



ethical space

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PAPERS

- Communicating mental illness and suicide: Public relations students' perceptions of ethical practice – Kate Fitch
 - Ofcom: An evaluation of UK broadcast journalism regulation of news and current affairs – Chris Frost
 - News as conversation, citizens as gatekeepers: Where is digital news taking us? – Luke Goode
 - The revolution must wait: Economic, business and financial journalism beyond the 2008 crisis – Gary James Merrill
 - Myth-making on the business pages: Local press and glocal crisis – Joel Stein and David Baines
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The International Journal
of Communication Ethics

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Aims and scope

Communication ethics is a discipline that supports communication practitioners by offering tools and analyses for the understanding of ethical issues. Moreover, the speed of change in the dynamic information environment presents new challenges, especially for communication practitioners.

Ethics used to be a specialist subject situated within schools of philosophy. Today it is viewed as a language and systematic thought process available to everyone. It encompasses issues of care and trust, social responsibility and environmental concern and identifies the values necessary to balance the demands of performance today with responsibilities tomorrow.

For busy professionals, CE is a powerful learning and teaching approach that encourages analysis and engagement with many constituencies, enhancing relationships through open-thinking. It can be used to improve organization performance as well as to protect individual well-being.

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A new model for 'hackademic' publishing?

Journalism examines the here-and-now, the major issues and personalities of the day. And yet the production of academic books can often take up to two years (or even longer) between conception and actual publication. The peer review process can last months as can also the editing and publication process. As a result, academic texts tend to focus on the broader, theoretical and conceptual issues and lack the urgency and vitality of more 'journalistic' texts. To put it simply, when they appear they are irrelevant. Clearly a new model of academic publishing is needed if the requirements of journalism academics, students and those members of the public interested in deepening their knowledge of journalism matters are to be met.

Seven books edited by Professor Richard Lance Keeble, of the University of Lincoln, and John Mair, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Coventry University, over the last three years are proof enough that academic texts on major contemporary media issues can be produced quickly and with impact while remaining original, rigorous and packed with contributions by internationally acclaimed writers. Published by Abramis Academic, of Bury St Edmunds, they have focused on:

- the crisis in trust in British television after the 'faked quizzes' scandal;
- the coverage of the great financial crash of 2008;
- the reporting of the war in Afghanistan;
- the impact of the Internet on journalism;
- the state of investigative journalism internationally;
- the reporting of the 'Arab Spring', and
- the phone hacking scandal and the ethics of journalism.

On the Afghan war book, Professor Tim Luckhurst, Professor of Journalism at Kent University, wrote in the *Times Higher Education* of 2 December 2010: 'The book contains the testimony of Britain's best front-line correspondents set in historical context alongside detailed academic analysis. It is rigorous, relevant and timely.' In terms of impact, all the texts have been launched at sell-out events in central London and have been widely discussed on websites such as journalism.co.uk and pressgazette.co.uk – and are the subject of much Twitter activity. Most importantly, they are also bought and read in major newsrooms.

Virtually all the texts have emerged from conferences organised jointly by Coventry University, the BBC College of Journalism and the University of Lincoln's School of Journalism. The last book followed the annual conference of the Institute of Communication Ethics (of which Prof. Keeble is a director and Mair the chair) in London. Normally, the issue of *Ethical Space* following the annual ICE conference will be a special issue carrying most of the papers delivered. As Tim Crook reports here, so many excellent papers were given exploring various aspects of the on-going Hackgate scandal that only a book-sized production could cope with the amount of copy.

At the conferences top mainstream and alternative journalists, academics and students present brief papers – some journalists, such as Bob Woodward of Watergate fame (talking on investigative journalism), Jeremy Paxman, of the BBC's *Newsnight* (on the Afghan war) and Oliver Poole, of the London *Evening Standard* (on the reporting of Libya and the fall of Col. Gaddafi), link up via Skype. Their contributions are then written up for the book – with the work of others added to make up the final text (normally with 30 chapters). The editing process is extremely rigorous – those submissions not matching the high standards are simply rejected.

The implications of this radical new publishing model are considerable. It certainly helps bring together mainstream and alternative journalists and the academy in a crucial, critical dialogue. As Prof Luckhurst concluded: 'Abandoning the idle pretence that excellence and speed are incompatible helps us to engage with the world. As higher education confronts intense new pressures, maximising such engagement will be crucial.'

- *Beyond Trust: Hype and hope in the British media; The great crash of 2008 and the crisis in journalism; Afghanistan, war and media; Face the future: The internet and journalism today; Investigative journalism: Dead or Alive?; Mirage in the Desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring'; The phone hacking scandal: Journalism on trial (all published by Abramis Academic).*

Richard Lance Keeble
University of Lincoln

Hackgate and its implications

Tim Crook reports on the 2011 annual conference of the Institute of Communication Ethics

The Institute of Communications Ethics held its annual conference on Friday, 28 October, in London and explored Hackgate and its implications. The papers presented at the Foreign Press Association in the Commonwealth Club reflected the consternation and divided opinions that the scandal has generated within British journalism and the academy.

The discussion coincided with the judicial and public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, including its unlawful behaviour, headed by the English Appeal Court judge Lord Justice Leveson set up under the 2005 Inquiries Act. According to the *Independent*, there are now around 200 police detectives engaged in inquiries into alleged press illegality at News International's *News of the World* and elsewhere, the work of private detectives, and alleged payments by journalists to police officers.

I was happy to attend an event that I thought more intelligently and effectively explored the key issues in a way that the Leveson Inquiry may be unlikely to achieve. I gave a paper entitled 'Infantilising the feral beast: The criminalisation of the bad boys and girls of popular journalism: Hackgate's boomerang' and was happily accompanied by three students from Goldsmiths as well as the researcher, Justin Schlosberg, a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths working within the Leverhulme Media Research Centre.

Schlosberg presented a compelling paper indicating that British television news had marginalised the representation of the awkward questions being raised about the death of the weapons inspector Dr David Kelly and the Hutton Inquiry 'inquest' verdict that he had died as a result of suicide. This level of textual, qualitative and quantitative research enables us to question shibboleths and preconceived notions about what is 'good' and 'bad' journalism.

Outside our comfort zones

As I mentioned to my Goldsmiths' colleagues, conferences of this kind take our opinions and knowledge outside our own comfort zones to be

tested by other perspectives as well as being the chance to air our own research and opinions.

The scandal has shaken me over the last few months. Although I had heard the allegations and acknowledged the 'industrial gossip' over the years, I had naively and, I accept, stupidly assumed that the new generation of showbusiness/celebrity 'masters and mistresses of the universe' in the 1990s through to at least 2007 obtained their 'intrusive' stories by persuading friends, associates and employees of the great, the good and the ugly to confidentially whistleblow however lowly the 'lowest common denominator' of subject.

I have an essentially shy and embarrassed anticipation and assumption about asking personal questions and although having been a journalist for several decades, I have never had that ability to whisper and plumb intimate secrets with such apparent panache and success.

Well, now it seems some or much of that 'success' and journalistic pizzazz was no more than grubby snooping of targets' mobile messaging, and possible phone and computer tapping. And other 'great' stories may have been obtained by metaphorically passing brown envelopes stuffed with cash to serving police officers. How absurdly pathetic.

The reality for me: endless grind and slogging

It is not even 'hard' work. Journalism for me has hardly been glamorous. Any significant stories I have ever unearthed, if they could ever be described as 'significant', came about by endless grind and slogging, eyes straining through swirls of microfiche and pages of documents in badly lit surroundings, working well into the early hours of the morning, waiting forlornly for people to meet me in cold, dreary and banal places, waiting for telephone calls and emails that were never replied to. Most of the work was boring and attended by anxiety. The adrenaline and rush were so rare, I find it hard to recall any.

And as the mythology is stripped from the high octane, on-the-edge realm of Hackgate sleaze sleuthing, we are getting a sad and ridiculous picture of some stoned journalists with addiction problems and inadequate personalities, promoted and paid way beyond their talent zone, some snorting cocaine and dropping 'E's to keep up on the fringe with celebocrats who probably had much less talent than they had.

And so the Wizard of Oz is a bald, little man struggling to control levers and the puffing of

dry ice behind an illusory light and sound show. We have an almost allegorical myth of the Hackgate Wizard keeping a ledger of mobile phone numbers, pin codes, computer ISP numbers, and an armoury of Trojan computer viruses, and digital video and sound recording software in the warehousing of sneaking and snooping across the highs and lows of human success, failure, and tragedy. Just how typical, widespread and real this myth actually was is a matter for police and judicial inquiry. This degree of journalistic vice, although exceptional, risks being unfortunately misrepresented as the general.

Equally absurd about the Hackgate phenomenon is the vista of the sins of the past visiting and punishing the innocent of the present. Far from being properly condemned as the impulsive vandalism, cynical business move, and destructive censorship by a foreign press baron, Rupert Murdoch's shutting down of the *News of the World* was fast hand clapped by Britain's liberal intelligentsia. The Foreign Secretary William Hague said 'sad, but necessary' in a live two way from Benghazi. And so George Orwell's 1946 observation:

It is Sunday afternoon preferably before the war. The wife is already asleep in the armchair and the children have been sent out for a nice long walk. You put your feet up on the sofa, settle your spectacles on your nose and open the *News of the World*,

is now consigned to an obscure and forgotten footnote of popular cultural history.

Brilliant and fascinating papers

In reflecting on the brilliant and fascinating papers given at the conference I have been left wondering whether we might have a choice between modernism as antithetical to censorship and a celebration of the anti-social and the art of the scoundrel and the rascal...and postmodernism, as the nihilistic indifference to freedom and a collage of the past to mask the present.

The morning keynote address was provided by Professor Brian Cathcart, of Kingston University – also accompanied by a cheerful brood of his students – in which he explored the methodology and *modus operandi* of developing a professional individual responsibility for journalists through source trailing.

Professor Cathcart is part of the 'Hacked Off' campaign and very much an intelligent critic, along with the Media Standards Trust, of journalistic irresponsibility. 'Hacked Off', and in par-

ticular the *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies and the solicitor Mark Lewis, ably and courageously fought to challenge the denials, obfuscations and false-consciousness of the country's media and political establishment who had hoped that the 2006-2007 inquiry, prosecution and conviction of one journalist and one private detective were all that was needed and representative in terms of discretionary policing.

In my opinion Professor Cathcart and his associates cannot be blamed for the problems of boomerang: the disproportionate political and legal reaction to this scandal. They must be praised for iconoclastic campaigning, investigative journalism and outstanding legal advocacy.

We cannot forget, as he took an opportunity of reminding us in the afternoon, that Hackgate is not just about super-rich indulgent celebrities having their silly private lives tittled and tattled about. The events include the unlawful interception and manipulation of the phone messages of a child abduction and murder victim, Milly Dowler, the victims of modern day terrorism in London and possibly New York City, and the potential interference and obstruction of a murder inquiry into a man slaughtered in a pub car park in Sydenham whose body was left with an axe embedded in his skull.

Improving media accountability

Dr Damien Carney, Principal Lecturer in the School of Law at Portsmouth Business School, constructively discussed methods of improving media accountability through regulation. He emphasised the importance and advantage of actively involving the National Union of Journalists and balancing regulation with media freedom and rights scrutiny and protection.

Sean Dodson, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Leeds Metropolitan University, presented an impressive analysis of the need to develop a relevant and effective self-regulatory code for journalists on the internet. He made some compelling references to codes agreed by US media institutions that seem to be much more progressive and alert to the new world of contemporary multimedia journalistic practice.

He also reminded us that there are many aspects of US journalistic and online culture with much higher and stringent standards of integrity. UK journalists should read the code of ethics for *The New York Times* and National Public Radio to discover how the US tradition of establishing and maintaining trust between journalists and audience has a longer and more effective trail.

John Mair, chair of ICE, passionately articulated a compelling charge against those responsible for Hackgate and a tribute to the warriors shaking News International to its foundations. Rupert Murdoch's operation as a media magnate between the 20th and 21st centuries, like that of his predecessor press barons, leaves a nasty and ambiguous legacy.

Business success and profits have sustained ailing national titles and expanded broadcasting satellite employment and provision. But the very brakes that a strong trade union presence in mentoring and ethical regulation could have provided were long destroyed and dismantled when he divided and ruled the NUJ chapels of his Fleet Street assets in the middle 1980s to skeddaddle to his notorious industrial theme park in Wapping.

Professor John Tulloch, of Lincoln University, was a veritable high and cream tea mid-morning. Lovingly pressing his fingers against anthologies of Charles Dickens' journalism, Tulloch revealed that hacks and coppers have been 'at it' from the very beginnings of mass media newspaper publication and modern policing that the creator of Chuzzlewit, Little Nell, Uriah Heap, and Oliver Twist actually campaigned for in the mid-19th century.

Cultural and intellectual treat

Professor Tulloch was a cultural and intellectual treat, academic and scholarly nectar, and gave us a little flavour of the riches that undergraduate and postgraduate students at Lincoln must have on a more regular basis.

As he self-effacingly referred to his research as 'work in progress' and extemporised with precise and entertaining academic prose on Dickens' role as journalist, magazine editor, and his apparent happy financial investment in Metropolitan Police story provision, he left us with a compassionate entreaty for the tolerance of the journalistic rascal and scoundrel through the ages.

Healthy sandwiches, mineral water, orange juice, coffee and biscuits for lunch were followed by Richard Peppiatt, former reporter for the *Daily Star*. Peppiatt could have been type-cast as the repentant tabloid hack, but in fact he contributed strongly to the debate with intelligent analysis in a Baudrillardian frame of simulacra and his realisation that those working within a tabloid newsroom need greater insight and awareness of the difference between 'journalism' and 'story telling'. Both are creative enterprises, but the former needs ethics and responsibility.

Peppiatt is no stranger to Goldsmiths. On his last visit there, he 'confessed' to infiltrating the first days of teaching in the history department of the Princess Beatrice as part of his reporting duties for a national 'newspaper' covering the country and the world with two or three foot sloggers. His presentation indicated considerable potential as an academic lecturer. If it is within his personal ambition, I certainly think he deserves a fair run of intelligent journalism at the BBC or a *Guardian*-style media institution.

Relationship between journalists and the bereaved

Jackie Newton, Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Liverpool John Moores University, and Dr Sallyanne Duncan, Lecturer in Journalism and Media Ethics at the University of Strathclyde, revealed brilliant research into journalistic use of social media and the relationship between journalists and the bereaved. This is just the kind of information needed at the Leveson Inquiry.

They have quietly and professionally explored and researched the practices of regional journalists, who of course, make up the majority of British journalistic publication, and who do not appear to be properly represented at Leveson. What they discovered, and I apologise for simplifying or not comprehensively reflecting the complexity of their study, is that:

- 1) the bereaved need journalists and appreciate their interest; particularly when most of their suffering is caused by the criminal justice system and not the media;
- 2) overblown construction and expectation of 'privacy' for the bereaved should not result in any self-censorial journalistic avoidance of the bereaved;
- 3) there is an active contestation and debate about the ethics of using material from social media sites without the permission of bereaved families even though they appear to be public spaces, when in fact they are perceived by many relatives of 'victims' to belong to Habermasian 'intimate space'.

Dr Eamonn O'Neill, Programme Director of the MSc in Investigative Journalism at the University of Strathclyde, explored the complexities of challenging the rule of law when pursuing a public interest that can be supported and confirmed as 'a greater good'.

It requires professional discipline, strong and supportive editorial and legal supervision, and

something I have been advising colleagues and students for many years: the need to protect sources and confidential information through digital safeguarding, counter-surveillance techniques and putting controversial material in a protective shield beyond the British legal jurisdiction.

Working undercover

Dr O'Neill spoke with authority and referenced some of his own case histories working undercover (though in one case he used his own name: it seems nobody bothered to Google him!) exposing a miscarriage of justice and meeting a renegade MI5 agent abroad for the purposes of journalism. Digital finger-printing can, of course, work both ways. It seems his blog is regularly visited by somebody at the Home Office and he is tempted to increase the boredom level of his postings in anticipation of the apparent surveillance.

David Baines and Joel Stein of Newcastle University presented more detailed qualitative and quantitative research into the potential problematical relationship between a regional business daily and the Northern Rock, then a major employer, investor and political and social institution.

As I found when presenting a broadcast business programme many years ago, there was not a lot of scope for ideological questioning of the fruits of capitalism, high profit and short-term banking practices. Baines and Stein's exploration of 'myth-making on the business pages' reminded everyone that the world's financial crisis has powerful and compelling dimensions in the local and regional frame of journalism.

The final, and I think, most powerful presentation of the day came from Professor Tim Luckhurst of the University of Kent. He warned convincingly that Leveson and the wider crisis of journalism standards, ethics and illegality risked missing the target and ignoring the prize. Expensive and invaluable public interest journalism needs a new business model. The present one is failing. What does a nihilistic endgame attack on News International achieve? *The Times* is kept alive by the *Sun*. The success of the *News of the World* and others like it cross-pollinate across the media industry that is dying from new media, the fiduciary drainage of media legal and compliance settlements and many other climate change dimensions in economies of scale and social and media consumption.

'Don't imagine,' said Professor Luckhurst, 'that the readers of the *Daily Star* are not perfectly aware of what they are buying and reading. I speak as somebody who went from comprehensive school to Cambridge University and would not for one minute wish to patronise the kind of people who know what is real news and entertaining story telling.'

