

CONTENTS

Page

3 INTRODUCTION

**PART 1:
JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC TRUST**

- 5 WHY CITIZENS DISTRUST JOURNALISM
Dr Karin Wahl-Jorgensen
- 7 THE BBC'S FAILINGS ARE A WARNING TO ALL JOURNALISTS
Andrew Gowers
- 9 THE THREAT TO THE MEDIA IS REAL
Martin Kettle
- 11 JOURNALISTS' SELF-RIGHTEOUS ARROGANCE HAS GONE TOO FAR
Martin Kettle
- 13 JOURNALISM'S KEY BATTLE IS WITH ITS OWN INTEGRITY
Joyce McMillan
- 15 WHEN ENTRAPMENT REPLACES THE NOTEBOOK
Bill Hagerty
- 17 ROTTWEILERS SAVAGE DEMOCRACY
Barry Richards
- 19 BALANCING ETHICS AND COMPETITION
Roman Gerodimos
- 21 A COMPACT OF TRUST BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC?
Mike Jempson *

**PART 2:
MINORITY VIEWPOINTS?**

- 24 TO TREAT ME AS DIFFERENT IS UNFAIR
Stephen Brookes
- 26 FROM THE PULPIT
Fareena Alam *
- 28 ROBUST, RIGOROUS AND ETHICAL?
Hamza Vayani
- 29 ROMAPHOBIA – EUROPE'S 'ACCEPTABLE RACISM'
Valeriu Nicolae *

- 32 THING'S AIN'T WHAT THEY 'SEEM' TO BE
John O
- 34 LOSING FAITH IN COLLEAGUES I THOUGHT WOULD HELP
Sandra Nyaira *
- 37 BE AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK
Bob Dale
- 38 ARE YOU LISTENING?
Jim Latham *

**PART 3:
MORE SPINNED AGAINST...**

- 41 NUMBER 10 AND THE MEDIA: CO-DEPENDENTS IN THE SPIN CYCLE
Graham Allen MP
- 44 UNSOURCED AND UNSUBSTANTIATED
Nicholas Jones *
- 46 RETHINKING ANONYMITY
Bill Norris

**PART 4:
TRAINING JOURNALISTS**

- 47 THE CHALLENGE FOR JOURNALISM EDUCATORS
Deirdre O'Neill
- 50 TEACHING JOURNALISTS TO COVER EUROPE
Paul Rowinski

**PART 5:
REGULATION**

- 53 THE PCC - FAST, FREE... BUT NOT VERY FAIR
Andreas Koumi
- 55 APOLOGISING FOR MISTAKES THE AMERICAN WAY
Jacob Ecclestone
- 57 NEW CODE FOR BROADCASTERS
Fran O'Brien *
- 60 TRUST AND LIBEL LAW
Bruce Whitehead
- 62 A QUESTION OF IDENTITY?
Patrick Trollope
- 63 CLEANING UP THE ACT
Bill Hagerty

* **Denotes speaker**

Journalism and Public Trust

Journalism and Public Trust

Public confidence in journalism should be the best guarantee that the powerful are being kept in check. After all journalists are supposed to be the 'Fourth Estate', acting as the eyes and ears of the public.

Yet it has become axiomatic that journalists rate low in public esteem, down there among the politicians and estate agents – ironically the very people we are supposed to be keeping an eye on.

At the end of a year when editorial practice in the most highly regulated and hallowed 'public service' broadcasting institution has been picked apart in forensic detail by Lord Hutton; when the highly-profitable demise of Piers Morgan became as talked about as the faked pictures of alleged war atrocities he published; and when Alistair Campbell finally departed from Downing Street to spin yarns on stage, where do journalists stand in the pantheon of public trust?

Soon after the Hutton Report was published in January 2004, the Newspaper Society polled 1,515 people and found that:

- 20% regarded regional newspapers as the most trusted news source
- BBC TV came second with 19%
- Teletext came next with 12%
- National daily newspapers won trust from a mere 11%
- BBC radio had a 10% trust rating.

A year earlier a YouGov poll had asked a similar number who they trusted to tell the truth:

- 82% trusted commercial TV news journalists
- 81% BBC News
- 80% Channel 4 News
- 65% broadsheet journalists
- 60% local newspapers
- 44% their local MP
- 36% mid-market papers
- 25% government ministers
- 20% opposition MPs
- 16% estate agents

- only 14% gave credence to tabloid newspapers which between them outsell all the other papers.

One perverse message that could be drawn from these figures is that most newspaper readers prefer to rely on outlets they don't trust for their information about the world...

In the most recent poll about public confidence in political discourse, conducted for *The Independent* in October 2004:

- 78% said the Hutton/BBC tussle had made little difference to their belief in the BBC's trustworthiness.
- 9% said it had made them trust the BBC more
- 9% said it had made them trust the BBC less.

In answer to the question *Who is more to blame for the decline in trust in the political process?*

- 55% blamed politicians
- 20% blamed the media
- 21% said both.

Asked whether accuracy in the news has improved in recent years

- 25% it has improved
- 27% said it had worsened
- 42% said it was about the same.

If we consider the trust rating of journalists in the earlier polls that is not saying much...

Of course, there are lies, damned lies, and statistics – but this year has also seen a plethora of articles (some included here) by respected journalists challenging their colleagues to look again at their attitudes and practices.

It is appropriate, and significant, that the year should end with a conference about journalism and public trust organized by the NUJ Ethics Council. Within a week of its announcement over half the available places were snapped up. Restoring public trust in journalism is clearly close to the hearts of those who work in the trade.

Mike Jempson
NUJ Ethics Council

Journalism and Public Trust

PART 1

**JOURNALISM AND
PUBLIC TRUST**

WHY CITIZENS DISTRUST JOURNALISM

Dr Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

THE BBC'S FAILINGS ARE A WARNING TO
ALL JOURNALISTS

Andrew Gowers

THE THREAT TO THE MEDIA
IS REAL. IT COMES FROM WITHIN

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JOURNALISTS' SELF-RIGHTEOUS
ARROGANCE HAS GONE TOO FAR

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JOURNALISM'S KEY BATTLE IS WITH ITS
OWN INTEGRITY

Joyce McMillan

WHEN ENTRAPMENT REPLACES THE
NOTEBOOK

Bill Hagerty

ROTTWEILERS SAVAGE DEMOCRACY

Barry Richards

JOURNALISTS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM:
BALANCING ETHICS AND COMPETITION

Roman Gerodimos

A COMPACT OF TRUST BETWEEN
JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC?

*Mike Jempson **

**WHY CITIZENS DISTRUST
JOURNALISM**

Dr Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

*Cardiff University School of Journalism,
Media and Cultural Studies*

JOURNALISM cannot be trusted because news organisations are too commercially driven, biased, and aligned with government and special interests. There is a 'conspiracy of silence' on the part of government and media, who tell citizens only what they want them to know, and keep the important information secret.

This bleak view of journalism prevails among respondents to the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex.

The archive seeks to capture the opinions of 'ordinary people'. It solicits detailed written replies from respondents around Britain to questions about set topics four times a year. In the summer of 2001, that topic was their opinion of the mass media, and the extent to which they serve the public interest. The 161 responses provide a rich source of detailed opinions from a wide range of British citizens who speak in their own voices.¹ I have studied these responses, and was surprised by the strength of these citizens' distrust in journalism.

The citizens who write to the Mass Observation Archive revealed that because of their dislike of conventional journalism, they are increasingly turning to alternative sources of

¹ The panel has a high proportion of women (around 70%), and a very high proportion of older people (more than 90% over 40). In terms of geography and class it is also somewhat skewed (towards the south of England and middle-class respondents). In the summer of 2001, 161 individuals responded to the directive. The interviewees are identified by the information they provide, which varies from one respondent to the next. Quotes from respondents are subject to the copyright of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, 2004.

Journalism and Public Trust

information, threatening the long-term viability of journalism.

The respondents' opinions lend credence to widespread ideas that there is a "crisis of public communication"² because politicians and the journalists who report on them are seen as out of touch with the concerns of citizens.

It is a crisis that has a financial impact on news media, as evidenced in the continuing declines of newspaper circulation and readership. But it also points to the apparent inability of mass media to serve their ideal role in a democratic society; that of creating an informed public. We expect the media to serve as an independent 'watchdog' on government³, to provide a platform for a diverse public debate, and to encourage citizen participation in politics.⁴

The media are unreliable

Mass Observation respondents were both aware of these responsibilities, and quick to point out how media fall short of meeting them. A young man expressed the prevailing view succinctly when he argued that "generally, the media supplies pap for the masses".

A 68-year old retired teacher expressed her disenchantment in a tone that showed the depth of her frustration: "What is the point? Why read the papers, or watch the news, if I believe so little of what is written/talked about?"

Many other respondents used strikingly similar language, though some reserved special scorn for the red top press. As one 74-year old woman put it: "I'm afraid I don't see how anyone who only reads tabloids and relies on TV for news can be sufficiently well-informed to be an effective member of a democracy, and this depresses me."

In part, respondents saw news as unreliable because of the commercial

incentive driving print journalism. As one elderly man put it, "the media's main intention is to make money on stories that sell. Therefore we hear biased opinions about more sensational events rather than receiving true facts about more important and crucial issues of concern".

A female respondent felt that "if the media supplied only factual information, I think they would rapidly lose their audience/customers, and quantities of political pundits, commentators, journalists and spin doctors would be out of a job. The newspapers and commercial radio and TV have to consider the political stance of their advertisers and owners".

Respondents questioned the independence of media; as one woman put it, "no part of the media is really a free agent, they are all paid or are responsible to someone and act accordingly".

Turning away from mainstream media

While many respondents pointed to government spin as a culprit for misinformation, some believed that there is a darker truth behind the manipulation of public information. One elderly woman gave voice to this theory as follows: "Of course we depend on the press, but it seems most unlikely that the general public get fully informed on sensitive or volatile issues. The conspiracy of silence on matters that could be viewed as important is so great that the public are unaware even that anything is going on.... We learn of government cover-ups months/years/decades later."

Another respondent echoed this view when he wrote that "very often we are not told facts but conjecture and half truths, we are fed what the media wants us to see and hear, and with information that the government has censored and considered before releasing it. We are not told the truth unless it is innocuous".

To these citizens, it appears that that the media, far from working to create an informed public, are in league with a government and corporate cabal out to

² Blumler, J., & Gurevitch, M., *The crisis of public communication*. London, Routledge, 1995.

³ See p.1, Wheeler, M., *Politics and the mass media*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1997.

⁴ See p.99, McNair, B., *Introduction to political communication*. London, Routledge, 1999

manipulate the public. This bleak and cynical view of the media was not universal. A few writers praised the media, as in the case of one woman who felt that “by and large the news seems to be very well presented”.

Others felt that public service broadcasting does well at informing citizens. However, the overwhelming tone of the responses was harshly negative and cynical. Because of their lack of trust in conventional media, many respondents said they rely on alternative sources of information. One retired woman from Brighton wrote that “the best possible solution is to read a cross-section of the papers and form your own opinions”.

Another respondent felt that “with the Internet, you can access all sides of the story whether it be true or not. The internet can also sell you a lot of untruths and myths but that is its beauty in that it is so free”.

Respondents also professed to place their trust in magazines ranging from *Red Pepper*, *New Internationalist*, *History Today*, and *Private Eye*. Other sources for information included newsletters from organisations such as Greenpeace, Oxfam, Save the Children, and the Ramblers Association. Finally, most respondents continually check their information and ideas about key issues by talking to friends, family members, colleagues and acquaintances.

Overall, the responses indicate that news media do occupy a central place in the lives of citizens. However, they are frequently mistrusted by their audiences who turn to other sources of information.

How can journalism respond to this challenge? There are no easy solutions. But to begin with, there are some searching questions to be asked about why citizens believe that they are kept in the dark by a ‘conspiracy of silence’, and what can be done to demonstrate the democratic purpose and independence of journalism.

<wahl-jorgensenk@cardiff.ac.uk>

THE BBC'S FAILINGS ARE A WARNING TO ALL JOURNALISTS

Andrew Gowers

Editor, Financial Times

WHAT I am about to say may seem perverse, even shocking, at the end of a week like this one. But here goes: British journalists owe Andrew Gilligan a debt of gratitude.

The BBC reporter whose misguided stories on the government's case for war in Iraq landed his employer in crisis exposed poor editing, deteriorating journalistic values and sloppy management at all levels of Britain's public service broadcaster.

But he should also be remembered as the journalist who held up the mirror to British journalism as a whole, exposing its foibles and its faults. For while the crisis at the BBC is deep-seated, it is merely part of a broader malaise in British politics and media. And while radical reform of the corporation's management is undoubtedly necessary, the need for reassessment does not stop there.

Lord Hutton's judgment on the BBC, in his report on the death of David Kelly, the government scientist, is devastating.

Mr Gilligan's original broadcast casting doubt on government claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was unfounded. The corporation's news editing procedures were defective. Its system for handling outside complaints failed. Its board of governors did not make proper inquiries before backing the story. It is no surprise, therefore, that both Gavyn Davies, chairman, and Greg Dyke, director-general, walked the plank.

What is both alarming and depressing is that neither man seems to have begun to understand the lessons of the affair, or to have reflected on what it means for the BBC as a news organisation or for journalism at large.

Journalism and Public Trust

For the true message of the Hutton report is that this was a story about journalism, not about the deliberate embellishment of a government dossier on Iraqi WMD, against the wishes of the intelligence services. That claim - the central one in Mr Gilligan's May 29 broadcast - was demolished in Lord Hutton's conclusions, in a way entirely consistent with the evidence at his disposal.

As for the question of how the intelligence services got their assessment of Iraq's WMD so grievously wrong, that is a legitimate, but separate issue.

The Hutton report is about a story that was wrong, defended against furious government complaints by a BBC management that had not bothered to check it, even weeks after it was broadcast, and backed by a board of governors determined to resist external pressure at the expense of obscuring the truth.

Now, all broadcasters and newspapers, including this one, make mistakes. Even the greatest can occasionally run off the rails, as *The New York Times* did with its rogue reporter scandal last year. But it is hard to imagine a graver charge against a media organisation than the one Lord Hutton levelled against the BBC.

In reply, Mr Davies insinuates that Lord Hutton's conclusions do not fit the facts and mutters about threats to press freedom. And Mr Dyke claims the Gilligan story - though mistaken - was in the public interest and that the governors had no reason to apologise. In so doing, both demonstrate that they have only a passing acquaintance with the basic tenets of good journalism.

The flaws in Mr Gilligan's story should have been obvious from the moment he went on air. It was based on the testimony of one source, when most good editors - especially when it comes to contentious stories - insist on independent verification.

It was vaguely phrased, unedited (at least in the notorious May 29 "two-way")

and changed by Mr Gilligan from one broadcast or newspaper column to the next. The source, it subsequently emerged, was misdescribed - and could not have known in sufficiently complete detail about the matters on which he was being made to comment.

Against this background, Mr Dyke's contention that the thrust of the story was worth reporting, and that any mistakes were in the detail, defies belief. Worse, it demonstrates the extent to which the BBC has been infected by the poisonous culture that has long since tainted other parts of the discourse between politicians and the media.

For Mr Dyke and Mr Davies, it was more important to resist and oppose the government than to check or correct an erroneous broadcast. In other words, an agenda, born of a desire to demonstrate independence, got in the way of the truth.

No one - certainly not Lord Hutton - is suggesting that journalism must now retreat from questioning and investigating those in authority. On the contrary: such activities are more needed than ever. But they will have to be done better and - like government officials - we have a duty not to "sex up" what we claim to have found.

Let this dreadful misadventure, then, serve as a wake-up call for journalists.

It should remind us that reflexive media mistrust of every government action or pronouncement - matched by an equal addiction to "spin" in government - is corroding British democracy and eroding trust in the media themselves.

It should prompt us to resist the easy, superficial certainties of *parti pris* opinion and rediscover the virtues of accuracy, context and verification. Of course, these things are easier to declare than they are to do and all of us will sometimes fail to live up to these high standards.

When we make mistakes - as everyone does - the BBC's experience should teach us to correct rather than to defend blindly. That is the only way to

start restoring confidence in the broadcast media, newspapers and the thousands of conscientious journalists who work in them.

*This article originally appeared in
The Financial Times, Sat 31 Jan 2004.*

THE THREAT TO THE MEDIA IS REAL. IT COMES FROM WITHIN

Martin Kettle

Columnist, The Guardian

'In the following comment piece, we referred to an article in the Spectator by Rod Liddle and in doing so may have given the impression that he thought Lord Franks, the chairman of the inquiry into the Falklands war, was a law lord. Rod Liddle, having mentioned Lord Franks and others in his piece then referred to "law lords and the like". He has asked us to point out that he knew quite well that Lord Franks was not a law lord.'

From *The Guardian's* Corrections and Clarifications column, Thursday 26 February 2004

HAVING read the Hutton report and most of what has been written about it, I have reached the following, strictly non-judicial, conclusions: first, that the episode illuminates a wider crisis in British journalism than the turmoil at the BBC; second, that too many journalists are in denial about this wider crisis; third, that journalists need to be at the forefront of trying to rectify it; and, fourth, that this will almost certainly not happen.

The reporting of Lord Hutton's conclusions and of the reactions to them has been meticulous. The same cannot be said of large tracts of the commentary and editorialising - nor of much of the equally kneejerk newspaper correspondence. Much of this comment has been sullied by scorn, prejudice and petulance. The more you read it, the more you get the sense that the modern journalist is prone to behaving like a child throwing its rattle out of the pram because it has not got what it wanted.

Since in some quarters it has become almost obligatory to dismiss Hutton out of hand, it is necessary to reassert that the law lord did an excellent job in

Journalism and Public Trust

conducting his inquiry so briskly and transparently, and to stress that his report is overwhelmingly consistent with the evidence he received.

This is especially true of what became the crux of the inquiry: the alleged sexing up of the Iraq dossier, Andrew Gilligan's reporting and the dispute over the naming of David Kelly.

From the start, though, too many newspapers invested too heavily in a particular preferred outcome on these key points. They wanted the government found guilty on the dossier and on the naming, and they wanted Gilligan's reporting vindicated. When Hutton drew opposite conclusions, they damned his findings as perverse and his report as a whitewash. But the report's weakness was its narrowness, and to some extent its unworldliness, not the accuracy of its verdicts.

There was rattle throwing from the right of the pram - "a great disservice to the British nation" (Sir Max Hastings in *The Daily Mail*) - and from the left - "Lord Whitewash" (Paul "We are paid to be cynical" Routledge in *The Daily Mirror*). But the worst example, appropriately enough, came from the man who has a good claim to be the author of the entire problem between Downing Street and the BBC, the former Today producer Rod Liddle.

Liddle is the man who hired Gilligan. He is also the man of whom a former colleague said (as told to *Today's* historian): "Rob didn't want conventional stories. He wanted sexy exclusives ... I remember Rod once at a programme meeting saying 'Andrew gets great stories and some of them are even true' ... He was bored by standard BBC reporting."

Liddle's article in the current *Spectator* exemplifies this approach, and incarnates a great deal of what is wrong with modern journalism. Liddle's article is wrong on the facts (Lord Franks, chairman of the inquiry into the Falklands war, was not a judge, much less a law lord), sneering (Lord Hutton's Ulster brogue is mocked, and he is described as anachronistic and

hopelessly naive), and unapologetic (the best Liddle can manage is that Gilligan's famous 6.07am report went "a shade too far"). Above all, Liddle's piece is arrogant, embodied in his remarkable final sentence: "I think, as a country, we've had enough of law lords."

