Journalism

principles & practice

second edition

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list of boxes

notes to the reader

Layout

The design of this book may look unusual but it is easy to follow and is explained in Chapter 1. Start at the top of page one and continue reading the untinted text until all becomes clear...

References

For the benefit of anyone unfamiliar with the Harvard style of academic referencing, when you see something like this in the text (Bloggs, 2009: 10) 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 2009. The number 10 in the above example refers to the page number in the original source.

preface

The book in your hands can be used as a textbook, but I hope it is much more than that; the idea is that it introduces the voices of practising journalists and of journalism studies academics, and gets them to talk to each other. For this second edition, each chapter has been revised and updated to take account of developments since the publication of the first edition as well as feedback from readers. Every word has been revisited, which is not to say that every word has changed – although many have.

New features include details of the ways in which journalists have been using the UK's Freedom of Information legislation, and there is far more here than in the first edition on the use of blogs, video and audio on the web, non-linear packages, interactive maps and other ways of doing journalism online. To reflect the reality that online journalism is increasingly part of the job for *all* journalists, the online elements are embedded throughout the book as a part of everyday journalism rather than treated separately; however, there is a new chapter specifically on telling stories via pictures, whether on TV or online. The concluding chapter has been expanded to address in more detail the converged nature of much 21st century journalism and to remind readers that, even as the technology changes all around us, the fundamentals of journalism remain crucial.

This edition features several new interviews with different journalists, most of whom are introduced in Chapter 1 and all of whom are listed in the References. Interviews conducted for the first edition remain but most have been updated by fresh interviews with the same journalists. Sadly, two of the original interviewees were no longer with us when work on this edition began.

Paul Foot died at the age of 66 in July 2004, not long after publication of the first edition of this book, 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 one of the new interviewees for this edition is Deborah Wain, joint winner of the prize in 2007.

A very different type of journalist from the Oxford-educated Foot was Brian Whittle, who started out on a local paper as a 17-year-old. They may have had different backgrounds and attitudes, but they were cracking reporters and both were generous with their ztime, willingly discussing their craft with me for the benefit of future generations of journalists. When, subsequently, I 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. I told him that, if the book ran to a second edition, I would be contacting him to update his contributions. Sadly, that was not possible because, in December 2005, he collapsed and died at a party held to mark the departure of the *Express* and *Star* national newspapers from Manchester. As former colleague Peter Reece (2005) commented: "It was fitting that he was in the company of journalists, for tabloid ink ran through Brian's veins." He was aged just 59.

The words of Paul Foot and Brian Whittle are as pertinent today as when they were spoken, which is why they remain in this revised edition.

contents

one

who, what, where, when, why and how?

an introduction to journalism

key terms

Agency; Churnalism; Communication; Ethics; Fourth estate; Free press; Ideology; Journalism; Journalism education; Public sphere

Journalism or churnalism?

"Journalism is a chaotic form of earning, ragged at the edges, full of snakes, con artists and even the occasional misunderstood martyr," writes Andrew Marr in his book *My Trade*. "Outside organised crime, it is the most powerful and enjoyable of the anti-professions" (Marr, 2005: 3). So journalism is a trade, or a craft, rather than a "proper" profession such as medicine or the law. But what is journalism *for*? To pay the mortgage, if you ask many hacks. But journalism is about more than that. It is a form of ***communication*** based on asking, and answering, the questions Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Of course, journalism *is* a job, journalists *do* need to feed their kids or pay off student loans, and they 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. ***Journalism*** informs society about itself and makes public that which would otherwise be private.

Rather an important job, you might think. But public opinion polls relentlessly remind journalists that we vie for bottom place with politicians and estate agents in the league table of trustworthiness. A typical poll of more than 2,000 adults in 2006 found just 19 per cent saying they trusted journalists to tell the truth – we were the least trusted occupation – whereas 92 per cent said they trusted doctors, who topped the poll of trustworthiness despite the best efforts of serial killer Dr Harold Shipman (Hall, 2006). A YouGov poll for *British Journalism Review* in 2008 found that public trust

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 the phenomenon of user-generated content.

Journalism

Journalists may indeed inform society about itself, and much journalism may be concerned with making public that which would otherwise be private, as suggested in this chapter. But such a formulation falls far short of an adequate definition. For a start, journalists also supply information, comment and amplification on matters that are *already* in the public domain.