Why did Hackgate happen – and what is the solution?

The debate acknowledged the risk of moral entrepreneurs giving Hackgate an importance that was disproportionate to the problems it revealed. A reference was made to the weapons of mass destruction scandal and the Chilcot inquiry. Surely more important? Points and arguments were robustly and respectfully made and then Professor Richard Lance Keeble, continually grabbing my copy of the last edition of the *News of the World* to highlight the quotation from George Orwell, got everyone in a circle, distinguished professors included, to reflect on why did Hackgate happen and what is the solution?

Never being one to avoid getting in a last word or two, I piped up: 'Ego, fear and ambition' and left it to the other half circle to suggest some reforms and amelioration.

Solutions that do not cut journalism below the knees, as one of my colleagues once graphically described it, are difficult to find. But if there was a consensus emerging, I thought it was the empowerment of the individual journalist's 'conscience clause' in regulation and employment contracts, long campaigned for by the NUJ. It is a low cost and non-punitive popularist option. It has the advantage of confronting the oppression of aggressive and unethical media managements demanding 'rat-like cunning' with the ends justifying a doubtful means culture. The battle zone would be employment tribunals.

- *The conference was superbly organised by Fiona Thompson and twittered as #ICE2011*

Tim Crook is Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, specialising in Media Law, Ethics and Radio.

Examining the relationship between free speech and freedom of the press

Free speech and freedom of the press are often conflated ideas, with the latter, in particular, lacking a clear conceptual and historical framing. In his recently published book *Journalism and free speech* (Routledge), John Steel examines the historical and philosophical relationship between journalism, free speech and freedom of the press in light of contemporary debates and problems related to media freedom, regulation and censorship. Here he outlines his motivations for writing the book and its main arguments

Motivations

The development of political ideas and how they come to be articulated in the 'real world' of politics have always been at the forefront of my intellectual concerns. Perversely this interest has intensified in recent years in an era in which we have arguably set ourselves adrift from the risky endeavour of pursuing 'moral clarity', to borrow from Neiman (2009) and embraced the uneasy comfort, though arguably limited gains, offered by grand political pragmatism or oppositional moments. Political 'praxis', I would suggest, is missing from contemporary politics with little sign of making a significant return. This work then is an attempt to remind readers of the link between 'big' ideas, in this case ideas about freedom of speech, and their application in historical and contemporary contexts.

I came to the study of free speech after being prompted by my undergraduate tutor, an expert on J. S. Mill, to look at how Mill's *On liberty* laid the foundations of our modern conceptions of the realms of individual liberty and the appropriate limits of state and social power. From reading Mill I became fascinated with the range of justifications *for* and limits *to* free speech.

This interest was pursued in my PhD which sought to understand how the various justifications for free speech were incorporated into the ideological schemas and political contestations of the nineteenth century and how these were articulated in the media of the day. It is this connection between ideas and praxis that I've attempted to explore in *Journalism and free speech*, given journalism's necessary relationship with this concept and its application as freedom of the press.

Main arguments

I take the view that both historical contextualisation and philosophical analysis are fundamentally important to our understanding of contemporary issues, particularly in the realm of politics and it is this dual approach that I have sought to expand upon and apply in the book. The central claim then is to assert a reconnection with the historical and philosophical development of 'free speech' as an ethical and political principle in order to remind ourselves of its virtues, its limits and importantly how such a concept has been and continues to be subject to misdirection and misapplication.

The philosophical and historical development of freedom of speech and its relationship to ideas about freedom of the press are explored in the first two chapters of the book. Here I assert that journalism's relationship to the principle of freedom of the press has historically become contorted which in essence has severed the link between it and its conceptual kin – free speech. Judith Lichtenberg (1987), of course, addressed the conflation of press freedom and free speech and the consequences of such slippage on our understanding of both notions. Yet I suggest that a re-statement and re-articulation of the functions of these two concepts is required to remind us of their value and their fragility.

The remainder of the book is centred upon journalism and the debates which relate to its political, social, cultural and civic functions, all analysed through the conceptual prism of free speech. Here I concern myself with constraints, both formal and informal, which are intended, though not always successfully, to balance free speech with other important considerations, be they security, privacy, protection from 'harm' and so on.

Of course, in the wake of 'Hackgate' freedom of the press is under pressure. The Leveson Inquiry into the practices and ethics of the press is underway as I write and the clamour for the press to 'get its house in order' once and for all

grows seemingly day by day. What this scandal has done has brought into sharp focus the disconnect between the essence of freedom of the press with its strong civic dimension and the market imperatives which drive much contemporary journalism. This book historically contextualises this dynamic and argues that the principle and praxis of freedom of the press should be re-connected to the civic and democratic ethos which underscores the principle of free speech.

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Media watchdogs: Countering the mainstream's armour of smugness

Reeta Toivanen summarises the contents of her BA dissertation looking at media watchdogs, their influence on the media – and press's representation of them

The study examined the process of media accountability and media criticism as practised by three media watchdog organisations in the United Kingdom: the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom¹, MediaWise² and Media Lens³.

Literature review

The literature review demonstrated that investigations into media watchdog organisations are fundamentally based on issues of media accountability. There is currently no clear understanding of what media watchdogs are or should be: should they be regarded as media critics, pressure groups or media activists? Thus, the literature review discussed the overlap between media accountability, media critics and media watchdogs as pressure groups.

This discussion revealed that there are clear gaps in the current knowledge about the role of media watchdog organisations in the UK: their work, purpose and effectiveness in relation to the media, how that connects to issues surrounding media accountability and media criticism, and how both the media and media watchdogs engage with those issues. Thus, the dissertation aimed to contribute to this situation by investigating how media watchdogs, both as pressure groups and as critics, engage with media accountability and their potential impact on the media.

Research methods

The main aim of the research was to explore the social process and institutions of media account-

ability and criticism in relation to the three media watchdogs. With this aim in mind, the following research questions were drawn up:

- what role do they play in the UK, particularly in relation to the mainstream media and the public in general?
- how do the watchdogs themselves understand their roles in media accountability?
- how do the mainstream media regard the watchdogs?

Based on the research questions, three different methods were chosen for the study: interviews with the organisations, content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles, and discourse analysis of a small subsample of the articles from the content analysis. Interviews were chosen because they can help to produce an overall picture of the organisations, their work and the social world they inhabit. However, they do not say much about what kind of actors these organisations are seen as and depicted as by the mainstream media.

Therefore, a content analysis of UK publications through the Nexis database was undertaken to reveal if the organisations are given a voice in the first place and thus what kind of actors they are depicted as. Finally, a discourse analysis of six representative articles was undertaken to show in more detail how the media regard the organisations.

Summary of findings

The first part of the study explored the work of the organisations as pressure groups and media critics and it was shown that the organisations deployed a plethora of different strategies which were used in their work on media accountability, despite the fact that some of them did not consider the theme as a priority in their work. It was also shown that the organisations' engagement with media accountability from outside the industry constituted them as external M*A*Ss: a non-state means of improving the media, working outside the industry and working on media accountability without the industry's acceptance (Bertrand 2003: 22-23).

Under Bertrand's typology all the three watchdogs are classified as 'associations of militant citizens': media users who try to influence the media via a number of strategies, such as appeals to law-makers, letter-writing campaigns, complaints to regulatory systems, evaluations etc. (2000: 119). Finally, it was argued that the work of watchdogs in trying to hold the media accountable was often reactive in nature.

The second part of the findings explored the organisations' relationship to their audiences, particularly in relation to the media. This was done by examining the results of the content analysis. It was suggested that the media were dismissive of the organisations. But it was also shown that when the media did use them in their coverage they seemed to value the organisations as sources, because they were often quoted and their opinions and comments were neutrally reported. Despite the often negative attitude from the media, press coverage of the watchdogs was actually mostly neutral towards them. Almost 77 per cent of the articles were neutral towards the groups and only 9 per cent were negative and 11 per cent positive.

However, when these figures were broken down in terms of individual groups, a slightly different picture emerged. Almost 96 per cent of the articles where CPBF was mentioned were neutral towards the group. Similarly, MediaWise was regarded neutrally in 85 per cent of the articles. This trend was also evident in the discourse analysis which showed that CPBF and MediaWise were represented fairly neutrally and portrayed as authorities. Analysis of representational strategies showed that in terms of representation of social actors the articles either did not use any labels or names for CPBF and MediaWise or else they were referred to as 'press freedom campaigner' (Nousratpour 2010), 'pressure group' or 'media watchdog' (Robinson 2006).

In other words, the groups were either named accurately in terms of the types of organisations they are or they were 'impersonalised'. Following Van Leeuwen's (1996) inventory of how social actors can be classified, 'impersonalising' social actors – i.e. treating them as institutions – gives more weight to their statements. The labels assigned to the groups also confirmed this since they fairly accurately match the types of organisations they are. This combined with the fact that naming social actors can have an impact on how they are perceived (Fairclough 2003) means that these labels then represent the organisations neutrally since they match the reality.

The quoting verbs used in relation to the two groups also highlighted this attitude. The word 'said' was most often used in relation to the statements made by CPBF and MediaWise (Travis 2003, Andrews 2010, Nousratpour 2010). The word 'said' is what Caldas-Coulthard's (1994) typology of quoting verbs categorised as neutral structuring verbs which introduce a saying without evaluating it explicitly. In conclusion,

CPBF and MediaWise were portrayed neutrally and authoritatively, which confirmed the findings of the content analysis.

The exception was often Media Lens which the study showed being covered more negatively than the other two organisations, being used as a source less frequently, and being mentioned less in the news pages. Whilst it was still mostly regarded neutrally – in 46 per cent of the articles – there was a much higher percentage of negative coverage in comparison to the other two: 23 per cent versus 4 per cent for MediaWise and 2 per cent for CPBF. Furthermore, Media Lens was mostly portrayed in negative terms through lexical choices and representational strategies. The lexical analysis revealed that Media Lens was discussed in negative and oppositional language. Portraying Media Lens in negative and often patronising terms was used to undermine its authority and deny it any legitimacy as a social actor. By doing that, the media implied that Media Lens should not be taken seriously and is not worth engaging with.

It was suggested that this finding was in line with the prevalent literature on the mainstream media's reaction to their critics. However, Media Lens was also shown to be an exception in terms of media's reaction. Extensive evidence suggested that Media Lens had had an impact on working journalists, even if only to a limited extent. Neither of the other two organisations seemed to have been able to capture the media's attention to the same extent as Media Lens had.

Watchdog's influence on the media

The third part of the study discussed the watchdogs' influence on the media and suggested that the media is not entirely dismissive of the watchdogs and often regard them in neutral terms. The findings showed that the watchdogs were quoted directly in 47 per cent of the articles and most often (32 per cent) appeared in news sections (as opposed to culture, comment, reviews etc). But again, Media Lens was the exception. Whereas MediaWise and CPBF were mentioned in the news sections (49 per cent and 43 per cent of the time respectively), Media Lens was only mentioned in 7 per cent of the articles in the news sections. Instead, it was most often (30 per cent) mentioned in the opinion and letters pages. Furthermore, in just over a third of the articles (35 per cent) they were used as a primary or a secondary source and in total they were used as a source in 68 per cent of the articles. This shows that the media do not ignore them completely; they actually give them a voice.

Furthermore, whilst some of the data discussed above showed that the watchdogs have had an impact on the media coverage, thus suggesting that the media is not entirely dismissive of them, the total coverage is not very extensive. Most of the articles appeared in only a few newspapers and magazines: *Morning Star* (21 per cent), the *Guardian* (20 per cent) and *New Statesman* (17 per cent). The rest of the mainstream media only mentioned them on average in 1-5 articles. In addition to the three publications mentioned above, only the *Independent*, and the *Times Higher Education* reached a ten article threshold, which translated to 4 per cent of the coverage. That being said, biggest circulation publications – i.e. what could generally be considered national media (the *Daily Mail*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Mirror*, the *Observer*, the *Sun* and *The Times*) – were responsible for half of the coverage (50 per cent).

Furthermore, a total of 248 articles means that on average there were only two articles per month over the ten-year period of study that mentioned the watchdogs. The significance of this becomes clear when it is considered that the reason why media coverage is considered important is because it can affect the success of interest group efforts (Thrall 2006) and it can also legitimise actors (Andsager 2000). Thus, the fact that the media coverage of the watchdogs was quite infrequent and minimal in most of the papers, suggests that the watchdogs are not generally seen as, what Davis (2002) called, 'legitimate' sources.

But gaining media coverage was not necessarily the most appropriate way of defining influence of the three organisations because they do not look at their own work in terms of media coverage or being effective in specific targets. It was shown that goal orientation was not part of how they defined themselves as organisations. The work itself was considered valuable enough in its own right for the watchdogs. For example, Tim Gopsill was not very concerned about being covered by the media because CPBF was not driven by publicity, and he was not convinced that media coverage would help the group's work (Gopsill 2011).

Furthermore, both CPBF and Media Lens argued that because they are not goal and target oriented organisations, they do not measure effectiveness or success in achieving certain objectives. Gopsill argued that it is the general value of the work 'for its own sake' that matters and that the organisation's basic existence is worth

it in itself because it provides a 'countervailing force' in public discourse against the media companies (ibid). A similar sentiment was expressed by Media Lens (2011).

It was finally suggested that, because the inherent value of the work means that they play an important role as M*A*Ss in the UK, they were deemed more honourable than influential. This was found to be similar to other studies on the influence of other media accountability systems.

Conclusion

The study highlighted the challenges of working as media watchdogs in the contemporary media environment – with sometimes hostile media and little influence over the media. But that does not diminish the general value of the work of these organisations. There is some evidence to suggest that enough of the public and a number of media professionals appreciate the work of these organisations. The study also highlighted the need for more evaluative research on media watchdogs in the UK particularly about their effectiveness. The number of 'media-watchers' is growing which makes it important to understand what kind of effects they might have on the media environment.

But the fact that these organisations might not have any idea of how effective they actually are, makes effectiveness an interesting and important area of research. Not only could media research benefit from such studies (for example, by deepening the understanding of media accountability systems), the organisations themselves could benefit since the research could help them to reflect on and improve their work. Therefore, future research should look more analytically into the effectiveness of media watchdog organisations.

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Notes

¹ See www.cpb.org.uk

² See www.mediawise.org.uk

³ See www.medialens.org

Communicating mental illness and suicide: Public relations students' perceptions of ethical practice

Mental illness and suicide are complex issues which have significant social and economic implications. This study investigates the perceptions of public relations students in Australia towards ethics, following exposure to resources developed to educate students about the ethical challenges in communicating mental health issues. The findings suggest students recognise ambiguity around 'professional' ethics in relation to these issues; the need for personal responsibility in ethical public relations practice; that ethical development is incremental; and that they learn most effectively through major assignments. The study includes recommendations for the teaching of ethics in relation to complex issues such as mental health

Keywords: Public relations, ethics, education, mental illness, suicide

Introduction

Mental illness and suicide are significant social issues. For example, in Australia mental illness is estimated to cost the economy A\$20 billion each year (Council of Australian Governments 2006). More people die from suicide than from the combined total of motor vehicle accidents and homicide in Australia, where it is the leading cause of death for men aged under 44 and women aged under 34, and suicides cost the economy an estimated A\$17.5 billion annually (ConNetica Consulting 2009, 2010). These figures do not address the social and emotional impact on family, friends and work colleagues. Challenges in addressing mental health issues

include considerable stigma and misconceptions about these issues in the community (Herman, Saxena and Moodie 2004, ConNetica Consulting 2010).

The Response Ability Project for Public Relations Education is managed by the Hunter Institute for Mental Health, a not-for-profit organisation funded by the Australian government as part of the Mindframe National Media Initiative. The project develops teaching resources for higher education so that public relations graduates, as future communication practitioners, will be more aware of, and able to respond sensitively and appropriately to, issues relating to mental illness and suicide in professional contexts. A pilot study was run in several universities in 2009 (Mason and Skehan 2009), and the resources made widely available to Australian public relations educators in 2010.

This study investigates the recognition by final-year public relations students of professional ethics, and of the communication challenges around mental illness and suicide, following the use of Response Ability resources. The aim of this research is to investigate how public relations students respond to the introduction of complex social issues such as suicide and mental illness in their curricula in order to understand the pedagogical and curricular implications. The broader issue is the need to understand how students recognise professional responsibility and, indeed, the ethical challenges which they may need to engage with in their future careers.

The study makes specific recommendations regarding the teaching of ethics and ethical practice, particularly in relation to social issues around mental health, to public relations students. The research design uses surveys and a focus group to investigate students' knowledge after exposure to Response Ability resources in at least two units (i.e. the discrete subjects which make up the public relations major). The findings allow the development of recommendations for teaching public relations ethics in higher education, particularly in relation to complex and sensitive social issues such as mental illness and suicide.