Think about the implications of that. To Liddle's fellow practitioners of punk journalism, it can be excused as sparky, or justified on the grounds that it is what a lot of other people are saying. To criticise it is to be condemned as boring or, like Hutton, hopelessly naive.

To me, though, it smacks of something bordering on journalistic fascism, in which all elected politicians are contemptible, all judges are disreputable and only journalists are capable of telling the truth, even though what passes for truth is sometimes little more than prejudice unsupported by facts. Liddle is an extreme case, if an influential one (he was ubiquitous in the studios last week, acting out his juvenile Howard Marks fantasy). But he is the iceberg tip of a culture of contempt towards politicians (and thus of democracy) and judges (and thus of the law) that is too prevalent in British journalism (think Jeremy Paxman, for instance, both as interviewer and author). Too much of the initial response to Hutton has wallowed in that fashionable but ultimately destructive cynicism.

Fortunately, however, not all of it. Amid the excessive condemnation of Hutton and the equally exaggerated (and frequently self-interested) dancing on the BBC's imagined grave, there were other voices, which deserve to be heard more widely.

So, hats off to *The Economist* editorial that skewered Gilligan for a report that was "typical of much of modern British journalism, twisting or falsifying the supposed news to fit a journalist's opinion about where the truth really lies. Some in the British media have described such journalism as 'brave'. Sloppy or biased would be better words".

Bravos, too, for Saturday's signed article by *The Financial Times* editor Andrew Gowers, which described this "dreadful misadventure" as a wake-up call for British journalism, and said it "should prompt us to resist the easy, superficial certainties of *parti pris* opinion and rediscover the virtues of accuracy, context and verification".

A round of relieved applause also for the BBC's acting director general Mark Byford for his direct response to David Frost's question this week that "Mostly right isn't good enough for the BBC".

There is certainly a threat to modern journalism, but it does not come from Hutton, or even from Tony Blair. The over-reaction to Hutton has had the unintended consequence of ensuring that Blair cannot be seen to intervene further against the BBC. Providing Byford continues as he has begun, the BBC's independence is safer now than it would have been had Hutton spread the blame around more evenly.

The threat to modern journalism is real, but it comes not just from without but also from within. It comes not just from the manipulations, favouritism and half-truths of the discredited, and partially abandoned, Labour spin culture, but also from the media's disrespect for facts, the avoidable failure to be fair, the want of explanation and the persistent desire for melodrama that are spin's flip side.

A month ago, the Phillis report on government communications set out some ways that the post-Campbell political world could clean up its act. These need to be followed through. But do we in the media have an equivalent awareness of the equally urgent need to raise our own game? I do not believe we have even begun to realise the damage that some modern journalism is doing to the fabric of public and private life.

As Rod Liddle might say (but wouldn't), I think, as a country, we have had enough of such things.

*This article originally appeared in
The Guardian, Tues 3 Feb 2004.*

JOURNALISTS' SELF-RIGHTEOUS ARROGANCE HAS GONE TOO FAR

Martin Kettle

Columnist, The Guardian

BY ANY meaningful standards, Piers Morgan ought now to be a disgraced man. The former *Mirror* editor told a very big and an extremely prominently displayed lie in his newspaper and, as his lie unravelled, continued to defend it. Even when the lie was finally nailed, he refused to apologise, and was therefore sacked.

It sounds like an open-and-shut case, and in my view that's just what it is. Yet Morgan is laughing all the way to a shiny new career in television and his demand for a £1m payoff seems to have touched no general nerve of outrage. Not for the first time, an egregious piece of journalism - a front-page story that should never have appeared with so little checking - has caused no dents in the British press's self-image.

By rights, Morgan ought to make us journalists look into our souls. Instead, we mostly just shrug our shoulders and move on, unwilling or incapable of putting our house in order.

The Mirror's faked tale was not some one-off event. It was merely the latest manifestation of a widespread and in some ways peculiarly British disease. This holds that, within increasingly elastic limits, a journalist is entitled to say pretty much what he or she likes, whether or not it is precisely true, without being subject to any outside sanctions or professional penalties for doing so.

Please don't get this wrong. Journalism has inherent limitations, and many journalists are only too well aware of them. They recognise, as the American political reporter David Broder puts it, that a newspaper is always "a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we have heard about

Journalism and Public Trust

in the last 24 hours". But a lot of us believe that the flaws and, above all, the aggressive self-righteousness are getting out of hand. Last time I wrote critically about the British press in this column, just after the Hutton report, I was flooded with private emails from other journalists who shared these concerns.

Anyone who doubts that things need to change should look at *The Mail on Sunday* two days ago. "Blair told: go now" was the massive headline across the front page, accompanied by the subhead: "Party bosses in open revolt as leadership race begins".

Only by reading the accompanying story could one discover the reporting on which such a big claim was based. "A *Mail on Sunday* survey" had approached 25 Labour officials in marginal seats; of these 25 the number who said that Blair should go was - wait for it - five.

And what motives, other than reflexive resentment of the law and the desire to make mischief, lay behind the attempt last Friday by a group of *The Sun*, *The News of the World* and *The Mirror* to challenge the order banning them from revealing details of Maxine Carr's identity and possible whereabouts? The order aimed, rightly, to put a firewall between modern journalism and its intended victim. Without it, the press would undoubtedly have attempted to solicit attacks on Carr.

Yet this is the logic and momentum of modern journalism. People at the top of nearly all institutions in this country, reports Anthony Sampson in his new book *Who Runs This Place?*, see the growth of media power as the biggest change in modern Britain. "They mention the media more often with fear or dislike rather than with respect, and with a contempt for their short-term horizons, their superficiality and destructiveness," Sampson finds.

The result is the siege condition under which an approximation of public life is conducted in Britain in the year 2004. The media's temptation to flaunt its power is old - "Kiss 'em one day and kick 'em the next," Beaverbrook once put it - but it has now become such an

addiction that many reporters seem barely to know they are crossing the line. Is this down to a lack of professional standards? Yes, in part. But it also reflects lack of accountability.

Forty years ago, there was another irresponsible power in the land, one that also considered itself outside the rules that others made and obeyed. Then, it was the trade unions that resisted every attempt to bring them within the terms of a shared civil society. For decades the unions explicitly denied that an unjust society had a right to place conditions upon the way they did their job. Their most powerful leaders - rightly dubbed barons - often behaved as though they had no responsibility for the condition of the country beyond the gratification of their own self-interest.

It took many decades for the trade unions to be brought within the boundaries of civil society and the law. It had to be done, but it was not done well. We still deny trade unions their true importance and we lack, as a society and as trade unionists, a shared concept of good trade unionism that would allow workers' organisations to play their rightful role in the workplace and in industry. But at least trade unions no longer make the claim, solemnly endorsed as recently as the Donovan royal commission of 1968, that these things are best left to the unions themselves to sort out.

Yet that is the situation that still applies to the press today. The parallels with the unions of the 1960s are striking: a parallel belief that the law has no place in their affairs; a parallel conviction that self regulation is all that is required; a parallel belief that government action in this field is malevolent; a parallel contempt for public opinion; and a parallel cadre of barons who do not accept that anyone else has rights to set against their own. As Onora O'Neill put it in her 2002 Reith lectures: "The press has acquired unaccountable power that others cannot match."

It doesn't have to be this way. As a society we once tried to decide what

kind of unions we want. Now we could - and should - ask the same questions about the kind of media we want.

Throughout his important new history, *The Creation of the Media*, the American sociologist Paul Starr hammers away at the theme that societies have regular opportunities to set the framework of the kinds of media they require, and to set them in accordance with the needs of civil society for good media, as well as in the material interests of the media owners for big profits.

We are at such a moment here in Britain. Or we could be if we tried harder to discuss how our press could be better than it is, and how we might improve it without shackling it. What do we really mean by freedom of the press? That anyone can say anything about anyone, however untrue? Or that a society needs trustworthy and reliable information in order to make its decisions? Surely we deserve something better than what we've got. This is a minefield, of course, but it's also a task absolutely worth undertaking.

For a start, the government should set up a royal commission on the press. The crisis of democracy is a crisis in journalism, warned Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. Today it is the other way round.

This article originally appeared in The Guardian, Tues 18 May 2004.

JOURNALISM'S KEY BATTLE IS WITH ITS OWN INTEGRITY

Joyce McMillan

Freelance columnist, member of NUJ National Executive Council

A BRITISH journalist is kidnapped and subsequently released in Iraq; and across the UK, newsrooms thrill with empathy and outrage, in a reflex there-but-for-the-grace-of-God reaction that must grate on the nerves of the families of other groups whose lives are in danger in Iraq.

But even outside the small world of journalism, there's a growing chill of concern that events like yesterday's kidnap in Basra of the freelance journalist James Brandon - just 23 years old, and working on a story for *The Sunday Telegraph* - are becoming more common, and reflect a disturbing change in the relationship between journalists and the news they report.

The Iraq war has, of course, been a particularly bloody one for the news media. In the first phase of the conflict, western journalists faced a sharp choice between "embedding" themselves with the armed forces in order to gain maximum access to and protection from one side in the conflict, or acting independently, and accepting the high risk of being caught unprotected in sudden fire-fights and airborne attacks.

By the end of July 2003, according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 20 journalists had died, including ITN's Terry Lloyd, caught in an exchange of fire while travelling independently in a clearly marked press car; and the IFJ records 2003 as one of its most dangerous years on record, with 92 journalists known to have died worldwide in the course of their work, and many more injured or incapacitated.

Nor is it only in zones of open war that journalists face increasing danger. Across the former Soviet Union - in

Journalism and Public Trust

Russia, Ukraine, Belarus - journalists who seek to expose corruption in high places face terrifying risks; only a few weeks ago, in the latest of a series of killings of investigative journalists and broadcasters, the editor of Forbes business magazine in Russia, Paul Khlebnikov, was seized and shot, and his body dumped in a lay-by on the outskirts of Moscow, in what many saw as a revenge killing for his negative coverage of the affairs of leading Russian business figures.

From Colombia to the Philippines, the situation of journalists who seek to expose links between government, drug-related mafias and violent death squads is equally perilous. And last November in Belfast, a conference on 'Journalism Under Threat' heard the shocking news that Northern Ireland's tentative - and, for some, destabilising - transition towards peace has brought no respite for those reporting on the conflict; on the contrary, there are now at least 16 Northern Irish journalists known to be living under explicit threats from various paramilitary groups, a higher number than at any time during the height of the conflict.

And although these facts are chilling and depressing, I suppose that to many people they will hardly seem surprising. In the world of 21st-century conflict, it often seems that the battle to control the news agenda, and to shape the images the world sees on its screens, is even more important than the real-life conflict on the ground; and in that battle - the new virtual war, if you like, between Fox News and al-Jazeera - journalists are front-line troops, providing the information, words and images that can be shaped into a major opinion-forming narrative.

In the turmoil of post-war Iraq, this is obviously true, but it's also increasingly the case across the planet, as journalists and their editors become leading players in everything from major disputes between environmental activists and economic developers, to decisions about which of the world's many humanitarian crises demand international action.

Comment is free, but facts are sacred, the great CP Scott of *The Guardian* once said. But in an age when "facts" are increasingly seen as weapons, to be ruthlessly selected and spun in order to support an already existing point of view that distinction is becoming desperately hard to maintain. What's more, the hyper-competitive climate of the western media is not conducive to the long-term fostering of an ethic of civic journalism, characterised by high standards of accuracy and integrity.

"There can be no press freedom if journalists exist in conditions of fear, poverty and corruption," says one of the IFJ's own favourite slogans; and even if most British journalists manage to keep poverty and corruption at bay, there's no denying the fear - of failure, of unemployment, of never making it in one of the world's most intensely competitive professions, or of arbitrary power in all its forms - that keeps journalists away from some of the world's most difficult and sensitive stories, that compels some of them, often against their own consciences, to keep churning out hate-filled headlines on subjects such as asylum and migration, and that, on occasions, drives ambitious young writers and photographers, often working freelance without protection or training, to take the kinds of risks that can lead to tragedy.

And the official answer to all this, at least on the side of the journalists' organisations, is for political, military and paramilitary powers the world over to take a step back, and to start treating all journalists covering situations of controversy and conflict as if they are what they should be: impartial reporters of the facts, and neutral purveyors to their waiting audiences back home of truths unsullied by ideology or spin.

To that end, the IFJ is campaigning for the deliberate targeting of journalists and media staff to be made a war crime in its own right, for any failure to protect journalists to be punishable under international law, and for a new international framework for the impartial investigation of the killing of journalists and media staff.

But clearly though I understand the case for these reforms, I have a feeling that the campaign is unlikely to succeed, so long as journalists remain one of the unpopular professional groups on earth, often perceived as exercising their huge influence on public opinion and debate without integrity, responsibility, or even basic decency.

It goes without saying that journalists should be free to report on conflict without fear or favour, and with as much independence as they can achieve. But in order to earn the kind of automatic protection from all sides which they need to do that job - and which James Brandon seems, remarkably, to have received from his Shia captors in Basra yesterday - they also have to demonstrate, and to be allowed to demonstrate, levels of honesty, objectivity and courage in their work that mark them out as servants of the public interest and of the truth, as well as of the particular media organisations for which they work.

As we all know, free and accurate information is the lifeblood of democracy, the force without which it becomes a manipulative mockery of itself.

But if we journalists want to defend our profession from the growing external attacks which it suffers, then we will also need to defend it from those attacks to its integrity which come from within, from our own attitudes, our own working and management practices, and our own desperation to field the sensational headline at almost any cost.

Otherwise, in our fight for the right to report freely on a new century of wars, we may look around and find ourselves friendless; shorn of the allies on whom we might once have depended, but whose respect and support we have often forfeited, to the great long-term cost not only of ourselves, but of the whole society we are supposed to serve.

This article originally appeared in The Scotsman, Sat 14 Aug 2004.

WHEN ENTRAPMENT REPLACES THE NOTEBOOK

Bill Hagerty

Editor, British Journalism Review

SORT the fact from the fiction.

First quote (one journalist talking about another): "The man was clearly an asshole but I am not a snob and if he's a Belfast tabloid oik, he'll know a lot of things I don't know and need to know."

Second quote (addressed to two journalists): "You have zero imagination...so humanity is a mystery to you...the stink of your own spleen and bile - the pain you inflict - is a mystery to you. You people...I don't think you know what you do."

It's been another bad few days for the popular press.

The description of a fellow professional in the paragraph above was credited by Andrew Marr to the erudite Ian Hargreaves, following the new and subsequently short-term editor of *The Independent's* initial encounter with then Mirror Group boss David Montgomery. At the time Mirror Group Newspapers shared control of this newspaper with the current sole owners, Independent Newspapers, and, declares Marr in his coruscating new book⁵, Montgomery, journalist turned chief executive, had a ruthless management style and wanted to own *The Independent* outright.

The attack on two hacks, also ruthless and driven, comes from a new play, *Dumb Show*⁶, written by Joe Penhall. Penhall, a former local newspaper reporter, has no hesitation in biting the hand that once fed him. His loathing for the foot soldiers, rather than Hargreaves' contempt of a well-heeled

⁵ My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism, Andrew Marr, Macmillan, September 2004.

⁶ *Dumb Show*, by Joe Penhall, opened at London's Royal Court Theatre in September 2004.

Journalism and Public Trust

general and the equally virulent dislike of Montgomery's lieutenant, Charlie Wilson, by Marr – another former *Independent* editor – is absolute.

Put them together and the book and play deliver a condemnation of sections of the press that an industry constantly ducking sniper fire could do without – and that's even before the inevitable works based on Lord Conrad Black's excesses tumble from the word processors.

Forget Montgomery for a moment, hard that this may be for those bruised by him. *Dumb Show* tells the story of a mainstream TV comedian entrapped by a girl reporter and her "investigations editor". They ply their victim with drink, con him into producing drugs and gift-wrap their exposé with hidden microphones and cameras. The comic, greedy and needy for something to fill his void of a life, is allotted his share of the author's disdain, but compared to the reporters he is Mother Theresa.

All popular journalists are not like this – Penhall never mentions the word "tabloid", but you can tell that his piranhas are not from the *Financial Times*. And, indeed, neither are all celebrities so venal, even if the names of one or two press gang-banged egotistical television performers spring to mind. But there can be no question that there are reporters cheerfully willing to stray into ethical no man's land in pursuit of a tacky story, or that entrapment has become as vital a part of their armoury as once was a notebook and readable shorthand.

"I love this job," says Penhall's investigations editor, sensing the kill. "...Working up an 'act'. Learning lines. Remembering them. Getting, you know, *butterflies*...it's just like being an actor." Can the thrill of performance really be a motivation for the kind of unscrupulous hunting down and humiliation of celebrities that features in some of our newspapers, especially the Sunday red-tops? Are the hunters and the hunted much the same?

Or is it, as the same character claims, the belief that famous people are all

fakes? – "They're not special. They're pariahs." Envy, a generous salary and expenses, plus the often mistaken belief that the degrading of celebrities sells newspapers, adds up to a heady cocktail.

In an interview, Penhall advanced the theory that "there seems to be a tabloidisation of culture, whereby the love of the grotesque and the sadistic thrill of other people's trauma and embarrassment are becoming legitimate entertainment." One only has to watch half-an-hour of *Big Brother* to grasp his point.

Editors and executives responsible for unleashing journalists whose morality has been parked outside with the office car will argue that "the market" is responsible for such stories. Yet the papers that pursue celebrities even when there is no vestige whatsoever of public interest to the dirt they scrape from the bottom of their shoes are mostly struggling. Chasing the worst of reality television down a blind alley has done nothing to solve the problems of slipping sales.

The truth is that the public gets the newspapers it deserves – and, in what are still large numbers, it wants. If Penhall's condemnation of the red-tops, and the conduct of such industry leaders as those vilified by Marr and Hargreaves, honourable journalists both, doesn't say much for this branch of the media, it says even less for contemporary society.

<billha@currantbun.com>

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The Independent, Thurs 7 Sept 2004.*

ROTTWEILERS SAVAGE DEMOCRACY

Barry Richards

*Professor of Public Communication in
the Bournemouth Media School,
Bournemouth University*

THE serious news programmes on national television and radio (such as Today, The World at One, Newsnight, C4 News) play a key role in sustaining our democracy. But is it possible that this broadcast genre, often celebrated for its integrity, may be more damaging to our political culture than a lot of 'tabloid' style programming?

We all know about the Rottweilers, the aggressively challenging interviewers who bite lumps out of politicians. They are often applauded as they do so, and feted as a major democratic advance on their forbears, the deferential interviewers who let politicians get away with murder.

Of course, the sceptical persistence of an interviewer may sometimes perform an importantly useful role in opening an aspect of political reality to public gaze. But amongst the Rottweilers, scepticism is enveloped in cynicism and hostility, in an attitude which on a daily and basic level is likely to have a number of adverse effects on audiences.

This attitude is likely to promote cynicism about politics, it gratuitously polarises arguments and people, and it militates against creative thinking about problems in society and how to tackle them. Overall it brings a negativity and fractiousness to the emotional tone of our politics - and it does so in an age when the decline of traditional party affiliations and the rise of personal and emotional agendas in many areas of life means that the emotional dimensions of politics are of increasing importance.

These are obviously serious charges against an influential form of media content. Not only are the Rottweilers accepted, they are probably widely popular. And in many cases it is easy to

see why this is so. They can transmute instantly into loveable Labradors. When not baring their teeth, they may come over as humorous, warm and decent people. Their approach to many topics is sensitive, and their treatment of non-politician interviewees is usually very respectful.