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

in journalists had declined since the same question was asked five years earlier; this was for every sector of journalism except the redtop tabloids, where trust was already so low it could hardly decline any further (Barnett, 2008). Mistrust of the ***fourth estate*** starts early, it seems. When 11 to 21-year-olds were asked how much they trusted journalists, just one per cent said "a lot", 19 per cent "a little", and a whopping 77 per cent replied "I do not trust them" (*Observer*, 2002).

Such attitudes have become all too familiar to online journalist Jemima Kiss, who told me that one of the disappointments in her short career to date has been "some people's assumptions and prejudices about you if you say you are a journalist". Such as?

> It has happened more times than I could count. 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 cliche of a ruthless, doorstepping tabloid hack, I suspect, the type perpetuated in cheesy TV dramas.

Yet despite this image problem, a never-ending stream of bright young and not-so-young people are eager to become journalists. Why? Because it can be one of the most exciting jobs around. You go into work not necessarily knowing what you are going to be doing that day. You 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; to indulge a passion for writing, maybe to travel, maybe to become an expert in a particular field; to seek truth and campaign for justice; or, if you must, to hang out with celebrities.

Then there's the thrill of seeing your byline in a newspaper, a magazine or on a website; the excitement of seeing your footage on TV or online; and the odd experience of hearing your voice on the radio or via a podcast. You can then do it all over again. And again. Little wonder, 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:

> 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. (Randall, 2000: viii)

Whether it is as simple as that is a question we will explore further in this and subsequent chapters.

Fourth estate

The notion of the press as a "fourth estate of the realm" – alongside the Lords Spiritual (clergy sitting in the House of Lords), the Lords Temporal (other peers), and the House of Commons – appears to have first been used by Edmund Burke in the 18th century. Recalling this usage in 1840 – believed to be the first time it had appeared in print – Thomas Carlyle had no doubt of its meaning:

> 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)

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

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 an editor; then being paid less than many of the people whose own complaints about low pay might make news stories.

> **"I always tell them start-off pay is abysmal and if they are lucky it will move on to disgraceful after a year, and by the end of the training it will be only just short of appalling."**
>
> *– Sean Dooley, former Northcliffe editor.*

Almost a century ago journalists staged the first strike in the history of the National Union of Journalists, when they walked out of the *York Herald* in 1911 to protest against working hours and conditions that were described as like something from *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens (Mansfield, 1943: 159; Gopsill and Neale, 2007: 84–85). Then, 97 years later in May 2008, journalists on the same newspaper's current incarnation as the *Press* walked out in protest at low pay. The *Press* is now part of the Newsquest group, which in turn is owned by Gannett, a US-based giant that made more than $1 billion profit in 2007 from a turnover of $7.4 billion. A group of strikers wore Edwardian costumes borrowed from York Theatre Royal to help draw parallels with their 1911 predecessors and, in a very 21st century touch, they also set up a group on the social networking site Facebook as well as their own blog. One explained their grievance: "We often feel as if we are still working in Dickensian conditions, our pay is certainly something which is stuck in the past. Trainee journalists start on just £13,500 a year" (http://nujyork.blogspot.com).

The pay of most journalists, particularly those just starting out and particularly those working in the local or regional media, is shameful. As one trainee reporter put it:

> Young people with a strong enough passion for writing will suffer low wages for the chance to work in journalism. But it is a disgrace to the industry as a whole that

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:

> 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)

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 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).

Free press

Editors and owners alike are often heard extolling the virtues of a "free press", a liberal model based on the 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 the law, they do not have to submit to censorship in advance. Newspapers are said to be in the business of truth-telling and serving only their readers. Thus,

> they should have to. The industry cynically manipulates our ambition. (Quoted in Journalism Training Forum, 2002: 57)

Some wannabe journalists *are* put off when they discover the awful truth about pay. Others become disillusioned by work experience in newsrooms, 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 – on the telephone or the internet. Waseem Zakir, a business journalist with BBC Scotland, came up with the word "churnalism" to describe too much of today's newsroom activity. He told me what he meant:

> 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.

An ever-increasing workload may reduce the chances of doing the very things that made journalism seem so attractive in the first place. On top of all that, young journalists have to listen to more experienced hacks grumbling that "it wasn't like this in my day". The old-timers may have a point, but even the journalists of 100 years ago looked back fondly on a supposed "golden age" of journalism circa 1870 (Tunstall, 2002: 238).

