too much and if I carried on at that pace the episode would be two hours long. So at that point I have to readjust and scale it back or whatever, but most of the time I think it now comes fairly naturally.

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Crampton applied her journalistic nous to podcasting despite the fact that the nearest thing she had to training in audio production was "when I was a teenager my friends and I had a not very good band, so we were constantly fiddling around with microphones and laptops because we wanted to make demos and recordings". To avoid the expense of hiring a studio, episodes of *Shedunnit* have always been recorded in a walk-in wardrobe in her home, even before Covid-19 restrictions forced most other podcasters and radio journalists similarly to identify the quietest space in their homes from which to record. "Wardrobes are an excellent option, as is under the duvet," she says, adding: "Turn your washing machine off – it does sound better."

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"Radio just makes your imagination grow."

– Terry Gilliam.

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Complementing her output of sound and words are the occasional related pictures she posts on Instagram. "If I talk about a particular edition of a book or whatever, I do share a picture of it there, and people seem to enjoy that," she says. "But it's definitely a secondary, supporting element rather than the main thing."

**"IT'S PICTURES YOU'RE LOOKING FOR ALL THE TIME"**



Pictures may be very much a secondary consideration for podcasters but they are absolutely crucial to TV and video reporting. Cathy Newman freely admits that, when she switched from print to **broadcast journalism**, it took a while for her to grasp the centrality of visuals to television news. “When I first started in TV I think a lot of my stories were pretty much newspaper stories on TV, I didn’t really think much about the pictures,” she says. As most of her early stories for *Channel 4 News* were about Westminster politics, the available **pictures** tended to be pretty dull anyway: lots of green benches in parliament punctuated with familiar set-ups of men in suits getting out of cars, walking down stairs and shaking hands. She certainly thinks about the pictures now:

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It’s all journalism at the end of the day, but you’ve got to turn it into TV. You’ve got to try to find a way to make it visually interesting. So a lot of what I do, once I’ve got a story and nailed it down, is then getting interesting voices to talk about it and bring that story to life, and then find an interesting way of illustrating it.

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“To tell a story on TV you’ve got to have people on camera.”

– Cathy Newman.

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TV pictures, as with other visuals, tend to follow what is known in the trade as “the rule of thirds”, described for beginners in the following way:

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Mentally divide your viewfinder into thirds vertically and horizontally, like a noughts-and-crosses grid. The horizon or a distinct horizontal line in the landscape (a river or road, perhaps) should be a third of the way up or a third of the way down the screen. People should be a third of the way across the frame – looking into or walking into the two-thirds space, rather than walking out of the frame. (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 181)

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Keeping the above in mind while framing an image is a good basis for producing a useable shot, but even such technically proficient visuals can still be rather uninteresting if they just show a politician going into a meeting, for example. However, sometimes pictures are a pleasure to work with, as Newman explains:

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For some of the stories I’ve done the pictures are a gift really. For example when I went out to the Congo with Angelina Jolie and William Hague. To have this odd couple – the celebrity and the politician – going around a refugee camp, and this amazing African light, that was great in terms of pictures. Obviously there were some really harrowing stories, and lots of children for whom that refugee camp was home, so that was a story with very difficult subject matter. But because of where I was and who I was with it was really easy to turn that into engaging television.

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It could also be turned into poor television by somebody who does not know what they are doing, so it is worth pointing out that picture-led stories do not really tell themselves any more than text-based stories ever really write themselves. Even the most promising material requires journalistic skill and judgement to create the finished product.

Although Newman still goes out and about reporting, her job is now more about anchoring news bulletins and interviewing guests ([Figure 11.1](#)). That’s not quite all. “I

like tweeting while I'm on air," she says. "There's a sense of immediacy about it, a sense of urgency, when you're live on air." That enables her to engage in real-time conversation with viewers about pieces that have just been aired. Not just the stories themselves, either. "Last night there were many more comments about the new top I had on than about the story we had done on Iraq," she says. Such is life on television in the age of the **active audience** and social media, for women especially. Studies in different countries have shown that female presenters and reporters on TV are systematically held to different standards of clothing and appearance than men, not just by viewers but often by management too (Newton and Steiner, 2019).



**Figure 11.1** Cathy Newman in action in the Channel 4 News studio, presenting, conducting live interviews and occasionally tweeting

Source: [www.channel4.com/news/by/cathy-newman](http://www.channel4.com/news/by/cathy-newman)

The central importance of pictures to television also struck Lindsay Eastwood when she moved from print to TV news. "It's pictures that you're looking for all the time," she says. Other obvious differences included the difficulty of persuading people to appear on screen (as opposed to chatting with someone while making a few notes) and the "frustrating" amount of time it suddenly took to get anything done. As somebody who had covered parish council meetings for her local newspaper as a 16-year-old on work experience, she also noticed that an awful lot of regional TV news involved following up stories that had already appeared in the local press or elsewhere. "Frustrating" is a word Eastwood uses frequently, but that is not the whole story. She recognises that being on air from the scene of breaking news is "where you get your kicks. That's the main thing to be proud of if you're working for TV, and radio is even more immediate. Television is good at showing things as they are, like fires, devastation." She recalls covering inner-city disturbances in Bradford:

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The riots stick in my mind because I was out there filming in the thick of it. That was an unbelievable experience really. Very scary. ... There were bricks coming over. We were trying to find a spot to film because obviously behind police lines you can't see the rioters in front, so we were trying to get on high places on either side of the road. But we were also trying to watch our backs. Then there were rowdy people coming round the side of us. I interviewed some. You want to be interviewing the young folk that are involved, saying, "Why are you doing it?" I did feel a bit of hostility a couple of times, but nothing too in-your-face. There were a lot of university students involved so they were quite articulate about why they were doing it.

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"Fires and destruction make good TV."

– Lindsay Eastwood.

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A television reporter needs to be prepared for almost anything for the sake of telling a story with pictures, as when Eastwood put on a pair of waders to stand waist deep in water while reporting from *inside* a flooded house:

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The photographers were going out in the boats with their wellies on, but the [print] reporters were nowhere to be seen, they were in the community centres where everybody had been evacuated to, getting the human story. But we have to be in there in the houses that are waist deep, which is fun. You do get the smell and the sense of absolute devastation, the shoes and the photos floating around in the house and everything is ruined, which you wouldn't experience as a newspaper reporter. But you've still got to try to get the human side as well, of course. It's not quite as glamorous as it's made out to be, but it gets the old adrenalin going.

Also, on the first day of the floods all the technology kept packing in because it was raining so hard, the cameras were getting wet and stopping working – we were drying a camera with a hairdryer. Give me a notepad! My top tip is: pencils rather than pens, when it's raining.

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On occasions, instead of chasing breaking news, she has had the luxury of making a documentary film, such as the one about post-natal depression discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Getting the right pictures to tell such a story at length can be both a challenge and an opportunity to be more creative than there is usually time for in the more hectic world of news reporting:

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The women were in mental torment and thinking horrible thoughts about their babies, but how do you illustrate that in pictures? We did blurry kind of shots and treated the shots. One of the women said she used to walk around her village in a daze and she would just find herself somewhere, so rather than having her walking we did the cameraman walking through the village, filming it from her point of view. So there are techniques you can use without it looking too reconstructed.

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## “FIND SOME WAY TO ILLUSTRATE THIS”

Without it looking too clichéd, either. Not falling into the trap of visual cliché is something that Ayshah Tull is conscious of as she reports news stories on national TV:

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There's only so many times you can do a set-up shot of a kitchen or someone having a cup of tea or something like that, someone putting the kettle on. I really try and avoid that. I will try to be outside because it's a little bit more dynamic.

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Filming people outdoors became a necessity during the coronavirus lockdown, as did maintaining physical distancing, as Tull recalls:

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With Covid in particular it's been really tricky. In the first couple of weeks everyone was doing everything on Zoom, and for telly it just looked absolutely atrocious. After about the first week our bosses were saying, "Find pictures, find some way to illustrate this, because it's driving me nuts."

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Tull had that in mind when working on a story about loneliness among elderly people during lockdown, and finding a community group in an East Sussex village proved to be a way into the subject matter *and* a way to illustrate it:

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That was one of the first pieces where I really thought, “Right, where are we going to film, what are we going to do, what can we show?” And so we went to this village that we found by speaking to people, because we wanted a larger proportion of the older population and we found a community group that were doing all these things, and they were combatting loneliness. That’s how we came across the area, luckily it happened to be by a beach. So one of the first things was, “Let’s get a load of beach shots, let’s do a piece to camera there, let’s really set the scene.”

Especially when you’re filming members of the public who might not necessarily want to have their full face on camera, filming their backs or their sides – we had elderly people holding hands going for a walk, illustrating what was going on. We also had elderly people who were sitting by themselves, looking into the distance and stuff, which all painted a picture of the situation and made it a little more visually interesting. They sell the stories themselves, the words they were saying and how they felt told the story – but to keep someone interested it’s really important to think of all the bits that go around it.

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You can watch the resulting report here: [www.channel4.com/news/loneliness-in-lockdown-how-isolating-alone-is-affecting-the-elderly](http://www.channel4.com/news/loneliness-in-lockdown-how-isolating-alone-is-affecting-the-elderly).



**Figure 11.2** Ayshah Tull doing a piece to camera in East Sussex for *Channel 4 News*

Source: [www.channel4.com/news/by/ayshah-tull](http://www.channel4.com/news/by/ayshah-tull)

To help connect the different elements and interviews featured in that story, Tull delivers a piece to camera ([Figure 11.2](#)), which is a familiar – some might argue, *over-familiar* – technique used in television news and current affairs reporting. Does she have any advice for doing a piece to camera?

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Yeah, keep them short. Lindsey Hilsum, who is our international editor and just one of the best journalists that I’ve ever come across, when I started at *Channel 4 News* I asked her what makes a good piece to camera and she said, “Think of the most important thing in that story that you want to tell – the most important piece of the story that you want people to know.” ... That focuses the mind. There are loads of pieces to camera which don’t say

anything or add any value, and I think, if you're not going to add any value by doing a piece to camera then don't do it.

Nine times out of 10 – 10 times out of 10 – the story's not about *you*, it's about what's going on in the world, and I've seen a lot of pieces to camera that look rather vain – “Oh look, I'm here, I'm this and I'm that”. ... It's funny, when I first started at Channel 4 I was all, “It's about getting everyone's story across and I want to have more of them and less of me,” and then one of my bosses said, “You do actually need to do a piece to camera at some point.” So I kind of relaxed a little bit. I still feel that a piece to camera should have a point, and that helps me to figure it out. It's the single most important thing, and it won't be you – it absolutely won't be you.

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The point about the reporter not being the most important element of any story is emphasised whenever a journalist stands back out of shot, to make sure the focus is on the scene itself, and/or just shuts up, allowing the atmosphere of a situation to come across, even if that means a few seconds of silence.

## “WOULD YOU MIND SHARING YOUR FOOTAGE?”

Sometimes the only footage of an incident may have been shot by people on the scene themselves rather than a TV crew. That was the case one night in the summer of 2020 when police tried to shut down an unlicensed music event on a housing estate in west London. After clashes between police and some of the young people there, there were complaints that the authorities were targeting black communities more than white when it came to enforcing coronavirus physical distancing rules. Tull talks me through how **user-generated content** was incorporated into that story for the following day's bulletin, along with some phone footage taken by an off-duty member of the news team:

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It was on a weekend, and you can find it a little bit more difficult to get access to official sources and official people at the weekend, so it can be tricky to do some of these stories sometimes. So what we had was, someone who lived in the area went down when they heard what was going on, just with their mobile phone, and started getting video and people's reactions. Just literally with an iPhone and going down and just making sure that we had pictures of our own that we could use, that we could verify.

And then when I was constructing the piece we obviously needed more pictures, maybe from different angles, so we went down to White City and talked to people and said, “Did you see what happened, would you mind sharing your footage, where do you live?”, just verifying their identity a little bit, because one of the things and the problems we have with so-called user-generated content and stuff that's put online is that it's really difficult to verify, it's difficult to know if it's from that particular day at that particular time, if they are who they say they are. So actually, once you go down and you speak to them and you see it on their phone and you go, “Can you WhatsApp that to me?”, and they're more than happy to do it. Sometimes they're not, sometimes they want money and I say, “We're broke, we can't pay anything”, but usually they're more than happy to share what they saw and their experiences and stuff like that.

So that's how we got a lot of our footage for that particular story, and then piecing it together. It's really fun at the moment, because it's a mixture of having to do some of the traditional methods of actually going to the scene and speaking to people – it's so weird as a journalist to make those quick relationships and get people to trust you so quickly – all those traditional methods are still there, but you've also got the added element of technology now with online, so you've got that as well.

But you still need to use your common sense when it comes to verifying and making sure it's right and making sure you're telling both sides of the story. In that particular story, as well, one of the issues we had was language. Some news outlets had called it a riot, which we were thinking it doesn't look like a riot, it looks like a couple of kids who were angry who started chucking things. Working with the pictures, but being really mindful of using inflammatory language that doesn't necessarily reflect what's going on.

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"It is a standing joke in the BBC that any award-winning news package should have helicopters in it, no matter the story."

– Andrew Marr.

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Getting pictures is crucial, then; just not at the expense of journalistic standards. You might use dramatic footage but, as Tull says, "it's important to have context around it and explain the situation around it, I think that's really, really important". You can see the resulting news story here: [www.channel4.com/news/are-police-targeting-some-communities-more-than-others-in-lockdown](http://www.channel4.com/news/are-police-targeting-some-communities-more-than-others-in-lockdown)

## BUILDING THE BRAND ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Unlike Caroline Crampton, Cathy Newman or Lindsay Eastwood, Ayshah Tull *did* train specifically as a broadcast journalist. She too has branched out, in her case into online and social media. In addition to her TV news stories being circulated as video clips via Twitter and on YouTube and so on, which helps get them across to (often younger) audiences who may not regularly watch television news, she also makes separate videos for social media channels, including an *Uncovered* strand on Facebook Watch and short videos for Instagram called *Rated*:

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I did one on the origins of Black Lives Matter a couple of weeks ago, and that was specifically made for online, and I present an Insta series called *Rated*, which compares the UK to the rest of the world and it's specifically made for Instagram, it doesn't go out on telly at all. It looks at such a range of things, so it looked at Covid at the start, and then we did one recently on pets, which was ridiculous, just on pets around the world, what's the most popular pet, and just other things that might get the audience interested and coming back to our brand.

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Brand? Yes, *Channel 4 News* might be a public service broadcast news provider, but it is also a brand with a presence across online and social media. Tull covers the range, which now also includes the *Fourcast* podcast; the latter allows her to cover an issue in more depth and with more of a personal voice than a broadcast news bulletin would normally allow (listen to her 2021 podcast on #FreeBritneySpears, for example: [www.channel4.com/news/free-britney-fans-obsession-or-legal-injustice](http://www.channel4.com/news/free-britney-fans-obsession-or-legal-injustice)). "I was brought on to work on our Facebook Watch series at first and then I kind of migrated to working on both TV and online because I like to be ridiculously busy," she says. "Online is such an important tool."

Similarly, the *Guardian* has expanded its brand by, among many other things, producing a weekly series of under-two-minute "Fake or For Real?" videos which go out via Instagram and have proved popular particularly with young audiences who may never have even looked at the *Guardian* website, never mind a copy of the printed newspaper. By tackling topical stories that are circulating online, and exploring whether or not they are true, the entertaining videos are also providing a

public service by raising levels of media literacy. For examples, see:  
[www.instagram.com/p/BRd25kQBb5N/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/p/BRd25kQBb5N/?hl=en)

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“Never speak unless you can add to the picture showing on the screen at the moment.”

– John Arlott.

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Online videos are also an important part of the storytelling mix even for predominantly text-based journalists, such as Emma Youle and Nada Farhoud. For example, Emma Youle and Nadine White’s investigation into the activities of some pastors at the SPAC Nation church (discussed in [Chapter 6](#)) resulted in a lengthy written story on the *HuffPost* website, but that was not all, as Youle recalls:

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We had a video as well, which Nadine had rightly said we’re going to need because the younger community that are at the heart of this story are much more engaged with video than with print. Actually, what we found was that once they’d watched the video, they *would* read our 4,000 word piece – which is a huge amount of words for anyone to commit to – because they were so interested in the topic. But they came as a result of the video coverage.

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Such videos will invariably have subtitles to encourage those with the sound off to keep watching, and shorter video clips and “teasers” will be circulated via social media to draw audiences to the main online offering. “It’s been quite a successful strategy,” adds Youle.

It is a similar story at the online version of the *Daily Mirror*, where environment editor Nada Farhoud describes audio-visual ways of reporting the climate emergency. She went with a photographer to Greenland to find out how changes to the climate and rising temperatures were impacting the people and environment there:

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We took a drone with us, so we got some amazing aerial pictures but also it gave us footage that we put into a little video with facts over the top, and that was quite useful. We did several of those around the country, like coastal erosion. It’s not your traditional type of video that you’d get with a showbiz story, but creating our own videos to go with it – just another method of getting the message across, going on social media and getting to different readers.

And each individual we interviewed, if they could speak English or we had a decent translator, we could make those into videos – I think those human interest stories are really important. Sometimes people get desensitised about icecaps and polar bears because they’ve heard that story quite a lot of times – not that it’s not important, but if you can show how livelihoods have changed in one generation, then I think that gets the message across to a different audience. We found one guy who did speak English and he’d grown potatoes for the first time that summer – a little simple detail that helps explain changes.

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“If your photographs aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.”

– Robert Capa.

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**“WITHOUT THAT PICTURE WE WOULDN’T HAVE HAD THAT IMPACT”**



**Figure 11.3** The front page of the *Daily Mirror*, August 28 2019

It was not a video nor an aerial shot from a drone but a still photograph that really told the story, and it was splashed over virtually the entire front page of the *Mirror's* print edition (Figure 11.3) as well as featuring online. Headlined OUR WORLD IS IN MELTDOWN, the picture by Adam Gerrard shows two children playing in the sea 700 miles north of the Arctic Circle, wearing just shorts, in temperatures of 22C rather than the “normal” 8C (*Daily Mirror*, August 28 2019). Farhoud knows that Gerrard’s photograph got the story across in a more dramatic way than her words alone could have:

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Without that picture we wouldn’t have had that impact. People who weren’t reading the *Mirror* were getting in contact – you know, climate scientists who were probably a bit sniffy about talking to the *Mirror*. ... I think the way it was displayed was so clear and impactful, it was a whole package. If you didn’t have that picture as big it wouldn’t have been as clear and as easy to get your head around – this is the Arctic and there are some children swimming, you know, and by now it should have been starting to snow again.

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Farhoud recognises the relatively privileged position she enjoys by working for a major national news brand.

It is not every outlet that will invest in sending a reporter and a photographer on a 10-day trip (that picture was only taken on the last day, by the way), but even lower down the journalistic food chain the imaginative use of pictures can make a difference. The *Yorkshire Post*'s Susie Beever is primarily a words person, but she says:

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I think pictures are a really important part of storytelling now. I have this gripe about lazy picture use in stories and the same stock images being used over and over again, and even readers recognise they're stock images because they've seen them on so many PA stories.

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So, for example, when it came to illustrating a Press Association story about rent levels (discussed in [Chapter 9](#)), she invested a little time in finding suitable photographs of recognisable streets in specific locations, "instead of using a PA photograph of just a generic picture of a street with 'For Rent' signs". As with finding fresh facts and original quotes, it is a small, everyday example of a journalist taking care, showing imagination and having a bit of pride in how they do the job.

## CARTOONS: AN "ALMOST IRRATIONAL MEDIUM"?

Reporters and photographers may often think of themselves as being slightly roguish characters, yet "the true outsiders of journalism" are cartoonists, according to Martin Rowson. He should know because he is one, and he insists that topical cartooning is a form of visual *journalism* even if it is not always recognised as such:

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Despite a 300 year long tradition – from Hogarth onwards – of using funny pictures to make deadly serious moral, political and social points, cartoons – and, naturally, cartoonists – aren't taken too seriously. In addition they're often seen as semi-detached from the proper business of journalism because of their existence in such a different, unquantifiable, almost irrational medium. In a strange way cartoonists are journalistic chimeras: how they think, what they express and its effect on the readers makes them much more like columnists than illustrators, and personally I see myself as a visual journalist rather than as any kind of "artist". (Rowson, 2001)

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The periodic outbreaks of controversy and "offence" prompted by the publication of cartoons suggest that some readers also take them very seriously indeed ([Figure 11.4](#)).



**Figure 11.4** The issue of “offence”

Source: As viewed by @jameswhitworth.

James Whitworth was a reporter and feature writer on local newspapers before becoming a cartoonist, so he is well placed to assess the differences and similarities between the two jobs:

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As a reporter you report on facts and act as a conduit between news and the reader. As a cartoonist you comment on the news, there should be more leeway to apply your own opinions and criticise. The two do have some things in common, the most important is a desire to communicate things that people may not always want to be in the public domain. ... Ridicule and humour are extremely powerful tools to hold the powerful to account. Cartoonists deal with serious topical stories every day, and the best ones have the ability to burst the bubble of pomposity and point out the hypocrisy and incompetence in those whose decisions shape our lives...

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Why does he think so many news organisations still bother with such a seemingly old-fashioned concept as the cartoon in this day and age?

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Cartoons add an extra dimension, they combine the visual and text to create a form of journalism that can sum up complex stories in just a few pen strokes and words. They remain popular with readers, and can often be one of the main reasons consumers choose an outlet. After all, who ever cut out a one thousand word article and stuck it to the fridge?

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As if to demonstrate the power of a topical cartoon, not to mention ridicule and humour, one of Whitworth's was used as the *Sheffield Star's* comment on the Prime Minister's performance during the coronavirus pandemic, covering almost the entire front page (Whitworth, 2020). You can see some more examples of Whitworth's "few pen strokes and words" in [Chapters 3](#) and [5](#).

## A RICH MIX OF STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

From cartoons to podcasts, listicles to audio slideshows, still photographs to videos, charts to **infographics** and tables to interactive maps, there are now more ways than ever available to a journalist with a story to tell. Different branches of journalism do not exist in isolation and stories are increasingly run across multiple digital storytelling platforms, with news organisations encouraging journalists to think beyond traditional divides and delivery mechanisms, keeping pictures in mind even while researching the facts, and maybe accompanying and promoting a written story by producing a 60-second video (not forgetting the subtitles) to push out on social media. This is sometimes referred to in academic circles as **multi-modal journalism**.