Arguably this makes their contribution to political culture all the more damaging, as they are easily identified with and have high credibility. They are probably seen as nearer to the TV news reader, who is trusted by 66% of the population to tell the truth, than they are to the journalist, trusted by 18%.⁷

However a number of voices are now being raised questioning the trends towards attack and disrespect in news and current affairs presenting and in British political journalism as a whole. Some like John Lloyd⁸ are from within journalism. Some politicians too are fighting back, and other critical voices such as Steven Barnett⁹ are from academia.

What are the common forms of attack used by interviewers? Giving new life to an old cliché, these could be called 'soundbites'.

Amongst the main categories of 'bite' are accusing, bossing, and wedge-driving. Accusations come in a number of sub-types. Interviewees are accused, usually in slightly less direct language than this, of being incompetents, weaklings, turncoats or liars. Bossing comes in various forms, all intended to construct the interviewee as the moral inferior of the interviewer. We can include here finger-wagging (usually conveyed in tone of voice), chopping off, and the Parthian shot.

Lastly, wedge-driving involves a form of questioning that is designed to demonstrate that whatever policy or practice with which the interviewee is

⁷ MORI, February 2003.

⁸ 'Media manifesto', *Prospect* 79, October 2002, pp. 48-53.

⁹ 'Will a crisis journalism in journalism provoke a crisis in democracy?' *Political Quarterly* 73(4), 2002, pp. 400-408.

Journalism and Public Trust

trying to resolve a conflict will inevitably fail. The interviewer is in effect pressing the case that 'the shit will hit the fan', and that whatever antagonisms are involved in the issue to hand are irreconcilable ones.

Why are the accusatory, contemptuous and cynical words of interviewers a problem? What is their impact on audiences? Audience research, which as far as I know has not been undertaken, would be necessary to answer that question fully, but we can reasonably propose that there are two serious risks here to the health of our political culture.

One is linked primarily to the accusing tendency, though it is also reinforced by contemptuous bossing. It is that respect for politicians, confidence in the democratic political process and belief in the sphere of politics as a worthy field of human endeavour are further eroded.

Of course trust in politicians and in politics may have been in crisis anyway for other reasons, to do with the limits and flaws of political institutions, and the shortcomings of individual politicians. But instead of encouraging us to see these problems as potentially remediable, Rottweiler interviewing leads us to despair and to call a plague on all their houses.

This is not only because politics is presented as adversarial ritual. Nor is it only because one politician after another, across the political spectrum, is treated contemptuously. It is also because the interviewees, with whom as audience we spontaneously identify, take up one contradictory position after another.

In order to retain a confrontationist stance with different interviewees, the interviewer must first adopt one position, then – with equal relish – its opposite. As John Humphries has pointed out¹⁰, he cannot believe in all positions. So we are schooled by the presenters as our role models in the

assumption that positions are things to be adopted for argument's sake only.

There is a current of urbane nihilism in this, and it carries us far beyond a subtle use of devil's advocacy to clarify a debate, into a world where we have argument for argument's sake (at which point most people close down on politics, as they do on Parliamentary yah-boo) and where nobody can be believed. Comprehensive cynicism, or an impractical idealistic rejection of the world as it is, are the only positions then available.

Secondly, there is an effect likely to flow from the wedge-driving practice, which seeks to demonstrate that problems are unresolvable and conflicts are absolute. If it has any effect on how the audience understand politics, this must encourage views of the world as hopelessly ridden with unmanageable antagonisms. Such views either lead in turn to more cynical despair, or feed fundamentalisms of all kinds.

This compulsion of journalists and especially interviewers to try and drive wedges into negotiations as they are taking place is something we have heard and seen much of in the Iraq debate, and is one area where we may wonder at times about how aware some journalists are of their responsibilities in the political process.

The wedge-driving proclivity of interviewers invokes impoverished ways of thinking amongst audiences, for whom new resolutions and creative compromises are less likely to be entertained as they fall outside the poles of antagonism to which the interview constantly returns.

Overall this has a corrosive effect on thinking. Now it is a piece of conventional wisdom in media research that the media cannot tell us *what* to think, but they can tell us *what to think about*. In fact this power of agenda-setting can amount to a power to tell us *how* to think.

At least it aspires to that: the recurrent message of much political journalism, and especially of the radio and

¹⁰ See Paul Donovan, *All Our Todays*, Jonathan Cape, 1997, p. 135

television interview, is that we must think in cynical and pessimistic ways. We must assume that politicians are adopting incoherent or unworkable positions, and that they are striving to hide inconsistencies, cover up failures and deny conflicts with colleagues or allies. Notably, many politicians are for various reasons complicit in their ritual humiliation. And some audiences seem to have an appetite for blood which the Rottweilers satisfy.

We would need to look at our recent socio-cultural history to understand this fully, but perhaps part of the appeal of this kind of interviewing is in its contrast to the often seamless and bland discourse of politics often favoured by politicians. What we can call the *emotional deficit* in political discourse, the absence of a spontaneous and full range of emotional expression, leaves audiences hungry for anything which engages the passions and brings some psychological life and colour to the intellectually demanding work of figuring out what is best for us as a society.

If all that is on offer is a kind of courtroom drama led by interviewers fired with righteous passion, then people will go for that. But excessive consumption of this kind of material brings on a fever of negativity in a disillusioned audience, not clear thinking by an engaged citizenry. It may succeed at times in *exposing* the worst of politicians, but it risks *bringing out* the worst in all of us.

What's the alternative? In Barnett's historical account of political journalism, there was a brief period in between deference and cynicism, when journalists approached politicians as equals, in a spirit of constructive engagement, and interviewing styles were grounded in courtesy and intellectual curiosity rather than scalp-hunting. Perhaps we can hope for a restoration of this approach, as part of a larger ambition for our media to make more positive, respectful and emotionally complex contributions to our political culture.

<brichards@bournemouth.ac.uk>

JOURNALISTS IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: BALANCING ETHICS AND COMPETITION

Roman Gerodimos

Associate Lecturer in Political Communication Centre for Public Communication Research, Bournemouth Media School

JOURNALISM is in crisis. The profession is losing its credibility, its role in society is questioned. Self-regulation of the print press is not always working, while broadcasters - even the BBC - face growing conflicting pressures from the government, the market and the public.

Corporate practices are infiltrating the newsroom culture, both in terms of management and in terms of content. The line between truth and fiction is becoming increasingly blurred. Yet, we cannot afford to let journalism become just another job/industry in a post-modern community of consumers.

The role of the Press in democratic communications is too important; the progress of a country and the state of democracy depend on well-informed citizens. This brief article argues that unless we can give journalists the space and incentives for good practice through comprehensive reform, any attempts to mend the system will be doomed to failure.

Our understanding of the reasons for the decline of public trust in journalists is critical in order to devise appropriate and effective solutions that will strengthen journalistic practices, and subsequently, reinvigorate trust. It is simply not accurate to frame the current problem as a simple fault or failure of journalists and editors themselves; this is a much deeper and broader crisis that reflects:

- a) the cultural shift towards postmodernism and the segmented public sphere: as the quantity of

Journalism and Public Trust

options, channels, voices and audience choice increases (internet and digital revolution), the dominant narrative is bound to be challenged; trust in most forms of authority or hierarchical structures is declining. Trust as we used to know it is not coming back and some argue that it is actually a good thing, because *that* trust was based upon an unqualified acceptance of a dominant narrative (originating either in Whitehall or in Fleet Street) in a semi-religious fashion. What we should be aiming for is qualified trust based on transparency, inclusive discussion and respect of human rights.

- b) the structural shift towards deregulation, privatisation and concentration of media interests. “Chequebook” and aggressive journalism are there because they sell. As long as the content and process of journalism is directly dependent upon circulation and rating figures it will not be possible to get the kind of ethical and responsible journalism envisioned by some well-intentioned utopians. Journalists have not failed the public. Each and every individual journalist is trying their best to survive another day, to hang on to their jobs within an extremely competitive and fluid industry. It is the system itself that needs fixing.

Therefore, asking journalists to be more ethically considerate won't make much difference, unless we can also alleviate the pressures created by the conflict between competition and public service beforehand.

There is a terminal incompatibility between public service ethos and 21st century market pressures.

It's really about making a strategic choice: we can either have a totally free, unregulated media market where competition forces rule (and suffer the consequences in terms of content and ethics) or we can have a strong, public service-oriented corpus of journalism that is independent or fairly autonomous of market forces. Neither side is

free of side effects: one journalist's (or viewer's) public service is another one's censorship, totalitarianism or just boring upper-class sophistries.

This contradiction, which lies at the core of the crisis, is not an exclusive property of decision-makers, it applies to the audience as well.

Audiences complain when journalistic standards are ‘dumbed down’, yet they are the ones leading that very shift to lighter content and infotainment.

Solving the problem may require unpopular and long-term solutions that will reverse the trend towards yellow journalism, privacy invasion, focus on conflict rather than substance and the patterns of dependence between sources (politicians) and reporters (journalists).

That rationale calls for a radical overhaul of press regulation, media ownership, journalistic training, party political communications and overall media culture. Transparency and partial independence from corporate interests seem to be the keys to a viable solution.

Among other measures that need to be taken, those steps would seem vital:

- Non-profit and charity-status media need to be established so that they can support investigative journalism within pre-set standards. The principle of Public Service Broadcasting should be extended to the print press.
- Stricter and narrower limits in regards to ownership need to be set so as to increase the number of voices and interests represented.
- All government and party political communications should be televised or recorded and archived so as to increase transparency and minimise obscure practices of leaks that belong to the 19th century.
- Given its vital role in contemporary mass democracies, the Press should be fully integrated into the constitutional framework, becoming a formal Fourth Estate with equally regulated rights and responsibilities as the other three (judiciary, executive, legislature). That would

also allow for greater judicial and legislative overview of practices, especially when it comes to the right to privacy.

- Ethics and reflexivity should become an embedded part of journalistic training and everyday newsroom culture, while avoiding the trap of bureaucratic benchmarks.

This is no minor or temporary lapse of individual companies or journalists; it is a long-term, ongoing, fundamental conflict between the idealistic notion/expectation of 'the public' and the actual, everyday experience of individual journalists.

Unless the magnitude and importance of the problem and the extent of reforms needed are clear, any fragmented attempt to deal with the crises is bound to fail.

<RGerodimos@bournemouth.ac.uk>

A COMPACT OF TRUST BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC?

Mike Jempson

Director, MediaWise (The PressWise Trust); member, NUJ Ethics Council

THIS year began with Lord Hutton's report. His most controversial opinion may sound like common sense to most people, but for many journalists it was the height of effrontery – 'how dare he tell us how to do our job?'

'The communication by the media of information (including information obtained by investigative reporters) on matters of public interest and importance is a vital part of life in a democratic society.

'However the right to communicate such information is subject to the qualification (which itself exists for the benefit of a democratic society) that false accusations of fact impugning the integrity of others, including politicians, should not be made by the media'.¹¹

Yet there is plenty of recent evidence that the relationship between the Fourth Estate and those who purchase its wares is out of kilter.

- The credibility gap opened up by the Gilligan/Kelly debacle; the near paranoia generated by the Hutton Report; a rethink of BBC journalism promised in the Neil Report; and the debate about the Charter renewal;
- The sacking of Piers Morgan's for publishing faked pictures, and the continuing tabloid excesses around issues of tragedy and trivia;
- The corrupting influence of 'spin' and the failure of public trust in parliament signified by the Phillis Report, Lord Puttnam's Hansard Society investigation, and books by

¹¹ Par 467, 3(ii) Chapter 12: Summary of Conclusions, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of Dr David Kelly C.M.G.* by Lord Hutton, 28 January 2004

Journalism and Public Trust

- Ian Hargreaves, Nick Jones and John Lloyd;
- More calls for reform at the Press Complaints Commission, and PressBof's decision to produce a 'How to keep to the Code' guidebook for editors;
 - Conferences and debates up and down the country about the role and responsibilities of journalists;
 - European Parliament proposals to introduce an automatic Right of Reply across all media.

Hutton was echoing the view expressed by Onora O'Neill in her 2002 Reith Lectures, 'A Question of Trust'. Speaking about the media in her fifth lecture 'Licence to Deceive', she said: *'If powerful institutions are allowed to publish, circulate and promote material without indicating what is known and what is rumour; what is derived from a reputable source and what is invented, what is standard analysis and what is speculation; which sources may be knowledgeable and which are probably not, they damage our public culture and all our lives.'*

'Good public debate must not only be accessible to but also assessable by its audiences. The press are skilled at making material accessible, but erratic about making it assessable. This may be why opinion polls and social surveys now show that the public in the UK claim that they trust newspaper journalists less than any other profession.'

The consistently poor standing of journalists in opinion polls seems to suggest that public confidence in our ability to deliver 'the truth' is not improving. Yet journalists, and the publications and programmes they work for depend for their authority upon the public's willingness to trust them...

To earn the opprobrium of power elites is an occupation hazard of our trade, but to be regarded with suspicion by those in whose name we operate is quite another. Often editors (and some journalists) fail to appreciate that a willingness to admit to mistakes, and alert the public to them, is the best way to convince people that getting the facts right is journalism's primary concern.

As Onora O'Neill pointed out: *'reporting that we cannot assess is a disaster. If we can't trust what the press report, how can we tell whether to trust those on whom they report? How can we tell whether and when we are on the receiving end of hype and spin, of misinformation and disinformation? If the media mislead, or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned'.*

Democracy is harmed, and we are all dis-empowered, when the mass media abuse their undoubted power. Millions of people each day still buy newspapers, but falling circulation is the main worry newspaper publishers. Readers are regarded first and foremost as consumers and the products are angled accordingly. When the bottom line dominates quality invariably suffers. That which excites the palates of the readers' takes precedence over the heavier preoccupations of journalism. The 'free market' approach to news production has led to a situation where most journalists are unwilling to speak out publicly about the constraints under which they work for fear of damaging their career prospects. We rely upon whistle blowers in other professions, but vilify those who attack our own, even from within.

And the symbiotic relationship between broadcasting and the print media – not to mention the increasingly incestuous patterns of media ownership – mean that all our news media are now infected by the trivia bug.

I prefer to regard readers, viewers and listeners primarily as citizens seeking information about the world and the issues upon which they have to make decisions, rather than as consumers whose money and loyalty can be extracted by fear and titillation.

We need to develop new forms of media literacy that enable journalists and the public to understand each other's needs and aspirations. Press freedom is a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public, so why don't we develop a Journalist's Charter for Readers, Listeners and Viewers?

Journalism and Public Trust

How would the punters define their reasonable expectations of journalists – at least in so far as news and current affairs are concerned? I am sure that accuracy would top their list of demands, closely followed by publication of prompt and prominent corrections when inaccurate information has been published. They might even request a right of reply as an alternative to lengthy negotiations with the regulators or costly court action.

Journalists need the protection of a Charter too. More and more now have to operate as freelancers or on short-term contracts. To survive they must produce the stories that editors want to buy, and editors want stories that will increase circulation and advertising revenue.

Journalists are rightly suspicious of anyone who tells them how to do their job – unless it's the boss. trying to influence how they do their job. Successful recognition battles, have begin to counter the erosion of union organisation over the last 20 years, and even the CMS Select Committee supported the NUJ and MediaWise calls for a 'conscience clause' in journalists' contracts. That is why it is important for journalists' organisations to take a lead in developing such a Charter.

Most journalists would share readers' concern for accuracy. Some might seek 'a right to report' - the stories they believe it is in the public interest to cover rather than being simply 'of interest to the public'.

To devise the Charter, we need to engage in dialogue with our publics. When the US Committee of Concerned Journalists embarked on a similar exercise of surveys and public meetings, what emerged was a set of principles that would find resonance here:¹²

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.

¹² The results of their project can be found in *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, Crown, 2001. Website: www.journalism.org

- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

MediaWise is now building partnerships with colleges where the next generation of journalists are being trained to initiate dialogue between journalists and the publics they serve. Students will interview members of the public about their expectations of journalists, and working journalists about how they see their role, and what impediments they come across when trying to do their job well.

The results should give us the raw material for more detailed research to help improve the standing and standards of journalism – by influencing newsroom practice and vocational training. We might even see an expansion of mid-career retraining, so journalists learn not just from the world of hard knocks but also from the expertise and advice of those with up-to-date specialist knowledge. That might improve their copy, and their outlook...

MediaWise would like to produce a magazine that monitors journalistic products and the work of the regulators, and run a Right of Reply website.

Meanwhile shareholders, and advertisers, could take a lead from the growing movement for socially responsible business practices, and demand more exacting standards of the media outlets they espouse.

No doubt the public would be better served if there were a more enlightened and considerate approach to employment practices in the media. But that is another story....

<mike@presswise.org.uk>

PART 2
**MINORITY
VIEWPOINTS?**

TO TREAT ME AS DIFFERENT IS UNFAIR

Stephen Brookes

FROM THE PULPIT

*Fareena Alam **

ROBUST, RIGOROUS AND ETHICAL?

Hamza Vayani

ROMAPHOBIA – EUROPE'S 'ACCEPTABLE
RACISM'

Valeriu Nicolae

THING'S AIN'T WHAT THEY 'SEEM' TO BE

John O

LOSING FAITH IN THE COLLEAGUES
I THOUGHT WOULD HELP

*Sandra Nyaira **

BE AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK

Bob Dale

ARE YOU LISTENING?

*Jim Latham **

**TO TREAT ME AS
DIFFERENT IS UNFAIR**

Stephen Brookes

Chair, NUJ Disabled Members Council

WHEN, in February 1988 *Time Magazine* wrote about Dr Stephen Hawking, they stated that the world's leading scientist theorist 'is confined to a wheelchair, a virtual prisoner in his own body'.

Somehow, I feel that to make this the underlying definition of the capability and scientific importance of Dr Hawking was somewhat lacking in substance.

But that is what disabled people all too frequently feel about their representation in 'the media' - glorious stereotyping.

Reporters and editors like to create impact; and under present disability law conditions justify it as "powerful" writing.

Being a disabled person I state that journalists have no more right to turn me into an object of pity with such phrases as 'virtual prisoner in his own body' than they have to turn women into sex objects. Naturally if there had been an issue of ethnicity or gender there would have been understandable dismay from various rights groups.

We all are aware of the legal minefield of writing on issues of race – or gender – yet, nearly two years after the European Year of Disabled People, the media generally work around the 'medical model of disability' to the exclusion of real news value. Heavily based on 'courageous' individuals surmounting adversity, such journalism sustains the fact that real and very normal attributes of disabled people are forgotten to achieve a strong feature, and profit for the writer.

For those to whom the subject is new, disability was historically seen as an individual problem – a medical model – but then came the important development of a social model of

Journalism and Public Trust

disability. This interprets disability as a process of the failure of society rather than to do with the body of an individual. It moved the nature of any individual 'abnormality' and re-framed it as 'impairment'.

Maybe because a lot of the radical disability agenda has emerged from university and academic settings we are currently using a radical dictionary full of terms like 'model' to describe the distinction between social and medical aspects of disability.

To quote Michael Morgan a colleague who is a member of the NUJ Disabled Members Council, *"an admirable TV campaign on disability was launched in Northern Ireland last year, which, without having recourse to any sociological or cultural theory at all, brought home the essential truth that disability is complex.*

"There are sides to disability that most people are unaware of, it proclaimed and focused, naturally enough, on the social dimensions of disabled life – education, employment, poverty. It didn't once mention the medical side to disability – because it didn't need to - but it seemed to me that this 'model' could be extended to cover all the other dimensions inherent in the disability experience as well – the medical, psychosocial, emotional and sexual. Maybe no theorisation of disability is needed."