Even when disabused of romantic illusions about travelling the world on huge expense accounts, pausing between drinks to jot down the occasional note, large numbers of people are attracted by the fact that journalism remains an occupation in which no two days are exactly the same and where the big story may be only a phone call away. And by the fact that journalism *matters*.

If it didn't matter, why would there be so many laws restricting how journalists can do their jobs? Why would government and opposition alike spend so much time courting the media? Why would Shiv Malik, Bill Goodwin and others have been threatened

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through the democracy of the free market, 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:

> 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)

For Sparks, a truly free press – presenting objective information and a range of informed opinions while acting as a public forum – is "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 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 160 years ago:

> 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; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. (Marx and Engels, [1846] 1965: 61)

Ideological power has been described as "the power to signify events in a particular way", although ideology

with jail for protecting their sources? As we shall see in the next chapter, many journalists around the world pay with their lives precisely because journalism matters.

Explanations of *how* and *why* journalism matters depend, like so many things, on *who* is speaking. Journalism is variously said to be the fourth estate of the realm, to be part of a ***public sphere***, to support a ***free press*** or to inculcate us with the ***ideology*** of the ruling class. The reality is that journalism is probably all those things and more because, as we shall see below, there is not *one* journalism.

> **"The business of the press is disclosure."**
> *– John Thaddeus Delane, 19th-century editor of the Times.*

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 this book I have interviewed a range of journalists from different generations, different backgrounds and different media; their comments are taken from these interviews unless otherwise indicated. Here are some of those you will meet in subsequent chapters:

- Lindsay Eastwood, a reporter for ITV Yorkshire's *Calendar* news programme since 1998, began work on her local newspaper, the *Craven Herald*, straight from school. She moved to the *Watford Observer* and worked shifts on the nationals before returning north to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and then switching to broadcasting. In addition to reporting for *Calendar* she also makes TV documentaries.
- Paul Foot joined the *Daily Mirror* in 1961 and worked on the *Daily Record* in Glasgow before moving on to *Private Eye* and then *Socialist Worker*. He left when he was offered his own page in the *Daily Mirror* but eventually fell foul of the post-Maxwell regime at the paper and returned to his spiritual home at *Private*

is also "a site of struggle" between competing definitions (Hall, 1982: 69–70). To illustrate the point, Stuart Hall refers to media coverage of industrial action in the UK public sector in the late 1970s:

> [One] of the key turning-points in the ideological struggle was the way the revolt of the lower-paid public-service workers against inflation, in the "Winter of Discontent" of 1978–9, was successfully signified, not as a defence of eroded living standards and differentials, but as a callous and inhuman exercise of overweening "trade-union power", directed against the defenceless sick, aged, dying and indeed the dead but unburied "members of the ordinary public". (Hall, 1982: 83)

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).

An emphasis on the ideological content of journalism is frequently challenged for downplaying the agency of journalists 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 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; 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. Take Sparks' explanation for the "lurid, sensational and

Eye. When he was interviewed for this book he was on the staff of *Private Eye* magazine, a columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, and a freelance contributor to a range of other publications. He died in 2004.

- Sarah Hartley is head of online editorial at MEN Media in Manchester, where she helps run a converged editorial operation that includes print, TV, radio and the web; she is also an experienced blogger. She took her National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) exams at Darlington, started out as a trainee on the weekly *Leamington Spa Observer*, and later became news editor of the *Northern Echo* newspaper. She switched to the *Echo's* website in 1999 before moving to the website of the *Manchester Evening News* two years later.
- Jemima Kiss is the new media reporter for the *Guardian* website, writing news stories for the website's media section plus occasional pieces for the media pages of the newspaper as well as maintaining a blog, all on the specialist area of media and technology. She did not train as a journalist but studied fine art at college before working at the Brighton Media Centre, where she helped develop the centre's website. Jemima began writing freelance technology-based features for websites produced by a company based at the centre before becoming a full-time journalist for www.journalism.co.uk in 2003, writing about the digital publishing industry. She mostly learned on the job but was also sent on several short training courses about writing for the web and media law. She joined www.media-guardian.co.uk in 2006.
- Jane Merrick became political editor of the *Independent on Sunday* in 2008, but she was interviewed for this book while she was a lobby correspondent for the *Press Association*. After completing a postgraduate training course in Leeds, she worked as a reporter for the *Mercury* news agency based in Liverpool and then for

sometimes offensive material" he finds in much of the media:

> 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)

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