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"You cannot photograph without a point of view."

– Hansel Mieth.

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The result can be a rich mix of storytelling techniques, incorporating even more ingredients than those mentioned above, such as online picture galleries, quizzes, polls, wikis, live interactive chat, animated graphics, 360-virtual-reality filming, things that haven't yet been thought of. That means stories do not have to be told just in the ways they once were. For example, there have been many worthy news stories written about everyday male sexual harassment of women, but few will have made the impression of the video with which the *Guardian* chose to tell that story: of female video producer Leah Green walking and driving around the streets making unsolicited sexual comments to unsuspecting men, all based on real-life examples of things that are daily said to women. At just under four minutes, the resulting video – "*Get your arse out, mate*" – is as informative as it is awkward, as excruciating as it is funny. See for yourself here: [www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/apr/04/everyday-sexism-turn-tables-women-men-video](http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/apr/04/everyday-sexism-turn-tables-women-men-video). Telling a story in that way does not mean it cannot also be told in traditional ways, and indeed there was an accompanying text-based piece that placed the video in context (ONLY BY TURNING THE TABLES ON SEXUAL AGGRESSION CAN WE SEE HOW BAD IT IS, Leah Green, *Guardian*, April 7 2014).

## THE STORY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE TECHNOLOGY

Some news organisations are better resourced than others, when it comes to the staff and equipment available for filming, editing and so on. Cathy Newman, for example, recognises that "there's a terrible hierarchy of resources", adding: "I'm really lucky, once you get to a certain level you have the luxury of those resources behind you." But even reporters working for relatively well-resourced newsrooms sometimes end up as one-person purveyors of mobile journalism (also known as **MoJo**), as Newman's colleague Ayshah Tull did at one of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020:

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I had my iPhone out and posted a few videos when people went down on their knees, I made sure I had a video of everyone kneeling, and stuff like that. I put that up on Twitter myself, which actually did quite well. Images and videos on Twitter, when you're there and you're obviously reporting on what's going on, they tend to do quite well.

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Tull modestly insists she is “rubbish” at filming things. However, whether or not those were the best quality shots ever taken was of less importance than the fact that it was a significant event and she was there to record it. Video helped her to tell the story. That is a useful reminder that, for a journalist, the story is always more important than the technology. It is a thought that often occurs to Caroline Crampton when she comes across people with ambitions of producing their own podcasts:

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There are a lot of Facebook groups dedicated to amateur podcasting, and the vast majority of questions are about, “What kind of microphone should I get?”, and, “What do I have to do to my room to make it sound better?”, and all that kind of thing. While it's good to think about that stuff, I do sometimes worry that that's edging out, what will you actually say when you get the microphone? Especially for a show like the kind I do, the actual recording and editing is not most of the time I spend on the episode. Most of the time is spent on the writing and the research and the interviewing. Recording and editing is just a small slice at the end.

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So, the process of telling stories in sound and/or vision is not entirely separate from telling stories via the methods already described in [Chapters 9](#) and [10](#) or researching them in the ways discussed throughout the preceding chapters. The online platform that is now the main production outlet for many journalists – and for most journalism students today – lends itself particularly well to drawing on these different ways of telling stories, including audio and video as well as text, photographs, cartoons and other visuals. You don't have to go full podcast, for example, to realise that adding a recording of a conversation with a source might really help bring a story to life; and you might not have access to a TV film crew, but the techniques displayed every night on television news bulletins can still inform how you frame simple videos on your phone for use online.

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“Everything comes back to if the content is brilliant, and if it's not you can't dress that up.”

– Carla Buzasi.

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We have a rich palette of storytelling techniques from which to draw, then, but no amount of technological bells and whistles should deflect us from an understanding that it is the quality of *reporting* that remains the most important thing in journalism. And sometimes, as many a radio or podcast journalist will tell you, the very best pictures are the ones that exist only inside your head when you listen to an evocative piece of audio.

## Summary

Journalists are now working across different media sectors and platforms in a process that used to be referred to as integration or convergence, is now called multi-modal journalism by some scholars, and which might increasingly

be thought of as – *journalism*. Podcasts, TV, radio and online journalism may differ in style and detail but they also share certain core processes with each other and with older forms of journalism: the identification of news, the collection of information, the verification of evidence, the selection of material and the telling of stories. Although pictures have long been important for newspaper and magazine journalism, they are central for all television and some online journalism (including the websites and social media output of radio stations). Much video footage and many still photographs are now supplied by the audience (user-generated content) or by journalists who may be expected to be all-rounders or mobile journalists. Whatever the platform or technology, the story itself remains crucial, as is reporting it accurately and ethically in ways outlined throughout this book.

## Questions

What can audio add to a story?

How does the availability of pictures affect which stories become news?

Is mobile journalism the future of reporting?

Is there still a role for scheduled broadcast news bulletins and current affairs programmes?

Are cartoons really journalism?

## What would you do?

Let's return to the scenario featured in [Chapters 9](#) and [10](#). That is, you hear from the police that a local 10-year-old girl (Jane Doe) has been reported missing, having last been seen around 16.00 hours yesterday in the vicinity of her school. Police say she has not been seen since. The family home was searched overnight but there was no sign of her. Jane has a mobile phone but does not take it to school with her. It was in her bedroom and police officers have taken it away for examination. Her parents and their friends and neighbours joined police in searching for her overnight and the search is continuing today. Police say they are becoming increasingly concerned for the girl's welfare. If you work for a multi-modal news organisation, what ideas do you bring to the first editorial conference of the day for telling the story in sound and vision?

## Further reading

For detailed guidance on, and informed discussion about, how to tell stories in sound and vision on TV, radio and online, the best place to start is the excellent *Broadcast Journalism Handbook* by Gary Hudson and Sarah Rowlands (2012), which will take you through the practicalities of scripting, filming, writing for pictures, recording actuality, interviewing, editing, presenting and much more. *The Online Journalism Handbook* by Paul Bradshaw and Liisa Rohumaa (2011) includes chapters covering audio slideshows, podcasts and online video journalism, and multi-modal reporting is also discussed in Sheridan Burns with Matthews (2018). For radio more specifically, see Starkey and Crisell (2009), and for mobile journalism, see Burum (2021). The website of the BBC Academy includes a wealth of practical guidance on skills such as filming, editing, presenting, podcasting and multimedia storytelling, including the use of virtual reality: [www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/). Broadcast journalism is contextualised and discussed in the scholarly works by Barnett (2012), Bromley (2001), Chapman

and Kinsey (2009), Cushion (2012) and Harrison (2000), while Bednarek and Caple (2017) incorporate visual analysis and semiotics into their exploration of news values, news images and “how news organisations create newsworthiness”. There is a special issue of *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* (Vol 21, No 6, June 2020) on the theme of journalism and visual culture. For UK readers, Hanna and Dodd (2020) will guide you through the legal position both about copyright and about photographing, filming or recording in public places. Finally, as a reminder of the enduring power of the still photograph, and as a discussion of the role of the image within journalism, you probably still can't beat the late, great Harold Evans' ([1978] 1997) *Pictures on a Page*; you'll have to hunt around in libraries or secondhand bookshops, but it will be worth it.

## Top three to try next

BBC Academy collection ([www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/))

Gary Hudson and Sarah Rowlands (2012) *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (second edition)

Lynette Sheridan Burns with Benjamin Matthews (2018) 'Telling stories', Chapter 9 of *Understanding Journalism* (third edition)

## Sources for soundbites

Gilliam, 2016; Newman, interview with the author; Eastwood, interview with the author; Marr, 2005: 291; Arlott, quoted in Kelner, 2013: 102; Capa, quoted in Epstein, 2014; Mieth, quoted in Flamiano, 2018: 10; Buzasi, interview with the author.

## Broadcast journalism

Journalism on radio and television shares with all forms of journalism the basic techniques of news gathering and verification, although the importance of sound and pictures for broadcast journalism can affect both *which* stories are selected and *how* stories are covered. Paul Chantler and Sim Harris argue that radio is “the best medium to stimulate the imagination” because “pictures on radio are not limited by the size of the screen; they are any size you wish” (Chantler and Harris, 1997: 5). Just as pictures (in the head) are important for radio and podcasts, so sound is also vital for television, especially the sound of people's own voices (Holland, 2000: 79). Therefore, stories with the potential for good pictures and/or audio stand a far higher chance of being covered by broadcast journalists than those without either; and reporters covering important but dull stories without good sound or vision may try to *create* interesting audio-visuals through stunts or imaginative pieces to camera.

Broadcast journalism tends to have an immediate feel, reporting things that are happening *now* rather than things that happened earlier (even when this is an illusion). According to a classic study of the television industry, broadcast journalism is far from the “random reaction to random events” that it sometimes appears:

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On the contrary, it is a highly regulated and routine process of manufacturing a cultural product on an electronic production line. In stages of planning, gathering, selection and production broadcast

news is moulded by the demands of composing order and organisation within a daily cycle. The news is made, and like any other product it carries the marks of the technical and organisational structure from which it emerges. (Golding and Elliott, quoted in Manning, 2001: 51)

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Notwithstanding the powerful image of an “electronic production line”, individual journalists can still affect content to varying extents through their own skills and approaches (Manning, 2001: 53). Reading the words of TV journalists Cathy Newman, Lindsay Eastwood and Ayshah Tull throughout this book, for example, it is clear that although they operate within constraints laid down by employers and broadcast regulators, and work within editorial teams, they still have some room as individuals to develop their own contacts, stories and creativity.

Yet there is now so much material being pumped into newsrooms electronically that there are fears that some broadcast journalists may forget that “real news is what you go out and find through your own efforts” (Chantler and Harris, 1997: 64). For Jackie Harrison, a shift towards a “faster, racier style of news presentation” raises further questions about the quality of information and interpretation provided to citizens: “[What] appears to be a tinkering with production techniques and format style by news organisations eventually has an effect on news content and the amount of information available, and ultimately on the relationship of terrestrial television news to the public sphere” (Harrison, 2000: 29 and 42). Not that there is anything wrong with “fancy video effects” or even reconstructions as long as they do not mislead or “cheat” the viewers (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 295). So any effects ought to serve a purpose and any reconstructions ought to be clearly labelled as such. As with everything in journalism there is a fundamental ethical dimension to the editing of sound and pictures, as Hudson and Rowlands (2012: 294) insist: “As soon as you misrepresent the truth or distort the facts as you understand them, what you are engaged in is not journalism. It is trickery or fraud, and completely unethical.”

In contrast to text-based journalism, reporting for TV, radio and podcasting almost inevitably involves an element of *performance*. This can be engaging and entertaining, and it might involve getting important questions into the public domain even if an interviewee has no intention of answering them, for example. But it can also be irritating and distracting. Any broadcast news reporter or presenter who becomes tempted to travel too far down the grandstanding route ought perhaps to reflect upon Tull’s comment that, whatever the most important element of a story might be, it is certainly not the journalist.

## Pictures

The centrality of pictures to television can result in disproportionate coverage of telegenic stories and less coverage of socially important but visually dull issues. This is not a complaint heard only in academic circles. Journalist Andrew Marr makes a similar point when he writes that TV news is biased towards anything that can be illustrated with striking, exciting or colourful footage:

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Television news likes plane crashes and train crashes because of how they look. It is mostly bored rigid by car crashes, which kill many more people, but not all at once. Similarly, television news looks overseas and it likes boy soldiers and tanks rather than peacemaking and reconciliation. (Marr, 2005: 291)

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This stress on pictures also affects story selection in print and online media, but it is felt at its keenest on TV where the level of editorial interest in an item “is often determined by the pictures available” (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 29). The news value of pictures is discussed in [Chapters 3](#) and [7](#).

## Active audience

Audiences have long been said to be active in the sense that people bring their own interpretations to all media output. Since the arrival of social media, the term has also been used to show that journalism is no longer as one-way or linear as it was in pre-digital days. Online journalists tend to differ from other journalists in the way they relate to their respective audiences, according to a study in the Netherlands:

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[The] bottom-up concept of “the public” suggests that this group of journalists is much more aware of an active role for the people they serve than their offline colleagues. This is an interesting result, as it ties in with the discourse of new-media technologies in which they are perceived to empower people and further democratise the relationships between consumers and producers of content (be it news or information). It also connects to online media logic as a concept which includes the notions of *the audience as an active agent* in redefining the workings of journalism. (Deuze and Dimoudi, 2002: 97, my emphasis)

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It is within this context of redefining how journalism works that journalists are often urged to have a serious rethink about what their future role might be. If an “active audience” uses these new channels of communication simply to comment on the clothes that a TV news presenter is wearing on air, perhaps members of that audience also need to have a long, hard rethink.

## User-generated content

The phrase “user-generated content”, or UGC, may be relatively recent, but the phenomenon itself is not. A reader’s letter published in a newspaper or a magazine would be an example from old-school media, and other historical examples are photographs sent in by readers, reports of flower shows and amateur sporting events contributed by non-journalists, and radio phone-ins. Let’s not forget bystander Abraham Zapruder’s home movie of the President Kennedy assassination as far back as 1963. User-generated content is undoubtedly far more common now, with digital communication transforming the volume and speed of UGC so much that dealing with it is now a major part of the thinking of most journalistic operations.

“What is critical about this public behavioural shift towards an explosion of UGC is that mainstream media are making space for this production within newsrooms ... and within news items,” observes Rena Kim Bivens (2008: 116–117). “On some occasions, the flood of UGC linked to a breaking news item has actually reversed the traditional flow of news.” One such result of the availability of user-generated content such as the phone footage discussed by Tull in this chapter, is that we no longer have to rely just on film crews or photographers turning up *after* an event is over. That means “an image showing the causes of a happening may now be shown alongside an image showing the effects”, as Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple (2017: 117) put it.

## Infographics



Presenting information in the form of a graphic is at least as old as the pie chart but it has come into its own in the digital age, in which data can be displayed and compared in a vast range of ways and where the element of interactivity allows website users to click on those bits they wish to explore further. There are numerous ways of visualising stories and data, ranging from simple word clouds to complex mashups incorporating video and audio, and an increasing number of tools and apps available for journalists to use. Imagination and experimentation in such a rapidly developing field is no bad thing, but it is important to remember that it ought to serve a journalistic purpose rather than simply show-off technical wizardry. “When visualising data it is important to ensure that any comparisons are meaningful,” warn Bradshaw and Rohumaa (2011: 61): “Visualisation should also be used only when it adds something to a story.”

## Multi-modal journalism

Multi-modal is an elaborate way of describing a piece of journalism that incorporates different elements, such as text, audio, video, graphics and so on; the description may be applied to a newsroom or an individual journalist who operates in this way, as well to the treatment of a specific story. “News websites bring together text, audio and vision to present news in multi-modal ways and the same reporter may be responsible for gathering all the content in a story,” writes Lynette Sheridan Burns (2018: 168). She adds that the basics of thinking about news values, sources, verification and ethics all still apply, no matter how many different platforms or “modes” are used: “Whether the information is presented through text, imagery and/or audio-visual means, the processes used to turn information into journalism are the same” (p 177).

Neal Mann, who trained as a broadcast journalist before moving into digital and multimedia innovations, says that young journalists and journalism students “need to understand that they’re not going into a broadcast world or a print world”. Those worlds, he insists, are gone, and “we don’t have to play by the rules that we used to have to play by”. Up to a point. Recent studies have shown that online news sites have an uneven record when it comes to embracing the full potential of multi-modal storytelling (Bock, 2016; Harmer and Southern, 2020).

## MoJo

Mobile journalism, aka MoJo, mojo or MOJO, is essentially a one-person reporting operation based on a journalist using a smartphone to take still and/or moving pictures, record audio, edit and upload stories online via websites and/or social media. Doing this well is a highly skilled job, but paradoxically there are concerns that such reporting might lead to *de*-skilling and a lowering of standards within the news industry:

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Although journalists are being enskilled with techniques in multi-media production, they are suffering due to a lack of time to learn and produce quality MOJO stories, which ultimately deskills and demotivates staff. There is also evidence that mobile journalists have less specialised expert knowledge because they are being spread so thinly. ... There are also considerable concerns over the lacks of checks and balances as reporters publish straight to the web while on the road without their work being edited by another staff member. (Franklin and Canter, 2019: 186)

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Also, the extent to which MoJo is *the* future of journalism may have been over-hyped, because it can exist within and alongside documentaries, team

investigations and long-form “slow journalism” rather than necessarily replacing them.

# CHAPTER 12 DOING IT IN STYLE: THE LANGUAGE OF JOURNALISM

## Key terms

Brand identity; Clichés; Consistency; Copy; Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical linguistics; Ethics; House style; Ideology; Imagined audience; Journalese; Language; Lexical mapping; Orwell's six rules of writing; Plain style; Political correctness; Representation; Spelling; Stereotypes; Style guide; Tabloidese

When the Kaiser Chiefs predicted a riot in their hit song about a fairly normal night out in a northern English city, they were using poetic licence. When a journalist chooses a word such as “riot”, we expect its usage to be more precise, more accurate. Ayshah Tull talks in [Chapter 11](#) about whether or not a particular evening's events on a housing estate in London in 2020 merited the label of a riot. Dictionaries tend to define a riot as a violent disturbance by a crowd of people, but what level of violence is required and how many people make a crowd? At a common-sense level, we mostly understand the term riot to refer to something more than a group of lairy lads on a pub crawl, more even than a crowd engaging in a bit of pushing, shoving, chasing and lobbing a few bottles.

If a sizeable number of people are involved and some of them do use violence, it might not quite constitute a riot, but it is still *something*. What, though? A disturbance, perhaps? Tull's story was certainly about a disturbance, which is a neutral term, but that only tells us so much. Might we call it an affray? That sounds a bit legalistic and old-fashioned, and in any case is more commonly applied to a fight involving just a few people rather than a bigger crowd. Then there's fracas, although that probably downplays what happened that night, sounding more like just a bit of shouting. What about a clash? Clash is such a classic piece of **journalese** that its

use in a 1970s headline once inspired a group of punks to adopt it as a band name. It is dramatic, but also pretty vague.

In the end, Tull's voiceover used the neutral word confrontation rather than riot, and she went on to describe what happened in similarly neutral terms, giving viewers the facts and allowing them to form their own opinions about the meaning and implications thereof. Tull faced similar issues when covering the upsurge of Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, as she recalls:

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The language is really important. Donald Trump was coming out and calling people looters and rioters. Yes, some were doing that but the majority weren't. When I went down it was really clear to me that a lot of people were there as families, there were a lot of people who were white, who were mixed, there was a wide range, so I made sure I reflected that in my reporting. I'm really conscious of that. I don't want to call something a riot unless it *is* a riot, I want to be really careful and measured in the language that I use, and tell what I see as the truth as I see it.

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Careful and measured might not be the most exciting ways of thinking about writing, but they are a solid foundation for accurate reporting.

## WORDS MATTER

The above examples show the kinds of choices that a journalist has to make every day about how something, or somebody, ought to be described. Words matter, but can they ever be truly neutral? Critics of *Channel 4 News* might argue that avoiding terms such as rioter or looter in such instances is just as political or ideological an act as the labelling of police officers or soldiers as heroes and our boys, as some redtop newspapers do. Also in [Chapter 11](#), Lindsay Eastwood talks about the Bradford riots of 2001, when virtually everyone agreed that those events were big and violent enough to warrant that label. Even with such a major clash, though, people sympathetic to those on the streets might call it an uprising or insurrection, just as the authorities might describe it as wanton destruction or mindless

lawlessness. Such loaded phrases do not really belong in news reports unless they are clearly attributed to whoever says them.

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“The life of the journalist is poor, nasty, brutish and short. So is his style.”

– *Stella Gibbons.*

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Words can mean different things to different people as well as in different places, and those meanings can change over time. People can get distressed about words. Witness the vehement response on social media whenever somebody is accused of “misgendering” a trans person, for example. And the difference between a “terrorist”, an “insurgent” and a “freedom fighter” might have more to do with the stance of the people doing the labelling than with how many people have been killed by the person being labelled. This is what the BBC tells its journalists:

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The word “terrorist” is not banned, but its use can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should try to avoid the use of the term without attribution. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as bomber, attacker, gunman, kidnapper, insurgent and militant. We should not adopt other people’s language as our own. Our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom. While care is needed when describing perpetrators, an action or event can be described as a terror attack or an act of terror... (BBC News Style Guide, [www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/t](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/t))

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“Formats are never neutral in their ideological implications.”

– *Paul Manning.*

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And this is what the same BBC **style** guide has to say on the issue of gender identity:

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“Gender identity” has come to mean how people feel or present themselves, distinct from their biological sex or sexual orientation. Use sex to refer to a person’s physical development and gender to describe how they identify themselves.

Transgender, or trans, is a good umbrella term for a person whose gender identity differs from their sex at birth. A person born male who lives as a female, would typically be described as a “transgender woman” and would take the pronoun “she”. And vice versa. Use the term and pronoun preferred by the person in question. If that’s unknown – apply that which fits with the way the person lives publicly. If reporting on someone who is making their transition public, it may be appropriate to refer to their previous identity to help audience understanding. It may also be appropriate to refer to a transition to make sense of some stories.

Transsexual refers to someone who has changed, or wishes to change, their body through medical intervention. Use as an adjective – do not say “transsexuals”, in the same way we would not talk about “gays” or “blacks”. Transsexual is not an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender. Try to ask or find out which term a person prefers.

Take care with the term “sex change”, unless referring specifically to the surgical element of a transition. It should

not be used as a general description for a transgender person. (BBC News Style Guide, [www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/g](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/g))

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That was what it said at the end of 2020, anyway, but it is quite possible the guidance might have changed by the time you read this. Some people will see the above as a perfectly reasonable, and reasonably neutral, use of **language**; others might feel it denies women the right to define womanhood; and there will be yet others who will undoubtedly say it is all a sign of **political correctness** or “wokeness” gone mad.

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“All the major ideological struggles will necessarily be waged in words.”