Background

Public relations and ethics

Public relations educators and professional associations differ in their perceptions of public relations ethics (Breit and Demetrious 2010). For example, ethical practice in the industry is orientated towards the client, profit and com-

petitive advantage; however in public relations education, where public relations is perceived as a communication (rather than a management) discipline, there is more focus on the broader social role of public relations (Breit and Demetrious 2010). One issue is that public relations is potentially very powerful in terms of shaping public opinion, and can have a significant impact on community attitudes and behaviour (Bowen 2005), meaning 'practitioners have the obligation to act...in a socially responsible way' (Starck and Kruckeberg 2003: 37). Fitzpatrick and Gauthier argue 'ethical standards [should] include considerations such as the welfare of others, the avoidance of injustice, respect for self and others, and the common good' (2001: 198). Public relations education must therefore consider the practitioner's ethical responsibilities 'to yourself as a person, your profession and the wider community' (Breit 2007: 308).

Public relations, education and mental health

Mental illness and suicide are complex issues which have significant economic and social implications. In 2007 in Australia, one in five people suffered a mental disorder, where a mental disorder refers to an anxiety, mood or substance abuse disorder (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2009). Suicide is the leading cause of death in men aged under 44 and women aged under 34 in Australia (ConNetica Consulting 2010). Challenges in addressing mental health issues include the considerable stigma associated with mental illness and suicide and a lack of accurate information about mental health in the community.

Public relations practitioners may play a role, by recognising the need to develop socially responsible and ethical communication practices to reduce stigma and discrimination around mental health issues in the community; to be mindful of the link between communicating specific information around suicide and the potential for copycat behaviour; and to recognise that public relations practitioners may have to make choices regarding 'the use of appropriate language, branding and promotions, communication materials, managing media relations and managing your clients, colleagues and partners,' where a knowledge of these complex social issues can influence socially responsible practice (Hunter Institute of Mental Health 2010a: 1).

Mental health issues, therefore, raise ethical challenges for public relations practitioners who must consider the social impact of their communication activity. These issues also chal-

lenge public relations educators as research suggests many students fail to make the connection between practical tasks and academic learning, or to demonstrate reflexivity around their role and responsibilities as future professionals (Fitch 2011). In addition, 'students learn when they build on their previous experiences, have authentic learning tasks and engage in meaningful activity, and have social interaction and critical dialogue around social issues' (Cooper, Orrell and Bowden 2010: 49). The challenge for educators is to design a curriculum which encourages a 'critical dialogue around social issues' such as mental illness and suicide.

The Response Ability for Public Relations Education project

The Mindframe National Media Initiative was developed in response to a growing body of research, which demonstrated certain representations of suicide in the media could influence the risk of copycat behaviour in vulnerable people (Pirkis and Blood 2001, 2010) and that media representations tended to portray mental illness in negative and stereotypical ways (Pirkis et al 2001, Pirkis et al 2008), which can influence community attitudes and lead to stigma and discrimination. The Response Ability project began in 1998 and aimed to influence journalism education to promote the responsible and accurate representation of suicide and mental illness in the media; it developed a range of multimedia resources for use in teaching (Sheridan Burns and Hazell 1998, Greenhalgh and Hazell 2005, Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009).

In 2009, six Australian universities participated in a pilot project, Response Ability for Public Relations Education, and the resources were made more widely available in 2010 (see www.responseability.org). The website provides curriculum resources, including case studies, fact sheets, and discussion questions for both lecturers and students, and is designed to introduce students to the ethical issues involved in communicating about mental illness and suicide. According to the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 'the aim of the resources is to enhance the knowledge and skills of students so they are prepared to respond appropriately to communication issues surrounding suicide and mental illness' (2010b).

Public relations educators found the Response Ability resources 'useful, easy to use, of high quality and well presented' (Mason and Skehan 2009: 19). Students found the resources interesting and relevant, but few accessed the web-

site or demonstrated improved knowledge of communication issues concerning mental illness and suicide (ibid). In addition, students often failed to recognise the issues in terms of their relevance for communication ethics and professional practice; rather they continued to offer responses to survey questions which suggested interpersonal communication with individuals who were either experiencing a mental illness or considering suicide (ibid).

Methodology

This study investigates how students perceive ethics in public relations in relation to mental illness and suicide. The investigation provides useful insights for incorporating ethics into public relations curricula, particularly in relation to communicating complex social issues such as mental health. The research design employs a survey and a small focus group, which allows a complex and potentially controversial topic to be managed with sensitivity (Daymon and Holloway 2011). The researcher's university granted ethics approval (ethics permit 2011/009). In order to maintain a distinction between students' unit assessment and their participation in this research, students were recruited from a final-year unit where the researcher had no teaching role.

Participation in the research was voluntary. Forty-five students completed a survey regarding their attitudes towards, and their awareness of, mental health issues in relation to public relations practice. Students responded to open-ended questions designed to assess knowledge of the Response Ability principles, understanding of ethics, and how their studies contributed to that understanding. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify dominant and sub-dominant themes. In addition, units identified by students as useful in developing their understanding of ethical practice in relation to mental illness and suicide were ranked in terms of frequency. Students also rated their level of agreement with a number of statements about public relations practice. The researcher recoded responses into a nominal scale of disagree/agree and used chi-square to investigate demographic differences.

Following initial coding of the surveys, eight undergraduate students were invited to participate in a focus group; four students (two female, two male) accepted. A focus group offers 'rich data that is cumulative and elaborative' (Fontana and Frey 2000: 652) to emerge from the interaction between participants (Krueger and Casey 2000), allowing the researcher to investi-

gate in more depth the themes which emerged from the surveys. An independent facilitator led the focus group discussion regarding professional and personal understandings of ethics in relation to communication and mental health, using stimulus material (a hypothetical scenario involving the suicide of a colleague and the Public Relations Institute of Australia's [PRIA] Individual Code of Ethics) to encourage students to discuss the ethical issues and responsibilities from a public relations perspective. The discussion was recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed. The transcription was analysed in terms of the dominant and sub-dominant themes. As a form of member-checking, a two-page summary of the analysis was offered to focus group participants (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Participants agreed that the summary accurately represented the focus group discussion.

Scope and limitations of the study

This study reports public relations student perceptions of ethical challenges in relation to mental illness and suicide. Participants are enrolled in a public relations degree located in a communication school at an Australian university; their responses may not be generalisable.

The research project investigated more broadly student understandings of professional ethics. However, the focus of this paper is the student response to the introduction of mental health topics, and their perceptions of the ethical implications for public relations practice. Although focus groups are not usually considered appropriate for sensitive topics (Fontana and Frey 2000), a small focus group is suitable for complex, potentially contentious topics (Daymon and Holloway 2011) and may be more comfortable for the participants (Krueger and Casey 2000). Focus groups 'take various forms depending on their purposes' (Fontana and Frey 2000: 651) and can be as small as two or three people (Wilkinson 2004, Daymon and Holloway 2011).

Knowledge of mental health issues in relation to professional communication

Knowledge of Response Ability principles

Following exposure to Response Ability resources, many students articulated the need to be 'sensitive' when communicating about mental illness and suicide. However, the survey results suggested they could not demonstrate knowledge of the specific guidelines in the resources. For example, participants were asked to: 'name three things that are important to consider when communicating about suicide'. Despite

exposure to the resources in at least two units, 89 per cent of participants could not give three answers consistent with Response Ability principles. Eleven per cent of students could give three answers, and a further 53 per cent could give some (i.e. one or two) responses consistent with the principles. Similarly, participants were asked to: 'name three things that are important to consider when communicating about mental illness'. Ninety-three per cent gave answers not consistent with Response Ability principles. Seven per cent of students could give three answers consistent with Response Ability principles, and a further 56 per cent could give some (i.e. one or two) responses consistent with Response Ability principles.

As in the evaluation of the pilot study, a significant number of students understood the question in terms of interpersonal communication rather than the professional implications for public relations, suggesting the need for educators to emphasise professional obligations. The problem may relate to the way the question was worded as 'the answers provided seemed to reflect that students believed the question was about talking directly to a person who is thinking about ending their life/has a mental illness, rather than about communicating about these issues from a public relations perspective' (Mason and Skehan 2009: 19).

Communicating mental health issues

Focus group participants demonstrated familiarity with the Response Ability principles, in that they recognised the ethical implications for the practitioners and knew to avoid conveying specific information regarding the location and method of suicides and to encourage help-seeking behaviour: 'You're not allowed to put any details of how they did it, and you have to provide contact numbers...for Lifeline and things like that.' The students were asked if they found discussing complex scenarios such as this useful in terms of their own learning and responded positively: 'Suicide, I think, is one of the hardest issues to communicate about because it's so sensitive'; and 'Because these are things that you may have to deal with when you get out into the world.'

Students also stated that they thought working through such scenarios 'reinforc[ed] really how important it is to have certain ethical guidelines'. Ultimately, students recognised the responsibility for making socially responsible decisions rests with the individual practitioner: 'The responsibility I think still stays with you – you have a responsibility to the [organisation]

and that person, especially in this situation to that person. And then there's the responsibility to yourself to act ethically too.'

Professional ethics and mental health issues

The students were critical of the Code of Ethics produced by the PRIA, primarily because it emphasised reputational issues for the industry rather than considered the social impact of public relations activity: 'It is mostly financial ethics rather than...I don't even know what the word would be...but I guess emotional ethics.' Focus group participants did not find the code useful as an articulation of professional ethics, particularly following the discussion of suicide in the stimulus scenario: 'I don't find any of this relevant at all.' At the same time, students acknowledged the difficulty in developing a code which would address the diversity of public relations practice. However, the need to consider the impact of public relations activity on others i.e. the social dimension of public relations was a strong topic of discussion. Students perceived an over-emphasis in the Code of Ethics on risk and reputation management at the expense of social responsibility.

Students' perceptions of ethics and education

Developing understandings of ethical practice

Both survey and focus group participants perceived they learnt most about the communication issues around mental illness and suicide by completing a major assignment on the topic: 'You actually have to make a decision when you are making the campaign, instead of just talking about it.' This finding echoes the results of a study which interviewed journalism students who had entered an award designed to encourage responsible reporting of mental health: 'The majority of students indicated that they had learnt more about suicide and mental illness through their personal research in preparing a health or suicide piece,' despite exposure to Response Ability resources in their studies (Romeo et al 2008: 127). Assessment tasks define learning objectives for students (Biggs 2003); exposure at university to such tasks was considered important by focus group participants: 'Because you don't really learn that much until you actually put it into practice.'

Eighty-nine per cent of students surveyed reported at least one unit from the public relations programme as useful in developing their understanding of ethical practice in relation to mental health issues. The most frequently cited unit was one which included a major assignment on mental health the previous semester. The next most cited units were: one which par-

ticipated in the Response Ability pilot study in 2009 and continued to use the resources; a real-client unit, where students developed campaigns for not-for-profit organisations; and a research unit, which introduced research ethics and methodology. Neither of these units employed Response Ability resources, although both units encouraged students to consider the social impact and ethical implications of public relations activity.

Focus group participants perceived the emphasis on ethics in their public relations studies, in contrast to other disciplines, as important and valuable. However, units from courses (such as sociology and commerce); journalism (which has used Response Ability journalism resources extensively); and public relations units which had not used Response Ability resources (such as the real-client and research units) were identified by some students as contributing to their understanding of ethics and ethical behaviour in public relations practice in relation to mental health issues. This result is surprising, but confirms that students perceive their development of professional responsibility and understanding of ethical practice builds on their prior learning.

Ethics of using mental health issues in teaching

It is important to acknowledge one survey response, where a student wrote of their experience of completing a major assignment relating to mental health:

I think I had a distasteful assignment lacking ethical consideration based purely and only on choosing an assignment topic of mental health – I learnt PR isn't about ethics and teachers 'teaching' me about considering people – an aim to offend NO-ONE is rubbish. I was disgusted with this assignment.

Although this response was the only negative comment received in the surveys ($N = 45$), it illustrates that some students find material related to mental health issues confronting, posing a challenge for educators who may consider scaffolding the ethical communication of mental health issues in a degree. The Response Ability project offers advice on teaching sensitive material, and recognises that some people find the topics challenging.

Although this issue may be resolved by offering students a choice of assignments, such an approach means not all graduates will develop knowledge of mental health issues in relation

to public relations practice. In the semester prior to this study, one lecturer responded to a similar concern about the use of mental health as an assignment topic, justifying its inclusion because of its significance to, and insufficient awareness in, the community. These student concerns suggest careful planning across a curriculum needs to occur to ensure that potentially challenging content, such as the Response Ability resources, are incorporated appropriately into the structure of a degree, and are not over-used, i.e. a programme-wide approach to the introduction of the resources should be adopted.

Cultural diversity and mental health issues

Survey participants viewed ethics as sensitivity to, or empathy with, others: 'Ethics, to me, is consideration of other genders, religious beliefs, politics, etcetera and the ability to maintain a compassionate view of the world.' Other students extrapolated the idea of sensitivity to others, by defining ethics as an awareness of the social impact of one's actions or behaviour: 'the consideration of how our actions will affect others.' Most participants recognised that ethics involved a determination of what was socially acceptable, with a significant cohort recognising that ethics would vary due to culture and context.

Therefore, students perceived ethics as a dynamic process, where ethics varies depending on the particular social context. This finding suggests that educators should be aware of the different cultural experiences students bring to the classroom (Billett 2004) and should highlight the impact of culture and context on ethics in their teaching. However, this paper does not advocate that a cultural relativist approach should be adopted; rather, an understanding of socio-cultural contexts must be considered in relation to ethics and public relations.

Students have diverse experiences, which influence their learning and their understanding of ethics. Although chi-square tests revealed little statistical significance in responses by demographics for most questions, in relation to the statement: 'public relations practitioners cannot be responsible for the impact that their campaigns may have on members of the community, such as those people living with mental illness', a higher proportion of Australian students were more likely to disagree with this statement than international students. Such differences need to be addressed in the classroom, particularly given the diversity of students in, and the increasing internationalisation of,

public relations education. Teaching resources should be multicultural, and introduce cultural difference. In particular, understandings of mental health and attitudes towards mental illness and suicide vary across cultural, socio-economic and political contexts (Herrman, Saxena and Moodie 2004: 20-23).

Students in Malaysia, for example, are accustomed to graphic and detailed reporting of suicide in newspapers and may not recognise the impact of such reporting on suicide rates. The culturally diverse understandings of mental illness and suicide need to be taken into account when developing a public relations campaign. Embracing cultural diversity develops in students not only an awareness of difference but also explicitly the ways in which public relations practice can be socially responsible and culturally relevant (Chia 2009).

Implications for public relations education

This study is concerned with the ethical challenges in relation to mental illness and suicide for public relations, and makes some initial recommendations for educators to consider how they teach ethics in relation to these issues.

- Public relations activity needs to be considered in terms of its social impact (Starck and Kruckeberg 2003, Bowen 2005, Breit and Demetrious 2010), both on a community and – in the case of mental health issues – on vulnerable members of society (Fitzpatrick and Gauthier 2001). Some students, and indeed, practitioners, assume that professional responsibility relates to effective business practice, neglecting the social elements implicit in both 'social responsibility' and 'public relations.'
- Practical and contextualised learning tasks allow students to apply their understanding of ethics. If they are encouraged to reflect on and share their responses to the task, students have the opportunity to develop their knowledge of ethical communication.
- Public relations educators should set a major assessment item on mental illness and suicide. In this way, students will research the field and integrate theory with their understanding of professional practice. However, care should be taken in curriculum planning not to introduce multiple major assignments on mental health.
- Public relations educators could develop a real-client project or service learn-

ing activity involving mental health. Students may share their experiences and responses to the ethical issues they identify in a structured discussion (Fitch 2011), an approach supported by work-integrated learning scholarship, which advocates students reflect on practical experiences in order to better integrate theory and practice (Billett 2009).

- Public relations classes are diverse; at some Australian universities approximately half are international students (Fitch and Surma 2006). In addition, Australia is considered a multicultural country with one in four Australians born overseas (ABS 2006: 6). Introducing different cultural perspectives of complex social issues offers students an excellent learning opportunity.

Conclusions

One challenge in this study is the difficulty in isolating Response Ability resources as a single variable in terms of the impact on student learning in relation to ethics. Students, through both the survey responses and the focus group discussion, acknowledged the positive impact of a range of units, the diversity of the student body, and other activities such as paid work on their understanding of ethics in relation to public relations practice. This finding confirms that many factors contribute to students' professional development. From the student perspective, professional and ethical development is incremental and ethics demands a consideration of others, i.e. a recognition of the social impact of public relations, reinforcing other research findings (Bowen 2005, Breit and Demetrious 2010).

Specific knowledge and professional expertise in relation to communicating mental health issues should be scaffolded in a degree. Complex tasks, possibly for assessment, will improve students' understanding and knowledge of communication management in relation to mental illness and suicide. However, such tasks need to be carefully integrated into the curriculum to ensure that students develop appropriate conceptual knowledge to apply to different scenarios. In addition, educators should develop a context- and culturally-sensitive approach, which addresses the reality of both multiculturalism and internationalisation in contemporary public relations.

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PAPERS

Ofcom: An evaluation of UK broadcast journalism regulation of news and current affairs

Recent revelations about journalism ethics in the UK have thrown regulation of the media into the spotlight with the Press Complaints Commission found wanting and suggestions of change for the Office of Communication, the broadcast regulator, making this an ideal time to evaluate its performance. Amongst other duties, Ofcom is responsible for accepting and adjudicating complaints about editorial and programme content from viewers and listeners. Ofcom has received between 5,000 and 30,000 complaints a year, depending on whether some incident catches the public imagination. This paper analyses the thousand or so complaints adjudicated by Ofcom in the period 2004 to 2010 to identify how effective Ofcom is at dealing with complaints, particularly those about news and current affairs. The paper also aims to gain some insight into how Ofcom's adjudications affect programme makers' decisions.