That puts us into a situation of asking if it is ethically correct to use current terminology to excuse the art of writing to demean.

Well no, for the fact is that it is not just unethical to write in a demeaning manner about people, it is all too frequently just very bad copy.

And it's not just the written approach of using a model approach to disability that's unethical. Sometimes the disability has to be the basis of the story.

Wheelchair athletes frequently successfully compete in events to raise funds for rehabilitation groups. But as I know only too well the worst written stories about disabled people are hawked to the

press by groups serving disabled people! Charities often approach reporters and journals with stories about clients made good.

What is a journalist or editor to do? The answer is to practice good journalism.

Is there really a story in the event that merits reporting? On the other hand, is it merely written for the 'sympathy vote'? Or even worse does it assist in those awful telethon type shows.

Importantly if it does deserve coverage, consider the angle that can open up the story rather than the same old hackneyed 'in-spite-of' approach?

At this point I will note that an occasional tug at the heartstrings is thought of as part of the work of a journalist. Well forget it – there has been too much of it.

Journalists repeatedly exploit what they see as the "interesting" angle – the disability. The "super-crip" approach has become the staple, comparable to the social angle once epidemic in stories involving black people.

Reporters know it's wrong to interject their feelings into a news story, but the 'in-spite-of' story – is very much alive, well and perpetuated in the media. Every day I see the use of "afflicted" or "courageous" – even when the disabled person is doing the most ordinary of things like raising a family or going to school – coming from reporters' note books.

It is not acceptable.

Where are reporters who are listening to disabled people rather than using them merely to shore up their own story lines about what it's like to be disabled?

Where are the reporters who actually know about the Disability Discrimination Act?

Disabled people should not be used for inspiration. If we are to be newsmakers, it should be because we have news to provide, and the story should be

covered like any news item or release – the disability only noted when it is relevant to the story.

I'm disabled, and that is for every day. But to treat me as different is unfair, and therefore if I'm not a newsmaker, why can I find that I am in the news?

Disabled people have bad moods, good days, and believe it or not they have sex, so are their lives are unusual?

Ethical acceptance is something disabled people long to see. A writer should ask why they are seeking a story about disability, and are they genuinely looking for the real story behind the 'unusual'.

Typical stories about disability feature a lack of opportunity, barriers, or discrimination. *Those* are stories. And they should be investigated and reported as they are for any other minority – in an ethical framework.

<STBMBE@aol.com>

FROM THE PULPIT

Fareena Alam

Managing Editor, Q-News

WHEN the Greek poet Homer penned *The Iliad* - his harrowing, epic account of the Trojan War - most of his fellow countrymen probably expected him to produce a testament that made his own people appear good and noble.

After all, the war against Troy was a battle to restore stolen honour, returning Helen to her marriage bed and, in the process, demonstrate the moral and military superiority of the united Greek armies. Eager Greek youth must have waited with baited breath to hear the story of their magnificent victory - after ten long years of war - aided by the pagan gods and the strong arm of heroes like Achilles and Odysseus.

You can imagine their surprise when the tale did not play out as they hoped. Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and leader of the Greeks, far from being a wise ruler, is portrayed as a greedy, arrogant and power-hungry man who sends tens of thousands to their deaths for the sake of his own glory.

Achilles, the divinely protected hero of the Greeks, fights valiantly at times but is often consumed by rage and allows emotion to get in the way of his honour.

Menelaus seeks the return of his wife and honour, but is driven by revenge and seeks to see the walls of Troy razed to the ground with much booty taken to fill his coffers.

The enemy king, Priam, on the other hand is portrayed as an aging monarch who has little appetite for war and killing and whose reign has seen Troy prosper. Hector, his son and the Trojan hero, is the champion of his people. Hector is portrayed as civilised and gracious and he acts bravely in defence of his city and defiled in death by his rival Achilles.

Journalism and Public Trust

Homer, although a Greek, is clearly no partisan. His views are honestly and meticulously documented with little care as to who will be offended. Like a good reporter, he offers us a sincere version of the truth for all the read. It is a noble, albeit flawed, effort.

Being a Muslim journalist these days is a task worthy of Homer. She struggles between two extremes. On one hand, she faces acute pressure from the Muslim community to 'serve the cause of Islam'. On the other hand, she is faced with a cut-throat media industry that often tries to make her conform to its shifting agendas - at all costs.

Muslims love to hide behind convenient slogans and shallow platitudes (like "Islam is a religion of peace" or "don't blame Islam for the actions of Muslims") to make up for their intellectual deficit and lack of direction. At a conference I spoke at recently, I heard one of my favourite Muslims slogans earnestly repeated by community elders: 'we need more Muslims in journalism'.

If the purpose of having more Muslim journalists is so they can somehow swoop into the profession and change the way the industry works, we are being foolish. The media isn't here to make Muslims, or any group for that matter, look good. The best journalists are here to tell stories and to hold the mirror up to society.

Consequently, attempts by Muslim journalists to produce work that is introspective or critical of the community are labeled the work of the "gutter press". So difficult is this job that many fellow Muslim colleagues have chosen to cut their ties with the community for the sake of being journalists (who happen to be Muslim), committed to a profession, instead of an interest group.

When a community systematically attributes its ill-reputation on the 'media', as if it is a monolith, which is systemically and inherently Islamophobic, there is a serious problem. Such finger pointing takes away responsibility from us for the state our community is

in. An Islamophobic press is less than half the story.

Muslims have the right to demand that the media be fair, but we must also be open to scrutiny, even when it is uncomfortable.

The Quran tells us, "O you who believe! Uphold justice even against yourselves or your parents and relatives. Whether they are rich or poor, Allah is well able to look after them. Do not follow your own desires and deviate from the truth. If you twist or turn away, Allah is aware of what you do."

Our faith sets high ethical standards for us. It is to these standards that committed Muslim media professionals must aspire. Such a commitment need not come at the expense of honest, hard hitting and well researched journalism that challenges inspires and above all forces us to take a second look at ourselves.

May Allah help us tell the truth, whatever the cost. *Ameen.*

<fareena@q-news.com>

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ROBUST, RIGOROUS AND ETHICAL?

Hamza Vayani

Chief Executive, Youth Voice, Leicester

THE constant theme of today's media maze is the battle to capture people's attention. Little thought is given to the implications of the language and points of view used - which limit rather than encourage debate and engagement with the mainstream media.

The need for accurate use and understanding of language is crucial if unfair and negative myths are not to be perpetuated. Reporting that lambastes whole communities, using language that stokes hostility, resentment and gives rise to racism and discrimination, has a negative impact on, for example, the vast majority of law-abiding Muslims.

Facts should be reported, but we need to ensure that language is used in context and correctly. The point may have been made before, but it needs to be stressed if we are to avert in Britain the rise of Islamophobia we now see in Holland.

It is heartening to see the interventions of groups like the Muslim Council of Britain but more needs to be done to ensure language is used appropriately - it is unfair and improper to stigmatise so many on account of the few.

The next problem to tackle is one of perception. It is so important to ensure that reporting seeks to be objective. For a lay person it is frightening that one-sided and blinkered reporting subjugates the voices of moderates. On account of a few 'Radical Islamists' - a term perhaps used inadvertently - many others are similarly labelled. Translated from the Arabic, Islam means 'submission' - not terror or the oppression of civilisations.

Journalists must consider the implications of their actions. If they pursue a route that foments disenchantment, they are undermining

the cohesion and social fabric of a Britain that prides itself in being a land of hope and glory.

How do we enable opinions, views and concepts from all standpoints to emerge in a way that brings balance to the debates in the 'free space' we call mass media?

As a young person at the helm of a youth organisation with upcoming talent, it seems to me that some of the experienced crocs in the murky media swamp should rear their heads and share their experiences of highs and lows - what has worked and what hasn't worked. Maybe then we can get young people to join in with their ideas on how things could be improved.

But - I hear the chorus now - young people are apathetic and it's only the bright sparks that get involved. Well, for me that attitude is a cop-out; it is farcical and disempowering.

I have tried to lay out the challenge from a young person's perspective. How is new talent to be guided towards more ethical journalism in the future?

Firstly the key players - individual journalists and members of the public - need to be on board for the debate. The achievements of journalism need to be emphasised. Bigotry and the production of trash should not be the hallmarks of journalism. It should be a responsive, inclusive and evolving product, intelligent and committed to analysis that incorporates arguments for and against issues and allows room for varieties of views. Social attitudes evolve and points of view are refined when journalists provide constant and consistent scrutiny and challenge.

One key challenge, where criticism of journalistic output is rife, is the coverage of 'the war against terror'. How are we to ensure that atrocities, and the arguments for and against conflict, are reported objectively - without making individuals and whole communities feel vilified for activities they denounce and have no stake in?

The answer surely lies in recourse to that dreaded word – ‘standards’. There needs to be clarity and agreement among the stakeholders as to what the standards are. Who sets them? Who enforces them? Will they generate and restore the credibility of journalists and our confidence in them? We desperately need to strengthen public trust in journalists if we are to re-invigorate our much cherished British traditions of respect for difference and freedom of expression.

For this ‘road map to trust’ to be workable, we cannot beat senselessly those who do seek to bring some semblance of civility to the volatile beast that is the mass media. The approach has to be holistic. We must support and compliment those who seek to provide ethical journalism and are in a position to promote standards and nurture talent. We must engage in discourse to restore confidence and generate trust in journalism, and to insist that ethical reporting is a means of strengthening democracy, debate and freedom of expression.

We need a strategy to change the current culture of the media – where support for freedom of expression is undermined by fear of media output. This conference is an opportunity to begin discussing the issues, but we need to build a firm foundation that will take forward the debate over the years to come.

We need to create a media beast that is robust in its analysis, rigorous in its reporting standards and in which journalistic ethics are the gold standard to which all adhere and from which everyone benefits.

<hamza@youth-voice.org>

ROMAPHOBIA – EUROPE’S ‘ACCEPTABLE RACISM’

Valeriu Nicolae

*Director, European Roma Information
Centre, Brussels*

ALL over Europe majority populations have very strong preconceived and contradictory notions of Roma. If we are poor it is because we do not want to work; if we are rich it is because we steal. Negative stereotypes have given the Roma identity in Europe the worst social stigma. In many Eastern European ‘democracies’ they are repeated every single day to saturation point in newspapers and on television and the radio.

Under National Socialism in Germany consensus among the (otherwise strongly divided) people was created by identifying an internal enemy who was threatening the German people. Jewish people and Roma, many of them living in Germany for generations were stigmatised as ‘outsiders’, isolated from the remaining society and later exterminated.

While Jewish people have experienced a partial rehabilitation Roma continue to be the scapegoats. Society chooses to ignore the persistence of racism against Roma. It may seem inappropriate to compare the pervasive contemporary racism against Roma with the Nazi extermination project, but the constant reference to racial attributes (Roma as genetically predetermined to crime) and their alienation from the majority society (Roma as ‘the others’ against whom people need to protect themselves) harks back to that era.

Dr Robert Ritter, the moral author of the Nazi genocide against Sinti, Roma and Jews considered that people of mixed Romani and non-Romani (Aryan) blood had an inherited predisposition towards criminality. These were the first targeted for extermination.

An obsession about preventing Roma from polluting the White *Volkskoerper* is

Journalism and Public Trust

nothing new but the extent of it and similarities with Nazi propaganda are striking. Differences — whether ‘cultural’, ‘religious’, ‘economical’ or ‘racial’ — have been used too many times to explain the extermination of hundreds of millions of people.

Europe has played a major role, not just in wiping out entire civilizations in the name of those differences, but also in finding very sophisticated arguments to justify it. The mass media has been instrumental in building widespread acceptance of horrendous acts, presenting them as ‘divinely inspired’, ‘heroic’, ‘educational’ or, more bluntly, ‘necessary’.

The twentieth century began with atrocities in Africa and Asia perpetrated by the European colonial powers and carefully pictured by a majority of the mass media as acts of good will towards the ‘savages’.

The first legislated forms of racism in twentieth century Europe came about in the 1930s, when Nazi-owned media took its role seriously and was the main factor in achieving a national unity around Germany’s racial policies. In this way, the extermination of those identified as ‘parasites’ (Jews, Roma, Sinti and Slavs) became accepted by the most ‘educated’ European nation.

Racism, however, didn’t die with Adolf Hitler and the collapse of the Third Reich. The last of the colonial wars in the 1950s kept it strong, as the most ‘advanced’ European nations carried on with atrocities in the name of differences, often invoking ‘national interests’ and the need to ‘civilize’ the ‘dark continent’. The majority of mass media backed up the often genocidal actions of national governments.

Most recently, the mass media played a fundamental role in the human disasters in Rwanda and former-Yugoslavia. A Nazi type of ‘necessary’ transcendent national unity, justifying the extermination of entire ethnic groups, was promoted by media outlets in both countries.

These are the most easily recognizable

forms of racism, but they are not alone. Racism has evolved and Europe is now fostering ‘mellow’ forms of racism, customized for its second or third rate citizens.

Talk about ‘cultural differences’ undermining the ‘better values’ held by the majority is mainstream and regarded as innocent, almost liberal. Terms like ‘truth’, ‘objectivity’, ‘necessities of a market-driven economy’, and ‘the right to be different’, are now used to cover up and sometimes even give a shell of respectability to racism. Racist irony and humour are still permissible and widespread in the media, despite the historical fact they were used many times before as a reliable way to build up ethnic hatred.

Anti-Romatism, Romaphobia or anti-Gypsyism, is rampant both in its old and new versions. A majority of the European population makes no effort to hide their belief in strong negative stereotypes.

A survey of European media, conducted by On-line/More Colour in the Media¹³ demonstrated that “[i]n terms of groups with different national or ethnic origin, Sinti and Roma/Travellers are the group most often portrayed negatively - in almost one third of the cases, but they do represent a very small group in the sample (i.e. 14 mentions in total). The portrayal of Roma was neutral only half of the time; other groups were portrayed neutrally more often.”

Europe is still in denial of the Roma Holocaust, which wiped out over 95% of the Roma in Austria and Germany. In November 2001 a poll conducted in Romania¹⁴, (the country with the largest number of Roma) showed that 99% of Romanians thought Roma deserved the least respect among all ethnic minorities. The top three descriptions of Roma population by those polled were as ‘thieves’, ‘dirty’ and ‘lazy’. Only one in 25 of those interviewed was willing to consider Roma as equal-status citizens.

¹³ See www.multicultural.net

¹⁴ See www.mmt.ro/Cercetari/Bare%202001.pdf

The media took the results of this poll as 'normal', and even the very few pro-tolerance, leftist newspapers justified it on the basis of the 'obvious differences in values' between the two communities.

In August 2004, a leader of a popular labour union in Bulgaria (with the second highest Roma population in Europe) proposed the creation of paramilitary groups to fight against Gypsy gangs. The majority of Bulgarian media, including the leftist newspapers, responded favourably to the idea.

In 1993 the then Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, still the most popular politician in Slovakia, demanded welfare cuts to Romany mothers in order to curtail "the reproduction of socially unadaptable and mentally retarded people". He considered Roma as "anti-social, mentally backward, inassimilable and socially unacceptable". The Slovak press either ignored or saluted his statement.

On 21 July 1995, 17-year-old Mario Goral was beaten, then burned alive at the site of a Gypsy pogrom in World War II. He died of his burns ten days later. On 23 August, Jan Slota of the Slovak National Party had no problem declaring on Slovak National Radio: "I love roast meat Gypsy-style very much, but I'd prefer more meat and less Gypsies".

Again nothing happened.

Anti-Gypsyism is an electoral bonanza across almost the entire political spectrum. The media, well aware that racism sells, happily receives and promotes racist speech from political parties of the left, centre and right.

In 1998, under pressure from the tabloids, the UK Government re-imposed visa restrictions on Slovakia in order to prevent Romani asylum seekers from having their case heard in the UK. Only three years later, again under similar pressure, the UK government adopted a 'special' border policy, singling out persons belonging to seven named groups - Kurds, Roma, Albanians, Tamils, Pontic Greeks, Somalis and Afghans - for 'special' measures. Roma and Kurds, however, do not hold passports stating their ethnicity. This measure is still in place.

In keeping with its tradition, the UK government doesn't offer any training to customs officials in Romani culture and language and few people are aware that the UK government has actually developed a way to physically identify Roma. Despite a complete lack of logical or scientific basis, custom officials in one of the most developed countries in the world (but with an appalling record of human rights abuses) can decide who is or is not Roma.

Should we let Gypsies invade England?

This was the title of a telephone poll in January 2004 which attracted almost 20,000 people willing to pay premium rates to tell *The Daily Express* that they were not going to put up with the 'gyppos'. The poll was part of a larger media campaign in the British press led by tabloids that lasted for several months. The government responded by starting talks about measures to restrict access for Roma to the UK.

Let me repeat that: The government RESPONDED by looking for ways to RESTRICT the 'invasion'. They did not condemn the blatant racism, but LOOKED for ways to legitimize it. The tabloids were writing 'Victory' the very next day.

Replace the word 'Gypsy' with the similarly pejorative 'nigger'. Just imagine the worldwide reaction if the British government was looking at ways to prevent an 'invasion' of African-Americans, and that Colin Powell, for instance, was stopped by an overly zealous custom officer from entering the country.

There are hundreds of racist articles in the mainstream European press every day. Those against Roma do not even disguise their hate speech. In autumn 2003, a violent clash between Roma and Romanians - the worst such incident in Romania in 10 years - was presented by media as the 'War of the Gypsies'. A month later, 100 interviews in the town where the conflict occurred showed that all the interviewees thought the conflict was between two gangs of Roma Mafiosi. 'Victory' again.

To an outsider it must seem quite strange that the prevalent 'Romaphobia' all over Europe is downplayed by international institutions. Despite many reports by such institutions indicating that Roma are the largest yet most discriminated against ethnic minority in Europe, the only real effort seems to be to find more or less sophisticated reasons to justify Romaphobia. And the press continues to enforce negative stereotypes about Roma.

There are some efforts by the media to combat anti-Gypsyism, but they are far out-weighted by the 'economically motivated' efforts to dehumanize and alienate at least 10 million European Roma every day.

Freedom of speech should be the core of inclusive democracies, not the basis for defending racism and building up hate. When we will stop using freedom of speech to build up a Europe of hate?

It is very easy to say that none of what has happened is our fault. Seeking to avoid responsibility is built into the education system in a Europe unable to deal with its genocidal past. But whatever is happening now **is** our fault because we didn't try or manage to avoid the logical results of tens of thousands of hate campaigns against the 'others'.

I am frequently told by people about their Roma friends or their childhood spent around Roma - trying to claim 'knowledge' of the Roma and to justify the stereotypes they continue to believe. In central and eastern Europe at least six million Roma live side by side with the majority population. Every single one of them knows how to say 'thank you' in the official language of their country. How many non-Roma know how to say 'thank you' in Romani? Almost none. The fixation that Roma are different and evil has become the norm if not a political necessity.

It's 'Nais tuke', by the way.

<valeriu.nicolae@erionet.org>

THING'S AIN'T WHAT THEY 'SEEM' TO BE

John O

*Birmingham & Coventry NUJ;
National Coalition of Anti-Deportation
Campaigns*

**Do headlines have to incite
racial hatred?**

ASYLUM SEEKERS TO GET IVF ON NHS BEFORE CHILDLESS SCOTS

Asylum seekers will be given NHS fertility treatment on demand in a controversial move which will mean they are treated almost three times as quickly as many Scots.