– *Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress.*

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## HOUSE STYLE

When I started out in journalism it was still the done thing to ask any woman mentioned in a news story if she was Miss or Mrs, and if you forgot to include the vital detail of her marital status in your copy, you would be sent back to find out. It was a rule that was rigorously enforced, including by female editors, until ... well, it just wasn't any more. Rather like how women reporters were not allowed to wear trousers to work ... until they were.

The language used by journalists is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. It is the result of conscious and unconscious choices made in countless newsrooms over the decades (and then dissected in countless classrooms). Journalistic style goes well beyond matters of marital status, gender identity, political violence and street disturbances. Take the case of Elizabeth Taylor, for example. The name may not mean much to younger readers, but Liz was once one of the most famous – and glamorous – women in the world.

According to journalistic folklore, when she was asked how she was feeling during a visit to London towards the end of the 1950s, she replied with a quotable quote: “I’m feeling like a million dollars.” Her remark was duly reported in most of the following day’s newspapers, but only in the *Daily Telegraph* was a currency conversion deemed to be necessary. To fit with that newspaper’s style guide, which stipulated that any amount given in a foreign currency must always be followed with a translation into pounds sterling, the quip was rendered as: “I’m feeling like a million dollars (£357,000).” As *Telegraph* historian Duff Hart-Davis (1990: 9) put it, the absurd quote was an example of the paper’s “slavish devotion to its house rules”.

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“Never use a long word where a short one will do.”

– *George Orwell.*

---

All news organisations have a concept of house style; that is, the language in which stories should be written. Why? Because, arguably, consistency in such matters of detail “encourages readers to concentrate on *what* its writers are saying” (Hicks and Holmes, 2002: 19, emphasis in original). A publication’s strictures on style can say as much about what the publication is *not* as what it *is*, as this entry from a later *Telegraph* (2008) style book indicates: “*Brave* is an acceptable adjective to apply to somebody who has perpetrated a courageous act. Its usage to describe the demeanour of somebody suffering from a serious illness is tabloid.” Rarely can the word “tabloid” have been used with such disdain.

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“Avoid adjectives. You report. Readers can decide what to think.”

– *David Holmes (@spikefodder).*

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Many news organisations have their own style books and/or searchable electronic guides, some now published for all to consult online. Others rely on new recruits picking up unwritten rules from more experienced colleagues, with the cry, “What’s our style for...?” frequently heard amid the hubbub of the newsroom. Such guides contain stipulations, reminders and points of clarification, and the details are not fixed forever:

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There are unmistakable trends in house style: in grammar, loose, colloquial usage is more accepted than it was; there is less punctuation, ie there are fewer capital letters, full stops for abbreviations, apostrophes, accents etc; in spelling, shorter forms are increasingly common and the ... –ize ending has lost ground to –ise... (Hicks and Holmes, 2002: 21)

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All those trends have continued. Speaking of trends, given that online journalism may now be read by audiences in different countries, to what extent do journalists need to be aware of this new, more international readership? “A lot,” says Jemima Kiss, who points out that the *Guardian* has built up a huge international readership online, especially in the USA and Australia. Kiss continues:

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You could say that the UK is our minority audience. That said, I would think readers value our Brit take on the world, hence coming to us in the first place. So it is important to keep the personality and tone of our voice, for example the humour.

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Ah yes, the humour. As in this unimprovable entry from the *Guardian* style guide:

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*Goths* (uc) Germanic tribe that invaded the Roman empire

*goths* (lc) Sisters of Mercy fans who invaded the Shepherd’s Bush Empire (*Guardian* style guide; Marsh, 2007)

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“It has become a cliché of books on news writing that they all seem to offer the old joke: avoid clichés – yes – like the plague.”

– Gary Hudson and Sarah Rowlands.

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The number of opinions about journalistic style seems to be matched only by the fervour with which each one tends to be expressed. Amid the rules and regulations, style guides can indeed be repositories of humour, as here:

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Lazy journalists are always at home in *oil-rich* country A, ruled by *ailing* President B, the *long-serving strongman*, who is, according to the *chattering classes*, a *wily political operator* – hence the present *uneasy peace* – but, after his recent *watershed* (or *landmark* or *sea-change*) decision to arrest his prime minister (the *honeymoon is over*), will soon face a *bloody uprising* in the *breakaway* south. ... Towards the end, after an admission that the author has no idea what is going on, there is always room for *One thing is certain*, before rounding off the article with *As one wag put it...* (*Economist* style guide, 2008)

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And here:

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*amok*: no Daily Telegraph style book would be complete without the observation that only Malays can run amok. See also berserk...

*berserk*: no Daily Telegraph style book would be complete without the observation that only Icelanders can go berserk. See also amok. (*Telegraph* style book, 2008)

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However, the written style of a piece of journalism should not be thought of as divorced from the reporting process itself nor the content, argues Peter Fryer, because “style isn’t a kind of sauce that you ladle on your work in great dollops to make it palatable or piquant” (Fryer, 1998: 69).

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“We misspelled the word misspelled twice, as misspelled, in the Corrections and Clarifications column.”

– *Guardian correction.*

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Those news organisations that publish their style guides must expect members of the audience to take advantage of such transparency and point out when journalists fail to follow the house style, as one reader does below:

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*Guardian* house style: full name the first time, surname thereafter. Except when it’s not. The *long read* features several people who are referred to in this manner – a writer, a former high-ranking council officer, a union official, a CEO – and one who isn’t. The cleaner and union activist whose work is the main focus of the article is evidently black, female and a manual worker. Although her full name is stated, she is then called by her first name, Ernesta, throughout. When will the *Guardian* stop patronising people whose status in society, shamefully, is lower than it ought to be? Let’s see respect for everyone you report on. Benny Ross, Newcastle upon Tyne. (Letters, *Guardian*, July 3 2020)

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That’s them told. See Box [12.1](#) for some examples of news organisations’ style guides that are available online.

## Box 12.1

### Style guides available online

Many news organisations make their style guides available online, and here are just a few worth looking at:

*BBC News*

[www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsstyleguide/)

*The Telegraph*

[www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/about-us/style-book/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/about-us/style-book/)

*The Guardian and Observer*

[www.theguardian.com/info/series/guardian-and-observer-style-guide](http://www.theguardian.com/info/series/guardian-and-observer-style-guide)

*HuffPost*

<https://guestblogging.com/huffington-post-toolkit/editorial-style-guide/>

*BuzzFeed*

[www.buzzfeed.com/emmyf/buzzfeed-style-guide](http://www.buzzfeed.com/emmyf/buzzfeed-style-guide)

*Press Gazette*

[www.pressgazette.co.uk/press-gazette-style-guide-includes-advice-on-off-the-record-show-dont-tell-and-our-banned-list/](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/press-gazette-style-guide-includes-advice-on-off-the-record-show-dont-tell-and-our-banned-list/)

## “WRITE CLEARLY”: A GUIDE TO STYLE

In the [Appendix](#) of this book you will find an example of a style guide. Like all such guides, it contains a mixture of common practice, pointers towards correct use of English, points of clarification, attempts at attaining consistency and a list of clichés to be avoided (see pp 256–257). One aim of house style is to “eliminate undesired idiosyncrasies” in copy (Bell, 1991: 83). However, this book’s style guide no doubt contains its fair share of “personal idiosyncrasy and whimsy” (Cameron, 1996: 323); that is, prejudices, pet hates and arbitrary preferences. Many of the sample house rules may be almost universal among journalists within the UK while others will not. Student journalists should study the styles of different organisations and be aware that, even if it is not codified in a written guide and you are expected to absorb it by osmosis, some form of house style will certainly exist.

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“WANK: Full out in copy, w\*\*k in headlines.”

– *Sunday Sport style guide.*

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Anyone entering a newsroom on work experience or as a new recruit will quickly need to get to grips with that particular organisation’s preferences on a range of stylistic issues – whether to abbreviate Councillor to Coun or Cllr, whether to cap up Prime Minister, whether to end words with –ise or –ize, whether the editor still prefers women who chair organisations to be labelled “chairman”, whether to use single or double quotation marks, and so on – and to apply such rules consistently. When you change jobs you will have to do it all over again. Eventually, of course, you might be in a position to challenge, break or set the rules – but first you need to know what they are. The [Appendix](#) will give you an indication of current style within a sample UK newsroom and highlights some issues worth thinking about. At the same time, it just might help you to write better copy.

The underlying ethos of such guides – as of [Chapter 9](#) on writing news – is the plain, terse style of writing advocated by the journalist,

novelist and essayist, George Orwell:

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A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is unavoidably ugly? (Orwell, 1946b: 151–152)

---

Orwell went on to list six rules of writing, to be relied upon “when instinct fails”:

- Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (Orwell, 1946b: 156)

Of course, Orwell would sometimes break his own “rules”, as would fellow novelist (and former journalist) Ernest Hemingway, whose own pointers to good writing style have been boiled down to just 17 words:

- Use short sentences.
- Write clearly.

- Use simple words.
- Don't overwrite.
- Avoid adjectives.
- Leave yourself out of it. (Quoted in Sheridan Burns with Matthews, 2018: 160)

Aspiring journalists could do worse than to keep that advice in mind as a starting point for *any* piece of writing, including scripts for audio-visual items.

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“Every word must be understood by the ordinary reader, every sentence must be clear at one glance, and every story must say something about people.”

– *Harold Evans.*

---

Although they are described as rules, implicit within the above is that the writer *thinks* about words rather than using them automatically. Too much questioning might not go down well with all colleagues, as is suggested in the Adrian Mitchell poem *Early Shift on the Evening Standard Newsdesk*. When writing a story about heavy fog, a journalist in the poem suggests replacing the traditional “thick blanket” with “sodden yellow eiderdown”, only to be asked: “Are you insane?” Mitchell himself briefly worked on that newspaper, so he knew what he was talking about – and he well understood the difference between journalism and poetry. The lesson of that poem, according to Jean Aitchison, is that the familiar style and conservative language of particular news outlets can provide audiences with “a comforting sense of security and continuity” (Aitchison, 2007: 195). The choice of style, then, can be seen as a form of brand identity. For many scholars in the field of **critical linguistics**, it is far from being neutral.

“Think before you write!”

– 1970s poster produced by the Yorkshire NUJ Equality Working Party.

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## MINDING YOUR LANGUAGE

Concern about potential ethical and other implications of the language used within news media has prompted civil society organisations such as campaigns and charities to team up with journalists, academics, health professionals and other experts to produce informative guides to covering certain issues or sections of the community. See [Box 12.2](#) for details of just a few of these. They cover a wide range of topics from disability to refugees, from suicide to racism, from domestic violence to HIV, and much, much more. Of course, not all journalists would agree with everything in them, but we can surely agree with the key message that we should try to write about things from a position of being better rather than *uninformed*. And, in the words of an old newsroom poster that I remember from my early days as a reporter, highlighting the use of sexist and stereotyped language in news stories: “Think before you write.” It remains good advice. We should also think *while* we are writing something, and even *after* we think we might have finished. “Careful revision is a sort of quality control,” writes Peter Fryer (1998: 14). “It’s a sign of skill, professionalism, and pride in your work.” That’s something we can all keep working at.

### Box 12.2

#### Mind your language

There are a range of reporting guides produced by the National Union of Journalists and other organisations to encourage better informed coverage of various issues in the news. They include tips on appropriate language and style.



The following guides are all available from the NUJ at:  
[www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-resources/nuj-guidelines/](http://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-resources/nuj-guidelines/):

*Responsible Reporting on Mental Health, Mental Illness  
and Death by Suicide*

*Guidelines on Reporting Race*

*Guidelines for Journalists on Violence Against Women*

*Disability Handbook*

*Guidelines on LGBT Reporting*

*Guidelines for Reporting HIV*

*Media Guidelines: Reporting on Muslims and Islam*

*Dementia-Friendly Media and Broadcast Guide*

*Reporting Poverty*

*Reporting Terrorism*

\* \* \*

Guides available online from a range of other organisations  
include:

*Covid-19 Language Guide*

<https://reframe.resolvephilly.org/covid-19/language/>

*Reporting Domestic Abuse in the Media*

[www.ipso.co.uk/media/1871/reporting-domestic-abuse-in-the-media.pdf](http://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1871/reporting-domestic-abuse-in-the-media.pdf)

*Dignity for Dead Women: Reporting Domestic Violence Deaths*

[www.welevelup.org/media-guidelines](http://www.welevelup.org/media-guidelines)

*Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*

[https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Media\\_Guidelines\\_FINAL\\_v2\\_TABa8C6.pdf](https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Media_Guidelines_FINAL_v2_TABa8C6.pdf)

*Transgender Guidance*

[www.ipso.co.uk/member-publishers/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/transgender-guidance/](http://www.ipso.co.uk/member-publishers/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/transgender-guidance/)

*Reporting on Muslims and Islam*

[www.ipso.co.uk/media/1972/islam-guidance.pdf](http://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1972/islam-guidance.pdf)

*Use with Care: A Reporter's Glossary of Loaded Language in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict*

<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/assets/docs/197/150/4d96ac5-55a3396.pdf>

*Editorial Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Children in the Media*

[https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/mma\\_editorial\\_guideline.pdf](https://mma-ecm.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/mma_editorial_guideline.pdf)

*Diversity Style Guide*

[www.diversitystyleguide.com/](http://www.diversitystyleguide.com/)

*Conscious Style Guide*

<https://consciousstyleguide.com/>

## Summary

All news organisations have rules governing style, whether or not such rules are codified in written guides such as the sample one in the [Appendix](#) of this book. Their purpose goes beyond minimising mistakes in spelling, grammar and vocabulary to ensuring consistency *within* outlets and differentiation *between* brands. The most common style in UK journalism is based on the plain style advocated by George Orwell, but Orwell himself would have rejected much journalese as clichéd writing. It has been claimed by critical linguists and others that style is not neutral and that stylistic choices and presentational formats can have ideological implications by reinforcing stereotypes and marginalising critical voices. The plain style of news reporting draws attention away from itself as language, leading to suggestions that it purports to be unmediated truth rather than one representation of events. In turn, the rejection of conventional journalistic style may be seen as stylistically and ideologically challenging or transgressive.

## Questions

What is the point of house style?

What would *you* change in the style guide in the [Appendix](#)?

Can words ever be neutral?

Has the style used in tweets influenced more formal journalism?

Has political correctness really gone mad?

## What would you do?

You have to sub-edit a human interest feature about a young woman who runs a community dance class in her spare time. It begins like this:

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The leggy dancer is putting the youngsters through their paces. They throw themselves into the dance workout just like thousands of others who attend similar classes across the country. But there is one big difference. These children are mentally handicapped. Their tubby little bodies, often a symptom of down's syndrome or mongolism, strain to kick to the music's driving beat. Minds that will never achieve maturity strive to please the pretty teenager who makes no allowance for their physical and mental shortcomings...

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What changes, if any, would you make to the piece of copy above?

## Further reading

The classic text on journalistic style probably remains Harold Evans' (2000) *Essential English for Journalists, Editors and Writers*. Although somewhat dated even in its revised edition – but not as prehistoric as its original title of *Newsman's English* – it remains full of good advice on essentials such as active writing and wasteful words. Hicks (2013), Hicks et al (2008), McKane (2014) and Fryer (1998) all offer good general advice and Waterhouse ([1993] 2010, also 1994) is always worth reading on the subject of writing. House style is discussed further in Hicks and Holmes (2002), which also includes a brief style guide containing some interesting differences from and similarities to the one used in this book. HW Fowler's (1983) *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is a handy companion for any journalist, along with a decent online and/or printed dictionary and possibly an occasional visit to the website of the Plain English Campaign (with its free guides, grammar quiz, "gobbledygook generator" and more specialist "football gobbledygook generator") at:

[www.plainenglish.co.uk](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk). Style guides themselves can increasingly be found online: see [Box 12.1](#) for links to some, and see how they compare to the one in the [Appendix](#) of this book. You can also follow @guardianstyle on Twitter, if that takes your fancy. The *Guardian's* former style guide and production editor David Marsh (2013) has produced a book on grammar that is more entertaining than that makes it sound; former Bloomberg journalist Robert Hutton (2013) has also done his bit to make the world a brighter place with *Romps, Tots and Boffins*, a guide to “journalese”, much of which was crowdsourced via Twitter (he is @robdothutton, by the way). For more academic critical reflection on – and study of – the language of journalism, the best place to start is Smith and Higgins (2013); also see Fowler (1991), Bell (1991), Richardson (2006), Conboy (2007), and a special issue of *Journalism Studies* (Vol 9, No 2, April 2008). Deborah Cameron's research paper, *Style Policy and Style Politics*, remains a rare example of journalists' internal style guides being subjected to the kind of academic scrutiny usually reserved for journalists' published output (Cameron, 1996), while Jean Aitchison's (2007) *The Word Weavers* is also worth a look. Incidentally, Cameron and Aitchison have both held the eyebrow-raising title of “Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication” at the University of Oxford. Debbie Cameron also blogs about sexist language at: <https://debuk.wordpress.com/>; she often focuses on the media, as with her exploration of news coverage of several court cases in 2020 that involved violence against women, which is well worth a read and is available here: <https://debuk.wordpress.com/2020/07/11/isolated-incidents/>. Cameron also tweets as @wordspinster. Finally, some interesting work on language and journalism seems to have started at the Philadelphia-based Reframe project; see here: <https://reframe.resolvephilly.org/>.

## Top three to try next

Tony Harcup (2022) ‘Style guide for journalists’, a sample style guide for a UK newsroom in the [Appendix](#) of this book

Harold Evans (2000) *Essential English for Journalists, Editors and Writers*

George Orwell (1946b) 'Politics and the English language', in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (1962)

## Sources for soundbites

Gibbons, quoted in Lonsdale, 2016: 86; Manning, 2001: 60; Hodge and Kress, 1993: 161; Orwell, 1946b: 156; Holmes, tweet by @spikefodder, May 11 2013; Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 128; *Guardian*, September 28 2007; *Sunday Sport* style guide, undated; Evans, 2000: 15; 1970s poster, "compiled by women and shapely, attractive, virile, blond and brunette, sexy boys, all members of the Yorkshire NUJ Equality Working Party".

## Journalese

There are some words and phrases that are frequently used in journalism but not so much in real life: whenever a policy is slammed, a number of jobs are axed or a have-a-go-hero makes a mercy dash to save a tot from a blaze or an inferno, there is journalese at work. In many cases these clichés operate as a form of harmless shorthand, and the short word tot is much easier to fit into a headline than toddler, while being a bit more age-specific than child. But journalese can also convey a deeper message. A news outlet that refers to grown women as girls or babes, for example, might not have a very sympathetic attitude towards feminism; and one that refers to scientists as boffins may not have a particularly sophisticated understanding of issues such as climate change. An extreme form of journalese is tabloidese, whereby every philanderer is a love rat and anybody unlucky enough to get cancer is automatically described as brave (Harcup, 2014a: 297). The tabloid style in particular has been found to be "predicated on an exclusively populist set of

assumptions about their target audience” (Conboy, 2006: 45). But such assumptions are open to challenge, not just from future generations of journalists but also by members of the audience themselves, as when a backlash from *Sun* readers once prompted a re-think about whether it should have reported a celebrity’s mental health issues by splashing the word “bonkers” across its front page.

## Style

A concept of house style exists to eliminate inconsistency *within* a title and also identifies those “minor style choices by which one news outlet’s finished product is *different from another’s*” (Bell, 1991: 82; my emphasis). As Deborah Cameron points out, style guides produce distinctive voices for different titles by subsuming the voices of individual journalists (big name columnists usually excepted) under “corporate norms”. Such rules help differentiate one news organisation from another and, by reflecting the usage or aspirations of a target audience, contribute towards what might be termed a “brand image” (Cameron, 1996: 320–324). This may go some way towards explaining why the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, issues its journalists with a list of banned words that includes “toilet” and offers advice such as: “Christmas lunch is what most of our readers would eat, not Christmas dinner” (*Telegraph*, 2008). Jenny McKay points out that magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *The Spectator* seek to avoid the “corporate monotone” of a restrictive house style by allowing “more scope for the individual voice of the writer to be heard” (McKay, 2006: 62). However, this very absence of house style can itself be seen as part of the brand image of those particular titles.

The sample style guide included in the [Appendix](#) of this book features one such set of house rules. Other rules are available.

## Language

Language is “never altogether neutral”, argue Smith and Higgins (2013: 5), and it can be used “to empower as well as disempower”. Critical discourse analysis is one method used by linguistic scholars to try to identify and unpick the ideological assumptions and power relations that may be embedded within written texts. Journalists themselves may often be dismissive of academics’ close textual analysis, but choices over language are inseparable from issues of truth and “what really happened”, argue linguists Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress:

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It is common for linguistically-oriented critics to attend too much to language, and to overvalue the importance of what is contained in words, especially words in written texts; but the opposite can also be the case. All the major ideological struggles will necessarily be waged in words, through texts that circulate in various ways by virtue of various technologies, in forms of language that bear the traces of these struggles in innumerable ways. (Hodge and Kress, 1993: 161)

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For Cameron, even the plain language celebrated by Orwell – and more or less embraced by most UK news media to this day – also has ideological implications:

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The plain and transparent style recommended by Orwell is particularly well suited to the prevailing ideology of modern news reporting as simply “holding up a mirror to the world”, and it is not coincidental that this style is most strictly adhered to in news rather than feature items. The use of a plain, terse, concrete language in news items – a language that deliberately aims not to draw attention to itself as language – is a code, not unlike the code of realism in fiction, and what it conventionally signifies is unmediated access to the objective facts of a story. It implicitly conveys to us, in a way a less self-effacing kind of language could not hope to do,



that what we are reading is not really a representation at all: it is the simple truth. ... [It] is the linguistic analogue of the camera never lies, and should be treated with similar suspicion. (Cameron, 1996: 327)

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Similarly, critical readers of journalism need to pay attention to words that are *not* used as well as those that are. Close analysis of the language choices within news stories is sometimes referred to as “lexical mapping”, and it can help us identify not just those primary definers or dominant arguments that are being amplified, but who or what is being “left out or marginalised” (Conboy, 2007: 37).