Keywords: Ofcom, Office of Communications, regulation, broadcasting, journalism, complaints

Introduction

Ofcom, the UK's broadcasting regulatory body, came into existence in January 2003, set up by the Office of Communications Act 2002. Its main legal duties as set out by the Communications Act 2003, are:

1. ensuring the optimal use of the electro-magnetic spectrum;
2. ensuring that a wide range of electronic communications services – including high speed data services – is available throughout the UK;

3. ensuring a wide range of TV and radio services of high quality and wide appeal;
4. maintaining plurality in the provision of broadcasting;
5. applying adequate protection for audiences against offensive or harmful material;
6. applying adequate protection for audiences against unfairness or the infringement of privacy.¹

Ofcom is funded by fees from industry levied for regulating broadcasting and communications networks; and grant-in-aid from the government. It is answerable to the UK Parliament but is independent of the UK Government.

At a time when UK media regulation is undergoing its most critical assessment from the public and parliament, including the Leveson inquiry set up by the government in the wake of the Milly Dowler phone hacking revelations and the closure of the *News of the World*, this paper will look at Ofcom's activities. Although broadcasting has so far largely avoided the criticism heaped on the national press for illegal activities it is an ideal time to examine how Ofcom carries out its regulatory duties enforcing its obligation to protect viewers and listeners (especially minors) from harmful or offensive material and to protect those who might appear in programmes from unfair treatment or invasion of privacy. The paper will attempt to identify trends in complaints and to examine particularly any lessons that can be learnt from complaints about news and current affairs.

People wanting to complain about broadcasting standards or unfair treatment in TV or radio programmes in the UK can complain to Ofcom. Ofcom advises them to contact the broadcaster first, complaining to Ofcom only if unsatisfied with the response, but that is not essential. Complainants are required to complete a complaints form that is available online or can be ordered by post or by phone. Once the complaint is received, Ofcom will carry out an initial assessment to decide if there is a case to investigate. If it feels there has been a potential breach of its code, it will proceed to review the programme, providing details of the complaint to the broadcaster and seek a response.

After considering the complaint and the broadcaster's response Ofcom's content board will then reach a decision about whether the complaint is upheld, not upheld or has been resolved. Board decisions are published on the

Ofcom website in a fortnightly bulletin. Some more serious breaches may require that the broadcaster broadcast the adjudication at an appropriate time and in the most serious cases the sanction can include a financial penalty or even a suspension or removal of licence to broadcast.

Data gathering

Data for this study were gathered from Ofcom reports (www.ofcom.org.uk). Ofcom publishes two types of report:

1. an annual report of their activities including statistics of complaints²
2. a fortnightly complaints bulletin identifying every complaint adjudicated.³

The fortnightly complaints bulletins allow Ofcom to identify the programme complained of, the broadcaster, the clause of the code complained of and the outcome of Ofcom's adjudication. In the case of fairness and privacy complaints it also identifies the complainant. It does not do this for standards cases, partly because it is not significant and partly because there may be more than one complainant. For instance, in the Ross/Brand case there were thousands of complainants. The detailed data contained within the bulletins were all logged onto a database allowing them to be filtered and manipulated in a way that best allowed analysis.

In order to identify programmes that were broadcast by radio as opposed to those broadcast as TV and in order to identify programmes that were news or current affairs each was tagged if it was radio, or if it was news and current affairs. News and current affairs programmes were identified as being programmes that:

- provided a regular news service or;
- regularly commented on or analysed the news or;
- provided topical in depth analysis of current affairs.

These included *News at Ten*, *Newsnight*, *Panorama*, *Despatches* and local news services. Programmes that although factually based were either reality television, educational programmes or contained no (or very little news) current affairs such as *Motorway Cops*, *Neighbours from Hell*, *Police*, *Camera*, *Action*, cookery or nature programmes were excluded from this category.

Tables of data were also extracted from Ofcom annual reports to show total complaints made and programmes complained about. These are identified separately in the analysis below. The aim of analysing these data is to identify how effective Ofcom is at dealing with complaints and to gain some insight into how its adjudications affect programme makers and their decision making. Is Ofcom able to address the issues that are of real concern to viewers and listeners?

Analysis of Ofcom complaints

One way of analysing how effective Ofcom is as a regulator of editorial content in programmes broadcast by licence holders in the UK is to measure the number of complaints made and the responses those complainants receive. There are three main categories of complaint:

- those that complain about a programme but that do not allege breaches of Ofcom's broadcasting code;
- those that complain about a programme and that do allege a breach of Ofcom's broadcasting code and that are resolved after some action by Ofcom;
- those that complain about a programme and that do allege a breach of Ofcom's broadcasting code and that are adjudicated by Ofcom.

Those complaints that do not allege breaches of the code cover everything from complaints about schedule changes to irritation at the ending of a favourite series. These are not pursued by Ofcom. Complaints that are potential breaches of the code are identified in Ofcom's fortnightly complaints bulletin.

Ofcom's broadcasting code

Ofcom is required by the Communications Act 2003 to draw up a broadcasting code against which it can measure complaints made. This must cover programme standards (minors, impartiality, accuracy, harm and offence) and fairness and privacy.⁴ The development of the two types of complaints (standards – and fairness and privacy) is historical but covers the key areas of concern of legislators. Standards, including matters of taste and decency, violence, sex and bad language were under the control of the Broadcasting Standards Council, set up by Margaret Thatcher in 1988 and given statutory authority by the Broadcasting Act 1990. The Broadcasting Complaints Commission had been set up by the Broadcasting Act 1990 to consider complaints concerning unjust

or unfair treatment or unwarranted invasions of privacy (Frost 2000: 188-189).

The two were combined by the Broadcasting Act 1996 to become the Broadcasting Standards Commission. This covered the dual role of the two former bodies, looking at both standards – and fairness and privacy. It sat alongside the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority who controlled the licensing arrangements for the independent TV and radio providers (ibid: 200). The BSC was obliged under the Act to produce a code and it relied on past codes, the BBC code and codes in use elsewhere to produce a code very similar to the one still in use today. This was taken over by Ofcom when it replaced the BSC, ITC and Radio Authority in 2003. The key difference with regard to the code was the legislative decision to replace ‘taste and decency’ with ‘harm and offence’.

These new terms are more specific allowing measurement by regulators rather than personal judgement. Offence can be determined to have taken place even if one disagrees it is justified and so regulators need only decide if the offence taken was reasonable or unreasonable. Similarly, harm can be measured by the circumstances. Taste and decency is just that, a matter of taste. The new terms also fit much better with the times smacking less of censoriousness seen by many as unsuitable for the 21st century.

The former BSC code was applied by Ofcom for its first year or so giving it time to consult on a new code that was introduced in 2005. This followed a similar pattern to previous codes and although a new consultation followed a couple of years later, the new code introduced for 2011 was little different covering standards (particularly with reference to minors), harm and offence (the newly updated and more specific names for taste and decency) and elections.

The Ofcom code is broken into ten sections (see table 1). The majority of complaints made largely fall under section 1 (under 18s) and section 2 (harm and offence).

Table 1: Ofcom code and its operation

Section 1: Protecting the Under-Eighteens
Section 2: Harm and Offence
Section 3: Crime
Section 4: Religion
Section 5: Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions

Section 6: Elections and Referendums

Section 7: Fairness

Section 8: Privacy

Section 9: Commercial References in Television Programmes

Section 10: Commercial Communications in Radio Programming

(see <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/>)

Over the lifetime of Ofcom there have been three major issues that have drawn a large number of complaints. The first programme to attract large numbers of complainants was the BBC2 programme *Jerry Springer: The opera* broadcast on 8 January 2005. Critics claimed the programme was blasphemous, contained several hundred swearwords and was very damaging to young people. Ofcom received 8,860 post-transmission complaints whilst the BBC received 47,000 or so complaints before transmission and another 900 after broadcast.

Channel Four was the next to trigger widespread protests when Ofcom received more than 45,000 complaints about alleged racism in *Celebrity Big Brother* (C4) in 2007-8. This was followed by the *Russell Brand show* (BBC Radio 2) in 2008-9 in which Russell Brand and his guest Jonathan Ross rang actor Andrew Sachs and left an offensive message on his answer machine. The show was broadcast on 18 October 2008 and two complaints were received by the BBC the next day. The *Mail on Sunday* ran a story that the BBC might be prosecuted for obscenity on 26 October and the number of complaints rose by a further 1,585.

By the end of the week, the BBC had received 30,500 complaints. The final total was 42,851. Ofcom investigated having received 1,939 complaints by 25 October 2008 and in April it fined the BBC £80,000 for breaches of the privacy section of the broadcasting code and £70,000 for breaches of the harm and offence section⁵. These three were the biggest cases in terms of the number of complainants and therefore, presumably the amount of upset caused.

How the analysis was done

The analysis was carried out by compiling information on all the complaints taken up by Ofcom and published in its fortnightly bulletins. The data were compiled into a database giving access to all Ofcom's decisions about complaints made. The database includes information about the outcome, the clause of the code against which the complaint was made, the programme and the broadcaster. Ofcom

adjudicates on complaints concerning 200 to 300 programmes drawn from the many thousands of complaints it receives every year. Complaints may be unadjudicated either because they are duplicate complaints or because the complaint does not breach the broadcasting code. There are, therefore, three headline statistics (to March 2011):

- total number of complaints made: 172,191;
- total number of cases (programmes complained about, some of which may attract hundreds or even thousands of complainants): 49,753;
- total number of cases in potential breach: 999.

Ofcom receives a considerable number of complaints each year from viewers and listeners (see table two and figures one and two).

Table 2: Complaints to Ofcom

Year	cases closed	complaints made
2004-5	1,149	4,184
2005-6	1,102	14,227
2006-7	1,483	5,575
2007-8	12,726	67,742
2008-9	13,203	27,549
2009-10	10,888	28,281
2010-11	9,202	24,633

(Ofcom 2004-2011 annual reports)

Although the figures for 'cases closed' is reasonably steady for the first three years and then increases dramatically by more than 10,000 to remain reasonably static again for the next three years, complaints made numbers can vary wildly from just over 4,000 to more than 67,000.

The number of complaints made reflects the number of complainants in any one year and so it is not possible to make any real judgement about the variation. Some issues spark large numbers of complainants raising the total in any particular year quite dramatically. Most of the very large increases are explained by complaints made about the high profile, controversial programmes mentioned above: *Jerry Springer: The opera* (BBC2); *Celebrity Big Brother* (C4) and *The Russell Brand show* (BBC Radio 2). If these complaints are factored out, the figures show that complaints made in the first three years are typically around 5,000 and in subsequent years around 25,000:(see Table 5).

'Cases closed' refer to individual programmes complained about, rather than complaints.

Typically in the first three years there are around 1,200 cases closed and subsequently around 12,000. This jump in both cases closed and complaints made is explained by a change in the way Ofcom has collected the data. When Ofcom first started operations, its Contact Centre logged and assessed the broadcasting complaints received by Ofcom and referred any that raised potentially substantive issues under the Broadcasting Code to the standards team for investigation. It was these complaints that were identified in the annual reports. However, from 2007/8 these data were no longer reported separately and so the much larger total number of complaints made to the contact centre (not just those referred to the standards team) were reported. An Ofcom spokesman said:

This change in the way Ofcom reports on its broadcasting complaints was for the purpose of clarity, and to provide a single picture of the work Ofcom undertakes on regulating broadcasting standards. Therefore, while it appears there was a sudden increase in complaints, the number of cases has remained relatively consistent.

Of course, as awareness of Ofcom and its role entered the public consciousness, an increase in complaints might be expected.

Table 3: Complaints received by Ofcom's standards team after redacting major causes of complaints identified above.

2004-5	4,184
2005-6	5,367
2006-7	5,575
2007-8	22,742
2008-9	25,610
2009-10	28,281
2010-11	24,633

Figure 1: Complaints made to Ofcom

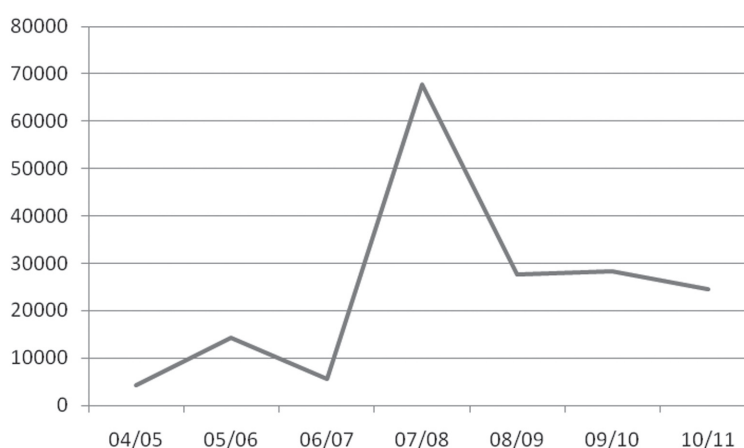
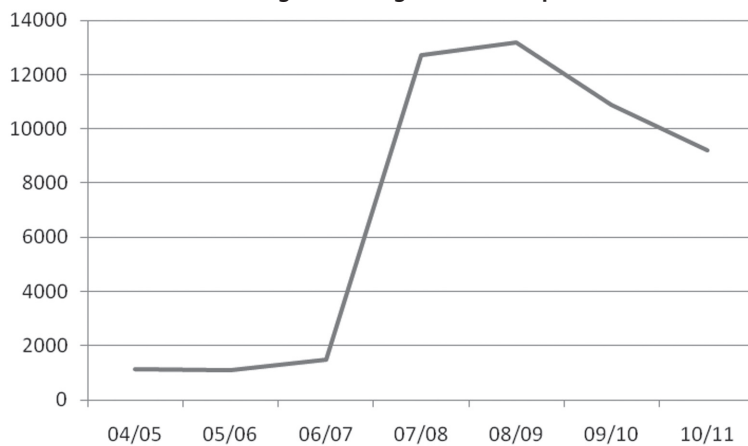


Figure 2: Programmes complained about



Ofcom investigates complaints made to it after an initial assessment that allows it to reject complaints that are not potential breaches of its code. It then publishes the results of its investigation and whether it has upheld the complaint in its fortnightly broadcast bulletin.⁶

Table 4: All complaints listed in Ofcom bulletins

year	standards cases total	% upheld	privacy and fairness total	% upheld
2004	141	47.5	67	22.4
2005	167	31.7	66	30.3
2006	168	31.5	92	26.1
2007	144	73.6	85	36.5
2008	195	76.9	95	35.8
2009	179	83.8	112	26.8
2010	179	81.0	31	19.4

In its first seven years of operation, Ofcom adjudicated 1,522 complaints. These were complaints that allegedly breached its Broadcasting Code and that required Ofcom to reach a verdict. Of these 528 concerned privacy and fairness. Looking at all the complaints, the vast majority are not in breach of the broadcast code and so are rejected. On average each year 7,096 cases are not in breach of the code. An average of 168 standards cases per year are found to be in breach with 61 per cent of the complaints upheld, an average of 15 involving sanctions. The remaining cases are resolved following some action from the broadcaster. An average of 78 fairness and privacy cases are dealt with each year of which 28 per cent are upheld (see Table 4).

News and current affairs

Ofcom does not separate out its decisions on complaints made against news and current affairs and other programming. However, it is possible to identify news and current affairs programmes in the complaints bulletins and flag them in the database so that they can be calculated separately.

For news and current affairs complaints, there is an average of 14.4 standards cases per year of which 47.4 per cent are upheld and an average 28.9 fairness and privacy cases per year of which 27 per cent are upheld. This compares with an average 155.3 standards complaints about non-news programmes per year of which 62.1 per cent are upheld and an average 57.9 fairness and privacy cases per year of which 27.2 per cent are upheld (see Table 5).

The biggest subject of complaint within news and current affairs is fairness closely followed by privacy with 112 complaints (48.5 per cent of the total) being about fairness and 51 complaints about privacy (22.1 per cent). There are fewer news and current affairs programme complaints than for other types of programme with a ratio of standards programmes complaints of 10.8:1 and for privacy and fairness complaints of 2:1. However, without calculating a ratio of transmitted news programmes to entertainment programmes (something that is outside the scope of this research) it is impossible to say whether this is significant.

However, if the ratio of standards complaints in non-news and news are indicative of the ratio of entertainment and news and current affairs programmes, it is clear that the chances of news and current affairs intruding on someone's privacy or treating them unfairly is much higher than for non-news programmes as the ratio of the number of news complaints is much higher. Since many non-news programmes are fictionally based or require active participation, this is probably not too surprising and may not mean anything.