The Scotsman, Sunday 29 August 2004
<http://news.scotsman.com/health.cfm?id=1013052004>

THE correct title for this piece should have been, '*NHS post code lottery denies rural Scots the chance of fertility treatment*'. Apart from being factual, it would, I am more than certain, have sold more copies than the headline *The Scotsman* chose.

'NHS post code lottery' has been good copy for a number of years now. Good enough to go on, and stay on, the front page of any national daily, and sell extra copies because of it. Or to be the lead story on any of the TV news channels, and stay there most of the day.

However *The Scotsman* thought better and ran the story with only one thing in mind - to 'scapegoat' asylum seekers. To my mind, whether *The Scotsman* intended it or not, the title '*Asylum seekers to get IVF on NHS before childless Scots*' is a subtle incitement to racial hatred as it quite clearly lays the blame for something on a targeted minority, whom it knows are getting more than their share of racist abuse. The person who wrote the article must have known quite well before putting

fingers to keyboard, that it is not asylum seekers who decide who gets treated under the NHS and where and when that will happen.

What is the real story here?

RULING EXPOSES IMMIGRATION LOOPHOLE

The European Court of Justice in Luxembourg yesterday exposed a large gap in Britain's immigration laws when it ruled that a Chinese woman who travelled to Belfast to have her child has the right to live in Britain because the child became an Irish citizen by birth and therefore an EU national.

The Guardian, Wednesday 20 October 2004
www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,,1331225,00.html

To my mind there are two things wrong with this story. Firstly it is not factual reporting and secondly, it misses a good human interest story.

There is not a loophole in the UK's immigration laws or in European Union law. This case, when it started in the UK immigration courts, was on the interpretation of EU law. Quite simply, 'could a foreign national benefit from the fact that their child was a European national and be able to reside with that child in the European Union'. The case progressed quite naturally through the UK legal system and was then referred by the Immigration Appellate Authority to the European Court of Justice for clarification.

The Court's ruling/clarification was that 'a foreign national could benefit from the fact that their child was a European national'. Mrs Chen had broken no law whatsoever and as 'carer' for the child, providing certain criteria was met, was entitled to remain with her daughter in the European Union, and her own particular preference was the UK.

'Just good family planning'

'Not so much the *Right to Family Life* but the *Right to have a Family*'. This could have been, and would have been my title for the story about Mrs. Chen.

If women in China who already have one child become pregnant with a second and the pregnancy comes to the attention of the authorities, a Chinese court can issue an order to force the mother to have an abortion and compulsory sterilisation. Where a woman does give birth to a second child, sterilisation is compulsory.

Already having one child and prevented by Chinese law from having a second, Mrs Chen decided that she would have another child, and then had to decide where it would be born - definitely not China. Mrs Chen read up on European law and saw a legitimate way to have her second baby and keep it. It was just good family planning. There's a bloody good full-length article in this if anyone cares to write it.

Conclusions

Should we as journalists challenge each other, our editors/bosses on the way stories are written/presented? Definitely yes! Beginning with ourselves, as the writing starts with us.

The flavour of the day/week for editors can damage the health/well-being of thousands of people. Both the articles featured above were misleading, both in their titles and content and the first could/may have increased hatred towards asylum seekers.

As journalists/trade unionists we need to challenge each other on the way we write stories. The way we would like to write it and the way the editor/boss insist we write it. Collectively challenge our editors/bosses, when they target minorities with malice aforethought.

<JohnO@ncadc.org.uk>

LOSING FAITH IN COLLEAGUES I THOUGHT WOULD HELP

Sandra Nyaira

Exiled Journalists Network; Former political Editor, Zimbabwe Daily News

AT the end of September I laughed so hard after reading a humorous article in *The Guardian*. The story was about the launch of an initiative in Austria, in which people are taught how to laugh for their own good. It is targeted at, among others at the lower end of the social scale, asylum seekers. Laughing, the authorities had realised, was a major stress-reliever, so they had to teach asylum seekers how to laugh hard and get their systems working better.

About this time, I went to a library in Surrey to do some internet research. By virtue of having come first, I was automatically going to have use of the first available computer. This small library has three computers and two of them had already been booked so the woman who arrived after me had to wait an hour for us to finish. And wasn't she angry that I - she assumed I was an asylum seeker - had been allowed access before her...

She shouted obscenities and lamented that asylum seekers were being allowed in, because even where she stayed it was the same thing: "You just never get a computer because the bloody asylum seekers have booked them all the time way before you".

She accused asylum-seekers of the rise in crime in and around Britain's major cities - just look at what is happening in Glasgow, and so on.

I was shocked by her behaviour, especially in as posh an area as Surrey. When the system is not coping - when the NHS fails to reach its targets, for example - people chose to blame asylum seekers, mainly because of the way the media here tell the story.

From the time I set foot in this country I realised that refugee and asylum matters are not a laughing stock but life and death issues. In the last year alone I have read articles, mostly in the tabloids that blamed refugees, nay, asylum seekers, not only for the resurgence but for the rapid spread of infectious diseases like TB, the dreaded HIV/Aids virus, SARS, as well as housing shortages and even terrorism.

I am one of those who have been badly affected and actually have lost faith in the people I thought maybe able to assist me and hundreds more like me.

As a Political Editor at *The Daily News* in Zimbabwe, we re-ran stories that appeared in most British newspapers, giving them a home slant, when things started falling apart in 2000 as a result of the ruling government land seizures. Naturally I expected the British media, which seemed to be sympathetic to the cause of the suffering masses in Zimbabwe, to be able to write stories that supported those people fleeing political violence and persecution. But no, most of them were not.

It was not just Zimbabwean refugees, but those from Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and many others coming from some of the world's troubled spots. As soon as they land at Gatwick or Heathrow, they blight Britain's services. It is all sheer hypocrisy.

Right now we have a Zimbabwean asylum seeker languishing in prison for allegedly trying to steal a two-year old girl. He claims he was just returning a gesture from the child and was trying to greet her at a busy shopping centre as his African custom would require. But no-one in the media tried to look at it that way. As a result of the fears that abound in this society, it simply meant this guy was trying to abduct a child.

Asylum seekers are also responsible for road accidents, dwindling fish stocks in the Thames, swans, etc. etc. Journalistic output on asylum issues is pathetic, yet sadly the public seem to support and appreciate the racist stories that emerge from the tabloids.

Journalism and Public Trust

Of course there are those who know and can readily rubbish the stories but the majority are only concerned with their amenities and how resources are being stretched by immigrants.

We need responsible reporting on such sensitive issues. In a sense the right-wing British press plays the same role the far right played in the last French Presidential election – it has put the contentious aspects of asylum on the map. The racist, anti-immigrant National Front voiced the fears of ordinary people. That is the reason why Le Pen did so well in the first round of the elections. Ultimately, both the centre right and the centre left parties were forced to move to the right on the issue of immigration. But had either party dealt with the issue openly and honestly before, we might have had a different result.

Papers like *The Express* publish unconscionable crap about asylum seekers but in my view all they are expressing is the worries (brought to the fore mainly by the Press) of many ordinary people who fear that their jobs and flats will go to immigrants.

I think the real failure is with the British government itself in failing to inform its citizens sufficiently about the issue – who are refugees and asylum seekers, what forces them from their homes, how are they helping to build towards the British dream, why are they here, and so forth. The government needs to focus on the worries of the electorate and answer questions forthrightly, not just in the vote-catching way they do now.

It's no secret that British people have in the past supported tax increases if they were to bring them more hospitals and amenities. Similarly, I would argue, a well informed populous would rally around immigrants to a greater extent if the government explained the moral justification, and focused on the need for more young labour in a society with an ageing population. Instead the Labour government talks about 'holding-camps' in North Africa.

Both the media and the government know the truth about what is happening on the ground and what the immigrant population is doing to keep the country going so why not tell the truth?

Most immigrant stories are against asylum seekers and one cannot honestly condemn a journalist for writing the story because the story is there. The biggest problem we have is that pro-immigrant stories are not being published at the same rate. We need to query the decisions by editors in the newsrooms so we can challenge them to change, instead of aiding the proliferation of anti-immigration stories.

The use of the term asylum seeker itself has increased over the past few years and seems to carry a lot of negative connotations with it. I sometimes wonder to whom the media would attribute society's mishaps if refugees and asylum seekers did not exist. They would have to be invented, I guess.

I have a number of friends who have been granted leave to remain here and some whose cases are still pending. Just sitting with them watching the news or reading newspapers can be a nightmare. In one bulletin alone the word asylum seeker was mentioned more than six times – I could see the fear it invoked in them.

People think they are criminals because of the way issues that concern them and their welfare are covered. Asylum seeker stories have become a staple of the tabloids. We cannot go for more than one week without a front page story on asylum seekers.

Variation between the tabloids - the *Mail*, *The Sun*, *Daily Star*, *News of the World*, the *Express* and even *The Mirror* - is minimal. *The Mail* is vicious in the way it covers asylum and immigration issues, especially with its anti-government stance. *The Mirror* is sometimes more generous but *The Express* is the worst. But it is the uniformity of their characterisation, and the lack of balancing viewpoints, that is striking.

Journalism and Public Trust

Remember the 1999 Dover stories that described Roma asylum seekers as 'bootleggers' and 'scum of the earth targeting our beloved coastline'. Things have not changed much in the way asylum issues are covered, and we are led to believe that refugees continue to 'swamp' Britain.

We all have our favourite examples of the negative stereotyping of asylum seekers in the press. It just has to be brought to an end. It's not going to be easy but I feel more at ease when I know there are journalists trying to fight for change.

From the *Mail* to the *News of the World*, we have to assert that the language of inaccurate terms like 'bogus' and 'illegal' is simply making life more difficult for tormented souls who are seeking to start life afresh after years of torture, harassment and intimidation.

According to a recent Mori poll, the result of this kind of daily barrage of disinformation is that race and immigration are now perceived as the third most important political issue facing Britain - ahead of defence, crime and the economy. Only health and education are seen as more important.

Scotland Yard has even stated publicly that negative newspaper articles lead directly to an increase in violence against asylum-seekers but newspapers simply do not see things the same way. They refuse to take responsibility for their actions as a new kind of racism continues to take shape in Britain.

As much as I put the blame on the government for failing to explain to the people about asylum issues, I think we must also take stock of how journalists have been using dubious statistics and claims when covering asylum stories.

We ought to be able to appeal to journalists' professionalism and ask them to report the stories of refugees properly without taking sides, providing the facts rather than assuming they are put a blight on our housing, education, health etc.

We must appeal for accuracy, and insist that the Home Office properly and regularly supplies journalists with authoritative figures.

Of course it may be difficult to convince some of the tabloids because in my opinion, the racism spewed from these newspapers is not because of carelessness or lack of thought but a deliberate and systematic campaign of hate which no amount of liberal pleading will unhinge.

The journalists and their editors have enormous power and they abuse it in the way they present asylum and immigration stories. What makes it more scary is that such papers sell far better than the more level-headed 'quality' dailies.

Racist coverage of asylum seekers is a failure of democracy I would argue because it is not the press freedom or freedom of speech that people have fought so long for. What freedom is gained if such coverage results in suffering and attacks upon people? Hate can never be compatible with democracy, for hate destroys everything but itself.

We must not tire of campaigning for just coverage of asylum, refugees and immigration issues, and press for compliance with guidelines from the NUJ and the PCC. The PCC must hold editors to account and demand that they explain to the public why they knowingly mislead.

This issue must not be thrown under the table. It must be discussed openly to make sure we can all continue to fight for what is right and just.

The public trust most of the things they read in newspapers so journalists must be responsible in the way they present issues that directly affect the lives of others, especially those who are in no position to answer back.

<snayira@yahoo.co.uk>

BE AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF OUR WORK

Bob Dale

Dover District Reporter & Asylum and Immigration Specialist, BBC Radio Kent

WHEN I took up my post as BBC Radio Kent's Asylum and Immigration Correspondent I knew it was going to be one of the most ethically-challenging roles of my career.

Not only did I still have my responsibility to deliver the BBC's three traditional values – to educate, to inform and to entertain – I would also be telling the stories of people who had fled countries that don't have the luxury of a free media, where just talking to someone like me can get you or your family killed.

The thin line I had to walk for the next six months, and continue to do so after returning to my regular job as Dover correspondent, was to reflect the concerns felt by our listeners about the asylum issue, while basing all my own reporting on fact, and fact alone, rather than negative newspaper coverage.

The asylum debate has been fuelled by generalisation and easy headlines for too long, what it needs is clear, unbiased reporting, coupled with human stories. Something that became clear very quickly was that, while even the least antagonistic member of the public would often be prepared to repeat the stories they read about 'asylum seekers just coming here for the benefits', once they had met a refugee and heard their first-hand account of persecution, the attitude softened, even if only a little.

I also realised, from attending conferences and seminars, that there is a gap in the regulation over coverage of asylum issues.

When a story appears about a named individual, and that person feels hard done by, he or she can launch complaints to the PCC or Ofcom, and

ultimately take legal action. But many newspaper reports simply referred to "asylum seekers" as a generic group, leaving the PCC virtually powerless to investigate any complaint of unfairness. With issues as big and important as asylum and immigration, maybe it's time to look at ways of closing this hole?

If we're going to have more regulation, then it has to be fair to the journalist, but also transparent. People must know that, if they, or their communities, are the victims of an injustice by the media, there are ways to get recourse, but the journalist must also know that, if they do their jobs properly, do their research, check their facts, give all sides the right to equal reply, and write the story even-handedly, the process will back them up too.

Who should set these standards?

I feel there has to be some kind of industry involvement. Only a journalist or broadcaster can really understand the kind of processes by which news is reported, and the pressures of deadlines and editors. But there should also be public representation, the people who are the end users of our product. Who knows, we might even learn something if we listen to their ideas on how we should report the news?

I honestly believe most, if not all, of my colleagues in journalism are ethical. If left to do their jobs, they will investigate stories properly and report facts, rather than wild rumours. There may be a case for looking at the role of the owners in the print industry, but as a broadcaster through and through I could never claim to have any knowledge of how much undue influence finds its way onto the newsroom floor.

We should always be aware of the impact our work has.

A commercial TV producer friend of mine, who has worked extensively in the East, was telling me how the World Service is regarded in India. "When they hear something," he said, "They say that it must be true, because it's on the BBC".

Since then I've often stopped while writing copy, asked myself if I can say with absolute certainty whether this or that is a fact, and if the answer is no, then out it comes.

It could be that, in the UK at least, we fall into the trap of hoping that our worldly, cynical audience only half-believes what it hears and reads, so it doesn't really matter if we repeat hackneyed generalisations. That would be a very dangerous trap to fall into.

In today's crowded media climate it's become necessary to shout even louder to get heard by the public, and maybe this can lead to sensationalism for the sake of a good headline. It's important to remember, especially when writing about asylum, that we are writing about people, often vulnerable and frightened people, people whose lives could genuinely be in danger, rather than simple statistics.

<bob.dale@bbc.co.uk>

ARE YOU LISTENING?

Jim Latham

Secretary, Broadcast Journalism Training Council

I CAN suggest one reason why a growing sector of audience and readership doesn't trust journalists – apart, that is, from a spineless print complaints system.

Give 'em a dose of the old Broadcast Complaints Commission, I say, and they'd sit up and take notice. Don't get me started.

But, how about this? We all work in an institutionally racist industry. And, particularly post 9/11, most black and Asian people have got the message and are deserting mainstream print and broadcasting journalism in their droves.

Why be insulted in your own home? Switch the bloody thing off or stop buying it.

Is anyone surprised by the phrase "institutional racism?" Or by the fact that, good heavens, readers, listeners and viewers, might actually exercise some kind of choice and take their business elsewhere? (and I choose my words carefully.)

The message was there, loud and clear, from Liverpool.

Authoritative figures give the black and Asian readership/audience sector as 10-15% of the national population – much higher in some regional centres – and likely to rise as high as 30% in the next 20 years.

In America and Canada, you ignore your ethnic minority audience at your peril – "Diversify or die," is a much-used marketing phrase.

Can the commercial side of our industry literally afford to allow its audience/readers/customers to believe that they don't count in editorial and programme agendas?

Journalism and Public Trust

Some UK marketing departments seem to have heard the message. Halifax Howard is fast becoming an icon.

But when the interest rate-rise vox-pops come around, a visitor to Planet UK might well be forgiven for thinking that no black or Asian family owns a mortgage or a house.

You've heard about the grey pound and the pink pound. Your marketing departments are talking about the brown pound and the black pound. Are *you* listening?

Because the business case for diversity has far-reaching implications for journalism – we're beyond the point where token representation in by-lines or TV presentation is going to convince a sophisticated and cynical (with good reason) audience and readership.

It's going to take a lot to balance years and years of grotesque portrayal of ethnic minorities in the UK media ('Immigrants eating swans' – are you listening?)

The treatment of the Ron Atkinson story is a marker – he may be a good bloke, but the story at least deserved some analysis of the conditions that would produce what he said.

And Alan Green's more recent attempt at humour, mid-football commentary, did little to persuade me that any lessons were learnt.

This is about journalism and journalists – individually and collectively. Ninety-six per cent of us are white and middle class – are you listening? Anyone care to suggest why that is the case?

And I'm afraid – "Well, we never get any applications from black or Asian journalists," won't cut it – at least until you've analysed why that should be. There isn't space here but I can suggest a few explanations.

Oh, and by the way, do me a favour. While you're considering the above, just let your chair swivel through 360 degrees and count how many black and

Asian journalists you can see in *your* newsroom – send me your answers.

There've been plans, legislation, statements, policies, initiatives, conferences, codes, courses and discussions going on about diversity – or the lack of it – since the IFJ "Code of Bordeaux," in 1954.

But in spite of the undoubted progress that's been made, particularly in the broadcasting sector, largely led by the BBC, there's been little change in individual *attitude*.

The distressing fact is that many journalists believe the racial stereotyping promoted by their own industry and the every-day racism experienced by many black and Asian people on the street, is replicated in many newsrooms.

Most white journalists have no knowledge or experience of other cultures to inform their reporting of *anything* to do with ethnic minorities.

The accepted definition of institutional racism comes from the McPherson Report. It says, amongst other things, that unintentional racism is still racism. I've recently interviewed quite a few black and Asian journalists – their stories bear out every dot and comma of the McPherson definition and exemplify, time after time, experiences of racism.

One example – a black woman journalist arrives in the newsroom and has to share an office login code until hers is sorted out and, as a result, sees, first hand, the racist jokes routinely passed round the office e-mail system.

And here lies a problem. How can any journalist have any credibility in the day-to-day work of reporting, whether he or she is honestly trying to be objective, fair and balanced, or particularly when taking a moral standpoint in tackling social injustice, while back at the office they tolerate, condone or even participate in one of greatest social injustices – racism and lack of diversity?

Journalism and Public Trust

And if you think this fundamental hypocrisy is lost on audiences, readers and listeners, you're deluding yourself – it's at the root of the lack of trust between ethnic minority communities and mainstream broadcasting and print media.

No institution is simply a pure structure with racism built in like the plumbing – they're made up of individuals holding views, attitudes and beliefs derived from environment, education, and other social processes.

It follows (hopefully) that those attitudes, views and beliefs can be changed – with recognition of their existence as a first step and robust anti-racist mission statements, cultural awareness training (benchmarked to recruitment and promotion,) and revisited disciplinary codes, to follow.