Analysis of words alone is not enough for scholars Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple, who point out that texts must be seen (and studied) in context, such as the use of pictures, as discussed in [Chapter 11](#): “News discourse, especially that which is rendered in the digital media of tablets and smart phones, is packaged in a complex verbal-visual display of images, graphics, typography, words, and navigational elements that guide the reader both within and away from the story page” (Bednarek and Caple, 2017: 9).

## Political correctness

Anyone objecting to the media’s use of discriminatory or derogatory language targeted at certain sections of the population is likely to be labelled a “snowflake”, a member of the “woke brigade” or someone wanting to impose “political correctness” on everyone else. But what is often referred to as political correctness is largely a matter of simple courtesy, argues Jenny McKay. It might be politeness, but that does not mean it has no political significance:

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In the early days of the struggle by ethnic minority groups and women for social equality many journalists dismissed the idea that choice of words made any difference. (This was perhaps surprising

since they had staked their lives and livelihoods on the fact that words did matter.) Now, however, many of the bigger publishing houses have recognised that there is something excluding about, for example, writing which uses the male pronoun, he, all the time when the people who are being described are in fact a mixture of he and she. ... [T]he phrase “politically correct” is often used to denigrate worthwhile attempts to think about the full significance of a writer’s choice of words. Of course, the prescriptive aspect of this can be taken too far but the underlying motive is, in many cases, less sinister than polite. (McKay, 2006: 72)

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As Conboy notes, the tabloid press regards political correctness with particular enmity because “they appear to perceive it as monitoring the use of language and possibly heightening public awareness of language abuses and discrimination expressed through language” (Conboy, 2006: 42).

A dismissive attitude towards sensitivity around issues such as racism, sexism and disability can limit the extent of ethical debate among journalists who work within mainstream media (Keeble, 2001b: 1–2). Yet journalist Gary Younge (2006) argues that the widespread abandonment of once common words, such as “darkie” and “spastic”, should not be seen as political correctness at all; rather, such changes occurred as a result of social progress, “not imposed by liberal diktat, but established by civic consensus”. This seems to be a never-ending process because, just as some examples of discriminatory language fade from use, others emerge or are revived. Incidentally, the passage about “mentally handicapped” children featured in the *What would you do?* section of this chapter is based on a feature published in a Fleet Street title in the 1980s. It was considered unremarkable at the time.

## Critical linguistics

Critical linguistics is an academic field that seeks to identify and analyse patterns within the use of language. Within journalism studies specifically, it has been used to explore how the language of news reporting is “structured according to the ideological assumptions of the news media” and may “legitimate or naturalise the dominant social order” (Conboy, 2007: 24). It is argued, therefore, that the issue of house style goes beyond simple choices over presentation to have an ideological effect. Paul Manning argues that the journalist’s concern to meet restrictive stylistic requirements can result in “less discursive news treatments and fewer opportunities for a wider range of news sources to inject critical or oppositional voices” (Manning, 2001: 60). Thus the mode of address of the *Sun*, for example, has been categorised as “heterosexual, male, white, conservative, capitalist, nationalist” (Pursehouse, cited in Stevenson, 2002: 101). So style guides themselves can be seen as ideological, irrespective of whether their authors see them as such:

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Though they are framed as purely functional or aesthetic judgements, and the commonest criteria offered are “apolitical” ones such as clarity, brevity, consistency, liveliness and vigour, as well as linguistic “correctness” and (occasionally) “purity”, on examination it turns out that these stylistic values are not timeless and neutral, but have a history and a politics. They play a role in constructing a relationship with a specific imagined audience, and also in sustaining a particular ideology of news reporting. (Cameron, 1996: 316)

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Yet journalists can on occasion break with consensus, both in terms of style and in terms of ideology. When Nell McCafferty covered the Dublin criminal courts for the *Irish Times* she abandoned the conventional rules of court reporting and journalistic style, as she explained in the introduction to a collection of her descriptive and often plaintive articles:

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Because these people have suffered more than enough by appearing in court in the first place, I never used their real names and addresses. I have named the Justices who decided their fate. Hopefully, this collection of articles will put them in the dock for a change. (McCafferty, 1981: 2)

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And organisations representing marginalised communities – even marginalised groups of journalists – sometimes produce their own suggested style guides in an effort to raise the consciousness of mainstream journalists about issues such as gender, race, sexuality, poverty, physical and mental health. See [Box 12.2](#) for some examples of these. The journalistic writing process is also discussed in [Chapters 9](#) and [10](#), while the ethical implications are considered in [Chapters 2](#) and [13](#).

## PART THREE WHAT NOW FOR JOURNALISM?

An ethical approach to journalism underpins the entire book but is most explicit within [Part Three](#), which considers some of the ways journalism has changed and some of the ways it hasn't. At a time of flux, it is worth taking a step back from admiring the latest technological wizardry to remind ourselves what journalism is for as well as what it could become. If we value journalism primarily as a means of informing society about itself, of asking awkward questions, then it seems to be a pretty good bet that there will still be people producing journalism in one form or another in the future even if we cannot yet know how (or even if) it will be paid for, or on what platforms or media it will be delivered. No matter how the journalism "industry" develops in the years ahead, journalism as a practice is likely to remain an activity that can be socially worthwhile and ethical at the same time as being fun. If the future is unwritten, as someone else once said (Joe Strummer, I believe), then readers of this book will be among those writing the future of journalism.

# CHAPTER 13 AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO JOURNALISM

## Key terms

Codes of conduct; Editors' code; Empathy; Ethical journalism; Ethics; Honesty; Human rights; Impress; Intrusion; Ipso; Leveson; NUJ code of conduct; Ofcom; Phone-hacking; Privacy; Public good; Public interest defence; Regulation; Representation; Self-regulation; Trust

“Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible,” writes Janet Malcolm (2004: 3), a journalist herself. That’s the intro to a work of non-fiction, but it might have been better suited to a novel or short story. *Every* journalist? Some, for sure; perhaps even quite a few. But, for all their flaws, journalists tell us things about the world every day that we would not otherwise know, and most strive to do so as accurately and fairly as they can manage with the time and resources available. That seems morally defensible to me.

However, journalism undoubtedly does have its dodgy characters and its dubious practices. Just because some critics go over the top and denounce our entire trade as worthless, fake or corrupt, does not absolve us of the responsibility to take legitimate criticisms on board and reflect on our actions. Ideas about right and wrong are central to journalism – to good journalism, anyway. Ethical thinking has therefore been woven into the text throughout this book. From discussion of the public interest in [Chapters 1, 2 and 6](#), fairness and truthfulness in [Chapter 5](#), how to interview people in [Chapter 8](#), and avoiding discriminatory language in [Chapter 12](#) – to give just a few examples – ethical considerations are not separate from learning *how to do journalism*, they are integral to it.

“Privacy is for paedos.”

– Paul McMullan.

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Sometimes, though, it all goes wrong. That was clear from the way that, not only did journalists pack the press bench and an overflow room at the Central Criminal Court in London (aka the Old Bailey) on July 4 2014, but there were journalists in the dock too. Chief among them was Andy Coulson, who had edited the biggest-selling newspaper in the UK before going on to work in 10 Downing Street as spin doctor to Prime Minister David Cameron. Coulson was sentenced to 18 months in prison for conspiring to hack phones during his time as deputy and then editor of the *News of the World*. He had denied it but a jury found him guilty after a trial lasting eight months. Sentenced alongside him for phone-hacking offences were three former news editors of the paper and a private investigator; their sentences ranged from four months in prison suspended for a year (plus 200 hours of unpaid community work) up to six months in prison. It was not **ethical journalism**'s finest hour.

The court was told that for several years during the first decade of the 21st century, the popular Sunday newspaper that loudly campaigned for tougher action against criminals had itself functioned as a “thoroughly criminal enterprise”, in the words of prosecutor Andrew Edis. Mr Justice Saunders said during sentencing:

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The true reason for the phone-hacking was to sell newspapers. In an increasingly competitive market, the editor wanted to make sure that it was his paper that got the stories which would create the biggest headlines and sell the most newspapers and he, and others at the newspaper, were prepared to use illegal means to do that. No doubt Mr Coulson was under considerable pressure to maintain, if not increase, market share. He had been appointed as editor at a very young age. He was ambitious and it was important for him to succeed. He, amongst others, passed that pressure down to their subordinates. There was great competition between the various desks. The evidence in the case is that there was considerable pressure on desk

heads to get good headline-grabbing stories every week and there was little concern for how they got them (Saunders, 2014).

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The judge went on to use the phrase “cover up” to describe how the public, parliament and the since discredited Press Complaints Commission (PCC) had been misled for years by representatives of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire, who long maintained that just a single rogue reporter had been responsible for illegal hacking into voicemail messages. In fact, the court was told, many other journalists were involved and thousands of phone-hacks were carried out in the hope of finding potential stories. People whose private communications were intercepted included crime victims, royals, celebrities, politicians, sports stars, agents, friends and family of the aforementioned, and even random people with vaguely similar names to those targeted. The judge noted that, “as nobody knew how the *News of the World* had got the stories, an undercurrent of distrust developed between friends and family who suspected each other of selling the information” (Saunders, 2014). Because of subsequent legal claims, we now know that hacking extended beyond the Murdoch empire to the rival *Mirror* group titles (Greenslade, 2020b).

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“Most of the time, the public interest defence was trumped-up nonsense.”

– Piers Morgan.

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Individual journalists react differently to mention of the whole so-called **hackgate** saga, which now feels a very long time ago even though it continues to hover over the UK press like an ominous cloud. Many are quick to point out that they personally have never hacked a phone, would never have dreamed of ever doing so, adding that the behaviour of the guilty ones had tarnished the good name of most ordinary, decent journalists. Others wonder if the tactics deployed at the *News of the World* were not just an intensified version of what is almost bound to go on at the more competitive,



redtop end of the journalistic spectrum; and that if every journalist who has ever done anything a bit dodgy is going to end up in the dock at the Old Bailey then the prisons are going to be even more overcrowded than they are already. Journalists get understandably uncomfortable at the sight of fellow hacks being arrested and tried, even if they have no particular sympathy for the individuals involved. Some argue that what a number of *News of the World* employees got up to was reprehensible but that the law eventually caught up with the perpetrators, so what was the big deal? Others point out that many of those responsible got away with it for years, with the police only investigating properly long after the dogged investigative journalism of Nick Davies at the *Guardian* had shamed the authorities into belatedly taking the issue seriously.

Under the law in the UK there is no **public interest defence** to justify phone-hacking, but many journalists and others might still have been more sympathetic to the alleged hackers if the stories they were investigating were truly in the public interest and if information could not have been obtained in any other way. After all, even in a liberal democracy, ethical journalism can sometimes be in conflict with the law, as when a journalist risks jail to protect the identity of a confidential source. But if what is revealed is just celebrity gossip, where is the public interest that might justify intrusion, ethically even if not legally? Given the numbers of journalists around the world taking huge personal risks by reporting on the activities of governments or big business, is it not a trifle embarrassing for UK hacks to get themselves imprisoned for reporting about love-rats and serial shaggers?

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“If something leaves you uncomfortable, then it is probably unethical.”

– *Chris Frost.*

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## **CODES OF ETHICAL CONDUCT**

The phone-hacking scandal brought into the public domain discussion of issues around intrusion into privacy, press freedom, statutory regulation, self-regulation, concentration of media ownership, the commercial pressures under which many journalists work and allegations of a bullying culture within some news organisations. It was neither the first nor the last crisis of conscience to hit journalism in the UK, but it would be wrong to think of ethics as being concerned only with such huge scandals. Ethical issues can crop up at any time in a journalist's working life, just as they have cropped up at various points in this book, sometimes labelled as such, sometimes not.

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“The press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.”

– *Editors' code of practice.*

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Around the world there are hundreds of codes of ethical conduct available to help journalists think through what might be right or wrong in certain circumstances. There are codes produced by regulatory authorities, backed up with formal rulings and sometimes even punishments; there are codes drafted by charities, health organisations and various lobbying groups, with the aim of raising awareness within newsrooms; and there are codes produced by journalists' own organisations, notably trade unions such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), which covers the UK and Ireland. Some are detailed sets of rules that try to anticipate every eventuality – and can consequently become rather long and hard to remember – while others are more like general principles. The NUJ code of conduct ([Box 13.1](#)) is an example of the latter, and it has evolved since its first appearance in 1936 into 12 relatively short, sharp assertions of what journalists do. Let's take a closer look.

## Box 13.1

### NUJ code of conduct

A journalist:

1. At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed.
2. Strives to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair.
3. Does her/his utmost to correct harmful inaccuracies.
4. Differentiates between fact and opinion.
5. Obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means.
6. Does nothing to intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest.
7. Protects the identity of sources who supply information in confidence and material gathered in the course of her/his work.
8. Resists threats or any other inducements to influence, distort or suppress information and takes no unfair personal advantage of information gained in the course of her/his duties before the information is public knowledge.
9. Produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation.
10. Does not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service save for the promotion of her/his own work or of the medium by which she/he is employed.

11. A journalist shall normally seek the consent of an appropriate adult when interviewing or photographing a child for a story about her/his welfare.
12. Avoids plagiarism.

The National Union of Journalists believes a journalist has the right to refuse an assignment or be identified as the author of editorial that would break the letter or spirit of the NUJ code of conduct. The NUJ will support journalists who act according to the code.

(The code was last amended in 2011; check for updates at [www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk))

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*A journalist at all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed*

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The right of the public to *information* is key here because, for the NUJ, that is fundamentally what journalism is about. Yes, it might be entertaining, enthralling, amusing and many other things, and it might also be a way of making money, but unless it informs people in some way then it isn't worthy of the label journalism. The above clause reflects the concepts both of human *rights* and of audience members being *citizens*. The points about media freedom and freedom of expression are, in this sense, means to an end – the end being a better informed citizenry. See [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) for discussion of the fundamentals of journalism, the idea of a free press, and the ways in which journalists are subject to a range of constraints.

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*A journalist strives to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair*

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For information to be useful it has to be accurate, but the above clause goes further to assert that technical *accuracy* is necessary but not sufficient on its own. There may be no requirement for formal

balance or impartiality here (unlike the Ofcom code), nor of perfection – note the word *strives* – but *honesty* and *fairness* are crucial when it comes to selecting which bits of information to include in a story and what to say about them. See [Chapter 5](#) for discussion of the importance of verifying information, and [Chapter 9](#) for how to write it up as an accurate news story.

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*A journalist does her/his utmost to correct harmful inaccuracies*

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If you get something *wrong* then you have a duty to put it right, particularly if it might have serious consequences either for the subject of the story or for the people who read, watch or listen to it. In the long run, journalists who admit – and correct – their errors are more likely to be seen as *trustworthy* than those who pretend never to have slipped up. See [Chapter 5](#) for discussion of correcting the record when errors occur.

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*A journalist differentiates between fact and opinion*

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If people have a right to be informed then they must have a right to know what is factual information and what is opinion, comment or analysis. Fact and opinion might both be necessary, but this clause asserts that they are better if distinguished from each other to enable members of the audience to form *an independent opinion based on the reported facts*. This is not always as simple as it sounds, because facts can be contested and what counts as opinion can itself be a matter of opinion, but the assertion here is a useful reminder to journalists to ask themselves if they are *blurring* the two in a way that might misinform. See [Chapter 5](#) for discussion of the difference between facts and opinions.

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*A journalist obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means*

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Honesty and openness are the *default* position here when it comes to the gathering of information, which complements the earlier commitment to conveying that information in an honest way to the public. It is recognised that there might be *exceptions* to this, when a journalist might have to use deception, for example, but the bar is set deliberately high by the inclusion of the phrase, “overwhelmingly in the public interest” (see [Box 2.2](#) in [Chapter 2](#) for the NUJ’s definition of the public interest). What counts as *overwhelmingly in the public interest* will remain contested, but the strong wording of this clause ought to prompt journalists to pause and reflect before embarking on any form of untruthfulness in pursuit of the truth. Can it really be justified? Is it really worth it? Is there really no other way of finding out the information? See [Chapter 6](#) for discussion of investigations, including some using deception.

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*A journalist does nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest*

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Intrusions are by definition intrusive, so there needs to be a justification beyond nosiness or prurience – whether that’s for an *invasion of privacy* (examples might include people’s sex lives, domestic violence, drug habits, corrupt business practices, bullying behaviour, mental or physical health issues and so on) or for an approach after a *bereavement*. As with investigations, so with intrusions: the principle here is that there ought to be some genuine *public interest*, not just something about which some members of the public are curious (see [Chapters 2](#) and [6](#)).

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*A journalist protects the identity of sources who supply information in confidence and material gathered in the course of her/his work*

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Journalists are in the business of finding things out and informing people, and in virtually all cases the best way of doing that is by attributing the information to its source, on the record. On rare occasions, though, a source may ask for their identity to be kept secret. If a journalist agrees to this, there is a moral imperative to

protect the source, but promises should not be made lightly. Considerations include whether the source is a genuine whistleblower or merely someone being mischievous or misleading, and what practical steps you will need to take to keep any promise. See [Chapter 2](#) for examples of battles over protection of sources.

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*A journalist resists threats or any other inducements to influence, distort or suppress information and takes no unfair personal advantage of information gained in the course of her/his duties before the information is public knowledge*

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This again comes down to issues of *honesty* and *trust*. How can members of the audience trust that you are providing them with an honest account, and that you have not been either bought off or scared away from covering something? This is where the reputation and track record of individual journalists and entire newsgathering operations come into play. Reputations can be hard won but easily lost. See [Chapter 2](#) for more discussion of threats faced by journalists.

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*A journalist produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation*

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It is sad that a clause such as the above is still felt to be necessary, but stereotyped coverage, sexism, discriminatory or ignorant use of language, and sometimes even racist hate speech all continue to make appearances in sections of the news media – and all need to be challenged, ideally *before* publication. The issue of *representation* is important here, both how representative newsrooms are (or are not) of the wider population, and of how some sections of the community tend to be represented within the output of those newsrooms. See [Chapter 2](#) for discussion of representation and [Chapter 12](#) for more on discriminatory language.

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*A journalist does not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service save for the promotion of her/his own work or of the medium by which she/he is employed*

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Trustworthiness is once again the key here, with a fear that blurring the boundary between commercial and editorial activities will erode trust in the integrity of the latter. The NUJ would like to see a *firewall* between advertising and journalism. However, given the challenging economic conditions under which much journalism is produced today, and is likely to be in the near future, that is easier said than done. See [Chapter 14](#) for more on the challenges facing journalists.

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*A journalist shall normally seek the consent of an appropriate adult when interviewing or photographing a child for a story about her/his welfare*

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Children and, by implication, other *vulnerable people are offered special protection* in many ethical codes, in recognition of the reality that they may not always be in a position to give *informed consent*. However, the word “normally” leaves some room for interpretation here. For example, if a group of 15-year-olds walk out of their school on strike, would it be better to ask them why and report their reasons, or not to report their action unless an agreeable appropriate adult could be found? Even if a decision is made to go ahead with such a story, the code’s other clauses relating to fairness, honesty and accuracy should also be borne in mind, with particular care taken not to exploit naïvety or encourage potentially dangerous behaviour.

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*A journalist avoids plagiarism*

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That’s the idea, anyway, although there can be a thin line between following up another journalist’s story and *lifting* it wholesale. Quite apart from the fact that it is plain unethical to claim somebody else’s work as your own, there is also the very practical consideration of –



how can you know that they got it right? Incidentally, although both the NUJ code of conduct and the Impress standards code have exhortations against plagiarism, to date there is no similar clause in the editors' code of practice.

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“Publishers must ensure that significant conflicts of interest are disclosed.”

– *Impress standards code.*

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## THINKING ABOUT THE JOB

The code discussed above, as with numerous alternatives from different organisations and in different countries, cannot tell a journalist what to do in every circumstance. What it can do is help a journalist to think about the job. Sometimes pausing for a moment's reflection might be enough to prevent an unnecessary intrusion, for example, or a thoughtless use of language – *before* it is too late. In essence, taking a thoughtful approach to journalism means trying to put yourself in the shoes of the person you are interviewing or writing about, or their relatives; having a bit of empathy with people; and taking care to care, not just about the accuracy of the story but its potential impacts (Harcup, 2020: 75–85). Contrary to popular imagination, many journalists do think very carefully about what they are doing, even while they are doing it; do normally try to be sensitive to ethical issues and nuances; and do have a conception that **human rights** ought to be taken into consideration when weighing up the pros and cons of certain types of coverage.

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“Broadcasters must avoid unjust or unfair treatment of individuals or organisations in programmes.”

– *Ofcom broadcasting code.*

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Take Andrew Norfolk and the child grooming investigation discussed in [Chapter 6](#), a story that was extremely delicate and fraught with ethical considerations from the start. Given that it involved sexual assault, race, religion, extremely vulnerable children and community tensions, it would have made Norfolk's life much easier if he had simply ignored the story altogether. Instead, he found a way of tackling it, despite knowing that far-right racists might exploit it and that anti-racists might accuse him of fuelling prejudice. He admits that the investigation caused him lots of "anguish", especially in the first year, and not just because the details of the assaults themselves were so distressing:

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It's been horrible to write a story about a town and then the EDL [English Defence League] turn up and march through that town. We tried very hard, and would usually put somewhere in each article that most child sexual abuse is carried out by white men acting on their own. But those models [of offending] were known about and this one wasn't.

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For some critics, labelling those convicted as "Muslim" might be seen as irrelevant or even dangerous, but Norfolk points out that members of the Asian Hindu and Sikh communities would complain when that was *not* done because they did not wish to be implicated in these cases in the public eye. Instead, when reporting the convictions of groups of Muslim men, the *Times* went out of its way to also give space to additional Muslim voices who were speaking out against the attitudes that seemed to lie behind the offences, thereby helping to place the shocking stories within a wider context. In addition to race, religion and gender there is perhaps also a class dimension to this particular saga, as Norfolk explains:

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For many years in white liberal society, in which I include myself in this mea culpa, there was a complete distortion between life as it seemed to be and the reality of life being lived on the ground in some of those white working class estates in the north. And into that void step the jackboots of the BNP [British National Party], and there was fertile

ground for them to sow their seed because there were people who thought that nobody else was helping them.