Table 5: Complaints about news and current affairs listed in Ofcom bulletins

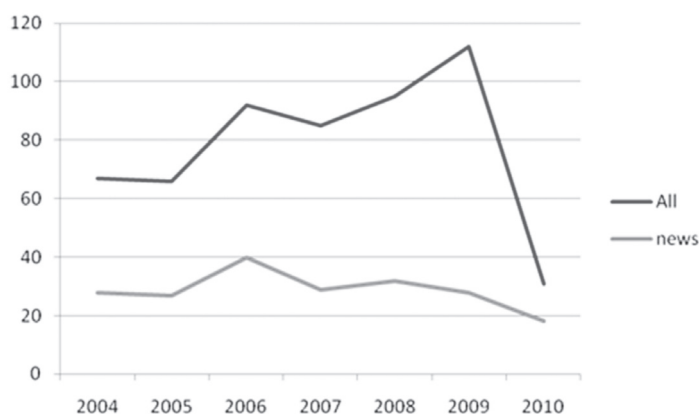
year	standards cases total	% upheld	privacy and fairness total	% upheld
2004	5	60.0	28	28.6
2005	16	0.0	27	37.1
2006	15	26.7	40	37.5
2007	18	66.7	29	20.7
2008	16	50.0	32	37.5
2009	13	81.8	28	10.7
2010	18	46.6	18	16.6

Table 6: Complaints about other programmes listed in Ofcom bulletins

year	standards cases total	% upheld	privacy and fairness cases total	% upheld
2004	136	47.1	40	17.5
2005	151	35.1	49	25.6
2006	156	31.4	51	17.3
2007	129	74.4	75	39.7
2008	183	78.7	86	35.7
2009	168	83.9	91	31.8
2010	164	84.1	13	23.0

Table 7: Ofcom adjudications of news and current affairs complaints by type from 2004 to 2010

Total complaints: 303					
resolved: 37		12 %			
Not upheld: 164		54.1 %		upheld: 74	
				24 %	
Complaint type	Number	as %	Upheld	As	
1 Children:	19	6.27	Uph 7	36.8	
2 Harm and Offence:	31	10.2	Uph 6	19.4	
3 Crime:	2	0.66	Uph 0	0	
4 Religion:	1	0.33	Uph 0	0	
5 Impartiality:	10	3.30	Uph 3	30	
6 Elections:	4	1.32	Uph 1	25	
7 Fairness:	139	45.9	Uph 20	14.4	
8 Privacy:	65	21.5	Uph 9	13.8	
9 Sponsorship:	16	5.28	Uph 14	87.5	
10 Competition:	13	4.29	Uph 12	92.3	
Not classified:	1	0.33	Uph 0	0	

Figure 3: Fairness and privacy adjudications

Complaints made against the code sections listed above fall into two categories: those where the harm is done to the subject of the programme (or someone else in the programme) and those where the harm is done to the viewer. The key sections of the broadcast code for news and current affairs are privacy, fairness, impartiality and accuracy, children, harm and offence.

- Fairness and privacy involve complaints that are nearly always made by someone involved in the programme (or someone complaining on their behalf),

usually the subject of the programme. There can be two types of complaint involved here: intrusion or unfairness during the making of the programme and/or intrusion or unfairness by broadcasting or by what was broadcast. In this type of complaint, the harm is usually alleged to have been done to the subject of the programme.

- Accuracy and impartiality complaints can be made by someone involved in the programme, but they are more usually made by someone who was not involved in the programme. These types of complaint often concern a harm (inaccurate information) done to the viewer or another but can be a harm to the subject in that it misrepresents them.
- Harm and offence complaints have to be made by others as they concern only the effect a programme can have on viewers.
- Children: complaints concerning children are generally made by viewers about programmes they fear may harm children or offend those responsible for caring for children. If the complaint concerns a child as the subject of a programme these are likely to be made by a parent or guardian of the child and concern intrusion into privacy.

An analysis of all the complaints about news and current affairs adjudicated shows that the number of fairness and privacy cases upheld was fairly small: 20 for fairness and nine for privacy; fewer than one sixth of the complaints being upheld on adjudication in either case. Looking through the upheld standards cases, there are no obvious lessons to be learned other than continued vigilance

over code issues. However, on privacy and fairness it is possible to categorise and consider several types of complaint.

Two of the privacy and fairness complaints concern candid filming that risked being intrusive at the scene: the first a woman filmed during a police drugs raid and the second a woman filmed at the scene of a traffic accident in which her daughter died. In both, Ofcom decided that the broadcasts were unfair and had invaded the women's privacy and should not have been broadcast.

Neither was considered to have been intrusive at the time of filming as had there been a strong enough public interest reason for broadcasting then Ofcom might have accepted that transmission was justified. Several of the unfairness complaints concerned interviewee expectations. It is difficult to tell through the filter of the Ofcom bulletin whether these were errors of judgement, different expectations from interviewee and interviewer or simply the news bulletin failing to live up the promises made. The 18 upheld fairness complaints (some of which were also privacy complaints) covered the following issues that have been split into three main categories:

Unfairness: Privacy and unfairness

Complaints where intrusion into privacy was also judged to be unfair

1. A woman was filmed handcuffed and in nightwear during a police drugs raid; she was not charged with any offence;
2. an attack victim was promised she could give a description of her attackers, which was not in the end transmitted, and 'body shots' invaded her privacy.

Unfairness – reputation

Complaints which were unfair because of choice of language

1. allegations of Saudi Arabian 'sweeteners' were unfair;
2. use of the word 'flop' was pejorative and thus unfair.

Complaints which were unfair because of implications made

1. A report suggested a council chief executive's job was at risk;
2. a Sikh priest was unfairly maligned;
3. ITV overstated ASA concerns about an advert;
4. coverage of a festival claimed it was a cover for illegal immigration (two complaints).

Complaints which were unfair because there was no right to respond

1. Complainant's radio station was criticised without right to respond;
2. a woman's accusations were said to be false allegations, which treated her unfairly;
3. a report on the collapse of a money transfer company (two complaints).

Unfairness – sources

Conduct of relationship with source did not go as promised

1. An interview was not conducted as expected and as promised;
2. the retraction of news piece was unfair to the reporter;
3. a woman agreed to take part in an interview if her identity was obscured but pictures of her were used;
4. surreptitious footage of a hospital was unwarranted;
5. a confidential complaint.

The broadcasters concerned were:

ITV1	4 complaints
Bangla TV	3 complaints
Panjab Radio	2 complaints
STV	1 complaint
BBC1	1 complaint
Radio 4	1 complaint
Sky	1 complaint
Five	1 complaint
Channel 9	1 complaint
Isles FM	1 complaint
Channel S	1 complaint

Privacy

Privacy complaints covered the following issues:

1. A woman was filmed handcuffed and in nightwear during a police drugs raid; she was not charged with any offence (as 1 above);
2. an attack victim was promised that a description of her attackers would be given, but it was not, also 'body shots' of her invaded her privacy (two complaints as above);
3. a woman injured in a road accident in which her daughter died was filmed and the film transmitted without permission (two complaints);
4. a programme examining the murder of the complainant's sister without seeking permission should have informed the complainant that the programme was to be broadcast;
5. clandestine filming in a nursery school;
6. a report on the collapse of a money transfer company (as 3 above).

From broadcasters:

ITV1	4
BBC1	3
Bangla TV	1

Complaints under the children's section concerned either violence or bad language. In two of the three language complaints the words were contained in the lyrics of pop songs. The programme had accidentally played the full version, not the 'radio edit' version of the recording. In one case, a story about child pornography, library footage had displayed website addresses for pornography sites which could have been easily read by children. ITV had three complaints upheld, whilst Sky, GEO News, Isles FM and OneFM each had one complaint upheld. This was considered a significant enough problem for Ofcom to have issued further guidance on 30 September 2011: 'Ofcom warns TV broadcasters to be more careful around watershed.'⁷

Three of the five harm and offence complaints concerned flashing lights, two against BBC1 and one against Sky. The Ofcom broadcast code warns against flashing lights as they may trigger photosensitive epilepsy. The other two complaints concerned a CCTV film of a late night knife attack (GMTV) and murder and an anti-Semitic joke on Radio Faza. Although all of the complaints that were upheld were breaches of the code, none was serious enough to warrant sanctions.

Sanctions

One of the major differences between Ofcom and the Press Complaints Commission is the power Ofcom has to levy sanctions against serious breaches of the broadcasting code. Ofcom is able, under statute, to reprimand a licence holder, levy a fine, suspend a licence or remove a licence altogether. It is the last two sanctions, relying on Ofcom's power to grant or refuse licences to transmit, that are seen as particularly controversial when Ofcom is suggested as a model for press regulation. The government is obliged to have some system to regulate the airwaves, which are a finite resource, and so using this as a method to punish licence holders who regularly breach the broadcast code has some logic. Most commentators seem to view this as unacceptable for the press or web-based news outlets.

Ofcom uses these powers infrequently and while it has suspended the occasional licence and even removed one altogether, these have been small specialist digital stations, involved in the soft porn end of the market. The majority of serious sanctions have been fines and, up to the end of 2010, Ofcom had fined stations a total of £6.221m averaging £135,239 a year. 2008 was a particularly punitive year with 19 programmes facing fines of £4,612,500, an

average of £242,763. However, this was the year when competitions based on phone-in voting were run with many of them closing voting or being repeat broadcasts allowing the public to vote, even though their votes would not be counted.

Granada Television, LWT and GCap Media Ltd were all fined more than £1m each. ITV2 and MTV were both fined in excess of £250,000. The BBC was involved in the Ross/Brand affair and also had problems with Sport Relief, Children in Need Comic Relief and several radio shows and was fined a total of £495,000. Other penalties range from £2,500 to £1.2m with a typical penalty around the £50,000 level. It is worth noting that no news or factual programme in the study period has breached the code badly enough for Ofcom to consider a sanction.

It is probably impossible to come up with a research method that would show whether penalties are successful in enforcing good practice. However, the general view from the public is that sanctions are likely to promote good behaviour and certainly large fines are not liked by shareholders, or (especially in the case of the BBC) by the public. The fact that sanction penalties fell significantly in 2009 following a number of serious incidents and then rose slightly the following year adds credence to this view, but is hardly incontrovertible evidence.

Table 8: Total sanctions levied by Ofcom

Year	total	average
2004	52,500	26,250
2005	185,000	30,833
2006	385,000	12,8333
2007	390,000	78,000
2008	4,612,500	242,763
2009	240,000	40,000
2010	356,000	71,200
Total	6,221,000	135,239

However, the compliance routine of all major broadcasters, particularly but not solely the BBC, does much to maintain high standards. The requirement of evidence of discussion of ethical decision making and a contractual requirement to adhere to guidelines are contained in the BBC's procedures and its compliance forms. Knowledge and proper implementation of the guidelines are central:

When applying the guidelines, individual content producers are expected to make the necessary judgements in many areas, but some issues require careful consideration at a higher level. The guidelines therefore

advise, and sometimes require, reference to more senior editorial figures, Editorial Policy or experts elsewhere in the BBC such as Programme Legal Advice (BBC Editorial Guidelines 2011: 2.2.3).

Conclusion

The recent outcries against the tabloid press and the setting up of the Leveson Inquiry have led a number of observers and politicians to wonder if broadcasting also has problems, whether Ofcom ought to be given a role in regulating the press or whether there should be a joint media regulator. The data here make it clear that complaints can be made about news and factual programmes and are taken seriously by Ofcom which is then able to take a serious line against transgressors. This seems to have enormously improved standards of journalism in broadcasting, with no evidence of increasing problems, no increase in complaints numbers and no significant problem complaints in the news and factual programming area.

Most breaches seem to be mistakes, minor errors of judgement or misunderstandings. This is despite an open complaints procedure allowing all to complain and despite accepting complaints that concern harm and offence, neither of which is fully the case with the Press Complaints Commission. Ofcom also has the ability to levy sanctions, but has not needed to do that for a news programme.

The PCC receives complaints mainly about accuracy (approximately 70 per cent) or privacy (20 per cent) whereas Ofcom's biggest complaint category is fairness (46 per cent) followed by privacy (22 per cent) and harm and offence (10 per cent). There is of course some crossover between accuracy complaints to the PCC and fairness complaints to Ofcom. Many accuracy complaints made to the PCC are in reality about fairness or about offence. The PCC also does not accept complaints about harm and offence except in very limited circumstances. Tempting though it might be to have a cross-media regulator, these figures do suggest that there are different problems to address in broadcasting to newspapers.

The final question is whether these figures show that Ofcom should have a role in regulating the press. Ofcom's ability to levy sanctions means that the industry certainly seems to take it much more seriously than the newspaper industry takes the PCC, whatever editors say about taking PCC reprimands seriously in their evidence to Lord Justice Leveson. Ofcom's guid-

ance is noted and acted on and there is little evidence of repeat breaches in news programmes. The statutory support that Ofcom can rely on to enforce its decisions on all broadcasters, the openness of the complaints procedure and ability to impose sanctions are all elements that would strengthen press regulation and should be considered by Lord Justice Leveson, but the idea of a media council spanning all media would probably be a mistake.

Despite convergence and the requirement for newspapers, magazines and broadcasters to have websites, a single media council would find it very difficult to give sufficient weight to newspapers and to broadcast news in comparison to the heavy load of TV entertainment programmes in a digital age that will see a steady growth of low-budget specialist channels. Leveson should look to Ofcom for ideas, but should ensure the press, and their websites, continue with their own, but much stronger, regulation.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/what-is-ofcom/statutory-duties-and-regulatory-principles/>, accessed on 24 November 2011

² See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/annual-reports-and-plans/annual-reports/>, accessed on 16 October 2011

³ See <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/>, accessed on 16 October 2011

⁴ See C4 S319-328 Communications Act 2003. Available online at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/contents>, accessed on 28 September 2011

⁵ See <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/content-sanctions-adjudications/BBCRadio2TheRussellBrandShow.pdf>, accessed on 28 September 2011

⁶ See <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/>, accessed on 28 September 2011

⁷ See <http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2011/09/30/ofcom-warns-tv-broadcasters-to-be-more-careful-around-watershed/>, accessed on 28 September 2011

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News as conversation, citizens as gatekeepers: Where is digital news taking us?

This paper considers the implications of recent shifts in the digital news landscape for democracy and the public sphere. It discusses the role of participatory news platforms and the claims made about the new elevated role for citizens as participants in and even producers of news. The paper concludes by arguing that rhetoric suggesting a radical upheaval in power relations between citizens and professional news media risks obscuring the real benefits of new modes of audience engagement

Keywords: news, democracy, citizenship, internet, participatory media

Introduction: Revolution in the air?

Consider a scene scarcely imaginable 10 short years ago: of the hundreds of millions of English language blogs tracked by blog engine Technorati, a majority deal in topics that are the traditional preserve of mainstream journalism (politics, technology, business, film, celebrity, sport and so on). Most aren't just confessional diaries or online photo albums (though often those elements are blended in). Technorati's research suggests blogs tend not to be made on a whim and then rapidly abandoned: 85 per cent of them have been active for more than a year. About a third of American blogs have more than 1,000 unique visitors every month (Sobel 2010). On Twitter, Middle East opposition protests, earthquakes and celebrity scandals unfurl in real-time via tweets from innumerable and often uncertain sources, and mainstream media struggle to keep up given their time-consuming responsibilities for fact-checking and analysis. Mainstream media, in turn, are being relentlessly fact-checked (and often found wanting) by dispersed but collectively potent online networks.

So-called 'crowdsourcing' sees once disaggregated citizens pooling resources, poring over British MPs' expenses accounts or scandalous documents released by WikiLeaks – too copious for professional journalism to monopolise. Internet users compile their own news agendas, circumventing the editorial craftsmanship of broadcast news bulletins or print news editions; the very term 'edition' connotes a snapshot temporality at odds with today's incessant news flows or 'ambient journalism' (Hermida 2010).

News has become *unbundled* and *modular*; tools such as Google News and RSS Newsfeeds allow users to compile a *Daily Me*, a concept prophesied by Nicholas Negroponte (1995) some 15 years ago. Or, via platforms like Facebook or Digg, audiences concoct news diets shaped by friendship and social networks. The expertocracy of news has been radically undermined. This is not to claim that our dependencies upon professional news outlets have loosened (quite the reverse may be true) but only that they have become more intricately mediated. The shift is more profound than one from analogue *table d'hôte* to digital *à la carte*. In terms of their role in shaping our information diets news providers are increasingly in the business of supplying ingredients rather than finished meals. Of particular concern to mainstream media, though, is how all this can function as a business at all when such an abundance of information, analysis and commentary is now available free at the point of delivery, and robust mechanisms for tying content to advertising have so far proven elusive. Murdoch's News Corporation, *The New York Times* and others (in concert with platform providers such as Apple) are, of course, busily engaged in trying to overcome this. It is difficult to see just how exclusively digitisation is responsible for the apparent crisis across newsrooms. As we hear stories from around the world of newspaper closures, newsroom 'restructuring', and circulation, subscription and advertising levels foundering (e.g. Abramson 2010, Deveson 2009, Oliver 2010, Pew 2009), somewhat apocalyptic tones have crept into debates about the future of journalism.

Clay Shirky is a leading US commentator on the rise of digital news and journalism (among other aspects of digital culture). With a rhetorical flourish worthy of the *Communist Manifesto*, he says this:

When someone demands to know how we are going to replace newspapers, they are

really demanding to be told that we are not living through a revolution. They are demanding to be told that old systems won't break before new systems are in place. They are demanding to be told that ancient social bargains aren't in peril, that core institutions will be spared, that new methods of spreading information will improve previous practice rather than upending it. They are demanding to be lied to (Shirky 2008).