I'm not trying to claim any moral high ground here – I too am white, male, middle-aged and middle class. But I do think some of the daily experiences of our black and Asian journalists and attitudes which don't deserve the trust or support of a significant slice of our customers, need to be dealt with.

We journalists are fond of advising others (I'm doing it now) from football managers to Prime Ministers, how to solve problems – it's time we looked at and within ourselves and sorted this bloody mess out.

<sec@bjtc.org.uk>

For the last year Jim Latham, has been working on a BJTC research project on cultural and social journalism in broadcasting. This article represents his personal viewpoint.

PART 3

**MORE SPINNED
AGAINST...**

NUMBER 10 AND THE MEDIA: CO-DEPENDENTS IN THE SPIN CYCLE
Graham Allen MP

UNSOURCED AND UNSUBSTANTIATED
*Nicholas Jones**

RETHINKING ANONYMITY
Bill Norris

**NUMBER 10 AND THE
MEDIA: CO-DEPENDENTS
IN THE SPIN CYCLE**

Graham Allen MP

*Labour MP for Nottingham North; author
'The Last Prime Minister: Being honest
about the UK presidency'*

BRITISH politics is dominated by Number 10 Downing Street and the media. Everyone else, Parliament included, is reduced to the role of on-looker rather than participant.

British politics is now defined by this love/hate relationship which is both unhealthy and undemocratic. Neither the Prime Minister nor the media are directly elected and if our democracy is to develop, the role of directly-elected representatives needs to be accommodated in a new political settlement.

Some years ago I remember Tony Benn complaining that British politics was being sold like soap powder. He was wrong, and for three important reasons.

First, British soap makers have far more money and far more opportunity to advertise and promote their products than British politicians. Second, people need soap powder in their everyday life far more than they need politics. Third, soap powder is more trusted than politicians. That is not because soap makers are any more virtuous than politicians, it is because of commercial necessity. Over time, a soap powder which fails to meet its claims will fail in the market place.

Three simple points, but they highlight the critical role of the media in making our political system work. Political news not only has to inform consumers of what is on offer in the political market but it also has to advertise and promote it. It has to make people interested enough to engage in an activity which is entirely voluntary - voting - and which generally makes little immediate impact on their lives. Finally, and most critically, the media do more than any

Journalism and Public Trust

other institution to determine whether politicians are trusted and whether their 'brand' succeeds or fails in the political market place.

Judged against all three of these tests, our political system is failing badly. The level of participation and engagement in politics is at its lowest since Britain became a full democracy in 1928. Significantly, the people most likely to vote at the next election are retired voters; those least likely are first-time voters. People still interested in politics are increasingly deserting conventional politics for alternative forms of activity. One single-issue pressure group - the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds - has more members than all three political parties combined.

People are not only more apathetic about British politics they are increasingly more cynical. In opinion polls politicians - and journalists - regularly figure in Britain's least trusted occupations. Politicians like to blame the media, but these developments are actually the result of a systemic failure in our political system and an unhealthy relationship of mutual dependency between its major players - the Premiership and the media.

It is no coincidence that both players are unelected and largely unaccountable. (The Prime Minister actually controls the institution - Parliament - which is meant to scrutinize him). Their power has allowed them to set the basic rules of engagement of British politics.

The Prime Minister of the day sets the political agenda and determines the basic issues on which the parties will compete for attention. In return, he or she is expected to provide news, instantly on request, at any time of day or night.

Without a separation of powers all stories flow through our unitary system with our unelected Presidency at the top. No political competition between an independent legislature and an independent Executive means 'one-source news', which breeds lazy journalism from those who accept what is offered and cynical journalism from

those who don't. The natural product of such an arrangement is 'spin', which I would define as the art of interpreting events in such a way that the interpretation becomes as much a part of the published narrative as the events.

There is nothing new about spin. Julius Caesar acted as his own spin-doctor, to brilliant effect, in the Gallic wars. The Tudors employed professional spin-doctors to turn Richard III from a well-loved ruler into Shakespeare's misshapen monster. What is new to Britain is the intensity and totality of spin - the subordination of every single event to a central narrative with a central character - the Prime Minister.

Too many people have attributed this phenomenon to Tony Blair personally. It is true that throughout his leadership Tony Blair has been acutely conscious of the power of the media to destroy parties and politicians. I believe that he is haunted by the memory of the early 1980s, when he first became an MP, when the Labour party was systematically vilified by the media. It left him and his closest advisers, Alistair Campbell and Peter Mandelson, determined to control the media perception of himself, his party and his government. There must never be a moment when he appeared uncertain or not in full control of events, particularly in relation to dissent within his own party. Such a moment would be used by the media to shred his reputation. Given the way the media turned on John Major as a 'weak' Prime Minister, who is to say he was wrong?

Blair and his circle have certainly had a personal impact on relations between government (i.e. No. 10) and the media. The power he gave to Campbell, and the focus and efficiency with which he used it, were unique in British history. But I believe that the fundamental rules of engagement were shaped as much by the media as much as by government.

One obvious source of media pressure is the onset of 24-hour news services. It means, quite simply, that political news gets stale much more quickly. A story needs to be constantly refreshed for the next edition of a newspaper or a news

bulletin. If it is not refreshed by some new event (which happens more often than not), it can only be refreshed by interpretation. The obvious first call for such a response is No. 10. The demands of modern news schedules create a cycle of responses almost as formal as a religious ceremony: event - response from No. 10 - response to No. 10's response - No. 10's response to the response...

Allied to this pressure is the growing tendency of the media to make political news personal rather than general, which in turn reflects the growing tendency of news organizations to become part of the entertainment industry. Events become important not in their own right but because of their impact on a political personality. Even the most dramatic or heart-rending stories have been treated in this way: 'Blair Rocked By Hostage Crisis'.

A third pressure comes from individual journalists, at a time when most British news organizations are contracting their staffs. It has become ever more important to get stories regularly published under their own byline, and that generates more calls on No. 10 to supply the extra ingredient to a story which helps it to 'make the paper' or give it a more prominent position.

The balance of power between individual journalists and their sources has shifted decisively in favour of the sources, and this development would have continued under any Prime Minister. Whatever the reasons, there is no doubt that more and more news reaches the British people through the prism of No. 10, and less and less of that news is trusted and believed.

How can this be remedied?

The long-term remedy is to rebalance our democracy, reviving the power of directly elected bodies (Parliament, devolved and local government) to make and initiate news and ending the virtual monopoly given to Number 10, and making the Presidency in the UK one directly elected by the people.

But that is not going to happen quickly enough. I think that in the short term we need new rules of engagement between the news-makers in Number 10 and news organizations.

First, I think that both sides should restore the boundary between fact and interpretation. When that distinction is restored, I think it reasonable for any government to offer its interpretation of any story (whether or not this is requested) and I think it reasonable in most cases for news media to report it clearly as interpretation. It might help if reporters used directly the phrase 'government spin doctors suggested that...' Perhaps newspapers could put 'spin' from any source in separate type.

Second, I think that Number 10 should no longer maintain a line on every single story, still less pretend that its line is universally accepted within the government or the Labour Party. In return, the media should not exploit this new openness to suggest that the Prime Minister is weak or indecisive or that the government is hopelessly split.

My third proposal may seem frivolous but I think it could provide a useful remedy against the uglier excesses of spin-doctoring. I believe that the terms of reference of the Press Complaints Commission should be changed to allow it to consider complaints by journalists as well as complaints against them. This could offer some support for journalists who have been lied to directly or threatened or harmed in any way in their own career, or felt themselves subjected to any unreasonable pressure to report news in a particular way or to suppress it.

Neither media nor politicians can afford to do nothing and allow the present relationship to continue. If both continue to provide the same diet of news which is over-managed and under-believed each will find itself bypassed by the Internet - a source of news and political activity which neither can control.

<ALLENGW@parliament.uk>

UNSOURCED AND UNSUBSTANTIATED

Nicholas Jones

Former BBC correspondent; author of 'Sultans of Spin' & 'The Control Freaks'; member Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

OF all of the changes which I have experienced in over forty years as a journalist I would say that by far the most profound has been in the phenomenal growth in unsourced and unsubstantiated stories.

The widespread failure to attribute facts and quotations has become a cancer eating away at the ethical standards of news reporting and the probity of the British news media.

Among the worst offenders are three of the most prominent branches of journalism: politics, sports and show business.

All three have a great deal in common. Much of the reporting tends to be personality-led and speculative. So fierce is the competition between newspapers, magazines, websites, television and radio, that the relevant journalists are no longer judged solely on their reputation for fairness and reliability but more often than not on their hit rate when it comes to delivering 'exclusives'.

Another significant similarity is that the news media's relationship with the leading practitioners in all three areas is increasingly controlled by spin doctors, celebrity agents and the massed ranks of the various specialists in public relations and public affairs.

Access to leading politicians, players and performers tends to be strictly limited and is often dependent on a pay-back, either in the form of favourable publicity or straightforward commercial promotion.

My greatest expertise has been in political reporting and I hope I can

describe with some degree of authority the step change which has taken place. A glance at a newspaper like *The Times* would illustrate the point I am making. It is not uncommon for the main stories leading the front page to be based entirely on anonymous sources.

Having worked on *The Times* as a parliamentary and political reporter in the late 1960s and 1970s I can say with some certainty that thirty years ago it was rare indeed to find a lead story in the paper which offered the reader no direct attribution for any of the facts or quotations. Former sports and celebrity journalists have told me their experiences reflect mine.

So great has been the transformation that even the humble caption to a celebrity photograph can no longer be trusted. Invariably the anonymous quotes tend to be attributed to 'an onlooker'. Snatch pictures taken by the paparazzi fill acres of space in the popular press and, as the only witness to an 'event' has usually been the photographer, the caption writer effectively has carte blanche to dream up the best possible story line.

I keep a file on what the 'onlooker' says and these stereotyped quotes have become a cliché. If, for example, a footballer gets caught on camera with a model, our friendly 'onlooker' has a pocket book full of suitable one-liners with which to embellish the story: 'They could not keep their hands to themselves...they were cuddling all the time...they certainly gave the impression of being an item'.

When it comes to political reporting the quotes are likely to be equally imaginative although our 'onlooker' is usually invested with far greater gravitas: 'A Downing Street insider says...'; 'The Prime Minister's aides believe...'; 'One cabinet source revealed...'; and so on.

Of course I readily accept that exaggerated and unsourced stories have been part of the lifeblood of Westminster for centuries but I do believe there has been a further deterioration in the level

Journalism and Public Trust

of public trust in political reporting since Tony Blair became Prime Minister.

Instead of seizing an unparalleled opportunity to do his bit to help push up the levels of accuracy and fairness in political coverage, Alastair Campbell took advantage of the commercial pressures which have driven down journalistic standards. Both he and the rest of the New Labour spin doctors under his control failed to speak on the record whenever possible or to insist that their own quotes were properly attributed.

In exploiting the demand for exclusives, by offering access and interviews in return for favourable coverage, he encouraged the trade in off-the-record tip offs and the growth in unsourced stories.

Obviously previous governments have been as guilty as Blair's administration in seeking to manipulate the media but the reliance placed on selective briefings during Campbell's six and a half years in Downing Street further undermined what is, after all, an essential foundation stone for democratic government, a free and fair flow of information from the state to the public and equal access for all journalists.

Given the commercial pressures which drive the intense competition within the media, journalists left to their own devices are unlikely to take the initiative and clean up their own act. Therefore I do think it is incumbent on the government of the day - and this applies to all those involved in public affairs - to make the first move.

Instant access for all media outlets and the public can be provided via the Internet and the massive expansion which there has been in websites. There is no reason why Whitehall departments and state agencies could not provide a level playing field.

Televised lobby briefings would open up to public scrutiny what is in effect the last closed shop in British journalism and help bring about a new culture of openness.

Unless there can be a new presumption that whenever possible government officials speak on the record, a culture of secrecy will continue as will the inherent tendency of much of the Whitehall machine to go on supplying information to journalists on an off-the-record basis which only encourages the fabrication of stories by those reporters left out of the loop.

If the Prime Minister fails to seize this chance to reform the lobby system and if he does give way in the face of protests from vested interests in the House of Commons press gallery, Labour can hardly go on complaining about the growth in unsubstantiated political stories.

I have never understood why the government does not see the value in treating all journalists equally.

Do ministers not realise it would make it so much harder for us to exaggerate or mislead if we all had simultaneous access to the same information. In that way reporters inside the magic circle as well as those outside it, really would be tested because the more official sources there are, releasing information to all comers on an on-the-record basis, the harder it would be to defend sloppy, cynical journalism.

At least there would then be a chance to drive up editorial standards.

<jonespin2@btinternet.com>

RETHINKING ANONYMITY

Bill Norris

*Former ITN and Times correspondent;
Associate Director, MediaWise*

THOU shalt not reveal thy sources. It is the First Commandment of journalism; our banner and creed. In journalistic codes of conduct throughout the world it is the one constant refrain, and for good reason: if our contacts cannot trust us to keep their confidence they are not going to talk. And if they do not talk, a lot of important stories are going to go unwritten and unbroadcast.

Many journalists have gone to jail to defend this principle; even in the United States, where journalists supposedly operate under the protection of the First Amendment. There, the latest victim is *New York Times* reporter Judy Miller. It is hard to think of any other profession which would show such bravery in defence of an altruistic ideal.

And yet....there is a problem. Far from encouraging trust in journalists, the 'unattributed source' has become a major reason for public distrust. This is especially so in the field of political reporting, where spin-doctors and disaffected politicians have come to rely on confidentiality to whisper all sorts of spurious tales into journalistic ears. When these are proved to be false, and sometimes even when true (think Andrew Gilligan) it is the journalist who carries the can.

The lobby system, under which journalists are free to print what they are told but must never disclose the source, has been a problem as long as I can remember - which is a very long time. Back in the 1960s, and for a long time before and after, lobby journalists were not permitted to disclose to anyone - even their editors - that daily meetings were taking place at No.10 and "under the clock tower" at Westminster. To say where their information came from was unthinkable and strictly against the lobby rules. Not surprisingly, this led to endless kites being flown by whichever party happened to be in power, and

endless denials when they fell to the ground. Things are somewhat more open now, but behind-the-scenes briefings on 'lobby terms' persist.

Modern conditions of instant reporting made possible by the new technology, and the advent of 24/7 news, have made it hard for reporters to resist the siren songsters of politics. If they take the time to make the proper checks on the story, the fear is that someone less diligent will beat them to the punch.

It is time, I think, for journalists to take a stand. "Can I quote you on that?" is a very good start, to be followed by "Why not?" If the answer reveals no more than personal cowardice on the part of the informant, forget the story. Let us make an end to 'well-informed sources in Whitehall', or 'friends of the Prime Minister said...' etc. etc. The public deserve to know who said what, and why.

There are, of course, instances in which the protection of a source's identity is absolutely vital. Whistleblowers within the civil service or industry who make disclosures in the public interest stand to lose their livelihoods or face legal sanctions if their names are revealed. This does not relieve the journalist of the responsibility for checking the facts of the story, but these are the people for whom we should be prepared to go to jail.

There is a suspicion in the public mind that journalists invent quotes from unnamed sources to spice up an otherwise dubious story. Of course, this would never apply to anyone reading this article, but lacking a name after those quotation marks, how is the reader to know?

We need to be more astute when promising confidentiality; to question the motives for declining to go 'on the record'. It is, after all, our neck on the block when things go wrong.

<NorrW7@aol.com>

PART 4
**TRAINING
JOURNALISTS**

THE CHALLENGE FOR JOURNALISM
EDUCATORS

Deirdre O'Neill

TEACHING JOURNALISTS TO COVER
EUROPE WHEN THE MEDIA FAIL TO
INFORM - A PARADOX

Paul Rowinski

**THE CHALLENGE FOR
JOURNALISM EDUCATORS**

Deirdre O'Neill

*Senior Lecturer in Journalism, Trinity
and All Saints College, Leeds*

WHEN Ryan Parry, an ex-student of mine, made a front-page splash in *The Daily Mirror* as a royal footman my first reaction was 'Good on you Ryan, you've made it'.

But this pleasure began to pale rather quickly. While it is undisputable that Ryan had natural talent and drive, and will have learnt a great deal of his craft on the job, and not from us, I started to feel ambivalent after the initial glow of pride about my (admittedly very minor) role in his meteoric rise.

After all, what had he learned from studying journalism? What was the nature of what he had achieved? To go undercover undoubtedly takes nerve and is justified when that which is in the public interest is being exposed.

But under the frankly thin veil of exposing security risks to the Royal Family, what the public really got was the fact that parts of the Palace are rather shabby and some of the Royals are rude – no surprises there then.

As for the exclusive pictures of the Royal breakfast table replete with Tupperware, this may display poor taste, but it is hardly headline news.

This ambivalence permeates all my work as a journalism educator. I might start the day with a theoretical lecture that looks at tabloidization, or the rise of news management and its pernicious influence on journalism, or how the powerful in society tend to win out in accessing the media and getting their voices heard.

From there I trot off for a practical session where I teach students the same old routines, where assumptions about who makes the most 'credible' news sources are naturalised, where students

Journalism and Public Trust

are encouraged to bring out the drama in stories.

The fact is, one needs a split personality at times to lecture in journalism. At our college we've always prided ourselves on critiquing journalism, discussing current debates in the field, at the same time as giving students some basic practical skills in news and feature writing. And what we critique in a theory lecture may be the very points we promote in a practical session.

Lecturers must be pragmatists: our students need jobs. Telling them to do it differently than how it is done on newspapers is not going to do them any favours if they wish to work in mainstream media. Competition for jobs is fierce while salaries for print journalism outside of the national press are often scandalously low.

In an uncertain job market where you are only as good as your last by-line, journalists are not likely to question news gathering techniques or the news values or news agenda in operation.

This explains how, despite changes in staff, the construct of news does not essentially change and why, despite a competitive news market, news products are often remarkably uniform.

It is therefore no surprise that even a female editor of *The Sun*, Rebekah Wade, keeps the anachronistic images of semi-naked women. To expect individuals to make a stand at the expense of their careers is unrealistic – what is needed is a collective response.

Writing in *Press Gazette* (1 March 2002) my colleague Tony Harcup recognised that ethical considerations cannot be divorced from what he describes as 'job insecurity, understaffing and macho management'. He believes that active NUJ chapels can offer 'an alternative, arguably more constructive way for journalists to raise ethical concerns about how they are expected to cover stories'.

Recently members of *The Express* chapel sought to challenge how its

members were required to cover stories about asylum seekers.

In his book *On Television and Journalism*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that it is journalists' views of themselves and the competitive environment they work in that shapes their style of reporting, a style that fosters cynicism and disengagement amongst news audiences, particularly in the political arena.

'Because they are so afraid of being boring, they [journalists] opt for confrontations over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous argument, and in general, do whatever they can to promote conflict...They are more interested in the tactics of politics than in substance...'

Bourdieu believes overstatement, simplicity, immediacy and conflict are the order of the day, rather than the complex or subtle explanations that many events in today's world demand.

Illuminating and complex reporting was frequently absent from the saturation coverage given to Ken Bigley, the British hostage in Iraq. John Pilger in *The New Rulers of the World* talks of 'politics by media, war by media, justice by media, even grief by media'. Perhaps we can add therapy by media. 'With the stark headlines, and the accompanying wall-to-wall coverage of the man, his life and his death – it was like Diana, Princess of Wales all over again', wrote Alice Miles in *The Times* (13 Oct 2004).