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In truth, then, the grooming, violence and sexual abuse of the girls was only part of the story. The other part was how the girls and their families had repeatedly been failed by authorities from social services up to the judiciary, who tended to see them simply as working-class girls making poor life choices. All of which meant the survivors and their families had no particular reason to trust a Fleet Street journalist suddenly wishing to report their plight, so Norfolk had to tread very carefully there as well and did not approach victims directly because of their vulnerability and young ages. Instead, he made contact with family support groups and gradually built up sufficient trust to allow some one-to-one meetings and interviews to take place. Upsetting and delicate as it was, Norfolk's grooming investigation was a million miles away from the demonising anti-Muslim headlines that have too often appeared in some UK newspapers. It also showed that a quiet and meticulous approach to pursuing a story can achieve more than the sort of macho, hard-nosed pushiness that some reporters – and editors – seem to think is required.

## ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the process of looking at journalists at work throughout this book, we have considered a range of influences that impact on journalistic practice. However, influences do not necessarily have to be thought of negatively, simply as constraints. Some influences may be interpreted as positive, even liberating. For example, although codes of conduct may be seen as constraining the behaviour of journalists in some ways, the existence of such codes may also help journalists to *resist* what they see as unethical behaviour and to *defend* journalistic integrity (Harcup, 2002a, 2002b and 2007). As the novelist and journalist HG Wells put it in a message to his fellow NUJ members way back in 1922:

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We affect opinion and public and private life profoundly, and we need to cherish any scrap of independence we possess and can secure. We are not mere hirelings; our work is

creative and responsible work. The activities of rich adventurers in buying, and directing the policy of, groups of newspapers is a grave public danger. A free-spirited, well-paid, and well-organised profession of journalism is our only protection against the danger. (Quoted in Mansfield, 1943: 518)

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If journalists are not to be the “mere hirelings” of the wealthy, as Wells put it, then we must take seriously our commitment to independent-minded observation, investigation, verification, scrutiny, accuracy and fairness in addition to honing an ability to communicate clearly and entertainingly.

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“Codes of ethics in journalism have not done much to eradicate unethical behaviour.”

– *Barbie Zelizer.*

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And so we return to the point made in [Chapter 1](#) that journalism is not simply an interesting job; journalism *matters* because it informs discussion in the public sphere. This social role in informing citizens means that a good journalist will be a reflective practitioner and will be aware that she or he is not simply an entertainer or a teller of stories. Reflection is required because skills alone “are not enough” (de Burgh, 2003: 110). The actions of journalists, individually and collectively, can make a difference to journalistic outputs and thereby, as HG Wells argued a century ago, can make a difference to people’s lives.

To help focus our minds on the point of it all, we might consider the alternative news values set out in [Box 13.2](#), which resulted from a study of ethical journalism in a range of international contexts (Harcup, 2020). As with any such list, they should be thought of as a prompt to discussion and reflection rather than a set of commandments. They could be used to ask questions about whether the “shared understanding” within newsrooms (Ross et al, 2018: 839) – referred to in [Chapter 2](#) – might be leading to stereotyped

approaches towards news, sources and journalistic roles; and to raise consciousness about the fact that such stereotypes and shared understandings are open to challenge.

## Box 13.2

### An alternative set of ethical news values

If the news is to get closer to living up to claims about its service to citizens and citizenship, then potential news stories ought to be measured against the extent to which they concern one or more of the following six criteria:

1. Social surveillance on behalf of citizens;
2. Monitoring of power;
3. Recording of community action and self-activity;
4. Challenging of assumptions and stereotypes;
5. Surprise and novelty;
6. Entertainment and humour.

Together, these alternative news values contain the essence of what news worthy of the name should be.

*Source: Tony Harcup (2020) What's the Point of News? A Study in Ethical Journalism: 140.*

Reflection is essential because journalists make choices every day: what stories to cover, which sources to consult, whose door to knock on, what questions to ask, who to believe, what angles to take, whom to quote, what quotes to use, how much context to include, what words to use, what pictures to use, what to leave out, and so on. They may not be entirely free choices, they are not taken in a vacuum, and sometimes there will be orders from on high, but for the most part a journalist's work still involves *choices*; and the journalist whose choices are not anchored in some sense of ethical responsibility may simply be blown this way and that by prevailing commercial and political winds. As Lynette Sheridan Burns writes:

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Professional integrity is not something you have when you are feeling a bit down at the end of a long week. It is a state of mindfulness that you bring to everything you write, no matter how humble the topic. ... Put simply, given the power that you have to do good or harm by virtue of the decisions you make, under pressure each day, the least you can do is think about it. (Sheridan Burns, 2002: 11)

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Not just to *think* about it but also to *talk* about it and even occasionally to *do something* about it (Harcup, 2002a, 2002b, 2007 and 2020). Every journalist who does that, and is not too full of herself to notice what is going on, knows that what she does is indeed morally defensible.

## Summary

An ethical approach to journalism takes account of issues raised in the industry's various codes of conduct, whether voluntary, self-regulatory or statutory. Such an approach draws on the concept of human rights and justifies intrusion into people's private lives only when there is evidence that such intrusion is warranted by a wider public interest or public good; but critics say the system of self-regulation has allowed sections of the press to bend or ignore the rules. Ideas about ethical journalism may change over time, may differ between different media platforms or sectors, and may also be different in different countries; there might be occasions when what is regarded (by journalists and other citizens) as ethical behaviour might differ from what is lawful. Journalists tend to guard their independence from the state and also, to an extent, from their employers. Although some employers seem to believe that ethics are whatever proprietors or editors say they are, it has been argued that *all* journalists need a sense of ethical responsibility and to think about the consequences of their work, because journalism can have an impact on individuals and on wider society. In the UK, the Leveson inquiry and phone-hacking trials are seen as marking a low point for ethical journalism, but it should be remembered that

it was journalism that uncovered the scandal. Ultimately, despite what the cynics say, journalism can be a morally defensible occupation.

## Questions

Can't most journalists simply leave ethics for their editor to think about?

When, if ever, might reporting the truth be unethical?

When, if ever, might invading someone's privacy be ethical?

What have human rights got to do with journalism?

Could something like the phone-hacking scandal ever happen again?

## What would you do?

We are back with the scenario introduced earlier in the book, about the search for 10-year-old Jane Doe. Police have found a body that has not yet been identified and your news editor asks you to visit the family home to seek an immediate interview with the parents, adding that if nobody is at home you should wait outside and spend the time using your phone to see what family members and others might be posting on Facebook or other social media. What ethical considerations might arise from this assignment?

## Further reading

*The Editors' Codebook* by the Editors' Code of Practice Committee (2021) is not just a guide to the provisions of the code itself, and how they have been interpreted by Ipso, it is also a valuable collection of practical issue-by-issue

discussions of the ethical implications of real-life decisions by journalists and their impact on others. Some deeper and wider consideration of journalism and ethics can be found in scholarly books by Harcup (2007 and 2020), Sanders (2003) and Frost (2016), along with edited works by Meyers (2010), Price et al (2021) and Wyatt (2014). Frost (2020) deals more specifically with privacy, while Palmer (2018) interviews people about their experiences as the subjects of news stories. The Ethics Council of the NUJ (2019) has produced guidelines on journalists' use of social media, that are worth a look. Luce (2019) is useful for the ethics of covering a whole range of particularly sensitive topics, such as child sexual abuse, mass shootings and natural disasters; Duncan and Newton (2017) focus on ethical issues around news coverage of death and bereavement; and Healey (2019) offers an important discussion of how to cover stories involving vulnerable people and others involved in traumatic events without adding to their trauma. For an illuminating series of case studies of journalists dealing with difficult ethical decisions, see *When Reporters Cross the Line* by Purvis and Hulbert (2013). The *Leveson Report* itself and the evidence presented to the inquiry are all worth reading, or at least dipping into, and can still be found online. For details of how the UK news industry got itself into that situation, the best place to begin is *Hack Attack* by Nick Davies (2014), the reporter whose investigation into wrongdoing in parts of the Murdoch empire uncovered more than did the rest of Fleet Street, the police and the Press Complaints Commission combined; his editor, Alan Rusbridger (2018), devotes a chapter of his own *Breaking News* to looking back on what it was like to run the story in the *Guardian* in defiance of the powerful voices telling him to drop it. More on the phone-hacking affair itself can be found in *Dial M for Murdoch* by Watson and Hickman (2012), also Hanning with Mulcaire (2014); for more on the fall-out, see Keeble and Mair (2012), Mair (2013) and Ogbemor (2020); as ever, Hanna and Dodd (2020) should help keep you out of the dock. Looking to the future, Ward (2020) attempts to sketch out a potential direction for ethical journalism as "a rich, multileveled, inclusive ethics that weaves old and new into a new framework for journalists" (p 319). After all that heavy stuff, *Tabloid Girl* by Sharon Marshall (2010) and *The Diaries of a Fleet Street Fox* by Lilly Miles (2013), aka Susie Boniface,



might provide a little light relief; don't take it all as gospel, though. In fact, don't take anything as gospel – even this.

## Top three to try next

Tony Harcup (2020) *What's the Point of News? A Study in Ethical Journalism*

Chris Frost (2016) *Journalism Ethics and Regulation* (fourth edition)

Lada Price, Karen Sanders and Wendy Wyatt (2021) *Routledge Companion to Journalism Ethics*

## Sources for soundbites

McMullan, quoted in Williams, 2011; Morgan, quoted in Hattenstone, 2005; Frost, quoted in Luce, 2019: 275; Editors' code, Ipso, 2021; Impress, 2017; Ofcom, 2019; Zelizer, 2017: 93.

## Ethical journalism

Ethical journalism may be regarded by some as an oxymoron. However, despite such cynicism, ethical journalism has resonance as a term used to describe journalism conducted in line with both the letter and the spirit of relevant ethical guidelines and codes of conduct; journalism that is informed more by a commitment to the public interest than to concerns about financial gain. This concept of ethical journalism can be seen as a beacon to help illuminate the tricky path through conflicting demands, loyalties and the sorts of constraints discussed in [Chapter 2](#). However, notions of what is and isn't ethical may change over time as well as varying between different countries and

workplaces. An empirical study of journalists' beliefs about ethical journalism in 18 countries (including Australia, China, Spain and the USA) found that “ideological, cultural and societal factors” within the different countries played a “critical and sometimes dominant” role in how journalists approached ethical dilemmas (Plaisance et al, 2012: 654). Journalism in different countries is the product of different systems, and this can impact on what is regarded as ethical, as Angela Phillips points out:

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While the professionalised “liberal” model of journalism is often held up as a norm, it is in fact a minority trend in a world where politically aligned journalism is arguably more common than neutral “objective” journalism and journalists are as likely to see themselves as commentators as they are to see themselves as neutral information gatherers. ... One of the very few things that seem to unite journalists globally, at least as an ideal worth fighting for, is autonomy from state control. (Phillips, 2015: 60)

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Another constant is that journalists are in reality engaged with ethics even when they (or critics) don't realise it, as Plaisance et al (2012: 641) argue: “Whether they are explicit in doing so or not, journalists are in constant engagement with ethics theory as they move through the continuous cascade of decisions that comprise the messy, complicated and often compromising production of news.” In the UK, at least, ethics was often a marginal (at most) element of journalism training until the phone-hacking scandal and Leveson inquiry pushed it to the centre of the stage. That did not mean ethical issues were not present back then, just that they may not always have been acknowledged as such.

## Hackgate

Hackgate is the inelegant label sometimes applied (after *Watergate*) to the phone-hacking scandal that led to the closure of Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* in 2011, the

establishment of the Leveson inquiry into press ethics, the demise of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) to be replaced as self-regulator by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipso), and the arrests of numerous journalists on suspicion of a variety of alleged offences ranging from bribing police officers to conspiring to pervert the course of justice. It began with the arrests in 2006 of the *News of the World's* royal editor and a private investigator for hacking into the voicemail messages of several individuals, including members of the royal family. When the pair were jailed the following year, publishers News International (now News UK) blamed it all on a single bad apple or rogue reporter, an explanation that seemed to be accepted by police, the PCC and those senior politicians who were keen to remain in Murdoch's good books. But investigative journalism (primarily by Nick Davies of the *Guardian*) gradually revealed that illegal phone-hacking had taken place for several years, literally on an industrial scale; allegations of hacking eventually extended beyond the *News of the World* and the Murdoch empire.

An official investigation into the culture, practices and ethics of the UK press was established by Prime Minister David Cameron and presided over by Sir Brian Leveson, who wearily pointed out that it was the seventh time in less than 70 years that the government had felt the need to commission a report into the state of the press. During almost nine months of public hearings (streamed live on the inquiry website), evidence was given by hundreds of witnesses, including proprietors, editors, ex-editors, reporters, victims of press intrusion, politicians, police officers, academics and representatives of the by then largely discredited PCC. Leveson's subsequent proposals included a new, independent, self-regulatory body to replace the PCC, this time with the power to investigate alleged wrongdoing and impose sanctions; the establishment of an arbitration service as a cheap method of dealing with potential legal actions against the press; and the setting up of a "whistleblowing hotline" for use by any journalists who feel they are being asked to do something unethical.

The Leveson Report's most controversial recommendation was for legislation to establish an official "recognition body" to

monitor the work of the proposed new press self-regulator; this suggestion was seen by many as the thin end of a wedge that might open the door to Ofcom-style statutory regulation and even state censorship or licensing of the press. One study of press coverage of the post-Leveson debate about self-regulation found that most UK national newspapers – the *Guardian* was a notable exception – framed such calls for reform as “a threat to press freedom”, exactly as had happened during earlier ethical scandals (Ogbebor, 2020: 206). Such one-sided and self-serving coverage can be seen as corrosive of the quality of public debate. “The media can use their gatekeeping and agenda-setting powers to influence decisions and opinion in favour of their position in a debate,” argues Binakuromo Ogbebor (2020: 4). “They can also limit the information available in the public sphere by keeping silent on issues they do not wish discussed in such debates.”

After interminable talks, stalemates and delays, in 2014 the bulk of the UK press set up Ipso to replace the PCC, and Ipso said it had no intention of seeking recognition from any post-Leveson body sanctioned by the state. As an editorial in *British Journalism Review* put it at the time: “We have a new beginning. Or, if you take a more critical view, we are back to business as normal” (Fletcher, 2014: 3). Not quite, because self-regulation of the UK press is now even messier than ever. Most major newspaper and magazine publishers are signed up to Ipso, which has a few more teeth than the old PCC, from which it has taken over policing the editors’ code of practice (see list of publishers signed up to Ipso here: [www.ipso.co.uk/complain/who-ipso-regulates/](http://www.ipso.co.uk/complain/who-ipso-regulates/)). Meanwhile, a rival self-regulator called Impress has been set up, which *has* gained official recognition as being Leveson-compliant; it has its own separate standards code, and has attracted a range of mostly small and local publications to its scheme (see latest list at: [www.impress.press/regulated-publications/](http://www.impress.press/regulated-publications/)). Then there are those outlets which, for their own varying reasons, simply declined to join either Ipso or Impress, notably the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Independent*, the *Evening Standard* and *Private Eye*.

## Public interest defence

We have heard a lot about the public interest throughout this book and particularly in [Chapters 2](#) and [6](#). The concept implicitly underpins much of what journalists do every day, and is also used explicitly to justify activities that would be regarded as unethical without such a public interest defence. The editors' code of practice allows some of its strictures to be set aside where it can be demonstrated that it would be in the public interest to do so (see [Box 2.1](#) in [Chapter 2](#)). This exception covers clauses on privacy, harassment, children, hospitals, crime, clandestine devices and subterfuge, and payments to criminals. It does *not* apply to the clauses relating to accuracy, opportunity to reply, intrusion into grief or shock, victims of sexual assault, discrimination, financial journalism, confidential sources, or payment to witnesses in a criminal trial, for which there are no public interest exceptions in the editors' code. The Ofcom broadcasting code and the BBC editorial guidelines also allow for certain forms of journalism to be broadcast only if there is an overriding public interest and for the issue of the public interest in freedom of expression to be balanced against people's expectations of privacy (see Hanna and Dodd, 2020).

However, "the division between private and public is rarely absolute" (Cooper and Whittle, 2009: 97–98), leading to frequent arguments about what is – and what is not – in the public interest for us to know about (see [Box 2.3](#) in [Chapter 2](#)). Perhaps some of the problem lies in the language used to express the concept, argues Karen Sanders:

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Undoubtedly the notion of public interest serves a useful normative role: it is the yardstick by which editors, publishers and broadcasters determine the boundaries of ethical behaviour. However, it is also unclear and abstract. ... The notion would repay closer scrutiny and perhaps recasting in the form of public or common good rather than that of "interest" which smacks of economism. Invading privacy for the *public good* expresses the truth that justice sometimes requires a private good to be subordinated to a public one. ... The careless invasion of privacy ... simply undermines journalists'

claims to be truly serving the people. (Sanders, 2003: 90–91; my emphasis)

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Who is to define the public good? And isn't there more than one public? Such questions would seem to be purely academic to the former tabloid hack Paul McMullan, who told the Leveson inquiry that "privacy is the space bad people need to do bad things in. Privacy is for paedos; fundamentally nobody else needs it" (quoted in Williams, 2011). It's an argument, certainly, but not one that reflects the thinking that has gone into codes of ethical conduct or charters of human rights around the world.

## Human rights

The concept of human rights can be seen as "a system of ethics, of moral thinking, that allows those who use it to determine what is fair and reasonable treatment for each individual on an equal and unprejudicial basis," writes Chris Frost (2020: 4). The idea that the world's citizens have certain inalienable rights is expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was agreed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris in 1948 in the wake of the Holocaust and Second World War ([www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/](http://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/)). Among the human rights asserted are the rights to privacy; to freedom of opinion and expression; and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through the media. In the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law, allowing the courts to weigh up the right to privacy (Article 8) against the right to freedom of expression (Article 10). This has resulted in media organisations sometimes using the law themselves, for example to challenge the idea that certain terrorism-related trials might be held in secret, and sometimes having the law used against them, as when an injunction is sought to prevent publication of a private matter (Hanna and Dodd, 2020). Human rights declarations and laws provide a framework within which journalists can think about the consequences of potential actions, whether large or small.

Like so much in ethics, human rights often come down to weighing up competing arguments and interests. Being universal, they apply just as much to people you are not keen on as they do to those you like or admire.

# CHAPTER 14 “OUR HISTORY WILL BE WHAT WE MAKE IT”: JOURNALISM TODAY, TOMORROW AND THE DAY AFTER

## Key terms

Artificial intelligence; Constraints; Consumers; Curiosity; Data journalism; Employability; Informed citizens; Mental health; Mobile journalism; Multimedia; Personality; Public sphere; Reflective practice; Slow journalism; Technological determinism; Work experience

If you find yourself crying in the toilets while on work experience, try not to take it personally. You will not be the first person to have felt overwhelmed by it all. Some excellent journalists spent their early days sneaking out of the newsroom for a quiet sob, and there are many more who felt like doing so. For people who have long yearned to become a *real* journalist, the reality of work experience can sometimes be a bit much, especially in a large workplace where everyone is super busy and nobody seems to know who you are. Listen to the buzz of people doing **journalism**, though, and soak up the experience. “Never think that you know more than the lowest journalist on the newspaper or agency, or wherever you start,” says Jane Merrick. “Take *everything* on board.”

## EXCITING POSSIBILITIES

Journalism is frequently said to be in crisis, yet somehow it is still here. Technologies, business models and job roles all change rapidly, but journalism is not fundamentally about technology – journalists must beware getting drawn into **technological**



**determinism** – or fancy new job titles that didn't exist five minutes earlier. Journalism is fundamentally about *people*, and emotional intelligence is more important than artificial intelligence. It's just that we now have some new ways of telling people stories, including new platforms, formats and technological possibilities. If the journalists of today, tomorrow and the day after retain a commitment to supplying people with accurate information, told as interesting and/or entertaining stories, then journalism will survive as a public service – even if there isn't necessarily much money in it.

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“Our history will be what we make it.”

– *Ed Murrow.*

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Anyone about to enter the journalism industry should be excited, believes Neal Mann:

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They need to learn the traditional aspects of journalism but they don't need to play by the rules that the older generation were forced to play by, were bound by. They can create content in a very different way that engages the audience and, moving forward, it's a very different way of thinking that's liberating for a young journalist, I think.

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Potentially liberating, yes. Also pretty scary, perhaps; especially after years of closures, cutbacks and job losses in so many news organisations. Despite the doom and gloom, people are still getting jobs in journalism, particularly if they have a range of skills and a *can-do* attitude. Carla Buzasi goes so far as to call the 21st century the “golden age” of journalism: “I think it's never been more interesting, there have never been more possibilities. ... The people who have the skills and the passion can still have great opportunities ahead of them.”

History suggests that journalism can often develop in contradictory ways at the same time. “I don't think anybody should be thinking, ‘I

want to be a print journalist or a magazine journalist or a radio journalist’,” adds Buzasi. “Try to pick up every skill you can. There are very few brands that only exist in one version of themselves.” With social media, individual journalists can even become their own *personal brands*. Sort of. “Journalists need to put personality into what they do,” says Mann: “There’s no such thing as a personal Twitter feed as a journalist, you are a publisher, but the thing that’s really key is getting across some personality and working out what your brand is.”

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“It’s handy to have as many skills as you can.”

– Lindsay Eastwood.

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Newer and older technologies have always tended to coexist (Zelizer, 2017: 142). So, alongside trends such as always-on “ambient journalism” (Hermida, 2010), speedy bite-sized “McJournalism” (Franklin, 2005b: 148), journalists becoming 24/7 clickbait merchants or “output slaves” (White, 2013: 51), we have also seen growing interest in what is sometimes called *slow journalism*. Whether delivered online, in magazine formats, as long-reads in newspapers, lengthy broadcast documentaries or podcast serials, slow journalism “takes its time to find things out, notices stories that others miss, and communicates it all to the highest standards,” as Susan Greenberg (2007) puts it. Slow and long-form journalism coexists with fast breaking news and mobile journalism delivered via social media, news websites or more traditional broadcast formats; and a 4,000-word written investigation can be accompanied, and promoted, via a 60-second video with subtitles. If it’s journalism, then it’s journalism, whatever the delivery mechanism.