But isn't it equally plausible to diagnose the reverse, namely an over-eager appetite for tales of revolution? Often we seem to demand to hear all that's solid is indeed melting into air: this certainly makes for better headlines. I suggest that the challenges faced by news media industries, by the journalistic profession and, by extension, by the structures of democracy and public debate are indeed serious but that we are not necessarily in the midst (or on the brink) of a 'revolution' in news media, certainly if we use the term 'revolution' properly to denote a radical change in ends and not merely in means. The future is certainly opaque but not least because the future is still there to be moulded by journalists, editors and owners as well as by citizens and consumers.

Citizens, consumers and gatekeepers

This paper is concerned with the implications of digitisation for civic, rather than commercial, values. However, whilst the focus will not be on paywalls, advertising revenues or the future of free news on the Web, it is vital to recognise that the fates of journalistic business models and of democracy are inextricably linked. This is especially so in our highly commercialised media ecology. It is always tempting for the media analyst concerned with democracy and civic functions of news media to place disproportionate emphasis on the potential of those institutions at one remove from the constraints (for some 'distortions') of the market. In the UK, for example, the BBC and the Scott Trust-supported *Guardian* newspaper, though facing serious pressures (Davoudi and Fenton 2009, Fenton 2010), can seem like beacons of civic purpose amid a sea of cut-throat commercial competition.

Moreover, both institutions have been key innovators in developing digital news platforms. And yet, realistically, the environment in which they operate (and from which they are only partially insulated) is overwhelmingly commercialised. In smaller markets, there is often an inverse correlation between the perceived necessity and viability of public service alterna-

tives to markets dominated by few (often overseas owned) commercial players (Puppis 2009).

In the face of near-ubiquitous commercialism across news media, it is tempting to romanticise the still relatively non-commercialised (or only nascently monetised) domains of citizen journalism, blogging and social media (where content retains relative independence from monetised platforms). The following argument will suggest an ongoing and vitally important democratic role for professional journalism – one that cannot be disentangled from commercialism. A sense of market realism is required for assessing the civic functions of news media in the digital age and advocates for a democratic public sphere need to engage commercial media in critical dialogue and acknowledge their imperatives. If, as I will argue, we should uphold the importance of professional journalism in the era of citizen journalism and social media, then it is unhelpful to treat commercial logic with lofty disdain as defenders of the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1989, Garnham 1992) are often wont to do.

The commercial news market, I suggest, is an insufficient but essential part of the public sphere. To those who believe that the commercial news market is essential *and* sufficient for a democratic media ecology – those who perceive non-market mechanisms such as public funding as distortions not remedies – the concept of 'citizens as gatekeepers' invoked in the title of this paper will seem unremarkable, possibly tautological. The liberal free press dream is one in which citizens determine the news – or get the news they deserve – by voting with their wallets and/or their attention (Curran and Seaton 2003: 346-62). Others, though, would argue that the roles of citizen and consumer, though not intrinsically contradictory, cannot be so easily merged (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). The kinds of news and information that empower us as citizens are not always those we would be drawn to by our immediate desires. Uncomfortable truths are often unpalatable in the short term and their value is only realised in the longer term. In any case, consumers can never be truly sovereign in a commercial news marketplace: citizens have always been partial gatekeepers in a range of complex power-sharing arrangements that include editors and journalists selecting, filtering and framing the news before citizens get to vote with their wallets or time.

This is not a critical claim. As citizens, we require professional newsmakers to exercise good

judgement on our behalf about the news agenda, and all the more so in a digital environment now characterised by information overload and by dense and inter-connected news delivery systems. What matters from a democratic perspective is what values and imperatives are driving those selection and filtering decisions and how media literate the public is in terms of understanding newsmaking processes. It is unconvincing and even regressive to hear the gatekeeping functions of professional news media referred to as if they were, by definition, some kind of affront to democracy, a kind of feudal power bloc to be swept away by opening the information floodgates of the internet.

Other agents in this complex power-sharing arrangement include, of course: journalists' sources and PR professionals; advertisers (and their particular target demographics); shareholders and, in some cases, old-fashioned proprietorial powers, though this kind of power has often been over-egged as a product of our appetite for demons – the economic power and market behaviours of large media empires have done more than the eccentric and ideologically-driven personalities of their figureheads to shape the increasingly globalised media landscape of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

But power-sharing arrangements have started to shift dramatically during the last decade with the rise of the internet and especially Web 2.0 or the 'participatory web' of bloggers, citizen journalists, YouTube and news recommendation engines hooked into social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Clearly, we can see citizens themselves exercising more gatekeeping power with ever greater choice, personalisation and unbundling of news as well as enriched opportunities to discuss and even shape the news agenda (Deuze 2008, Hermida and Thurman 2008). Clearly, too, we see challenges to the roles of some of the established gatekeepers: editors whose *raison d'être* appears called into question in the era of the *Daily Me* (a strong *raison d'être* can still be argued for but the point is it now needs arguing for and has lost its axiomatic status – see Gans 2010); proprietors and shareholders who see the internet steadily eroding their advertising, subscription and cover-price business models (Harris 2010); and journalists incredulous at the apparent hypocrisy of a blogosphere so acutely critical of 'mainstream media' and yet so often sloppy in its own journalistic standards and ethics (O'Dell 2010).

Google isn't 'just a tool'

A key issue for public ethics is how transparent (or opaque) are the mechanisms of public sphere institutions including media and information industries. Digitisation is not simply about power shifting between two blocs – citizens and professional media. The emergence of other gatekeeping powers complicates the picture. At an institutional level, this means the major online players – Google, Facebook and Twitter especially. At a professional level, this broadly means software and interface engineers. It is not the case that Google exercises the same kinds of gatekeeping powers as news providers: its influence is at the level of information architecture, not content. And yet it is also not the case that the software driving Google's search and news engines are neutral gateways to information (Beer 2009). Neither, for that matter, are YouTube's search or recommendation engines, or Facebook's Newsfeed algorithms. These are human-made systems designed to sift, rank and filter information flows on our behalf. They are, for the most part, proprietary (and jealously guarded commercial secrets) and subject to less critical scrutiny or public awareness than even the relatively mystified domain of the newsroom.

Neither is there anything intrinsically natural about the 140-character limit on Twitter; nor the assumption made by Facebook that the kind of news I am exposed to should be determined by the things that cause my 'friends' to click a 'like' button. Such features have all sorts of attractions and benefits but they are human-made interfaces that shape the way we consume news. The same holds for conventions of 'traditional' media: there is nothing natural or timeless about daily newspapers or hour-long tea-time news bulletins.

These are historical, human-made artefacts. It does not necessarily mean we should want to get rid of any of them. But it does mean we should always be thinking critically about their benefits and limitations, their usefulness and their fitness for purpose at any particular historical juncture. And at this point in history, just as we ponder the fate of the 'dead tree' newspaper (often misleadingly conflated with, or used as a metonym for, the fate of professional journalism), so our critical scrutiny must also now extend to the various online platforms and news delivery systems that are shaping our news consumption and, by extension, our conversations and our debates.

The digital world isn't flat

An ethical perspective on digitisation requires us, of course, to consider equality of opportunity. It is undoubtedly true that, for all the constraints, features and quirks of these new online delivery systems, citizens are granted unprecedented opportunities to shape the news agenda for themselves and, in many cases, for the peers in their networks. This undeniably represents a form of democratisation. But the idea that there is a broad devolution of power from the few to the many, from professional media to the citizenry at large, is of course simplistic. Power is not distributed evenly among the citizenry and new communication tools can create new forms of inequality just as they can help to level others.

The so-called digital divide is usually viewed from a supply-side perspective, as a primarily socio-economic and geographical (especially urban versus rural) problem requiring redress through infrastructure investment. But one major factor often overlooked (because it lacks clear policy implications) is the divide between the time-rich and the time-poor. An abundance of news sources to navigate and opportunities to 'join the conversation' (whether blogging, re-Tweeting stories or commenting on newspaper websites) scarcely 'democratises' news for citizens who work double shifts or have round-the-clock care responsibilities. Of course, we are led to believe that we are all leading increasingly busy and more time-pressured lives. Under time constraints, we look to professional news media to provide packaged digests of the important news of the day: this can be a useful antidote and complement to the more amorphous news flows of the web.

But as and when time allows, active and motivated citizens (motivation is also unevenly distributed) want and need longer-form journalism in order to understand issues sufficiently and this too is a vital antidote and complement to the bite-size chunks of news flowing especially around platforms like YouTube and Twitter. Can mainstream media do both the long and the short well? Both the wide-area survey and the deep-drilling? This seems a tall order, perhaps reflected in much criticism of TV news which stands accused of failing on both counts with both excessive soft news padding and a shortage of in-depth coverage: too long and too shallow are common complaints.

In terms of the digital divide, however, the issue is not simply the question of who has sufficient access, time and cultural capital to participate.

There are various power dynamics emerging within online platforms. In blogging, the A-list blogger phenomenon is now well-known: Huffington Post and Instapundit may have challenged entrenched mainstream news power but have become concentrated powers in their own rights (Farrell and Drezner 2008, Sunstein 2007). Compared to mainstream media, there are low barriers to entry to the blogosphere and social media and also fewer instances of producer loyalties divided between audiences and advertisers. And yet there are certainly first-to-market advantages and snowball effects: in an incredibly crowded marketplace like blogging, traffic is driven largely by word-of-mouth (its online equivalent, anyway), by referrals and links, not to mention profiling in the mainstream media: visibility begets visibility in what is essentially an 'attention economy' (Lanham 2006). This is not to claim that top blogs can sustain their position in the long term if audience satisfaction falls significantly (indeed, few mainstream media institutions have ever enjoyed such cushioning); brand loyalty doesn't run too deep in such a competitive market. But it is to suggest that new entrants to the market face considerable hurdles in gaining the kind of visibility required to compete.

We also see power laws at play in other aspects of online news consumption. The social news media site Digg.com has, since its beginnings, had a small fraction of users responsible for submitting a majority of the stories that get voted onto its front page because those power users accumulate visibility and influence and their stories are more likely to be seen and then voted for than those submitted by lower profile users. Under criticism that this looks more like a popularity contest than a platform for deciding the merits and newsworthiness of stories, Digg has made attempts to tweak the algorithm that weights votes for stories to mitigate this snowball effect: in turn, it has then come under fire for using secretive algorithms to undermine the meritocracy of a system that rewards the hard work and success of power users. Either way, 'democratising news', it turns out, is no straightforward business.

Recent research (Cha et al 2010) shows some striking things about Twitter. It tracked 54 million users and almost 2 billion tweets across an eight month period in 2009, looking at three different measures of network influence: first, who gets the most followers; second, whose tweets are most often re-tweeted through the network; and, third, whose names are mentioned or cited most often in other tweets. The

research found little overlap between these measures (less than 10 per cent): the 'million follower fallacy' mistakenly assumes that the Twitter users who recruit the most followers are necessarily the ones shaping the agenda and the conversations on Twitter. It seems Twitter is not just a popularity contest. But the research found strikingly low levels of reciprocity which cautions us against celebrating Twitter as some kind of gigantic water-cooler or digital coffee house. Steep power laws characterise all three measures of influence: the influence of the top 100 users (across all three measures) is exponentially greater than the top 1,000 whose influence is exponentially greater than the top 10,000. Outside the top 10,000, influence becomes statistically negligible – and this from a dataset of 54 million users!

Of course, there are plenty of water-cooler conversations occurring on Twitter but it is structurally closer to a broadcast medium than many realise: many followers and few followed; many tweeters and few re-tweeted; many commentators and few commented upon. There are agenda-setters and gatekeepers. Some of these are mainstream news outlets. In the research just cited, Twitter accounts with most followers include outlets like CNN and *The New York Times*, alongside various celebrities and politicians. But with sources that were most commonly re-tweeted (a better indication of who are the agenda-setters than who has the most followers) it seems traditional news outlets are largely eclipsed by successful new players: news aggregator services are important new gatekeepers in this environment with services like TweetMeme amplifying the power law by aggregating the most popular links and drawing yet more traffic to them in a self-propelling spiral.

Simpler research looking only at the volume (rather than influence) of Twitter traffic found the most prolific 10 per cent of users posting more than 90 per cent of tweets (Heil and Piskorski 2009): most people use Twitter primarily to hear rather than to speak (not necessarily a bad thing as I shall argue later). And there are numerous other examples of how variations on the 80:20 rule prevail in social networks. Social networks are not flat: they are hierarchical and often less conversational than we assume.

Does this matter? There have always been opinion leaders holding disproportionate influence within communities. It is true that their potential reach is greatly extended in online social networks. But this does not render such com-

munities undemocratic in and of themselves. In fact, online social network research is at such an early stage that we do not have a clear picture of whether and how much hierarchies of status and influence among peer networks are artificially bolstered by network design or are merely a reflection of wider social hierarchies. The point is that the resilient myth of blogging, citizen journalism and social media driving us closer towards some kind of egalitarian nirvana in the news where anyone can become newsmaker or opinion leader, where merit has truly triumphed over status, is deeply problematic.

News as conversation

Assessing the civic implications of digitisation involves questioning quality and not merely equality of opportunity. It is undoubtedly true that a number of positive things have emerged: greater choice, access and opportunities for participation, and a massive reduction in economic barriers to entry for aspiring amateur and even semi-professional newsmakers. It would be misleading to claim this is not a form of democratisation. Democracy is not simply a quantitative matter of *how much* choice, participation and opportunity is gained, though. The issue is also what citizens can do with these extended opportunities to engage with news and journalism.

Dan Gillmor – champion of citizen journalism and author of the hyperbolically titled book *We the media* (2006) – argues that the internet has been steadily transforming news from a lecture into a conversation. But this risks setting up a false dichotomy. The idea that news should nourish and stimulate conversation is not contentious: without conversation, citizens lack the wherewithal to test, refine and enrich their interpretations of and responses to the news they read, hear and watch. Clearly the internet enhances opportunities for citizens to engage in conversations with peers and with newsmakers. But the idea that news should *become* conversation is deeply problematic. It misses the importance of listening first before expressing opinion. To see journalism itself as conversation smacks of juvenile impatience or attention deficit. We risk celebrating instantaneous feedback and downgrading the values of reading below the fold and processing at a pace fitting for the complex issues news throws up. Tellingly, etymology links the word 'lecture' (for all its contemporary negative baggage) to the act of reading.

Gillmor himself, though, does not run amok with this rhetoric of news as conversation. He

is, in fact, deeply concerned with the quality of the conversation and worries about the fate of careful reflection. Recently, he has suggested we might need something like a slow news movement analogous to the slow food movement (2009, see also Shapiro 2010). Notwithstanding the point made already about the constraints on time-poor citizens, there is something useful in this concept. We tend to focus on the supply side of shrunken news cycles and competitive scoop-fests trumping the time-consuming journalistic practices of analysis and even, on occasion, verification. But we often neglect the demand-side: a slow news movement would have to be one that encouraged audiences to slow down, chew their news slowly and moderate their portion sizes rather than assuming more is better, to appreciate dishes that have been marinated and slow-cooked, which is just what the most valuable long-form, investigative journalism tends to be.

The 'morselisation' of news (Atkinson 1994) is, I suggest, not merely a supply-side but also a demand-side issue. This is not to deflect criticism of professional news media nor to support the simplistic claim that outlets serving up morselised news are just giving audiences what they want: supply and demand are shaped by numerous exogenous factors and also by each other. Moreover, it is not to support the claim that market realism dictates an inevitable drive towards faster, softer, more bite-size news. Such a claim constitutes fatalism rather than realism. It is simplistic at best and condescending at worst to fall back on the assumption that few outside the chattering classes want serious long-form news and current affairs any longer. So the point here is not that the public merely gets the news it deserves. However, there are some serious demand-side issues at stake here and we misread the problem, I suggest, if we do not acknowledge them. These issues are about citizenship and civic engagement.

When we hear about trends of declining voter turnouts in Western democracies, declining political party memberships, declining audiences for television news and declining newspaper readership figures, especially among the younger generation, some will proclaim a lamentable deterioration. Others, though, will say that matters are not necessarily deteriorating, only changing. After all, young people in particular may be increasingly disaffected with mainstream national politics but engaging in new and different ways: protests, petitions, online campaigns and the like. So too, a turn away from traditional news sources such

as newspapers and national TV news does not signal a decreasing interest in news and current affairs. Quite the contrary, in fact, as an array of new outlets for news, and opportunities to interact with the news, are being tapped into. This may be a cause for optimism unless one believes that, whatever the diverse array of debates and conversations going on at local and global levels, there is also vital importance in the kinds of shared conversations required to keep a democratic light shining on the national polity and its key players (both elected and unelected). If increasing numbers of, particularly younger, citizens are turning away from those conversations then there is a much wider social issue at stake, I suggest, than the quality of the news. To highlight the shortcomings of mainstream news media does not oblige us to single out and scapegoat the media for the state of the contemporary public sphere.

Google isn't evil

In a similar vein, it is not helpful to scapegoat the new media players for the perceived crisis in mainstream news and journalism. Google, whose unofficial motto is 'don't be evil' is, of course, the devil incarnate for Rupert Murdoch who argues that it has been brazenly stealing his content. Others, though, cite Google for other sins. In particular, it is seen as one of the major driving forces behind the unbundling of news: it deep links audiences into news stories, bypassing front-page portals with the advertising and branding that brings with it; and it fosters a fragmented, decontextualised approach to news consumption, encouraging greater morselisation and less critical scrutiny of the source behind the content. The tradeoff between unprecedented choice in news and information brought about by digitisation and the unprecedented fragmentation of public life it threatens represents a major dilemma from an ethical perspective.