Believing it to be part of our therapy culture, she criticises the public for working itself up into a 'frenzy of public mourning' and 'mawkishly poring over the grisly details of Mr Bigley's execution, a form of death porn' while seemingly far more indifferent to the deaths of the 68 British soldiers who have died in the conflict (not to mention the British journalists killed).

Also unedifying is the blatant hypocrisy of the press. The Bigley story was accompanied by the very images from a videotape of his murder which the press claimed should not be aired for fear of providing publicity to terrorists. A few

Journalism and Public Trust

years ago we had the ridiculous 'naming and shaming' of paedophiles in the *News of the World*, a paper that serves up an unwholesome diet of sex, scandal and sleaze, and which is littered with images of provocatively clad, barely pubescent girls.

We've come a long way from the old adage, sometimes attributed to Lord Northcliffe, that 'Journalism is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising'.

With the rise of public relations, these days everyone, it seems, has something to sell, be it a book, film, image or line, and journalists do not appear to have dragged their feet in being recruited on to the sales team. Free publicity dressed up as news or an exclusive interview, or the coverage or credence given to deliberately planted stories or spin hardly inspires trust.

In political reporting, the lobby system can also undermine journalistic integrity. And the fault does not lie solely with journalists.

Nicholas Jones, former BBC political correspondent castigates the former Director of Communications Alistair Campbell (*Free Press*, March-April 2004) for passing up the opportunity to 'drive up levels of accuracy and fairness by ensuring a level playing field for all political journalists at Westminster'. Instead Campbell took advantage of the competitive pressures on journalists to exploit 'the demand for exclusives by offering access and interviews in return for favourable coverage' and by encouraging 'the trade in off-the-record tip-offs'.

Duncan Milligan, press officer for the Fire Brigades Union, put it more robustly when interviewed by me for a study of the coverage of the firefighters' dispute of 2002.

He had noticed that coverage was much more critical of the union when reported by parliamentary correspondents. 'The Government had power over political reporters that we did not', he said. 'Political journalists were up Downing

Street's backside and willing to print anything Number 10 said'.

I also interviewed FBU members and officials about their attitude to the press since the strikes. None felt their story was properly told. My research shows some papers were quite fair in their coverage, but the politically-inspired excesses of the few – notably *The Sun* – have sullied the reputation of the press as a whole.

While Milligan was rather sanguine – perhaps resigned – about the vitriolic response of *The Sun*, this was not the reaction of ordinary members. Those I spoke to were deeply hurt and angered by how some sections of the press turned against them; how they couldn't get to put their case or tell their story. Some stations and individual firefighters will no longer take *The Sun*, and a number claimed that they do not read or trust *any* newspaper.

Journalism education should involve dealing with some of these issues if the public is not to lose further trust in the profession. Those of us working in this area must reconcile education in the broad sense of the word with skills-based training. We must encourage critical expression, instil high standards and imbue practice with an ethical dimension.

But if we are to promote a diverse journalistic output and journalistic integrity in our students, we must also remind them of the importance of collective organisation within the workplaces they will be entering as the most junior (and least powerful) journalists on their publications.

<d_o'neill@tasc.ac.uk>

TEACHING JOURNALISTS TO COVER EUROPE WHEN THE MEDIA FAIL TO INFORM - A PARADOX

Paul Rowinski

Senior Lecturer in Journalism, The Journalism Centre, Harlow College/Middlesex University; writer on Europe

LECTURING on the European Union to undergraduate, and often high-calibre postgraduate journalism students, I find they come to the table with little prior knowledge. Compounding the problem, they are often politically phobic, generally.

One of the key sources normally used to explain the political environment around them is often actually accentuating the problem.

The British media frequently predicates its arguments on Europe on false premises. As a lecturer, journalist and academic covering Europe, I encounter very different analyses elsewhere in the continental press, but students can seldom read these.

Academic fieldwork, based on interviews, has revealed how eminent UK 'Europe' correspondents and those working for the EU institutions they cover, are often assumed to be 'evangelists' or 'apologists' for Europe – because they have 'gone native'. That they are constructively critical is often ignored.

The scepticism comes from British politicians, other journalists and their employers. 'Europe' correspondents argue that a different set of news values are applied to their reporting. This often means the discourse on Europe is severely curtailed, if not spiked.

The institutions and structures of the European Union - due to their inter-relatedness with member nation states on one hand and pan-European

elements within the EU - are by their very nature complex.

Take the workings of the European Parliament (EP). Richard Corbett, MEP, described Westminster as theatre, saying it was 'better' television – lively, adversarial and confrontational. "Our (EP) debates cannot have government versus opposition," he explains.

"And then we have all the languages. If you are telling a joke in English, ten seconds later another group laughs. It is not a sexy parliament and it is not visual. Where we score well is in shaping legislation. Westminster is a rubber-stamp parliament. You know the outcome."

Yet the point that MEPs have real power to change legislation, rather than being 'lobby fodder', is rarely made in the British media.

Journalism students generally are completely oblivious to how Europe impinges on domestic reporting. Some suffer what I have dubbed 'political phobia' anyway, lacking a sound current affairs knowledge. Europe is often the weakest point.

Various teaching methods can be employed to counter this. A device commonly used is going through the newspapers. This brings it to life, supporting more formal learning, and helping to abate bad bouts of political phobia. But not when it comes to Europe. UK newspapers often compound students' confusion, with mixed messages, predicating reports on false premises. It is hard to stress the importance of understanding Europe for their effective reporting in the future.

My evidence is experiential - as a former foreign correspondent and writer/academic on Europe, conducting fieldwork with 'Europe' correspondents for the UK.

Any set of national daily newspapers have often done nothing to empower me – and probably contradict the arguments I present. I, like the 'Europe' correspondents quoted below, and the EU press officers serving them, find

Journalism and Public Trust

myself running the risk of appearing to advocate or apologise for Europe.

Let us take a fool's guide to recent European history, post-Second World War. This may partly explain the false premises in the British press.

Many of my interviewees suggested that because Britain was not directly embroiled in the fighting on mainland Europe, it did not perhaps feel such a compelling need to be bound into an economic and political integration that would prevent future wars – commonly cited as the initial motivation of the initial protagonists. Adenauer, the first post-war West German chancellor, together with others like the Frenchman Monnet, founder of the forerunner of the current EU, shared a compelling need to make peace and make it stick. Britain, victorious, and separated by a small stretch of water, felt no such compulsion.

Britain has suffered a disadvantage from joining the European club late, and not having been one of the six nations that moulded the original project. All of which may explain why discourse within British society is predicated upon a questioning view of the European project, which grew deeper in the post-war period.

Frederick Baker, an independent documentary film-maker who works for the BBC, Austrian and German television, comments: "I am talking about my experience as a British journalist trying to sell stories about the European continent... That is why I say that people are emotionally still at 1945. That is where you have to pick people up..."

"Generally, people want to know whose side they were on in the war, who bombed who... People cannot really handle that countries like France were on both sides, that gets really complicated. People in Britain are still very much on the feature film level of *The Guns of Navarone*, and the British film industry is still driving that narrative."

One of the key issues, in making for European coverage that is predicated on

false premises, is the news agenda of media organisations. Interviewees concurred on this issue, clearly arguing that Europe was treated differently.

Firstly, there appears to be a resistance of media organisations in this country to have Europe-specific coverage. This makes the life of 'European' correspondents difficult.

Baker cited the BBC2 *Correspondent* slot. He argues: "In the *Correspondent* strand there is the odd programme about Europe, but it is up against the rest of the world. There is no feeling of protected Europe, with a need for dedicated journalists, who really know what they are talking about."

A debatable point

He accepts the BBC covers the world, but argues it is not Eurocentric to have specific programming as well, otherwise: "If you are involved with the European Constitution, with laws that are having an effect, down your street, it is a huge abrogation of responsibility. People are actually being kept in the dark...but the British people want that."

David Walter is an ex-presenter of *Eurofile* and covered Europe extensively for both the BBC and ITN. He wonders why the radio programme had to change from *Europhile* to *Eurofile*. He too believes another set of values apply to Europe than to domestic politics, but always stopping short of compromising objectivity.

Paola Buonadonna has worked for more than a decade for the BBC. Her speciality is European affairs. She has worked on more than 15 programmes covering Europe. Nearly all were short-lived and axed.

She argues: "It is like reporting on a cult really. It went from being top of the agenda, in terms of what the BBC should cover in its political reporting. It is like pigeon-shooting in the Olympics now."

Buonadonna claims that when she started the it was a BBC stipulation that covering Europe was important.

Journalism and Public Trust

“The BBC decided that Europe did not draw in the crowds, which is true. But nor does Westminster, and nobody stops reporting domestic politics for that reason.”

Buondonna feels the Reithian ethos should apply. She does not work for Murdoch.

Baker cites one Europe-specific programme on British television, which is not useful to journalism students: “The only show that has survived in my whole career is *Eurotrash*... It is the longest-running programme that deals with Europe on British television. There is nothing else. That tells you the level of engagement with Europe.”

Press-wise a former correspondent used to cite how *The Times* had an Eighties mentality, when it came to covering the EU, not realising its institutions, like the Parliament, had moved on. They wanted ‘black and white’, as the correspondent put it, but the reality - with so many EU institutions mediating over each development - was actually shades of grey. EU institutions don’t help in this sense.

Dr Martin Bond, an ex-BBC producer and former press chief for the London office of the European Parliament, concurs with Buonadonna. As parliamentary spokesperson he was regularly told by the media they could not cover information on European elections from his office, because it was “propaganda”. Would they view a House of Commons release this way?

Geoffrey Martin, a former head of the United Kingdom representation to the European Commission, wasted months fighting at the Press Complaints Commission, over press caricatures.

“I used to talk to Lord Wakeham, who himself, as a former cabinet minister, misunderstood, or wilfully appeared to me to misunderstand the purpose of Europe. He said, ‘You should get a campaign going.’ I said ‘Lord Wakeham I am not interested, I am interested in that headline in the *Daily Mail* and the actual facts, the alleged facts, are wrong’. I lost every time”.

MEPs admitted to me recently, that the parliament is bad at selling itself. The long preambles do not lend themselves to media coverage. Decisions are often on different days to the debates. Corbett argued if you tell a joke in English it will take a long while, listening through their headphones, for everybody to get the joke.

This however is no excuse for the British media who have lost a lot more than what may be erroneous in translation. That is no laughing matter.

[<prowinski@hotmail.com>](mailto:prowinski@hotmail.com)

PART 5
REGULATION

THE PCC - FAST, FREE... BUT NOT VERY FAIR

Andreas Koumi

APOLOGISING FOR MISTAKES THE AMERICAN WAY

Jacob Ecclestone

NEW CODE FOR BROADCASTERS

*Fran O'Brien **

TRUST AND LIBEL LAW

Bruce Whitehead

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY?

Patrick Trollope

CLEANING UP THE ACT

Bill Hagerty

**THE PCC: FAST, FREE...
BUT NOT VERY FAIR**

Andreas Koumi

Secretary, Cypriot Academy; Founder, Exposure, N. London youth media charity www.exposure.org.uk

'Statistically, 2 out of 5 Greek women have got moustaches and I've been out with both of them.' **(Arf! Arf!)**

Daily Mirror, Saturday 10 July 2004

AFTER England's disappointing display in summer's Euro 2004 and Greece's subsequent victory, it's a throwaway line one might hear from a frustrated football fan down the pub. But surely not a comment one would expect to see printed in a national newspaper. Surely not even a British tabloid could stoop so low in a bid to appeal to more xenophobic readers during troubled times.

I'm sorry to have to disappoint. And the newspaper which, only a couple of months previously, had felt compelled to remove its editor for unforgivable inaccuracies, was responsible. ('Stalemates', *Daily Mirror*, 10 July 2004)

On this occasion, however, there was no hint of remorse from either the journalist in question or the new editor tasked with improving the publication's tarnished reputation. When I together with many others expressed our dismay, the response was the same to all.

"Where's your famous Greek sense of humour?"

E-mail from Derek McGovern to myself and others, 18 July 2004

When one female target of the *Daily Mirror's* bile had the temerity to ask why her particular grievance hadn't been addressed personally, she was told that there had been too many complaints

Journalism and Public Trust

which couldn't all be addressed individually.

"Would you have done? When would you have had the time to shave?"

E-mail from Derek McGovern to Olympia at Greek City video, 20 July 2004

Not to worry, I thought. There's always the 'Fast, Free and Fair' Press Complaints Commission (PCC). Surely they could be relied upon to encourage the *Daily Mirror* to behave more ethically.

I visited the PCC website for advice. I learned how the organisation was constituted and how their Editor's Code was formulated. And I began to wonder how this self-regulatory body, funded by the newspapers themselves, could possibly be in a position to act in the best interests of the public.

I discovered the 'Discrimination' clause of the PCC Editor's Code conveniently only protected individuals. As the *Daily Mirror* wasn't deriding anyone in particular - just every single Greek and, by extension, southern European women on the planet - I wouldn't get anywhere with that.

Not to worry, I thought. I could complain under the 'Accuracy' clause. After all, surely no self-respecting woman of any race (let alone 2 out of 5 Greeks) would go out with a sad little man who had to do down others in print to make himself feel better.

The PCC, at no cost to me and in a matter of weeks, lived up to two of its famous F's by concluding that no breach of the Editor's Code had taken place.

"The comment was intended to be a humorous remark rather than a descriptive statement of fact".

Letter to me, Monday 16 August 2004

In other words, we're prepared to let the press get away with insulting certain minority groups so long as we think it's funny...

Not to worry, I thought. If I wasn't happy with the *handling* of my complaint I could always refer the matter to the 'independent' Charter Commissioner, Sir Brian Cubbon. Perhaps someone not directly bankrolled by the press might be in a better position to challenge and criticise journalistic output.

I wrote to Sir Brian, explaining that the PCC's *handling* of my complaint might be in breach of the Race Relations Act as it considered the offensive, hurtful and damaging physical stereotyping of Greek women as humorous. His response?

"I'm afraid I cannot help you. I do not review the substantive decisions of the Commission. I am satisfied that the Commission fully considered your complaint, which was seen by all the members of the Commission".

Letter to me, Wednesday 1 September 2004

In other words, I'm an independent token and, even if the PCC's actions were unlawful, I have the power to do nothing other than fob you off. Oh and, by the way, they're all guilty...

Not to worry, I thought. If I wanted to suggest changes to the Editor's Code to ensure the public was better served I could always refer the matter to Ian Beale, Secretary of The Code of Practice Committee. The man who helps set the standards. The man who can help strengthen people's trust in journalism.

I wrote to Ian, explaining that, at present, it seemed unfair that minorities were unable to complain to the PCC on the grounds of discrimination.

As my experiences had proved, the 'Accuracy' clause provided people with inadequate protection.

I suggested that beefing up the Code to reflect the law, in terms of both the Race Relations and the Public Order Act, would send a powerful message to editors who did, after all, have a pivotal role to play in improving community relations in this country.

His response? No can do.

"...to change the Code to prevent comment of the sort you specifically mention would effectively prevent all light-hearted comment, which would be against the tradition of the British press and an encroachment on freedom of speech."

E-mail to me, Tuesday 5 October 2004

In other words, to maintain the 'tradition' of the British press, Greek women (and others) had to put up with being treated in an uncivilized way.

And if the PCC is happy to allow newspapers to get away with this sort of stuff, what message does that send to xenophobic readers?

Not to worry, I thought. If I wanted justice I could always engage valuable police resources. After all, they're paid for by the public, not the press. My complaint has been registered at the crime desk of Enfield police and is now in the hands of the Crown Prosecution Service.

My experiences might allow one, regrettably, to draw and express the following conclusions:

- 2 out of 5 tabloid journalists are racist.
- 2 out of 5 members of the PCC are conducting a whitewash.

I suspect, however, that no one would find this very funny. Unless there are fundamental changes to the way the PCC is constituted and funded, how its Editor's Code is written and regulated, such offensive statistics, whether accurate or not, will continue.

<andy@exposure.org.uk>

APOLOGISING FOR MISTAKES THE AMERICAN WAY

Jacob Ecclestone

Freelance, NUJ Ethics Council member

JOURNALISTS are not much given to introspection about the quality and accuracy of their work. They rarely admit to getting things wrong, and when they do there is a tendency to make excuses. Straightforward apologies are rare. British and Irish journalists should therefore sit up and take notice when two of America's most prestigious newspapers publicly own up to serious shortcomings.

On 26 May this year, *The New York Times* published a contrite admission that in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq it had fallen "for misinformation" about weapons of mass destruction. Four days' later, the paper's internal ombudsman, Daniel Okrent, published a long and detailed critique of editorial failures, concluding that those failures "were not individual but institutional."

On 12 August *The Washington Post* published its own *mea culpa*, admitting that it had underplayed stories which called into question White House claims that Saddam Hussein had an arsenal of WMD. The paper's Pentagon reporter, Thomas Ricks, wrote: "Administration assertions were on the front page. Things that challenged the administration were on [section] A18 on Sunday or A24 on Monday."

He went on: "There was an attitude among editors: Look, we're going to war, why do we even worry about all this contrary stuff?"

The *Post's* executive editor, Leonard Downie, wrote: "We were so focused on trying to figure out what the administration was doing that we were not giving the same play to people who said it wouldn't be a good idea to go to war and were questioning the administration's rationale. Across the

country, the voices raising questions about the war were lonely ones. We didn't pay enough attention to the minority."

Bob Woodward, who – as a young reporter – played a crucial part in exposing and eventually bringing down President Nixon 30 years ago, also owned up publicly to failure. In his present role as *The Washington Post's* assistant managing editor, Woodward conceded: "We did our job, but we didn't do enough, and I blame myself mightily for not pushing harder." He went on: "We should have warned readers we had information that the basis for [the war] was shakier than was widely believed. Those are exactly the kind of statements that should be published on the front page."

Commenting on *The New York Times's* exercise in self-criticism, Greg Mitchell wrote in the magazine *Editor and Publisher*: "While it does not, in some ways, go far enough, and is buried on page A10, this low-key but scathing self-rebuke is nothing less than a primer on how not to do journalism, particularly if you are an enormously influential newspaper with a costly invasion of another nation at stake."

Mitchell quotes a particularly honest confession by *The New York Times* that: "Editors at several levels who should have been challenging reporters and pressing for more scepticism were perhaps too intent on rushing scoops into the paper. Accounts of Iraqi defectors were not always weighed against their strong desire to have Saddam Hussein ousted. Articles based on dire claims about Iraq tended to get prominent display, while follow-up articles that called the original one into question were sometimes buried. In some cases there was no follow-up at all."

Welcoming the *The Times's* admission that when it finally gave "full voice" to the sceptics, the challenge was only reported on page A 10 when "it might well have belonged on page A1", Mitchell tartly remarks "that the same could be said of their [article] today, which also falls on page A 10."

In one particularly telling part of his analysis of how *The New York Times* had failed its readers, the ombudsman or 'public editor', Daniel Okrent wrote: "*The Times's* flawed journalism continued in the weeks after the war began, when writers might have broken free from the cloaked government sources who had insinuated themselves and their agendas into the pre-war coverage. I use 'journalism' rather than 'reporting' because reporters do not put stories into the newspaper. Editors make assignments, accept articles for publication, pass them through various editing hands, place them on a schedule, determine where they will appear. Editors are also obliged to assign follow-up pieces when the facts remain mired in partisan quicksand."

To those brought up on the arrogance of British newspapers, these examples of self-examination and self-criticism have an almost revolutionary appeal. How marvellous to have newspapers that admit their shortcomings and apologise to their readers.

Before getting too carried away, however, we should perhaps spare a moment for the bigger picture.