## “NOBODY ELSE KNOWS ABOUT THIS”

Despite dire predictions about the future, despite all the **constraints** discussed in this book, despite the low pay and the even lower public esteem, and despite the unethical behaviour that sometimes gives journalism a bad name, many intelligent, questioning, sociable and

articulate people are determined that's what they want to be. Why? Partly because of the thrill of finding something out and telling people about it, as Andrew Norfolk explains:

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Never in my entire career have I got the buzz I got from my very first bit of investigative journalism, which was on the *Scarborough Evening News*. It was about a further education college, just after they'd all been privatised and income was dependent on the number of students you had. So they had a crèche for babies and toddlers of staff, and some bright spark had decided to enrol them as full-time students with learning difficulties. It was the first story I'd ever done thinking, "Nobody else knows about this and unless it goes in the paper nobody ever will". And it had my name on it. You can't beat that.

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"I think the danger is if you get pigeonholed into doing one thing."

– *Ayshah Tull.*

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Then there are the inspirational people you might meet, sometimes in the unlikeliest of circumstances, as Cathy Newman recalls:

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I've interviewed a teenage rape survivor and she was really inspiring, how she'd got her life together at a point when she could have completely crumbled, and actually managed to build something positive out of this horrendous tragedy. That was very inspiring. That's as memorable to me as meeting the Dalai Lama, who said to my cameraman that he was overweight.

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"All jobs entail compromises of some sort," concedes Abul Taher, "and journalism has its share of them too." Yet he feels it remains a

desirable job:

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I was attracted to journalism because I had always wanted to be a writer. Journalism is easily the most widely read type of literature in modern societies, beating novels, books and poetry. There is a huge pleasure from writing a good, well-researched article, and you really do get a unique window into society through journalism. Journalism informs and educates people about the world beyond their own personal experience.

It is a good profession, but it is also one where there is very little financial reward unless you are at the top. Money is the biggest problem ... and it is especially hard if you have moved to London and are having to pay rent as well as student loans. ... I have a lot of friends who have become sick of finding that elusive break and want to do other things in life.

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“It’s a daily ritual of moral and intellectual compromise – it is a good job, but it is hard.”

– *Abul Taher.*

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## **“THE GREAT VIRTUE OF A JOURNALIST IS CURIOSITY”**

For those who haven’t been put off, what words of advice do some of the experienced journalists interviewed for this book have for coming generations? Merrick stresses the importance of learning “the basics” such as shorthand and the law. She points out that a humble(ish) attitude can also help: “There’s a balance between giving your newsdesk the confidence that you can do the job, and being level-headed. It’s a matter of getting that balance right.

Journalists will respect somebody prepared to take it all on board.” Norfolk also advises young journalists to spend time on the basics, including learning from experience:

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Don't be in too much of a hurry. Some people get a job on a national newspaper and within a couple of years, if they haven't got a title they're feeling frustrated. And yet they're the luckiest people in the world. I spent 11 years in regional journalism before I joined the *Times*. It doesn't matter how brilliant you are, the grounding you get – admittedly on terrible pay – from two or three years on a regional newspaper is the building block that then allows you in the end to build whatever you want. Learning by making mistakes, learning that it doesn't matter how simple the surname is, you always ask how to spell it – something as simple as that. Going to boring council meetings and magistrates courts is a really useful grounding.

One of my strengths is getting people to talk to me, and if I hadn't had those days on the *Scarborough Evening News* when a kid had died and I had to do the doorknock, and somebody takes you into their home – just learning the way to deal with people, from all different walks of life.

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“It doesn't matter how simple the surname is, you always ask how to spell it.”

– *Andrew Norfolk.*

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Persistence, charm and trust are three key requirements of anybody who wants to be a good journalist, believes Newman:

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Never give up. Keep hammering away at the story. I see people who think, “Oh that's quite interesting”, and they put in a call and then that's it. Keep on bashing the phones,

don't take no for an answer, get to the top, don't be fobbed off with the PR. Speak to the chief executive rather than the junior on the PR account because you're not going to find out very much from them. Charm your contacts, look after your contacts, don't burn your sources, earn their trust.

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For Emma Youle, the key is to “follow the stories that you're passionate about and do work that you find interesting”. That's what has always led to her own strongest reporting:

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I think you need to trust your instincts on that and if you think there's more to a story, keep digging, pester your editors for more time, but you need to be able to justify why the story's important enough and where you're heading. It can't just be, “I think I've got something great here”, but, “I've got a great source and if I could just have a few more days to follow these lines of inquiry that they've given me, we could get a much better story”. Or just having the guts to say, “I've got this FOI that's good, but could I have another week to go out and find the people that are affected by it?”. I think it's when you think you've got something good – fighting for it.

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“If you think there's more to a story, keep digging.”

– *Emma Youle.*

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Does she have any other tips for the next generation? She does:

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I read *loads* of other journalism, not just news. I'm always trying to think, “What are the stories behind those headlines?”, or looking out for something that's missing in stories. I often find that the best ideas come from talking to friends about issues in their lives. I think I listen very

actively to other people when they're talking about things that they're struggling with, just to think, "Is there something there that's more of a structural issue that we could be looking into?" ...

I think sources, particularly on investigations, are worth their weight in gold. Developing trust with sources is key. I think you only learn when you start doing it, that one source is often the way to get to lots of others. So if you've got a whistleblower type story you need to spend some time developing trust with the original source, asking, "Do you know anybody else who would talk to me?", or, "Who at the time did you tell about something, who might corroborate what you're saying?"

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Sources and contacts are absolutely vital, agrees Nada Farhoud, and it is never too early to begin cultivating them:

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Start building up contacts really early on, people around you, where you live. I still speak to people who 20 years ago lived in my town and were really helpful. Having fingers in lots of pies and lots of contacts is your way to understand what's going on. ... Take time to cultivate contacts and do it properly and you'll learn to get some good things out of them.

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"Start building up contacts really early on, people around you, where you live."

– Nada Farhoud.

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She adds that "you need to live and breathe news a bit". That is a common refrain among experienced journalists. "A passion for news" is one of the attributes listed by James Whitworth, when I ask him what is needed – in addition to an ability to draw – to become a

topical cartoonist. His other suggested attributes? “A keen belief in freedom of speech, and the ability to cast a jaundiced eye over stories and comment on them from a different angle. Also, being grumpy helps.”

Being something of a nosy parker can also help. Brian Whittle feels that “naturally nosy” people make the best reporters: “You want somebody who’s nosy, somebody with enthusiasm, somebody who wants to do it more than anything else.” Similarly, for Martin Wainwright, “the best journalists go into situations with open and absorbing minds. The great virtue of a journalist is curiosity – a constant interest in what makes people tick.” Jemima Kiss also mentions openness:

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The one thing they will need is an open mind, an attitude that they will not be intimidated or immediately dismissive of new technologies but instead approach them with an open mind and innate journalistic curiosity. A competitive edge comes down to being adaptive and fast to explore and understand something, whether a tech platform or a breaking story. ... Data journalism, the ability to find the story in the data and show it visually, is exploding. There are huge opportunities there.

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Making the most of technology and social media does not devalue the importance of meeting people in real life, she adds: “Get out and meet as many people as possible – join the union, go to meetings, go to conferences and talks, meet as many people as possible, always. And the old work experience thing.”

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“Meet as many people as possible, always.”

– *Jemima Kiss.*

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Yes, the old work experience thing, which is not limited to hiding in the toilets, crying. Work experience remains useful because



spending time in a real newsroom is one way of finding out if journalism is really for you (and vice versa) as well as making contacts within the industry. However, the NUJ and most journalism lecturers advise students against spending more than a couple of weeks in any one workplace unless you are getting paid.

While you are on work experience, be grateful for the opportunity and try not to have an attitude if you are being ignored for a while. Keep your eyes and ears open because everybody else there is likely to know far more about the job than you do; even if they don't, it's probably best not to let them know right away. Also, remember that at certain times you might be most helpful (and make the best impression) by offering to fetch some teas or coffees; if they notice that you are not too precious to do that, then at less frantic moments people might be more likely to chat and/or listen to your own story ideas. As *Independent on Sunday* editor Lisa Markwell advises those who want to break into journalism: "Show initiative, be passionate, and be young" (Markwell, 2013). If it's too late to be all those things, two out of three ain't bad.

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"Be yourself, everyone else is already taken."

– *Nadine White.*

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## EMPLOYABILITY

Some people manage to fall into employment directly following a spell of work experience; others struggle to get an interview, never mind a job. Luck plays a huge part but you can help make your own luck by becoming a news junkie, honing your skills, putting yourself out there as much as possible and not being easily put off. Polite persistence can be a vital tool whether chasing a story or a job. Farhoud still remembers telling a careers adviser at school that she wanted to become a journalist, only to be told "maybe you should think about doing something else" because journalism was too competitive a field to get into. "Well, how do you know unless you

give it a go?," asks Farhoud, who went on to work in regional newspapers, television, magazines and is now at the *Daily Mirror*:

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There's a whole host of jobs out there. Magazines are really exciting, TV is, radio is, there is something. As long as you've got the news bug, find what's right for you. ... Go and work on a local newspaper or an agency and build your confidence, don't think you necessarily have to jump in right at the top. The grounding is the most important thing. ... [Video skills] are going to be more important as time moves on. I'm going to have to adapt and use more multimedia options for stories, and if you're coming through when you're younger and you've already got that, and it's second nature to you, then you're in good stead. ... It's going to be tough and there are more and more challenges. If you're still passionate and you want to give it a go, get as much experience as you can, work experience, paid work.

Also, make sure you read papers – quite a lot of young people, particularly in our office and they work online, and they don't read a newspaper, they're just reading stuff online. The *Daily Mail* and us have a very different print and online audience, and the things that are online are very different from the things that are in the paper, so make sure you always read both.

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Anything else? Yes: "Stick at it."

Remember too that while some people become expert in a particular field, others become experts in reliability and general competence, which are not to be sniffed at. Also, new roles seem to be invented (or re-invented) all the time, and the job you end up doing may not be the one you thought you would like the most or be the best at. It can sometimes take a while to work that out.

Susie Beever started out at a news agency, spending just over a year and a half in the cut and thrust of fast-paced frontline reporting. She says that agencies can be a great training ground, although the lifestyle might not be for everyone:

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Anyone who does 20 months at a news agency, you think, “That person’s got some staying power.” Only do that if you think you’re cut out for it and you just want a quick, intensive experience. It does look good on your CV, to show you’ve got sticking power and you’re made of some mettle. But nothing’s more important than your sanity, and if it’s going to drive you into the ground, then don’t go there. There are other places that you can get experience.

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“The good thing about young people is that they don’t know what can’t be done.”

– Lyra McKee.

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It is also easier than ever these days for people to gain experience without even needing a media employer to offer a placement or take them on. Journalism students and others interested in communicating to an audience and/or impressing a potential employer (or attempting to launch a freelance or entrepreneurial career) can write and publish their own blogs and/or produce their own podcasts or videos, building up substantial followings via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and so on. “The main thing is just to do it,” says podcaster Caroline Crampton:

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When I was coming out of university in 2008–9, there was very much a sense of, “You should get out there and start writing a blog”, and that was a way of differentiating yourself from all the other people who *said* they wanted to be a journalist but weren’t actually *doing* it. And I think for me the same applies for podcasting now. And not only just doing it but doing it in a really deliberate and thoughtful way. I think it’s very easy to start a podcast where it’s you and a couple of your friends talking about books, and you might be passionate about it and you make each other laugh and you have a really good time doing it, but there are a lot of people doing that and it’s quite hard to make it stand out.

Whereas I think, one of the reasons why my show has been so successful, for what it is, is that there are not that many people doing it. ... I wanted to do something that would be a little bit different...

If you're interested in working one day for the BBC, or a production company or something like that, and you have ideas about the kinds of things you would make once you had that sort of job, I think you should start trying to make them *now*. ... Somebody who is 19 or 20 and is going to be applying for jobs in this field, they will go into it so much more strongly if they can say, "Well, I had a go at making my own documentary, and it might not be the best but here's all the things I learned while I was doing it". Lots of young people do this really well with YouTube, but podcasting really is even more accessible. A half decent camera for YouTube is five or six hundred quid, whereas you can get a decent podcast microphone, and the headphones you would need to edit, and the software you would need to edit it on, all for £75, probably. ... At a push you can use your phone.

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As discussed in [Chapter 11](#), though, it is a good idea to think about what you are going to say before you speak into the microphone.

## **SAFEGUARDING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH**

Technological developments have made it easier for individuals to publish things directly, but that definitely has its downsides as well as its positives. Something that today's journalists have to contend with – and tomorrow's potential journalists have to think about – that was never an issue during most of journalism's existence, is the impact of negative audience engagement and online trolling. It can be very draining, says Beever. Worse, it can threaten your mental wellbeing:

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You get so many people writing throwaway comments, "Is this journalism?", "Is this a slow news day?", or whatever, and things like that over time can actually chip away at your confidence. Why wouldn't it? Can you imagine if, say for

example you owned your own bakery business and someone was leaving a comment every time you posted a picture of your cake, saying, like, “Call this a cake?”, “My three-year-old could make a better cake than that”? Of course it’s going to affect your confidence, because at times you can become quite invested in things, so you can be writing a story about something that you care about, so when people rubbish it and just leave nasty comments... You know that it’s some loser because it’s really pathetic that you spend like three seconds of your life spreading unnecessary negativity...

These are just the silly comments – sometimes it can get really nasty. Nowadays there’s a lot of misunderstanding as well about what journalists can report on. When journalists report on inquests and court cases, people don’t understand that you have every right to be reporting on them, but obviously a lot of these cases can involve very sensitive issues, or people who are very loyal to one another, and it can get very nasty. Suicide inquests are going to always just bring out so many raw emotions, people will get very defensive, and people love to hate the media. Being on the receiving end of that can be really difficult, because you are just doing your job and you’ve not gone along to that inquest because you’ve wanted to be nosy and spill someone’s secrets to the public, you’ve gone along because there could be mishandling of someone’s mental health treatment, or opportunities that were missed... The hardest thing is being on the receiving end of that, when it’s loads of people piling in...

Some advice I was given when I started, and it’s really solid advice in the world of digital journalism now, is to remember that, say for example 10,000 people have read a story and there might be, say, 100 comments on it on Facebook, that seems like a lot – but if you remember that 10,000 people have read it, that is 1% of the people who’ve read it, and the other 99% read it and carried on with their day. Even if they didn’t like it they didn’t leave a comment because they just decided to scroll on.

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“Nothing is more important than your mental health.”

– *Susie Beever.*

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One study of journalists in the UK who have faced online trolling came up with a number of practical suggestions, which include acknowledging that it is OK to admit to being upset; reporting abuse to management and speaking with colleagues about it; “swarming” on social media in positive support of a journalist who is being picked on; and remembering to switch off from social media and online comments after working hours (Kean and Maclure, 2021: 79–80). Due to the pressure of working in today’s digital environment, Beever agrees that journalists now need to learn how to switch off:

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I think sometimes it’s important to care *less*. I think it’s important to care about stories, and to care about the people you’re writing about, but once you leave the office you leave that behind you. I know there’s this conception that to be a journalist it’s a lifestyle rather than a job, but nothing is more important than your mental health, and if you don’t have that you can’t go into work. So once you leave at the end of the day – I mean unless there’s a pressing reason like an unmissable opportunity or emails that urgently need answering or something – you’ve got to put some space there.

Certainly when it comes to the social media side of things, I think if you’re going to be reading comments on your stories, don’t do it while you’re sat at home watching TV, having your tea in the evening. Put some distance there. It might be a job that is a bit more of a lifestyle than, say, working in marketing is, but that doesn’t mean you should sacrifice your wellbeing for it. ... An ability to switch off, I suppose that goes for any job but certainly a job like this that’s so people orientated and emotional, you write about a lot of difficult issues sometimes, so don’t carry it around with you at the weekend.

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On the plus side, receiving the occasional message from somebody who says a story moved them, or made a real difference in their lives, can make it all seem worthwhile.

## “KEEP YOUR SENSE OF INDEPENDENT OBSERVATION”

Journalists now have to put up with even more public disdain than did the journalists of yesterday; more publicly expressed casual disdain, anyway. But, despite its many flaws, journalism continues to play an important role in informing society about itself, and the best journalists engage in **reflective practice** while contributing to the **public sphere**. What an immeasurably poorer place the world would be without journalism. So, if you (still) want to be a journalist, and if you strive to do it in an ethical way, don't feel the need to apologise for your choice. But don't neglect your mental health in the process. Be kind to yourself, as well as to the nervous work experience people who follow in your wake.

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“Whatever you see, there's a story behind it.”

– *Paul Foot.*

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For a last word, I turned to Paul Foot – veteran reporter, investigator and columnist – and asked what advice he had for aspiring young journalists in the 21st century. This is what he said:

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I think people should join the NUJ and if there isn't a union where they work they should do their best to try and form one. That's the first thing. The other thing is, don't lose your sense of curiosity or your sense of scepticism.

Understand the way the industry works and do your best to apply yourself against that. The last thing I mean is young people rushing in and telling their editors how to run the

world, that's absolutely fatal. There's nothing worse than the arrogant young person – who knows *everything* – going and telling people what to do. Even if they're right, which often they are, that's not the way to behave. That's the way to get sacked. You've got to keep your head, you've got to bite your lip, and you've got to do what you're told a lot of the time. Nine times out of 10 it's better to go ahead and do what you are told, but there's a tenth time when it is worth resisting.

The main thing is to keep your sense of independent observation as to what's happening around you, and to try to use what ability you have to get those things into print. Whatever you see, there's a story behind it. There is a truth and there's no doubt there are facts. Facts are facts, you can't bend them.

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And that seems to be as good a note as any on which to conclude a book on the principles and practice of journalism today. As for what it will be like tomorrow and the day after: over to you.

## Summary

The future of journalism is both uncertain and unwritten, but the social role of journalism in informing citizens, and contributing towards the health of the public sphere, means that journalists have an ethical responsibility to engage in a process of critical reflection. Despite the structural forces and constraints that bear down on journalists, individuals and groups of journalists retain elements of choice in their work. Recruits to journalism are advised to learn everything they can from more experienced journalists without ever losing their own sense of curiosity and independent observation. They are also advised to look after their mental health, including learning how to switch off.

## Questions



*Who* is journalism for?

*What* is journalism for?

*Where* is journalism heading?

*When* is journalism at its best?

*Why* are journalists not trusted?

*How* can you become an ethical journalist?

## What would you do?

You have learned a range of multimedia journalism skills and you know how to find, investigate and tell an accurate and interesting story. However, none of the media employers you approach are taking on new staff at the moment. What are you going to do?

## Further reading

You could usefully start by going back through this book and looking up the references and suggestions for further reading contained in each chapter. Then read David Randall's (2005) *The Great Reporters*, an enjoyable and inspiring introduction to the work of some, er, great reporters, including Nellie Bly and James Cameron. Further useful historical context can be found in *Journalists* by Tim Gopsill and Greg Neal (2007), which charts the first century of the NUJ and its members. Some different ways of doing journalism are explored in Susan Forde's (2011) *Challenging the News* as well as *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Harcup, 2013), and Barbie Zelizer's (2017) *What Journalism Could Be* discusses the future of journalism. *Journalism in Context* by Angela Phillips (2015) similarly combines journalistic insight with academic analysis to explore the role of journalism in the digital age. For detailed accounts of journalism on different continents, including perspectives from beyond the global north, see the edited collections by Weaver and Willnat

(2012), *The Global Journalist in the 21st Century*, and Hanitzsch et al (2019), whose *Worlds of Journalism* has an accompanying website featuring research data, interviews and reports on individual countries: <https://worldsofjournalism.org/>. Thematic essays by a wide range of international scholars are brought together in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2020). New academic research is published regularly in journals such as *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, and *Digital Journalism*, while reflective articles by journalists can be found in *British Journalism Review*. The Association for Journalism Education's (AJE) open-access journal *Journalism Education* is also worth a read. Finally, if you are serious about journalism, don't forget to check relevant websites, apps and podcasts; follow a range of journalists on Twitter; read a range of papers and magazines; and watch/listen to news and current affairs – every day.

## Top three to try next

Barbie Zelizer (2017) *What Journalism Could Be*

David Randall (2005) *The Great Reporters*

Tony Harcup (2013) *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices*

## Sources for soundbites

Murrow, 1958; McKee, from Mitchell, 2013; the others are all from interviews with the author.

## Journalism

Thanks largely to the market forces within which it operates, journalism is little more than “a magic mirror” held up to society that, far from reflecting real life, actually has “the effect of keeping the popular classes, in particular, in a state of ecstasy and to deny them knowledge about the world and knowledge about their position in the world”. So writes sociologist Jean Chalaby (1998: 5) in *The Invention of Journalism*. He argues that journalists have little interest in informing or educating people about the society in which we live, and instead “bypass the social dimension of individuals, address their fantasies and reconstruct a world of illusions around their readers’ dreams” (Chalaby, 1998: 193). Few honest observers would deny that there is an element of the above going on in journalism, and not only at the more fanciful end of the market exemplified by splashes such as FREDDIE STARR ATE MY HAMSTER, once brought to you by the *Sun*, or 45 MINUTES FROM ATTACK, courtesy of the *Evening Standard*. But is that really the full story?

We have heard from many journalists in this book and we have seen something of the good and bad of journalism – some of its principles, practices and ethics – at work in the real world. Two things that should have become apparent by now are that journalists are not all the same and that the future of journalism is unwritten. Everything has changed and yet, perhaps, little fundamental has changed. Alan Knight, an Australian journalist-turned-academic, argues that whatever new technologies and platforms may arrive with the promise that *anyone* can be a publisher, real journalists will continue to distinguish themselves by dint of their commitment to professional practices and codes of ethics, which should remain the core of journalism education (Knight, 2008: 123).