Google and its rivals have, indeed, impacted on the way news is accessed and consumed. But whilst this allows audiences to skim rapidly across the surface and enjoy superficial engagement with news, the very same platform allows audiences to plumb remarkable depths on a story, issue or event. It takes reading below the fold to new levels and allows citizens to interrogate and assess the credibility of news sources through cross-referencing and fact-checking. It also allows suitably motivated citizens to sift the hard news from the soft, to filter out the infotainment or 'noise' that seems increasingly prevalent in the bundled news of broadcasting and the press. A technology such as Google

can have such profoundly contradictory consequences precisely because its consequences are not hardwired into the technology: they are very strongly contingent on users and their social context. Again, this is about the demand-side as much as the supply-side.

As Fallows (2010) suggests, Google is attempting to redress the reputation it is acquiring for damaging both the business models of commercial news outlets (and especially newspapers) and the culture of long-form journalism. He profiles several projects designed to get Google partnering more constructively with mainstream news outlets. One example is the open source *Living stories* experiment designed to allow the automatic collating of reports on a story (one that might develop over a period of time) on a single page that will be prioritised in Google search results. In other words, Google is exploring ways to adapt the information architecture to encourage curation of stories on the producer side and deep reading on the reader side, redressing the decontextualisation or morselisation it is commonly held responsible for. As Fallows points out, not only is Google far from the sole factor driving the fragmentation of news, it also has no vested interest in the corrosion of quality, in-depth journalism: quite the opposite, in fact, as such corrosion is detrimental to its own value as a news gateway.

If it is reassuring that Google would encourage us to access in-depth, credible journalism, this is still under the auspices of the bespoke *Daily Me*. Again, Google can't be held solely responsible for the so-called 'echo chamber' effect where citizens seek out sources that reinforce their own views and prejudices without exposure to alternative or challenging perspectives (Sunstein 2007, Farrell and Drezner 2007). Google's outgoing CEO, Eric Schmidt, has an answer to this that he calls the 'serendipity principle'. In other words, his vision of a healthy online news environment is one in which individuals can get finely grained bespoke news whilst still stumbling across unanticipated topics and perspectives. This sounds like a healthy balance. But it leaves shared conversations about matters of common public interest very much to the whims of trending memes. If personalised news diets and micro-conversations are increasingly dominant, then perhaps the role of mainstream media is increasingly one of complementing (rather than competing with) the *Daily Me*, to regularly draw people out of their news bubbles and to convene debates on matters of public interest fueled by in-depth coverage of salient facts and perspectives. Such a claim will

no doubt appear futile, nostalgic or paternalistic to some.

Conclusion: Who is in the driving seat?

One way of drawing citizens out of their micro-conversations into a shared arena is to actively engage with citizen journalists, amateur bloggers and social media rather than seeing them as attempting to encroach on professional territory or merely paying lip service to them – something the *Guardian* online has undoubtedly led the way in. But it pays not to forget the obvious point that for all the committed bloggers (many of whom are either journalists or consider themselves journalists), a majority of citizens relate to mainstream media as audiences first and foremost and not as participants.

Without trying to reduce news and journalism to conversation, it may be possible to encourage more members of the audience to participate and contribute in order to foster greater engagement with the news and, significantly from a market perspective, with particular news media brands. For mainstream media to treat its audience as intelligent citizens and as potential contributors to an ongoing conversation does not mean treating them as equals. As citizens we tend to look to professional journalists to keep us informed about important events and to access newsworthy places and people on our behalf. But we also look to them to interpret, analyse, sift fact from conjecture and opinion, dig beneath the surface, air different voices, and tell us interesting stories. Despite the rhetoric of 'democratising news', citizens do not routinely aspire to be the professional journalist's 'equal' in matters of newscraft, even among those busily blogging and tweeting on a daily basis. Jay Rosen (2006) coined the now well-worn phrase 'the people formerly known as the audience' for these citizens. But as we see in other contexts (theatre, live music, television talk-shows and so forth), increasing audience participation does not in any sense render the concept of audience itself defunct.

Clay Shirky (2009) draws an analogy between journalism in the digital age and driving:

Like driving, journalism is not a profession... and it is increasingly being transformed into an open activity, open to all, sometimes done well, sometimes badly...The journalistic models that will excel in the next few years will rely on new forms of creation, some of which will be done by professionals, some by amateurs, some by crowds, and some by machines (Shirky 2009).

There is undoubtedly some truth in this claim. But the analogy with driving is an odd one that diminishes the craft and complexity of journalism, whether or not we want to label it a 'profession'. Truly anyone with basic motor, visual and cognitive skills can be a proficient driver; not so a proficient journalist. Good journalism pushes the boundaries, is creative and involves taking risks; not so, good driving.

Perhaps a better analogy would be with music. Many of us enjoy participating in music as well as listening to it. But picking up an instrument, whilst enjoyable and rewarding, also teaches most of us just how big the gap is between great musicianship and our own efforts. Participating in this way sharpens our appreciation (and critical skills) as listeners. Having some competence in music does not make us less respectful of or less interested in listening to expertly produced music – quite the reverse. And perhaps that is the mind shift needed in respect of blogging and citizen journalism. Mainstream news media need not disdain or fear the growth of amateur journalism, questioning whether it really is 'journalism': it should instead be engaging with it, offering master classes, showcasing the best, and treating it as an opportunity to increase understanding of and appreciation for the journalistic profession.

Again, such idealism should be tempered by a note of realism. Those of us outside the profession should care about the state of journalism because we care about democracy. Journalism is shaped by many forces on the supply-side and also on the demand-side. On both sides of the equation, there are forces which go much wider than journalism itself (including the economic climate on the supply-side and a growing culture of cynicism towards public life on the demand-side). But journalism, new or old, is neither the exclusive cause of nor a potential panacea for the shortcomings of democracy. The internet is bringing citizens greater choices and some extremely interesting opportunities for enriched forms of engagement with, and even participation in, the news. It also brings some risks for citizens: of fragmentation and polarisation, of information overload and dizzying acceleration. But the extent to which the internet can democratise news is a much less important question than the extent to which it can help democratise democracy itself.

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The revolution must wait: Economic, business and financial journalisms beyond the 2008 crisis

Although it is tempting to blame journalism's apparent failure to warn of the 2008 financial crisis on a lack of training, rigid routines or an over-reliance on elite sources, the malaise is far more deep-seated. For the last three decades, the British and American news media have seemed largely oblivious to the inherent weaknesses of free market economics and equally, the merits of alternative models. Economic and business journalisms are the inevitable products of the ideology that sustains them and in the absence of a coherent, mainstream political counterweight to neoliberalism, it is left to authors, satirists and even TV chefs to provide engaging economic and business journalism with a social dimension

Key words: business; economics; journalism; neoliberalism; alternatives; BBC

The great industrialist Henry Ford was not particularly noted for his sociological insight but he clearly appreciated the potency of public knowledge:

It is well enough that the people of the nation do not understand our banking and monetary system for, if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning (in Maguire 1957:79).

Although Ford gave no indication of the causes of such ignorance, the news media shoulders some responsibility. Indeed, economic, business and financial (EBF)¹ journalisms are inherently anthropomorphic in that their normative function is to inform people about the economic environment which they inhabit (Kinsey op cit: 160; Budd 2007: 2; Parsons 1989: 7). Although

scholarly interest has been rather limited in these areas (Doyle 2006: 434) the research suggests that EBF journalisms have, at best, a patchy record of connecting with the public; explaining concepts; highlighting nascent dangers; and promoting knowledge of alternatives to the *status quo*.

The universal importance of economics, business and finance, combined with the inherent complexities of the subjects places a considerable burden on the news media to explain and contextualise while holding the audience's attention. Journalists constantly struggle to produce appealing content (Corner et al. 1997: 91) and yet only around a fifth of Britons profess to being interested in business and financial news (Ofcom 2007: 25) and very few can explain basic economic concepts (see Peston 2009: 18).

It is a similar story in the United States. For example, in 1987 the Ford Foundation found the public need for quality coverage of business and economic matters 'remains measurably and markedly unfulfilled' and twenty years later, American journalists were still underachieving (Roush 2006: 201). Similar deficiencies were also noted by Diana Henriques (2000) and Mark Ludwig (2002). Evidence of the efficacy of EBF journalisms is scarce on both sides of the Atlantic and Gillian Doyle's stark assessment provides a pithy synopsis of the corpus: 'The task of facilitating a sound public grasp over the significance of financial and economic news developments is largely being neglected' (2006: 433). In these terms, Ford's nightmare of a citizenry that comprehends financial matters has little chance of being realised.

History repeats: Three centuries of irrational exuberance

The deficiencies of EBF journalisms are most evident when disaster strikes and the 2008 Financial Crisis inevitably stimulated renewed interest from academia (Tambini 2008, 2010, Marron et al 2010, Manning 2010). Such research is certainly invaluable but few scholars acknowledge that this was merely the latest in a long list of failures. Indeed, far from alerting the public to nascent dangers, the media habitually sustain booms which can lead to speculative bubbles and, hence, financial crises (Shiller 2000: 98). This has arguably been true since the early eighteenth century when coffee house gossip combined with enthusiastic reports in newsletters and pamphlets and 'fed the frenzied trading of speculators' prior to the bursting of the South Sea Bubble in 1720 (Dale 2004: 17, Balen 2002: 107).

Financial journalism grew in tandem with liberal capitalism and expanded significantly through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth (Parsons op cit: 5, 48). In this period the link between bubbles and the media strengthened despite huge improvements in communication technology. The trend continued from the 1920s to 2000, and over these years:

...the flaws of business journalism in writing about stock markets have remained almost the same: their reporting is too enthusiastic (or positive) and uncritical (Ojala and Uskali 2004: 1).

The EBF media grew considerably in size, scope and audience reach in the late-twentieth century. In the 1980s, the Thatcher and Reagan administrations promoted pro-business economic policy, market liberalisation and popular share ownership and in the 1990s, these combined with new technologies (satellite TV and then the internet) to give business and finance far more prominence than ever before (Bekken 2005: 75; Cassidy 2002: 178). Across all media, economics, business and finance are now part of the standard news offering.

Despite a century of expansion, however, there is little evidence of an improvement in the journalisms. For example, immediately before the Wall Street Crash of 1929, even the most cautious of the American financial media believed the boom would continue indefinitely (Bow 1980: 447). Seven decades later, the media was also instrumental in hyping the New Economy which spectacularly crashed in 2000. Thomas Frank maintained that the media were complicit because they eagerly promoted the 'democratisation' of the stock market with little regard for the risks (2001: 123). Lionel Barber, editor of the *Financial Times*, conceded that the 'financial media could have done a better job...ahead of the dotcom crash' (Barber 2009) but other critics were far sharper. John Cassidy, for example, wrote: 'Despite some honourable exceptions, the overall standard of reporting on the internet stock phenomenon was dismal' (2002: 326).

The failures of business reporting are also most apparent in exceptional times and for many, Enron is the definitive example. Until the company collapsed in autumn 2001, the majority of business journalists were seemingly oblivious to Enron's dubious accounting practices. Just months before its downfall, Enron 'had been the business media's poster child, praised for its 'innovative' practices and consistently listed

among the top American corporations (Nieman Reports 2002: 4). In heaping such adoration on the company, the media 'actively helped create the Enron scandal' (Madrack op cit: 3) and yet, according to Bob McChesney: 'Despite the vast resources devoted to business journalism in the 1990s, the media missed the developing story *in toto*' (2003: 314).

Some may argue that Enron was an exception and to cite it as an example of endemic problems in business journalism is unfair. However, Danny Schechter (2009) wrote: 'There is an unfortunate dialectic between financial failures and media failures.' This view is supported by Dyck and Zingales, who found that the media's inability to warn of Enron's impending collapse was 'not an occasional lapse, but a systematic problem that emerges during stock market booms' (2003: 99).

Although questions about journalism's role in the 2008 crisis promise greater understanding, they evoke a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Similar questions were posed in the wake of Enron's collapse (for example, McChesney 2003, Doyle 2006, Madrick op cit and others) but there's little indication that EBF journalisms have improved over the last decade. Indeed, the previous three hundred years suggest that the weaknesses are far more entrenched than many acknowledge. Even so, the public requirement is stronger than ever:

The world desperately needs good financial journalism. We need to understand the practical, ethical and editorial problems that can prevent it... (there is) ...an historic opportunity to address this need (Tambini 2008: 3).

In normal times: Three lines of academic inquiry

Given the relative lack of research into EBF journalisms, it is unlikely that these problems will be understood in depth for some time. A useful starting point, however, is to assume that, like other genres, EBF 'news items are not simply selected but constructed' (Schudson 1989: 265). Hence, news is the product of a complex process that is influenced by a plethora of professional, commercial and cultural factors. Three factors that are particularly pronounced in EBF journalisms – ethics, routines and journalist knowledge – have become fertile ground for academic investigation.

Firstly, unlike other genres, EBF journalisms can influence the performance of the subjects

and the outcome of events upon which they report. They have the unique 'power to move markets' (Tambini 2008: 9, Robinson 2008) and, as demonstrated in 1929, 2000 and 2008, these journalisms can influence the trajectory of the national – and even the global – economy. Consequently, journalists have an ethical responsibility to cover events accurately but without inducing panic (Wu et al 2002: 21; Kinsey op cit: 167; Marron 2010: 274). Financial journalists also need to be wary of breaking criminal laws, such as 'market abuse' which includes insider trading, market manipulation, conflicts of interest and non-disclosure (Tambini 2010: 162-163).

Secondly, routines strongly influence EBF news production. Gillian Doyle (2006: 448) noted that diary events – such as government economic reports and corporate results – provide an orderly and largely scheduled flow of ideas for stories. This might be convenient for journalists but Lawrence (1988) suggests that the regimented coverage of the 1980s bull market gave rise to inconsequential reporting that missed the warning signs of the 1987 stock market crash. Such a predictable schedule of pre-packaged news also means coverage becomes event-centred and episodic (Marron op cit: 271). Journalists tend to move as a herd (Payne 2008), become reliant on newswires and thus, there's an increased risk of producing mere 'churnalism' (Davies 2008). Similarly, competition for publicity is intense, so business and financial journalists are bombarded by PR companies attempting to frame stories in their clients' interest (Davis 2002: 70, Doyle 2006 :435).

Thirdly, a lack of journalist knowledge is commonly cited as a reason for the EBF media's inability to spot the warning signs of the 2008 Crisis (Barber 2009; Fraser 2009: 51) and this has become the focus of much recent study. Training has been an unresolved and neglected issue for years (Tambini 2008: 19) particularly for reporters working on the business sections of the non-specialist mainstream media (Doyle op cit: 440-441). The training deficit was the media's default explanation to criticism about the Enron episode (Madrack op cit: 6) and this was even acknowledged by Marjorie Scardino, CEO of Pearson (owner of the *Financial Times*) in a surprisingly candid *mea culpa* by proxy: 'We could have done a lot more digging (about Enron.) But business journalists often don't know a lot about business' (in Byrne 2002).

This was a worrying admission: if *Financial Times* journalists do not sufficiently understand their

specialism to be an effective watchdog, what hope is there for the non-specialist media? Furthermore, although training undoubtedly played a part in the 2008 failure, there are few signs that addressing the knowledge deficiency is on the agenda. For the two leading British training councils – the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) and the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) – multi-media skills are the top priority. While accredited courses are also expected to cover media law and public affairs, business and economics are barely mentioned on either organisations' website (NCTJ 2011, BJTC 2011). Consequently, only a handful of British universities run specialist courses, or even modules, in economics and business journalism and there are 'no reports of journalists rushing to enrol on accountancy courses' (Wilby 2009).

BBC journalists and their audiences: A mini-case study

Research into ethics, routines and practitioner knowledge will undoubtedly contribute to a deeper appreciation of the nature of the journalisms. But if EBF reporters are to deliver on normative expectations, a more productive line of investigation might begin with the relationship between journalists and their audiences.

The BBC provides a revealing case study for two reasons. First, despite increasing competition from satellite channels and online providers, it remains a highly trusted source of economic and business news (Blinc Partnership 2007: 42). Second, and most crucially, the BBC has a statutory obligation to be: '...fair and open minded in reflecting all significant strands of opinion, and exploring the range and conflict of views' (Neil Report in Budd op cit: 6). The BBC's strict editorial policy applies equally to its television, radio and increasingly popular online news output (Ofcom 2007: 34). Hence, with impartiality at the heart of its journalism (BBC 2011), the BBC arguably offers the greatest hope for improving public knowledge of the economic environment and offering pluralistic perspectives of economic and business issues.

The perennial challenge facing EBF journalists is to match content with the needs of a heavily segmented, lay audience (Milne 2009, Peston in Smith 2008). Specialist publications such as the *Financial Times*, can safely presume strong knowledge and common interests among their readers. But popular newspapers and broadcasters need to produce content that appeals to consumers, investors, employees, the unemployed, the retired and numerous other sub-

groups, all of whom require different information, have varying levels of interest and understanding, and will decode messages in their own, unique ways.