Robert Parry, a respected American journalist who helped to expose the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s, has commented that although the confessions of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were welcome as a way of correcting errors and ensuring higher standards for dealing with the issue of WMD, "the failure to address the larger issue of pro-conservative tilt will almost surely mean a continuation of the imbalance when other stories arise in the future. In the real-life world of professional journalism, reporters and editors will continue to know intuitively which standards – lax or strict – are most likely to protect their pay-checks."

That, I believe, is the nub of the issue for journalism in Britain as well as America: how can we overcome the inbuilt bias?

<scawfell@dircon.co.uk>

NEW CODE FOR BROADCASTERS

Fran O'Brien

Manager, Programmes policy, Content and Standards, Ofcom; Former NUJ Mother of Chapel

AS I write this article I am breaking off from reading some 900 replies to our public consultation on Ofcom's proposed Broadcasting Code – the new Code that will be published next year. It will set standards for programmes on radio and television services licensed by Ofcom as well as S4C and the BBC (with some exceptions).

We have proposed merging six legacy codes into one, which will be some 32 pages long. There are ten sections based largely on 'standards objectives' set out in the 2003 Communication Act (the Act) - everything from a section on harm and offence to due accuracy in news and due impartiality in programmes.

Every section contains principles which express high level aims, followed by rules. We have also put in some meanings of words to aid understanding.

Break the rules and a broadcaster risks a viewer or listener complaint to Ofcom which, if upheld, can lead to publication in the Ofcom complaints bulletin and, in the most serious of cases, fines, and/or (with the exception of the BBC and S4C) the revocation of licenses.

Almost all of the responses support our decision to create one code which is simpler and easy to read. Similarly the majority understand the importance of protecting children and ensuring harm doesn't occur. However, where they differ is how to achieve these goals while ensuring that programmes and programming are as challenging an innovative as possible. As you would guess there's a very wide range of views.

Broadcasters – as a group – are concerned to protect their right to freedom of expression. In general they argue that

adults must bear some responsibility for what they and their family choose to watch and listen to. Broadcasters want the Code to explicitly acknowledge that. The broadcasters are concerned too that the more prescriptive Ofcom is in the Code the less room there is for broadcasters to differentiate their services.

In setting the Code the Act requires Ofcom to consider - if we think it's relevant - that standards for harm and offence and fairness and privacy are set and enforced in a way which "*best guarantees an appropriate level of freedom of expression.*"

Freedom of expression is particularly important in journalism (but also applies to many other areas of broadcasting) and so we have put it in the proposed Introduction.

The opening paragraphs read:

1. *Freedom of expression is an essential human right. It is the right to hold opinions, to receive information and ideas and to impart them.*
2. *Broadcasting and freedom of expression are intrinsically linked. The one is the life blood of the other. Nowhere can that tension between the right to freedom of expression and its restriction be more acute than in drawing up a Code which seeks to regulate broadcasting.*
3. *All regulation in the proposed Code must be prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society. Unnecessary regulation should not be in this Code. Rules cannot be made at the whim of a regulator.*
4. *Regulation should be transparent, accountable, proportionate, consistent and targeted only at cases where action is needed. That is a requirement of the Act but it is also part of the test Ofcom has to apply in restricting freedom of expression.*

But Ofcom must balance this essential right with what the law also says about 'protecting' the public (particularly children). On this, the responses are split. Broadcasters are concerned that Ofcom may have gone too far in protecting the audience and, despite the

Journalism and Public Trust

code's intention outlined in the Introduction, it hasn't put enough emphasis on freedom of expression. This could result, broadcasters argue, in self-censorship or a 'chilling effect' on cutting edge and challenging programmes. Meanwhile many other respondents say we have not been restrictive enough.

There are a multitude of individual points but, in terms of journalism, broadcasters' concerns centre around:

- whether we are going too far in trying to protect the under eighteens involved in court cases;
- how far an under eighteen has the right to give consent for their own participation in a programme if the consent runs counter to the wishes of the adult who has care of them;
- whether broadcasters should be transparent with viewers and listeners about payments made to criminals or their families or associates (when justified by the public interest);
- whether there should be any rule in the code requiring broadcasters not to put a victim's life's in danger;
- how the complex rules regarding due impartiality should be framed to protect the broadcasters right to freedom of expression whilst fulfilling the legislative requirements of the due impartiality;
- how should a person's right to privacy be balanced against the right to gather (let alone broadcast) sounds and images?

Contrasted with the broadcasters' detailed responses are replies from the large numbers of private individuals who have written in having heard about the proposed Code from viewer and listener groups. Many of them may not have read the full consultation document but they have a short list of things that they feel passionately about and which have impelled them to write:

- fundamentally there is too much sex, violence and bad language on television;
- the watershed does not work;
- why replace the concept of taste and decency with harm and offence;

- who decides what generally accepted standards are;
- if people want to see explicit sex they can go to licensed sex shops;
- and – (and to a journalist this is the rub) – there is too much freedom of expression already.

What these individuals cannot know, without reading the full consultation document, is that the proposed Code is rooted in the Act and the 1996 Broadcasting Act. *'Taste and decency'* as a concept has been consigned to media history. Parliament has decided that the test must be one of *'adequate protection'* provided against the inclusion of *'offensive and harmful material'* judged by *'generally accepted standards'*.

As to what *'generally accepted standards'* are (GAS as one viewer decided to abbreviate them) – well, we have started research, which we will publish, about such issues as the use of sexual imagery on screen, and offensive language on radio and television, but importantly this research is looking at the impact of material according to the context in which it is transmitted.

We have also commissioned further research into what is acceptable in the soaps pre-Watershed in terms of sex, violence and language. This will all help us inform our Code as well as our decisions.

Web based guidance which can be regularly updated will support the Code and will utilise this research and more still to come. We will not build specific guidance into the Code because society's views change and can change very quickly.

For instance, following the Morecambe Bay tragedy sensitivity towards the way the British Chinese community were described was very high and will now probably remain so. That is a generally accepted standard that has emerged fully-fledged as a result of one high profile tragedy.

Then, of course, there is the deeply felt concern about the broadcasting of explicit sexual material – R18s as they

Journalism and Public Trust

are classified by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). Had Ofcom chosen to ignore this subject in the consultation it would have come up in any event - there are broadcasters who want to supply it and viewers who want to receive it.

In the consultation document Ofcom recommended that the prohibition on transmitting explicit sex should remain unless it could be established that there are sufficient safeguards to protect person under the age of eighteen and to ensure that adults who do not wish to see such material are adequately protected from harm and offence.

Some viewers' believe when it comes to explicit sexual material freedom of expression goes too far and should be hauled back.

The next letter on my pile, from someone who has read the consultation document, expresses this: *"you do not mention the reference in paragraph 2 of article 10 [freedom of expression] the conditions [that mean freedom of expression can be restricted] 'for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals.' The code should recognise the fact that television is essential a home entertainment system and information service and should not be used for purposes inappropriate to the home and family environment."*

Sex, violence, bad language and the possible effects on society and the young are the high profile areas that concern viewers and listeners. It is obvious to them that the broadcasters' freedom of expression must be curtailed in these areas.

There are very few comments, except from professionals, on journalism and the Code. Yet, when the redrafting prompted by the many responses ends, it must be the case that supporting broadcast journalism through a firm expression of the importance of freedom of expression will still be one of the pillars of the new Code.

Ofcom will endeavour to keep restrictions on journalists to a necessary minimum. The decisions

taken by news and current affairs editors and the journalists who work to them are amongst the most professionally and morally difficult that any broadcaster faces. The day-to-day weighing up of the public's right to know against the risk of infringing privacy or causing harm and offence are judged in the context of stories like the kidnap and murder of Ken Bigley and the mass murders at Beslan.

News events like these are a salutary reminder to those who are drafting the Code that the Code should assist broadcast journalists make those decisions and never hinder them.

<Fran.O'Brien@ofcom.org.uk>

TRUST AND LIBEL LAW

Bruce Whitehead

London-based journalist; writing and broadcasting about corporate and government malpractice

READERS and listeners trust journalists according to the truth of their stories. Despite the frequent listing of journalists at the bottom of the table of professional esteem, they are hugely effective in bringing wrongdoing to public attention. That they have been able to do so, and win public trust is no thanks to our draconian and ill-drafted libel law - one of the most restrictive in the world.

Although libel is a civil offence, the burden of proof is that of criminal courts - ie 'beyond all reasonable doubt', compared with the much less onerous 'on the balance of probability' required in the civil courts.

This litigious climate led Amazon recently to remove a book about George Bush from sale here, because its lawyers saw a potential complaint being brought by the Bush family in Britain. The volume is still on sale in the US.

The other problem is that the libel plaintiff (usually some dodgy business person or politician) can demand that the defendant (usually a journalist or newspaper) prove that the allegation is true. There's no such obligation on the plaintiff to show that the allegation is NOT true.

Last year I discovered how difficult it is to convince newspaper editors and their lawyers to challenge the libel laws in the public interest. I had uncovered a story that former Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) export department officials were now working for BAT, advising them how to defend against the DTI's smuggling investigation. Also, senior executives from BAT had been seconded to work at the DTI, even whilst the investigation was underway.

At first the broadsheets were very interested. A Sunday paper wanted more details, so I got them. Names, dates, an internal BAT email asking a member of staff - whose previous job was Director-General of the DTI's Export Promotion Department - to find out how the DTI's investigation of the tobacco giant would proceed.

The piece was ready to go when the news editor got cold feet. How could we prove any wrong doing? If we made these claims, might BAT sue us for libel? The paper chickened out and I went to *The Guardian's* special investigations department, whose own work had led to the DTI investigation into BAT.

At first the section was excited. In *The Guardian's* canteen, a journalist sifted through my evidence and was incredulous at the detail and quality of the material I'd gathered: internal BAT and DTI emails; revelations about ex-DTI staff exchanging their inside knowledge for the tobacco shilling; names of ex-BAT staff and advisers working for the DTI or government-funded trade organisations. The reporter excitedly gathered my evidence and promised to post it back to me.

A week later *The Guardian* announced they wouldn't be running the story because there wasn't enough evidence of wrongdoing. The fact was, none of this deplorable unethical conduct was actually illegal, despite it flying in the face of civil service rules on conflicts of interest. But surely that was the whole point? The fact that it WASN'T illegal?

The chairman of the Commons Health Select Committee, David Hinchliffe, said any connection between serving and former civil servants working on the DTI investigation into BAT was very worrying. Deborah Arnott, director of Action on Smoking and Health, said there was a clear conflict of interest when DTI staff were employed specifically to help BAT defend itself against a smuggling investigation.

None of this seemed to make any difference to the cowed broadsheet press. In turn, news editors each took a

Journalism and Public Trust

keen interest in the story, only to turn it down, unable to explain why a 'great story' had suddenly become 'not for us I'm afraid.'

I can only assume that the papers' lawyers had vetoed the article out of a fear that they would be unable to prove any wrongdoing. Libel damages are still extortionate, and newspapers were unable to take such a financial gamble. (Marcel Berlins' ideas for reforming libel law and damages by establishing a Defamation Authority are sensible.)

But there have been many stories which were run by editors even though they might not have been true, because it was overwhelmingly in the public interest that the information be aired. One example is the *Albert Reynolds vs. Sunday Times* case, where an appeal judge said that a newspaper could publish an allegation which it couldn't prove if there was a public interest defence. Unfortunately the courts are not always consistent and media lawyers are often too lazy to keep up with the intricacies of such legal rules.

Luckily Paul Foot ran my story in *Private Eye*. He correctly saw that the legality of what they were doing was irrelevant; it was deplorable and dishonest for businesses and government departments to act in such corrupt manner, and showed clear evidence of a conflict of interest. If there was a chance that the people involved might sue the *Eye* for libel, then so be it. Sadly Paul is gone, but the magazine must continue this publish-and-be-proud tradition.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen a large media organisation cowed by libel law. At ITN, I obtained exclusive footage of burned murder victims in Nigeria's Ogoni tribal region, along with testimony that Shell had ordered the killings as a reprisal for peaceful demonstrations which had disrupted oil production. I obtained the last TV interview Ken Saro Wiwa, the Nigerian human rights activist, who confirmed the allegations. I submitted a script but this was rejected on the grounds that 'Shell might sue us'. British libel law was again stifling journalism.

I later discovered ITN had dropped a similar previous report by a colleague minutes before it was due on air, for no apparent reason. Then George Monbiot reported in *The Journalist* that ITN had a contract to make corporate videos for Shell, and it all began to make sense. Just over a year later Ken Saro Wiwa was executed, resulting in Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth.

Against this background of repressive and stifling regulation, I believe libel law should be amended to lower the standard of required proof. The onus could be shared between the two sides to prove their respective cases, without reducing the necessary protection available to the wrongly accused. Only then will journalism be able to build on the public's fragile trust. The public interest is not served by sewing up the lips of the media and burdening them with unreasonable and restrictive laws better suited to a police state.

As it turned out, *The Guardian* was able to run the story this autumn, but only after the DTI investigation into BAT had run into the buffers.

But there is still a chance that BAT could sue, and the information – that BAT had persuaded the government to water-down the investigation into smuggling – might not have reached the public. What price trust then?

<Brucek3@aol.com>

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY?

Patrick Trollope

Southport Reporter & Mersey Reporter

In this country we have always prided ourselves on our world-leading reporting styles and the lack of government regulation, with ourselves setting the rules. Over the years however the media has become far more complex and the public is becoming increasingly bewildered and uncertain about whom it can rely upon.

I carry an NUJ press card, but what does it signify? The public does not seem to understand what it represents and unfortunately neither do some councils or other official bodies!

Sadly, anyone can make a press card and claim to be press, so the trust in our identity is lacking. If members of the public does not recognise the authenticity of our NUJ card, why should they trust what we say?

We are expected to reflect the views of all parties, no matter how small or how big, impartially. It is one of the hardest things to do, but at least we should try. It is exceedingly difficult when people don't trust you enough to give you all the information you need. Or if people go out their way to prevent you obtaining information.

The problem lies with the image of the media held by many of the general public, and lack of understanding about who is and who is not a journalist.

Until we can show that we are impartial, we are unlikely to get comprehensive background to a story.

Here lies Catch 22. If we have more regulation imposed on us we might lose our ability to stay impartial. On the other hand, some of the other problems that we face might be resolved, but at what cost?

Who should control the press? As the media becomes ever more influential, it is frequently regarded with suspicion by

the public, over an above healthy scepticism. Should we be looking at strengthening standards by lobbying government to give clear guidelines as to who can and who can't carry press cards? There could be big drawbacks if these were introduced.

There may be stultification of new developments within the media, including the emergence of Internet based coverage.

Legal controls are invariable inflexible and slow to respond to innovative moves. Also, there is the danger of increased political interference. Already this can be seen within the BBC. To enforce one national card, I feel, could endanger press freedom.

Is there a place for some sort of truly independent regulatory body, to oversee standards and to accredit genuine journalists or are there pitfalls along this route too?

Could the NUJ perhaps team up with other reputable organisations to promote legitimate press cards, and to regulate behaviour of the holders in order to restore the public's trust, without the necessity of outside intervention?

In any case this seems to be an appropriate time to raise the profile of the NUJ, outside the media - what it stands for and evidence of its role in promoting and upholding professional standards.

<news24@southportreporter.com>

CLEANING UP THE ACT

Bill Hagerty

Editor, British Journalism Review

IN THE interval between Lord Hutton's report and Lord Butler's, the BBC is going to be put under heavy pressure from inside and out over its coverage of news and its editorial procedures. With a charter renewal looming, it is vital that the corporation treads carefully: the dangers were given voice in the Commons by such diverse persons as the Conservative leader, Michael Howard, who wanted it to be regulated by Ofcom, and the Labour backbencher Sion Simon, who seemed to want the corporation to be privatised.

It may be too much to hope that the BBC will survive intact under the new charter, with its self-government, scope and licence fee all uncompromised. Politicians of many kinds are envious of its special place in British society and its international status as a trustworthy broadcaster – particularly of news – and some of them see it in crass commercial terms as a world 'brand' that could be converted into a source of vast private profit.

The price of a new charter which maintains most, if not all, of the qualities that set the BBC apart from other broadcasters, at home or abroad, is certain to be a strenuous effort from inside the corporation not only to clean up its act – especially where news is concerned – but to be seen to be cleaning it up. Whatever injustices the BBC's governors, managers and journalists see in Hutton's conclusions, they are in no shape to quibble with the report. The impossibility of resisting Hutton was made obvious by the resignations, whether willed or involuntary, of Gavyn Davies, Greg Dyke and Andrew Gilligan. The BBC is going to have to take Hutton on the chin, pick itself up, dust itself off, and start, if not quite all over again, then at least from the position of admitting that it has lessons to learn.

Some kind of internal inquiry has been

started under the guidance of Stephen Dando, a member of the executive committee who has just been given the title of Director, BBC People. It is much the same job as he had before when he was Director of Human Resources and Internal Communications, one of those grand quasi-military BBC titles, like the legendary CPCOH (Controller of Paper Clips, Outer Hebrides).

The BBC says of Mr Dando that "his career has focused on change management and people development within large organisations". So it is clear that, at this early stage at least, the BBC takes the view that the task is one which must be entrusted to a person with managerial, rather than editorial, experience.

Nevertheless, if Mr Dando's inquiry ends by proposing changes in working practice, the people who will have to put them into operation are journalists. The burden of day-to-day application of whatever new procedures are introduced post-Hutton will fall on researchers, reporters and editors. One aspect of the new BBC news approach is described in this issue of the *BJR* by Roger Harrabin, a *Today* programme correspondent and an architect of guidance drawn up to determine how the BBC should report stories which involve projections of risk to life and limb.

Work on the preparation of Harrabin's document began before Hutton, but its contents will certainly form part of the corporation's armoury of responses to the criticisms of its news selection and projection that have arisen in and around Hutton's report. The guidelines offer journalists a series of suggestions by which they can judge how to handle stories such as an outbreak of disease without exaggerating the dangers, skating over scientific differences of opinion, or unnecessarily alarming the public. They tackle the kind of news reporting and presentation problems that many journalists lack the scientific education or knowledge to cope with by themselves. They may well discourage irresponsible sensationalism. They are eminently sensible.

Journalism and Public Trust

One of the motives for constructing them seems to have been to save the embarrassment of having to call in scientists and other experts to go on TV or radio to set straight an inaccurate record. So it would not be surprising if similar sets of guidelines were to appear, designed to keep reporters from misunderstanding other aspects of life and thus avoiding unwelcome complaints and denials from business men, football managers, theatrical impresarios, show-business celebrities – from real stars to 15-minute famers – and even politicians.

The danger here is that however valuable and enlightening these guidelines proved, their effect would often be to overburden busy journalists to the extent that their work would slow down to a stop. Stories which failed immediately to satisfy some aspect of the ‘code’ would never be broadcast because time would simply run out.

So the challenges facing the BBC at this most testing time are to repair the demoralisation of its journalists caused by the Dr David Kelly affair; to set sane new or revised working methods obvious to the viewer and listener as well as to staff; and to achieve that without making it impossible for stories, even potentially embarrassing ones, to be given an airing. If the BBC can succeed in this, it will have earned the right to get on with its job of being the greatest public service broadcaster in the world.

That’s how most members of the public still see it. Their general contempt, in varying degrees, for the press remains. Restoring credibility and respect is by no means the BBC’s problem alone. The entire news media are suspect. The drinks in the Last Chance Saloon have long since been swigged. The glasses are empty. It is closing time and the bill has to be paid.

<billha@currantbun.com>

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