The extent to which individual journalists retain sufficient agency to *make a difference* remains an area of disagreement within journalism studies. Some theorists and academic commentators have been criticised for a tendency to downplay the scope for agency in the production of journalism. So, for example, the *political economy* model emphasises the determining role played by economic power and material factors in creating media products. In the view of Peter Golding and Philip Elliott: “News changes very little when the individuals that produce it are changed” (quoted in

Curran and Seaton, 1997: 277). For Chalaby, not only does the news not change much when individual journalists change, but much journalism within commercial media is actually doing the opposite of producing an informed and enlightened citizenry because it limits audiences' intellectual horizons and panders to their prejudices (Chalaby, 1998: 190–191). That's quite a claim – that, far from enlightening citizens with information about society, journalists *deny* people the knowledge needed to understand the world. It represents a strand of academic thought that seems to dismiss the possibility that many journalists *do* indeed seek to inform, to educate and even to stretch intellectual horizons, not just of their audiences but sometimes even of themselves.

Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall argues that journalists have “relative autonomy from ruling class power in the narrow sense”, within certain ideological limits (Hall, 1977: 345–346). But his emphasis is on the *relative* rather than the autonomy. He argues that, whatever their personal thoughts and wishes, journalists still tend to reproduce society's prevailing ideology within their work. This is not because of “conscious intentions and biases”, but as “a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes”, including sourcing strategies that in effect privilege the most powerful (Hall, 1982: 88). Yet individual journalists *do* retain some power to resist the demands of the market and to insist on acting in an ethical manner (Harcup, 2007).

John O'Neill argues that the relationship between the “virtues and vices” of journalism can be more fluid than is portrayed in the simplistic depiction of the journalist as either hero or villain, with journalists sometimes compromising standards and at other time defending them: “Journalists, like other workers, are not totally passive in their attitude to their own faculties” (O'Neill, 1992: 28). For example, although journalists may be bombarded with analytics about page views, they do not have to let that dominate their thinking, as Susie Beever says: “Your worth and your ability are not defined by how many people have clicked on your story.” The agency of individuals may be limited by economic and social structures, then, but it exists; just as ethical journalists exist.

Journalists work in a field that is – or claims to be – constituted by a professional commitment to ethics and truth telling, yet at the same time journalists may be expendable employees expected to produce stories to sell in the marketplace (O’Neill, 1992: 27–28; Harcup, 2002b: 103). Discussion of the agency of journalists – of the room they have to make a difference and/or to act in an ethical manner even when working within a commercial and/or bureaucratic operation – needs to take account of tensions between journalists’ different identities. Those different identities include being skilled craftspeople, socially responsible citizens, factors of production at the whim of management, individual members of staff with personal standards, and workers with at least the potential to share a sense of collective identity and even occasionally to speak or act collectively (Harcup, 2002b: 101–114, and 2007). If *journalism* matters to society, then surely the actions of *journalists* must matter too.

## Technological determinism

There is a school of thought within sections of the journalism industry, sometimes reflected within journalism training and journalism studies, that technology can solve every problem. Who and what developed new technologies in the first place, though? Human agency. That is, *people*, operating within the “social relations and systems of power” that we all have to live with (Zelizer, 2017: 141). As Angela Phillips (2015: 103) notes: “Technologies change but the human agency of gathering, analysing and disseminating information continues to be maintained across all platforms.” The uses to which any technology will be put are not determined by the technology itself but by people – and such uses will be contested, sometimes even resisted. Try to keep that in mind whenever you are told that the future of journalism is all about robots, artificial intelligence and automated news writing.

## Constraints

In [Chapter 2](#) we came across David Randall's suggested journalistic disclaimer. Having heard a bit more about the principles, practices and ethics of journalism, perhaps we might now rewrite it along the following lines:

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This product has been produced by underpaid, precariously employed and overworked journalists who were recruited from a relatively small section of the population before being socialised into the routines and news values of journalism. Much of the material originated from press officers and public relations professionals, mostly working on behalf of well-resourced organisations, or was lifted from social media. Many news items were selected to meet the perceived interests of audiences thought to be most desirable to advertisers and/or or to promote the brand by being shared or discussed on social media. Stories were produced against the clock and things may have changed since then which may or may not be reflected in updated copy. Stories have been made to fit largely arbitrary word or time limits determined by decisions on format, design and production. In the processes of research, writing and editing, stories may have been simplified and made more dramatic, with certain elements inserted or emphasised largely to generate clicks, improve search engine results and encourage social media engagement and shareability. The sources consulted may not have known the full story and/or may have had their own interests to promote, and some of the journalists may have been concerned not to jeopardise relations with some sources. The journalists involved may have their own opinions, and these opinions may or may not have influenced the finished product. The journalists may also have been influenced in story selection and construction by the attitudes of their proprietors, editors, colleagues and by views expressed on social media. They will have been mindful of legal constraints, regulatory rules and maybe even codes of ethical conduct, knowing how far things can be pushed and who is most likely to complain or take legal action.

They will also have been aware of what will most impress current and prospective employers. By the time you read this, the journalists may have lost interest in many of these stories and will probably have moved on to fresh ones, just as some members of the audience will be posting online comments along the lines of: “Is this a slow news day?”

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The disclaimer has become a bit long now, so we could sub it down to:

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Don't believe everything you read.

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It could go next to the corrections column.

## Reflective practice

If journalists are not to absolve themselves of all social responsibilities then they must become reflective practitioners, argues Lynette Sheridan Burns. Journalists should reflect critically on what they do, because “a journalist who is conscious of and understands the active decisions that make up daily practice is best prepared to negotiate the challenges involved” (Sheridan Burns, 2002: 11). That does not mean taking time off and sitting back in leisurely contemplation; rather, it means “an active commitment in journalists to scrutinise their own actions, exposing the processes and underlying values in their work *while* they are doing it” (Sheridan Burns, 2002: 41–44, emphasis in original). Such a concept rests upon a belief that journalists have both the individual capacity to reflect upon their own practice and sufficient room to manoeuvre to effect some change in their practice. “Conscience and a personal value system can influence conduct and transcend the limitations of the system and external pressures,” as Denis McQuail (2013: 219) puts it.

For Sarah Niblock, a reflective journalist is “one who can make confident editorial judgements that are informed by a strong awareness of their role in society. Consequently, they can anticipate and effectively negotiate a dynamic and evolving context for journalism production and reception” (Niblock, 2007: 26). In this context Pat Aufderheide argues that there is a need to cultivate “a more self-aware journalistic culture” in which journalists have the time, space and imagination “to bring other voices into their coverage” and “to introduce disturbing and conflicting perspectives” (Aufderheide, 2002: 12–14). Reflective practice therefore involves working both sides of the street: reporting conflicting voices and perspectives, offering differing readings, challenging the common sense of audiences and journalists alike, and thinking twice before using words such as “we” and “us”.

## Public sphere

As introduced in [Chapter 1](#), the concept of a space in which informed citizens can engage in critical discussion and reflection – a public sphere – is an ideal against which journalism has come to be measured and is often found to be wanting: “Analysts and critics may dispute the extent to which Britain *has* a properly functioning ‘public sphere’ ... but all agree that such a space *should* exist, and that the media are at its core” (McNair, 2000: 1, first emphasis in original, second is mine). The concept of the public sphere is associated with the writings of Jürgen Habermas, who – from a 20th-century vantage point – looked back on late 17th- and early 18th-century Britain and identified “the advent of a public sphere of reasoned discourses circulating in the political realm independently of both the Crown and Parliament” (Allan, 1997: 298). Although this public sphere was a conceptual space, it also had physical manifestations, for example in the coffee houses of London where such “reasoned discourse” could take place, albeit among a limited section of the (male) population. Habermas also points to the existence of multiple or competing public spheres, including a “plebeian public sphere” with its own radical forms of alternative media (Habermas, 1989: xviii, 425, 430, and 1992:



425–427; see also Downing et al, 2001: 27–33; and Harcup, 2013).

Yet the idea of journalism serving informed citizens is undermined by a tendency to put a commercial value on everything, to regard media output as just another commodity and to treat audiences as mere consumers, argues Granville Williams: “Counterpoised to this is a view of the media as a liberating force for human enlightenment and progress, informing, entertaining, nurturing creative talent and being financially and editorially independent from powerful vested commercial or political interests” (Williams, 1996: 3, see also Williams, 2014a). His words echo those of US broadcast journalist Ed Murrow, who famously told the 1958 convention of the Radio-Television News Directors Association in Chicago:

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Our history will be what we make it. And if there are any historians about 50 or 100 years from now, and there should be preserved the kinescopes for one week of all three networks, they will find there recorded in black and white, or colour, evidence of decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live. ... In this kind of complex and confusing world, you can't tell very much about the why of the news in broadcasts where only three minutes is available for news. ... I am frightened by the imbalance, the constant striving to reach the largest possible audience for everything, by the absence of a sustained study of the state of the nation. Heywood Broun once said, “No body politic is healthy until it begins to itch”. I would like television to produce some itching pills rather than this endless outpouring of tranquillisers. It can be done. Maybe it won't be, but it could. ... This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference. (Murrow, 1958)

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Whatever the media, platform or technology, that battle continues. And our journalism, like our history, will be what we make it.

# STYLE GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS

The following house style is the kind of thing that applies in many UK newsrooms. Other rules are available. See [Chapter 12](#) for links to a range of other style guides plus discussion of the language of journalism and recommendations for further reading.

## A

**a or an before h?** If the h is silent, as in hour, use an; otherwise use a, as in a hero.

**abbreviations** Shortened versions of words such as doctor (Dr) or Labour (Lab) do not need full stops, nor do initials such as GP, BBC or MP (which should be upper case with no spaces). Explain all but the most famous abbreviations either by spelling out: National Union of Students (NUS); or by description: the transport union RMT. If the initials are commonly spoken as a word (such as Nato) they form an *acronym*. Abbreviations such as *can't* or *that's* are increasingly common in today's media but some still frown on them unless they are in direct quotes.

**accommodation** Double c and double m. If in doubt, think double room.

**acronyms** A word formed by using the initial letters of other words, as in Nato (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). Explain all but the most famous like this: train drivers' union Aslef; or Acas, the arbitration service.

**Act** Upper case in the full name of an act, as in the Official Secrets Act.

**addresses** Most addresses in news articles such as court cases just give the street, not the number. But if giving the full address for contact details, write it as follows: South Yorkshire Police, 999 Letsby Avenue, Sheffield S9 1XX.

**adrenalin** Prefer to adrenaline.

**advice, advise** Advice (noun) is what you ask for or give. Advise (verb) is the act of giving it.

**adviser** Prefer to advisor.

**affect** Not to be confused with *effect*. To affect is to change. Such a change may have effects.

**ageing** Not aging.

**ages** Marcus Rashford, 24; or 24-year-old Marcus Rashford; or Rashford is 24 years old.

**Aids** Prefer to AIDS.

**A-levels** Hyphen and lower case l.

**all right** Prefer two words unless you are quoting a title such as *The Kids Are Alright*.

**Alzheimer's disease** Upper case A, lower case d, and note the apostrophe.

**among** Prefer to amongst.

**ampersand (&)** Use in company names when the company does: Marks & Spencer. Otherwise avoid.

**and** You may begin sentences with the word *and*. But not every sentence, please.

**apostrophes** Use an apostrophe to show that something has been left out of a word (eg *don't*, short for *do not*) and to mark the possessive (eg *John's foot*). Plural nouns such as children and people take a singular apostrophe (eg *children's games*, *people's princess*).

**armed forces** Lower case.

**Army** Upper case A if referring to *the* (ie British) Army. Army ranks can be abbreviated as follows: Lieutenant General (Lt Gen); Major

General (Maj Gen); Brigadier (Brig); Colonel (Col); Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col); Major (Maj); Captain (Capt); Lieutenant (Lt); 2nd Lieutenant (2nd Lt); Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM); Warrant Officer (WO); Company Sergeant Major (CSM); Sergeant (Sgt); Corporal (Cpl); Lance Corporal (L Cpl); Private (Pte). Do not abbreviate Field Marshall or General.

**asylum seeker** Two words, no hyphen. And try to remember that there is no such thing as an “illegal asylum seeker”, whatever the internet warriors or that bloke down the pub would have you believe.

## B

**backbenches** One word, as in backbencher.

**bail, bale** Somebody might be on police *bail*, and a cricket player will be familiar with *bails*. But a boat could be *baled* out, and a pilot could *bale out* of an aeroplane.

**Bame** An abbreviation applied to black, Asian and minority ethnic people and communities that, depending on the context, might need to be spelled out in full in the first mention in a story. However, it is increasingly common in mainstream publications without being spelled out even on first use. Do not use if what you mean is black people or people of colour, because some BAME people are white. If the story concerns a more specific section of the population, such as black people, or Chinese people, then it would usually be more useful to say so, unless a wider point is being made. Although the term is often pronounced as the word *bame*, BAME is preferred in text.

**Bank of England** Upper case B and E. Subsequently prefer the Bank, not BoE.

**bank holiday** Lower case.

**banknote** One word.

**barbecue** Not Bar-B-Q, BBQ or barbie, please.

**Barclays Bank** Upper case Bs, no apostrophe.

**bare, bear** Often confused. *Bare* means unclothed, unadorned, just sufficient, and to reveal; *bear* means to carry, to produce or give birth, and a furry animal.

**Barnard Castle** Not Barnard's Castle.

**begs the question** Probably best avoided because even the experts seem to disagree about what it means.

**biannual** Means twice a year. Often confused with *biennial* (every two years) so probably best avoided.

**Bible** Upper case. But biblical is lower case.

**bikini body** Really? No.

**billion** One thousand millions. Write the word in full (£1.4 billion) except in headlines (£1.4bn).

**birthplace** One word.

**boffins** This word lives on as journalese for scientists and other researchers, but it really shouldn't, should it? However, if scientists use the b-word about one another as a term of endearment, that's probably allowed.

**Boxing day** Upper case B, lower case d.

**breach** Means to break through or to break a promise or rule. Not to be confused with *breech*, which is either part of a gun or something to do with short trousers.

**breastfeeding** One word.

**brownfield** One word.

**brussels sprouts** Lower case, no apostrophe.

**BSE** Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, but not normally any need to spell out. You may refer to it additionally as "mad cow disease".

**Budget** Upper case B if this is *the* Budget set by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, otherwise lower case.

**but** You may begin sentences with the word *but*. But not too many.

**byelection** Prefer one word.

**bylaw** Prefer one word.

**bypass** Prefer one word.

## C

**cabinet, shadow cabinet** Lower case

**caesarean section** Lower case.

**canvas, canvass** Tents are made of *canvas*, whereas politicians may *canvass* for support.

**capitals** UK media now use upper case letters far more sparingly than they did even just a few years ago. Clarity and consistency can sometimes be at odds with each other, in which case clarity should be allowed to win.

**cappuccino** Lower case with a double p and double c. If in doubt, think double shot.

**Caribbean** One r and two bs.

**cashmere** A fabric, not to be confused with *Kashmir* in the Indian subcontinent.

**cemetery** Not cemetery or cemetary.

**cancel** Means to suppress and should not be confused with *censure*, meaning to criticise harshly.

**centre** Not center. Remember, *this* style guide is for a UK publication.

**century** Lower case, with numbers, as in 9th century or 21st century.

**chairman, chairwoman** Prefer chairman if it's a man, chairwoman if it's a woman, and chair if it is simply a position (eg The committee's first job will be to elect a chair). Lower case.

**Chancellor of the Exchequer** Upper case C and E. Subsequent mentions: the Chancellor.

**Channel tunnel** Upper case C, lower case t.

**cheddar, cheshire cheese** Lower case.

**Chief Constable** Upper case Cs for a particular Chief Constable, lower case for a meeting of chief constables.

**Christian** Upper case C, though unchristian is lower case.

**Christmas day** Upper case C, lower case d.

**churches** Full name, upper case, eg Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church; then Sacred Heart, or just the church if it is the only one mentioned in the story.

**Citizens Advice** Upper case, no apostrophe. They no longer add bureau at the end, although their collective body is still the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.

**city centre** Two words, no hyphen.

**CJD** Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, but not normally any need to spell out. You may refer to it additionally as "the human form of BSE".

**clichés** Clichés are hard to avoid completely, they change over time and they sometimes convey just the right meaning in a minimum of words. Keeble (2001a: 117) advises reporters to avoid saying that so-and-so is "fighting for her life" when a hospital reports her condition as "critical", on the grounds that it is a cliché. Maybe it is, but isn't critical also a cliché? At least fighting for her life gets a bit closer to the drama of such situations. As a rule of thumb (cliché alert!), whenever you are tempted to use a cliché in your copy, stop and ask yourself if it really is the best way of expressing precisely



what you want to say. Some particularly tired words and phrases are listed in the box on pages 256–257, but you’ve probably got your own pet hates (is that also a cliché?), so feel free to add your own.

## Cliché alerts

A cliché alert should go off in your head if you are thinking of using any of the following:

a big ask

a bridge too far

absolute scenes

acid test

after the Lord Mayor’s show

any time soon

a question mark hangs over

as so-and-so looks on (in picture captions)

at the end of the day

avoid like the plague

baby-faced assassin

back to square one

baptism of fire

battle of wills

between a rock and a hard place

bitter end

blaze of glory

bombshell

brutal murder

bubbly character

budding (in stories about young people)

bull in a china shop

burning issue

chickens coming home to roost

chiefs (or top chiefs)

closure (as prerequisite for moving on)

clutch defeat (or victory) from the jaws of victory (or defeat)

cold comfort

crack troops

cut her/his teeth

cyberspace

descended on (if you just mean people turned up)

does what it says on the tin

double down on

down to the wire

drop-dead gorgeous

drugs paraphernalia

early doors

eggcellent, eggxciting and so on (in stories about Easter)

elephant in the room

End of. (If followed by a full stop)

enigmatic

enormity

eye-popping

eye-watering

Fact. (If used as a one word sentence)

fairytale ending

fairytale romance

fears are growing

first the good news...

fit for purpose

flash in the pan

flaunts her assets (or curves)

flushed with success (in stories about toilets)

frail pensioners

gammon

genuine six-pointer

go figure

gobsmacked

goes without saying

going forward

hardworking families

high-level summit

high-speed chase

his/her indecision was final

hit the ground running

hopes were dashed

horns of a dilemma

humiliating U-turn

I have to say

iconic

interesting to note

in the coming days and weeks (or weeks and months)

ironically

is in our DNA

is the new black

is the new rock'n'roll

is the next Fleabag

it has to be said

it remains to be seen

jaw-dropping

kept himself to himself

kick-start

last but not least

leave no stone unturned

legend

level playing field

LOL

major hurdle

mass exodus

mega

meteoric rise

morning after the night before

move on (following closure)

must-win

named and shamed

national treasure

nothing will ever be the same again

OMG

only time will tell

personal demons

pillar of the community

plucky

probe

purrfect (in stories about cats)

pushing the envelope

quiet confidence

raced to the scene

raft of measures

ramp up

reach out (unless you are a member of the Four Tops)

red wall (unless the story is about a wall; and it's red)

revellers

rich tapestry

rich vein of form

ring of steel

ripe old age of

roaring 20s

rolled back the years

romped

sea change

Simple as. (If followed by a full stop)

slams shut (in stories about the football transfer window)

snowflakes (if you mean people rather than snow)

speculation was rife

sprightly

stakeholders

step change

step up to the plate

storm in a D-cup (in stories about bras or breasts)

strut their stuff

sweet smell of success

SW19 (in tennis stories)

take the bull by the horns

taken its toll

the devil is in the detail

the jury is still out

the last taboo

the new normal

the silent killer

the small matter of

the woke brigade

thinking outside the box

to be fair

to die for

too close to call

too soon to tell

took to Twitter

top-level summit

torrid time

tragic mum (or tot, or whoever)

tsunami (except when it actually is one)

tucking into festive fare (in photo captions during December)

unfriend

untimely death

unveils

up in arms

uptick

veritable feast

wake-up call

war of words

wardrobe malfunction

who knew?

**You can add any others you have spotted below:**

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\_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_

**climate emergency** Use in preference to climate change for first mention, at least, as it better conveys the seriousness of the situation we are in. Climate crisis can also be used.

**company names** Use spellings, upper or lower case letters, and apostrophes as the companies do themselves, even if they are ungrammatical or annoying.

**conman, conwoman** Both one word.

**connection** Not connexion.

**Conservative party** Upper case C, lower case p. *Conservatives* and *Tories* are also acceptable. The Conservative party is singular; Conservatives are plural.

**Continent** Upper case C only if you are referring to *the* Continent, ie mainland Europe.

**convince** You convince someone *of* the fact; you do not convince someone to do something, you *persuade* them.

**co-operate, co-operative, Co-op** With a hyphen because that's how it's pronounced. Lower case unless it's *the* Co-op.

**coronavirus** Lower case c. Not the China or Chinese virus.

**Coroner's Court** Bradford Coroner's Court, with upper case and apostrophe. But lower case if general, eg "The hearing will take place in a coroner's court".

**council leader** Lower case.

**councillors** Lower case for councillors in general, but upper case for titles of individual councillors. Some newsrooms prefer Coun, others prefer Cllr. Let's go for Coun.

**councils** Upper case on first use – Sheffield City Council – then just the council if it is the only one referred to in the story. The council *is* rather than the council *are*. Cabinets, committees, panels and boards can all be in lower case.

**couple** Plural, so prefer the couple *are* planning a holiday, not *is*.

**Covid-19** Upper case C and a hyphen. Not the China virus, nor Chinese virus.

**Crown Prosecution Service** Upper case first letters. May subsequently be abbreviated to CPS.

**curate's egg** Does not mean a bit good and a bit bad, because an egg that is good in parts is still rotten. But why are you even thinking of using this phrase at all?

## D

**dashes** Two dashes may be used – as in this example – to mark a parenthesis. One dash may also be used to introduce an explanation, add emphasis, or mark a surprise. But avoid littering your copy with too many dashes.

**dates** Prefer February 29, or February 29 2024. Not February 29th; nor 29 February; nor February 29, 2024.

**day-to-day** Hyphenated.

**D-day** Just the one upper case D, plus a hyphen.

**decades** 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, 2020s with no apostrophe. Swinging 60s is acceptable only if used ironically (and sparingly). Some prefer noughties for the 2000s; others ban it. Think long and hard before resorting to using the *roaring 20s* to describe the 2020s.

**decimate** Means to kill or remove a tenth of the population – not to defeat utterly or to have a big win over your opponents. However, even some pedants have now admitted utter defeat on this one.

**defuse** Means to render harmless or to reduce tension. Often confused with *diffuse*, meaning spread about.

**disabled people** Not *the disabled* or *the handicapped*, please.

**discreet** Means circumspect and should not be confused with *discrete*, meaning separate.

**disinterested** Means impartial, but is often confused with *uninterested*, meaning bored or not interested. Even a disinterested journalist ought to be very interested.

**Doctor** Abbreviate to Dr without a full stop.

**dominatrix** The plural is dominatrices, as any journalist who covered the case of Max Mosley v News Group Newspapers Ltd would be able to confirm.

**dots** Use three dots (ellipsis) to indicate that something has been omitted when quoting a document; also if you want to indicate that more could be said on the subject, eg “But that’s another story...”.

**double-decker bus** Not double-deck.

**drink driving** Not drunk driving. Court reports should include the actual measurements and a comparison with relevant legal limits, which in most of the UK are: 80 milligrams of alcohol in 100 millilitres of blood (but the limit is just 50 milligrams in Scotland); 35 micrograms of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath (22 in Scotland); or 107 milligrams of alcohol in 100 millilitres of urine (67 in Scotland).

**drug driving** Check the latest legal limits here:  
[www.gov.uk/government/collections/drug-driving#table-of-drugs-and-limits](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/drug-driving#table-of-drugs-and-limits)

**E**

**earring** No hyphen.

**Earth** This planet's name takes an upper case E.

**east** Lower case e if it is a description (east Leeds) or a direction (head east), but upper case E if it is the name of a region or a county (the North-East).

**E.coli** Upper case E, lower case c, with a full stop and no space.

**e-commerce** Hyphenated, lower case. But doesn't most commerce involve e-commerce now?

**ecstasy** Lower case. Write Es only if you are quoting somebody.

**Edinburgh** Not borough. See also *Middlesbrough* and *Scarborough*.

**eg** Means for example. Lower case, no full stops.

**email** No hyphen.

**enclose** Not inclose.

**epicentre** This really means the point on Earth directly *above* an earthquake or underground explosion, but is frequently misused as if it means the centre of something. If you mean the centre, what's wrong with just saying the centre?

**euro** Lower case for the currency. For the plural, prefer euros.

**exclamation marks** Known in the trade as "screamers", these are found by the dozen in the work of amateur journalists and editors of parish newsletters. They should generally be avoided except in titles, when quoting somebody shouting at the top of their voice, or when someone genuinely exclaims ("Ouch!"). They should certainly not be used to signal that something is supposed to be funny!

**exhaustive** Means comprehensive, but is often confused with *exhausted*, meaning tired.

**-exit** As in Grexit, Brexit, Megxit and even Legsit; can we please now give it a rest?

**expense** Not expence.

**eyewitness** One word, but what's wrong with witness?

## F

**fairytale** One word, but make sure you are not using it in a clichéd way.

**fast food** Two words, no hyphen.

**fewer** Means smaller in number so you can count 'em, eg fewer hours of sunshine, fewer people. Should not be (but often is) confused with *less*, which means to a smaller degree, eg less sunshine, less money.

**firefighter** Prefer to fireman.

**first, second** Not firstly, secondly.

**first aid** Lower case.

**flaunt** Means to show off or display something, but is often confused with *flout*, meaning to disobey contemptuously.

**focused** Prefer to focussed.

**foot and mouth disease** Lower case, no hyphens.

**fulsome** Means excessive or insincere, so *fulsome praise* means excessive praise rather than generous praise. Often misused and/or misunderstood, so ask yourself if it really is the best word to convey your precise meaning.

## G

**GCSE, GCSEs** Upper case, no full stops, and the plural takes a lower case s.

**general election** Lower case.

**gentlemen's agreement** Not gentleman's agreement. But *verbal agreement* might be less sexist, unless you are referring specifically to men in top hats.

**getaway** One word (as in getaway car).

**God** Upper case if you are using it as a name, lower case for gods in general.

**government** Lower case.

**government departments** Prefer upper case for formal names, like this: Department for Work and Pensions; Ministry of Justice. Use lower case for descriptions, as in environment department or justice ministry.

**graffiti** Two ffs, one t.

**green belt** Two words, lower case, no hyphen.

**green paper** Lower case.

**greenfield** Prefer one word.

**Greens** Upper case for the Green party, lower case for the wider green movement and for the food that you should eat up.

**gunman** One word.

**Gypsy** Upper case. Prefer to Gipsy.

## H

**half** Prefer half-a-dozen, half-past, half-price, halfway, two-and-a-half.

**hardcore** One word.

**headteacher** Prefer one word.

**heaven/hell** Both lower case.

**height** We may be well into the 21st century but most UK newsrooms still tend to give people's heights in feet and inches (6ft 1in). Other heights (eg buildings) are more likely to be given in metres (12.25m) or centimetres (25cm).

**hello** Not hallo or hullo.

**heyday** Not hayday or heydey.

**hiccup** Prefer to hiccough.

**high street** Lower case if referring to general shopping but upper case if it is the name of an actual street.

**hijack** One word.

**his, hers** No apostrophe.

**hi-tech** Hyphenated. A bit of a cliché by now.

**hitman** One word.

**housewife** Unless you are reporting on somebody who has married a house, or a retrospective on the 1950s, find a better description.

**humour** Not humor.

**hyphens** Many words begin life as two words, become hyphenated, and end up as one word – but rushing in too soon can create confusion. Check individual entries and in other cases be guided by current media practice, by pronunciation, and by the need for clarity.

## I

**ie** Means that is to say. Lower case, no full stops.

**in order to** An over-used phrase that can often be removed from copy without affecting meaning.

**income support, income tax** Lower case.

**infinitives** Avoid split infinitives when they may confuse, when they may sound inelegant, or when working for a boss who will fire you on the spot for using one. But as Raymond Chandler boldly told one of his editors: “When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split” (Chandler, 1984: 77).

**inner-city** Hyphenated.

**inquests** A coroner *records* a verdict. A coroner’s jury *returns* a verdict.

**inquiry, inquiries** Prefer to enquiry, enquiries.

**internet** Lower case.

**ise** Prefer to ize, eg organise.

**its, it’s** There is no apostrophe in the phrase *its death*, meaning the dog’s death, just as there is no apostrophe in the phrase *her death*. The apostrophe is introduced when *it’s* is short for *it is*. It’s that simple.

## J

**jack russell** Lower case for the dog (but upper case for the former wicketkeeper).

**jail** Prefer to gaol.

**jibe** Prefer to gibe.

**jobcentre, jobseeker’s allowance** Lower case.

**judgement** Prefer to judgment.

**judges** Full name and title for the first mention, eg *Judge Roger Scott*; then *Judge Scott* or *the judge*. High Court judges are known as Justice, as in *Mr Justice Henriques*; then *the judge* or the full version – not Judge Henriques. Recorders (part-time judges) are



known as *the recorder Mrs Mary Smith*. Full-time magistrates who used to be known as stipendiary magistrates are now district judges (magistrates courts). Find out more about judicial roles here: [www.judiciary.uk/about-the-judiciary/who-are-the-judiciary/judicial-roles/judges/](http://www.judiciary.uk/about-the-judiciary/who-are-the-judiciary/judicial-roles/judges/)

**Junior** Abbreviate to Jr without a full stop.

## K

**kick-off** Hyphenated.

**kilogram, kilometre, kilowatt** Abbreviate as kg, km, kw.

**knockout** Prefer one word.

**Koran** Upper case, prefer to Quran.

## L

**Labour party** Upper case L, lower case p. Subsequent mentions: Labour. Both are singular.

**labour** Not labor.

**lamp-post** Hyphenated.

**landmine** One word.

**lay, lie** He was *laying* the table while she was *lying* on the bed.

**layby** One word.

**lead, led** Leeds Rhinos *lead* the table now, but Huddersfield Giants *led* at the start of the season.

**less** Means to a smaller degree, eg less sunshine, less money. Should not be confused with *fewer*, which means smaller in number, eg fewer hours of sunshine, fewer people.

**LGBT** An abbreviation applied to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, communities and issues that, depending on the context, might need to be spelled out in full in the first mention in a story. However, its use is increasingly common in mainstream publications without being spelled out even on first use. Q is sometimes added at the end, for queer, but not all gay people are comfortable with reclaiming that term. As further letters and symbols get added, see *The ABCs of LGBTQIA+* here: [www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/style/lgbtq-gender-language.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/21/style/lgbtq-gender-language.html)

**liaison** Not liason.

**Liberal Democrats** Upper case L and D. She is a Liberal Democrat (singular). She is a member of the Liberal Democrats (plural). May also be abbreviated to Lib Dems.

**licence** You need to buy a TV licence (noun). You will then be *licensed* (verb) to own a TV.

**linchpin** Prefer to lynchpin.

**lists** Introduce a list with a colon: separate elements with semicolons; end with a full stop.

**literally** I'll literally explode if I see another example of this word being used inappropriately. No I won't, but please restrict use of "literally" to convey a literal (exact, basic) meaning.

**Lloyds Bank** No apostrophe.

**loathe** A verb meaning to hate, not to be confused with loth, meaning reluctant.

**Lord's** Note the apostrophe in the name of the cricket ground (but not in the House of Lords).

**lottery** Lower case.

## M

**mankind** Use only if you intend to exclude females, otherwise use humankind, humanity, or people.

**Marks & Spencer** Subsequently M&S.

**Mayor** Upper case when referring to a particular person (eg “Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham”), but lower case when referring to the job of mayor in general.

**McDonald’s** Upper case M and D, plus an apostrophe.

**measurements** For long distances, use miles; for people’s heights, use feet and inches; for people’s weights, use stones and pounds; for drinks, use pints; otherwise, use metric measurements.

**media** Plural (the media *are*), not singular.

**medieval** Prefer to mediaeval.

**memento** Not momento.

**mentally handicapped** Do not use. Prefer person “with learning difficulties”.

**mentally ill** Refer to “mentally ill people” or someone “with mental illness” rather than to “*the* mentally ill”.

**mic** Abbreviation for microphone. Prefer to mike.

**midday** One word, no hyphen.

**Middlesbrough** Not borough. *See also Edinburgh and Scarborough.*

**midweek** One word.

**mileage** Not milage.

**million** One thousand thousands. Write in full (£1.4 million) except in headlines (£1.4m).

**miniskirt** One word. Or short skirt, two words.

**minuscule** Not miniscule.

**Miss, Mr, Mrs, Ms** Courtesy titles are now usually used only for subsequent mentions in news reports, so John Smith becomes Mr Smith after the first time. The exception is court reporting, for which many organisations refer to defendants by their surname alone (Smith) while others reserve that discourtesy only for those who have been found (or have pleaded) guilty. Some publications have now abandoned courtesy titles altogether.

**misuse** One word, no hyphen.

**Morrison's** Not Morrison's.

**Mosques** Full name, upper case, eg Drummond Road Mosque. Then: the mosque.

**mph** Lower case, no full stops, as in 20mph.

**MPs** No apostrophe.

**Muslim** Prefer to Moslem.

## N

**names** Always check the spelling and use both first and family name on first mention. Do not use initials except in those rare circumstances where somebody famous is known by their initials (eg OJ Simpson), in which case there are no full stops.

**national lottery** Lower case.

**nationwide** One word.

**Nazism** Prefer to Naziism.

**nearby** One word.

**nightclub** One word. But does anybody still call them that?

**no one** Two words, no hyphen.

**north** Lower case n if it is a description (north Leeds) or a direction (head north), but upper case N if it is the name of a county or a region (North Yorkshire, the North-East).

**north–south divide** Lower case, connected by a dash (en-rule).

**numbers** One to nine inclusive should be spelled out; 10 to 999,999 should be given in numbers, with commas to mark thousands; then 2 million, 4.5 billion. Exceptions: percentages, where even 1% to 9% take the number; speeds will also be expressed in numbers, eg 5mph; temperatures take numbers, eg 30C (85F); sports scores will have numbers, eg 2-1; but numbers at the beginning of a sentence will normally be spelled out, eg “Seventeen England fans were arrested last night...”

## O

**off-licence** Hyphenated.

**Ofsted, Ofcom** Just an upper case O.

**oh!** Not O!

**OK** If OK is OK then okay is not.

**O-levels** Note the lower case l and the hyphen.

**online** One word.

## P

**parkrun** Lower case.

**parliament** Lower case.

**passerby** One word. Plural: passersby.

**pensioner** Not OAP.

**per** Prefer £20,000 a year to *per year* or *per annum*.

**percentages** Use %. Some prefer percent, per cent or even pc, but % is easier to see at a glance that it refers to a percentage. Be consistent.

**persuade** See *convince*.

**place names** Use an official website, an atlas, a gazetteer or an A–Z to check spellings. Never guess or assume.

**play-off** Prefer two words, hyphenated.

**plc** Lower case.

**police** South Yorkshire Police, then the police. Also lower case for the police in general. Note that police are plural, while police force (or service) is singular, so “police *are* investigating...” but “the South Yorkshire force *is* short of money”. Police ranks can be abbreviated as follows: Chief Superintendent (Chief Supt); Superintendent (Supt); Chief Inspector (Chief Insp); Inspector (Insp); Detective Inspector (Det Insp); Detective Sergeant (Det Sgt); Sergeant (Sgt); Detective Constable (DC); Constable (PC). Do not use WPC. Do not abbreviate Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable or Assistant Chief Constable – write it in full at first, then Mr or Ms.

**postgraduate** One word.

**postmodern** One word, lower case.

**post mortem** Lower case, two words, no hyphen; and you should always refer to a *post mortem examination*.

**Prime Minister** Upper case P and M.

**principal** The first in rank or importance, who may or may not believe in certain *principles*.

**prodigal** Means recklessly wasteful, not simply someone who returns.

**programme** Not program, unless it is a computer program.

**prostitutes** Not vice-girls, please. Increasingly, news media prefer the term sex workers. Be aware that child prostitute is a misnomer

because if the person concerned is below the age of consent they cannot legally consent to prostitute themselves – they are a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation.

**protester** Prefer to protestor.

## Q

**queuing** Prefer to queueing.

**quotes** As a guideline, use double quote marks unless there is a quote within a quote, which should have single quote marks; but note that many magazines in particular do the opposite. If a quote runs over more than one paragraph, open each paragraph with quote marks but close them only once, at the end of the full quote. Punctuation marks such as commas and full stops normally come inside quote marks when a full sentence is quoted but outside if just a phrase or partial sentence is quoted.

## R

**refute** Means to disprove, not to deny.

**reported speech** Should be reported in the past tense.

**restaurateur** Not restauranteur.

**reviews** Always give full details of title, venue, when the run ends and so on, including certificates for films.

**ring-road** Prefer lower case, hyphenated. Also: inner ring-road and outer ring-road.

**riot** OK if it really is a riot, but do not use for a mere kerfuffle.

**robbery** Means theft using force or the threat of force, and should not be confused with burglary or other forms of theft.

**rock'n'roll** One word with two apostrophes.

**Rolls-Royce** Upper case, hyphenated.

**Royal Air Force** Prefer upper case, then the RAF. RAF ranks may be abbreviated as follows: Group Captain (Group Capt); Wing Commander (Wing Cmdr); Squadron Leader (Sqdn Ldr); Flight Lieutenant (Flight Lt); Warrant Officer (WO); Flight Sergeant (Flight Sgt); Sergeant (Sgt); Corporal (Cpl); Leading Aircraftman (LAC). Do not abbreviate Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Air Chief Marshal, Air Vice Marshal, Flying Officer, or Pilot Officer.

**Royal Navy** Prefer upper case, then the Navy. Naval ranks may be abbreviated as follows: Lieutenant Commander (Lt Cmdr); Lieutenant (Lt); Sub Lieutenant (Sub Lt); Commissioned Warrant Officer (CWO); Warrant Officer (WO); Chief Petty Officer (CPO); Petty Officer (PO); Leading Seaman (LS); Able Seaman (AS); Ordinary Seaman (OS). Do not abbreviate Admiral, Vice Admiral, Rear Admiral, Commodore, Captain, Commander or Midshipman.

**rugby** Always distinguish between rugby league and rugby union. Use of the term *rugger* for either code should probably be a sacking offence.

## S

**Safeway** Not Safeway's.

**Sainsbury's** Not Sainsbury.

**Scarborough** See also *Edinburgh and Middlesbrough*.

**schizophrenia** This is a complicated illness so do not insult sufferers by using the term lazily to mean somebody who appears either undecided or inconsistent.

**school names** As in Bracken Edge primary school.

**scrapheap** One word.

**seasons** As in autumn, winter and so on, lower case.



**Secretaries of State** Prefer upper case titles, as in *Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi*, but the trend is for the caps to go, rather like those who hold such posts.

**Senior** Abbreviate to Sr without a full stop.

**September 11** Preferred to 11th or 9/11.

**shear, sheer** It will be *sheer* luck if you manage to *shear* the wool off that sheep.

**Siamese twins** The preferred term is now conjoined twins.

**sit, sat** He was *sitting* on the left until the teacher *sat* him in the middle. You may write that he sat on the left; do not write that he *was* sat on the left, unless he was placed there by a third party.

**slither, sliver** Snakes slither across the ground, so if you mean a very thin amount of something (like cake, or hope), use sliver.

**soccer** This term should be banned because, in the UK at least, it is hated by most people who play or watch the game. Say *football* instead.

**south** Lower case s if it is a description (south Leeds) or a direction (head south), but upper case S if it is the name of a region or a county (the South-West or South Yorkshire).

**spokesman, spokeswoman** The former if it is a man, the latter if it is a woman, and spokesperson if it is neither (eg an emailed statement) or is unclear.

**standing, stood** She was *standing* at the back until the photographer *stood* her at the front. You may write that she stood at the back; do not write that she *was* stood at the back, unless by a third party.

**stationary, stationery** With an a it means not moving, with an e it means writing materials (think “e for envelope”).

**staycation** Use only for a holiday spent *at home*. A holiday elsewhere is still a holiday, even if it does not involve overseas travel.

**streetwise** One word.

**swearwords** Swearwords can offend many people for little purpose, especially outside direct quotes. Stop and think before using, and be aware that different publications can have *very* different attitudes, with tabloid newspapers being among the most prudish (with the exception of the *Sunday Sport*, if that counts). Incidentally, if arranging a live audio interview, be careful about inviting a representative of the West Kent Hunt or a Culture Secretary named Jeremy Hunt, as BBC journalists Nicky Campbell and James Naughtie can testify.

## T

**targeted** Not targetted.

**taskforce** One word.

**temperatures** Prefer celsius with fahrenheit in brackets: 7C (45F).

**Tesco** Not Tesco's.

**that or which?** That defines, which informs. This is the style guide *that* is included in this book. This book, *which* is published by Sage, includes a style guide.

**theirs** No apostrophe.

**times** Use am and pm, not hundred hours. Some editors will not allow 12 noon or 12 midnight because what other noon or midnight are there? Just noon and midnight will normally suffice.

**tonne** Prefer to ton unless instructed otherwise, but be aware that they are different. A tonne (1t) is 1,000kg or 2,204.621b; a ton is 2,2401b.

**trademarks**<sup>™</sup> Take great care with these, and use an alternative unless you do mean the specific product in question. So, if you mean any ballpoint pen, don't write Biro.

**trillion** A thousand billion; that is, a million million. Write the word in full (£1.4 trillion) except in headlines (£1.4tn).

**tsar** Not czar.

**T-shirt** Prefer to tee-shirt.

## U

**under way** That *under way* should be written as two words was drummed into journalists of a certain vintage, so if I write it as two words and an editor changes it to one, a small part of me dies inside. I have no idea why, to be honest, but I am not alone. Don't say you weren't warned.

**unique** Something is either unique or it is not. It cannot be very unique.

**universities** Like this: Sheffield Hallam University or the University of Sheffield. Then just the university. Be aware that the Johns Hopkins University is often in the news and is almost as often named incorrectly.

**U-turn** Upper case U, lower case t, connected by a hyphen.

## V

**Valentine's day** Prefer upper case V, lower case d, and note the apostrophe.

**VAT** Upper case, no need to spell out any more.

**versus** Prefer a lower case v for Warrington Wolves v Saint Helens. Not vs.

## W

**Wall's** Note the apostrophe.

**Walmart** No longer Wal-Mart.

**wander, wonder** You may *wander* from place to place while others *wonder* why you don't settle down.

**war** Prefer lower case, eg Iraq war, apart from the First World War and Second World War.

**web, website, world wide web** All lower case.

**weights** A common rule is to still give people's weights in stones and pounds (12st 31b) even if other weights are in tonnes (17t), kilograms (36kg), grams (75g) or milligrams (12mg).

**welfare state** Lower case.

**west** Lower case w if it is a description (west Leeds) or a direction (head west), but upper case W if it is the name of a region or a county (the North-West, West Yorkshire).

**whatsoever** One word.

**wheelchair-bound** Few people are strapped into a wheelchair for 24 hours a day, so this should be banned in favour of saying someone *uses a wheelchair*, is a *wheelchair user*, or was *in a wheelchair* at the time in question.

**wheelie bin** Not wheely bin.

**whereabouts** Are plural.

**while** Not whilst.

**whiskey, whisky** *Whiskey* is for Irish and *whisky* for Scotch.

**wifi** No hyphen.

**withhold** Not withhold.

**workmen** Use only for describing a specific group of workers who are indeed all men, otherwise prefer workers.

**World Trade Centre** Not Center.

**wriggle room** Prefer to wiggle room.

**wrongdoing** One word.

## X

**x-ray** Lower case, hyphenated.

## Y

**yo-yo** Lower case, hyphenated.

**yorkshire pudding, yorkshire terrier** Lower case.

**yours** No apostrophe.

## Z

**zero** Plural zeros, not zeroes.

**zigzag** One word, no hyphen.

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Unless otherwise indicated in the text, comments by the following are taken from interviews conducted by the author between 2001 and 2021:

Susie Beever

Carla Buzasi

Caroline Crampton

Lindsay Eastwood

Nada Farhoud

Paul Foot

Trevor Gibbons

Sarah Hartley

David Helliwell

Jemima Kiss

Neal Mann

Jane Merrick

Cathy Newman

Andrew Norfolk

Kevin Peachey

Abul Taher

Ayshah Tull

Deborah Wain

Martin Wainwright

Nadine White

Brian Whittle

James Whitworth

Emma Youle

Waseem Zakir

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