One audience-building strategy is to connect economics to personal wealth – such as house prices, interest rates and pensions – and address the viewer primarily as a consumer or investor or, in business reporting, to focus on well-known brands (Tumber 1993). A second strategy is to humanise business by concentrating on personalities (Starkman in Schechter 2009: 23, Manning 2010: 8). This applies equally to corporate heroes who personify a company – such as Richard Branson – or villains, such as bankers in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis who were framed as the epitome of greed and deception (Tulloch 2009: 104).

Another related strategy is to frame business as drama, complete with characters and a gripping narrative. This was the ethos of Jeff Randall who became the BBC's first business editor in 2001 (Kelly and Boyle 2011: 230.) A few years later, he said BBC editors now 'get' what business is about:

If you tell the story properly, business is every bit as compelling, every bit as soap opera as politics. It's about power and influence, treachery and betrayal, money, big names and brands. Not about accountants in grey suits sitting behind desks shuffling paper (in Burrell 2004).

When Randall arrived at the BBC, he shared a widely-held belief that the organisation 'was culturally and structurally biased against business' (Randall in Kelly and Boyle op cit: 232). In 2007, in response to such charges, the BBC Trust commissioned a comprehensive study that looked at the impartiality of the corporation's business reporting (Budd op cit). Chaired by Sir Alan Budd, the research revealed no evidence of a bias against business *per se*, but it did find that BBC business news tended to focus on consumers and the buying public's relationship with companies (ibid: 14, 16).

Contrary to perceived left-wing sympathies at the BBC, trade unions felt their perspective was under-represented. Witnesses expressed concern that there were programmes on consumer rights but none about workers' rights: 'the world of work does not really feature on the BBC – and even when it does it is without the workers' (ibid: 20). In his narrative, Budd showed sympathy with the unions' assessment:

Around 29 million people work for a living in the UK and spend a large proportion of their waking hours in the workplace. However, little of this important part of UK life is reflected in the BBC's business coverage (ibid: 19).

This is one of the most illuminating of Budd's findings, particularly as it resonates with research from an earlier era. In the late 1970s, the work of the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) was widely criticised, partly because it challenged deeply held beliefs, particularly within the BBC, that television news is impartial (Deacon 2003). The Glasgow researchers discovered that in the reporting of industrial disputes, the views of workers were marginalised while disproportionate credence, airtime and context were given to managers and the government (GUMG 1976, 1980).

It is somewhat ironic that a BBC-commissioned report focused on perceived bias against business should concur with such radical research. Furthermore, although Budd encouraged journalists 'to pursue innovative ways of treating the audience as employees, citizens and investors [direct and indirect]' (Budd op cit: 24), some believe that the BBC is too eager to assume that shareholder contentment is synonymous with universal economic wellbeing. In a debate at London's City University, Professor Alistair Milne asked why the FTSE 100 index is quoted on every BBC News report (Milne 2009). Fellow panellist and chief BBC economics correspondent, Hugh Pym, replied: '... because 10 million British people are shareholders' (Pym 2009a).

This brief exchange is revealing for four reasons. First, the FTSE is of negligible value to the public because professional investors have access to market information far sooner (Schuster 2006: 97). Second, two-thirds of the profits of FTSE 100 companies are earned overseas (BBC 2010), so the index only partially reflects the health of the domestic economy. Third, although many Britons are, indeed, shareholders, their cumulative investment is tiny in comparison to the financial institutions which own around 90 per cent of all shares (Davis 2006: 11). And fourth, the FTSE 100 is immaterial to non-shareholders, and other indices – income statistics, poverty rates and un-paid overtime – would arguably be more relevant to, for example, almost seven million British trade union members (TUC 2010).

As with the BBC's former business editor (see above), the views of its senior economics cor-

respondent hint at underlying assumptions in the BBC's coverage of economics and business. For instance, although Pym acknowledged that the media should share the blame for the 2008 crisis with governments, banks and consumers (Pym 2009b), his post-mortem of the crisis (co-authored with Nick Kochan) gave no indication that the prevailing economic ideology warranted critical analysis. Instead, Pym and Kochan noted consensus among mainstream political parties that the free market brings prosperity to all: 'rocking the capitalist boat went out of fashion some time ago' (2008: 3).

There are two theories about the origins of such journalistic assumptions. One states that they are derived from shared values: reporters simply reflect generally-held views. An alternative theory is that journalists are part of a dominant group in society and, in their reporting, they tend to gravitate to other members of the elite for information and then reflect and reinforce the dominant perspective in their work (Curran et al 2005: 302).

On the surface, Pym's reluctance to criticise capitalism suggests his reporting is underpinned by commonly-held views. However, although parliamentary parties have, indeed, embraced neoliberalism over the last three decades, alternatives have not totally disappeared. For example, nationalisation, redistributive taxation and other pillars of post-war Keynesianism were rediscovered by the British and American governments as the 2008 crisis unfolded. What's more, there is evidence that such policies might be popular among the general public.

In 2009, for example, a major international survey (29,000 people in 27 countries), commissioned by the BBC World Service, revealed widespread disillusionment with capitalism. In only two countries did more than 20 per cent of people think capitalism was working well, and a higher proportion thought it 'fatally flawed'. There was also significant global support for more government regulation of business and a fairer distribution of wealth (BBC World Service 2009).

Such data suggest that Pym's statement is more in tune with the beliefs of the political and business elite than the general public, and further supporting evidence for the dominant theory can be found in the educational backgrounds of BBC journalists. Like Hugh Pym, the BBC's current business editor Robert Peston; economics editor, Stephanie Flanders; and her predecessor, Evan Davis; all studied philosophy,

politics and economics (PPE) at Oxford University (BBC 2001, White 2005, Greenham 2011, BBC 2004).

This observation has limited value in isolation but it clearly chimes with the argument that British journalists *per se* lack genuine public empathy because of their privileged roots and, in particular, their education. Edwards and Cromwell, for example, point to a Sutton Trust Report which revealed the imbalance: 45 per cent of leading journalists attended Oxbridge and '54 percent of the top 100 newspaper editors, columnists, broadcasters and executives were educated privately', compared to just seven percent of the general population (2009: 234-235).

No rebellion: The reinforcement of 'professional'

Although Robert Peston also accepts the 'slow and lingering death of financial paternalism', and hence the pre-eminence of individual economic actors (Peston 2009: 18), it would be foolish to make bold claims about either common pro-market beliefs among BBC journalists, nor indeed a tendency to favour that ideology in their reports. Indeed, most reporters would recoil in horror at accusations of bias, and yet there is agreement among academics, that "'bias" and opinion are fundamental conditions of the production of news, not accidental pathologies' (Curran and Seaton 1991: 174).

Edwards and Cromwell maintain that an organisation's recruitment strategy is the original source of bias. At the BBC, they wrote, this is: 'systemic, rooted in the very structure – who it employs, how they are chosen, who does the choosing and so on' (2009: 36). On this basis it would be fair to assume, for example, that Robert Peston's education and prior career – including a period as a stockbroker and nine years as a *Financial Times* journalist (White 2005) – would in some way influence how he sees the world of business. One would certainly expect this frame of reference to differ from that of an hypothetical rival of equal ability and knowledge who was born into a low-income family, attended a non-elite university and whose early career was spent as a researcher for a trade union.

In the absence of ethnographic studies, one can only speculate about the nuances of EBF news production process – at the BBC or elsewhere – and the extent to which the backgrounds of journalists influence the news product. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to assume that, as with other genre, a journalist's presumed

autonomy is greatly reduced once he or she has been socialised into the culture, norms, rituals and procedures of the group (Schudson op cit: 266). This process begins with recruitment, and then training, newsroom discipline and the influence of one's peers combine to create a 'cultural air' which sustains and defines 'professional' journalists (Zelizer 2005). A cohort of reporters is, to a large extent, homogenised in its appreciation of news values and working practices, and hence its production of news (Gavin and Goddard 1998: 466).

Journalistic culture is a powerful force and one can appreciate how it might trump other factors. Indeed, the 'increase training' argument often fails to acknowledge that additional courses will not necessarily produce more balanced nor critical perspectives. This depends to a large extent on who has designed the curriculum. In the United States, for example, business and journalism education have a long-standing relationship: corporations have been funding training programmes and sponsoring text books since the 1970s (Dreier 1982: 126, Bekken 2005) and some newspapers hire business people to train journalists in-house (Ludwig 2002: 134). In such circumstances, journalism classes would clearly be more sympathetic to the goals of big business than stakeholders such as local communities or workers.

The UK's training regime is less formalised but there are still hints of how course content might determine the parameters of journalists' understanding. At the BBC, Alan Budd noted the importance of senior business journalists in knowledge transfer (Budd op cit: 21) and such informal training – by which less experienced journalists learn 'on the job' – is surprisingly prevalent in other news organisations in the UK (Doyle 2006: 440-441). Irrespective of who writes the text books and delivers the classes, it would seem reasonable to assume that teachers would to some extent pass on their own interpretations of the economic environment. Consequently, in the case of journalists teaching other journalists, one can appreciate how a largely-unspoken newsroom *modus operandi* might be reinforced to the extent that even the most enterprising of journalist would find it hard to rebel against the dominant culture.

Pluralism denied: The ideological monoculture

It is important to reiterate that economics is an inherently subjective discipline. For centuries theorists have toiled over models – and politicians have grappled with practical realities – in the quest for enhanced, sustained and univer-

sal economic wellbeing. Debates in economics are perpetual and there is no definitive answer to the basic economic problem of reconciling finite resources and infinite wants. The same is true of business: the joint stock corporation, owned by public shareholders and focused on maximising investor returns, is just one form of commercial entity. Others include mutual organisations, worker co-operatives, private limited companies, state-owned enterprises, family-run businesses and freelances.

Although the word is rarely used outside academia, neoliberalism has been the dominant economic paradigm for the last three decades (McChesney 1999). At the core of the ideology is the belief that 'human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills' (Harvey 2005: 2). Hence, markets are the 'primary means of organising society' (Mansell 2011: 20) and together with low taxation, low inflation and minimal government intervention, a fertile environment is produced in which private enterprise can flourish and hence, create wealth (Heywood 1992: 81-86). True to its roots in classical liberalism, neoliberalism places faith in the individual rather the collective and 'business', particularly the joint stock company, is seen as the engine of economic success.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) is one of many to note that neoliberalism has become the universal political economic framework. Echoing Francis Fukuyama's (1992) proclamation that the demise of the Soviet bloc represented the 'end of history' and proved the intellectual superiority of capitalism, Žižek suggests that by adopting the tenets of neoliberalism, the traditionally left-wing parties of Europe and the US have negated neoliberalism's negation (2008: 189). This argument resonates strongly with Hugh Pym's assertion that few people criticise capitalism these days.

Indeed, many other British EBF reporters accept neoliberalism as a fact of life: researcher Gillian Doyle's interviews revealed 'passivity in relation to pro-market ideologies' (2006: 446). In the United States media, there has been very little debate about whether 'markets work' (Sherman 2002:28) and the view that reduced corporate regulation and 'free markets' have contributed to widespread prosperity has been largely accepted as 'conventional wisdom' (Goozner 2000: 24). Mark Fisher maintains that faith in neoliberalism is so entrenched that it is impossible to even *imagine* an alternative economic model (Fisher 2009: 2).

Although political parties have no 'convincing alternative grand narrative capable of challenging neoliberalism' (Cammaerts 2011: 48), the ideology still has plenty of credible opposition. For example, Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz questions the neoliberal assumption that markets are inherently self-correcting and serve the public interest well (in Mansell 2011: 20).

Other authors have focused on the apparent brutality of a system that prioritises unfettered profit maximisation over social concerns (Klein 2000, 2008; Monbiot 2001; Pilger 2002; Bakan 2004.) Bob McChesney branded neoliberalism 'capitalism with the gloves off' (1999: 8) and in the absence of criticism from left-of-centre parties, counter arguments typically come from trade unions' anti-poverty, environmental and development NGOs, think-tanks and a scattering of intellectuals (Cammaerts op cit: 48).

With the world's economies still reeling from the fallout of the 2008 Financial Crisis, one might hope that the news media would redouble its efforts to give exposure to such dissenting voices. The evidence from the last three decades, however, suggests this is highly unlikely. Many studies have, like the Glasgow University Media Group's early work (1976, 1980), noted the marginalisation of alternative perspectives. In addition to the BBC report (Budd op cit), examples can be found in South Africa (Kariithi and Kariithi 2007), Finland (Ainamo et al 2006), and the United States (Chomsky in McChesney et al 1998, Kollmeyer 2004 and Bekken 2005.)

Such empirical research demonstrates a significant ideological dimension in EBF news. Indeed, Daya Thussu argues that neoliberalism is such a pervasive, hegemonic discourse that it has become: 'part of the commonsense view of the world' (2007: 134). It is also a subtle discourse: many economic and business concepts are abstract so metaphors are commonly used by reporters. By characterising 'the economy' (or indeed, 'the market') in anthropomorphic, meteorological, biological or mechanical terms, it becomes a reified, mysterious force outside of the control of people or even government (Emmison 1983, 1986). What's more, the language and images: 'which serve to constitute (the economy) are produced without reflection. It has become the "natural" way to see ... a world of normality' (Emmison 1983: 154).

Business as unusual: The varied voices of dissent

With the normalisation and reification of neoliberalism, it is perhaps no surprise that EBF

journalisms have such a poor record of warning of potential dangers in inherently volatile markets. What's more, these journalisms have been criticised for neglecting deep-seated issues that affect millions of citizens. Poverty, unemployment, shortages of affordable housing and social deprivation are long-term problems, inexorably connected to much larger debates, and yet EBF news tends to be episodic, dealing with: '...single issues that emerge, occupy journalists' and the public's attention and then recede' (Wu et al 2002: 33). Bob McChesney gave a blunt assessment of this tendency among American journalists:

...the virtual absence of news concerning the working class and poor is taken for granted by professional journalists. It is not seen as 'self-censorship' to shape the news in such a manner. That is the genius of professionalism as a form of regulation (2003: 313).

This inability to address economic issues critically and as part of a far bigger picture, arguably characterised the non-reporting of warning signals in the prelude to the 2008 Crisis. Paul Manning argues that evidence of impending disaster was available to journalists but 'few began to develop a comprehensive or holistic approach that might point to the broadest dangers' (2010: 6). Professor Alistair Milne echoed Manning's concern and said journalists rarely analyse the capitalist system, and its impact on society as a whole (Milne op cit).

Why would such a critique be absent from much reporting? Perhaps it is because, in Stuart Hood's words, journalists interpret 'impartiality as the acceptance of that segment of opinion which constitutes parliamentary consensus' (Curran and Seaton 1991: 200). Hence, if politicians don't argue for alternatives, then journalists feel no obligation to find and present them. Protestors, intellectuals or left-wing politicians may vocalise criticism of neoliberalism but, in Daniel Hallin's terms, these groups may exist in the 'zone of deviance' outside of what mainstream culture accepts as normal, and hence beyond the professional codes of objectivity and fairness (in Schudson 2003: 187).

This is not to say, of course, that 'radical' voices are totally absent from EBF reporting. Indeed, dissenters are sometimes allowed to contribute to debates (Schudson 1989: 267; Tumber op cit: 358) and research suggests their inclusion is popular: a Glasgow University survey of television viewers, for instance, revealed that 73 per cent would like to see 'alternative' viewpoints

(such as Noam Chomsky, John Pilger and Naomi Klein) considered 'as part of a normal range of opinion' (in Edwards and Cromwell op cit:13). When counter-arguments to the political consensus are eloquently and passionately aired, the audience response is often exceptional (Edwards 1998: 95).

Arguably the most sustained criticism of big business in the UK can be found in *Private Eye*. Sharon Lockyer suggests this is because of the publication's unique ownership structure; an apolitical editorial line; and its disregard for reader sentiment and libel threats. Hence, unlike the majority of the British commercial media, the *Eye* can follow a: 'citizen-led rather than customer-led approach to journalism' (2006: 777). The magazine is also known for its 'comedy section' which provides a surreal complement to its investigative journalism. Indeed, the unlikely combination of biting satire and probing journalism was also used to great effect by American film-makers Morgan Spurlock, in his comprehensive demolition of McDonald's (*Supersize Me!*), and Michael Moore in his critical analysis of the American health system (*Sicko*) and neoliberalism itself (*Capitalism: A love story*).

Again, these films were extremely popular and generated debate about neglected economic and business issues. Similar innovation can be found on British television. In recent years, chef Jamie Oliver has raised public awareness of the poor quality of school meals in both the UK and the US (*Jamie's school dinners* and *Jamie Oliver's food revolution*) and in the process he questioned the ethics of the 'junk' food industry. Also on Channel 4, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall lobbied supermarkets to banish factory-farmed chickens from their shelves (in *Hugh's chicken run*) and, more recently (in *Hugh's fish fight*), encouraged more than 700,000 people to join a campaign for changes in European Union fishing policy and to urge the canning industry to use only sustainable tuna.

By following a hero on his righteous mission, these programmes inject a sense of drama in order to hook the audience (Thirkell in Kelly and Boyle 2011: 242). In this sense, they are similar to popular business-entertainment programmes, such as *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den*, but unlike these latter examples, the focus is not on key components of the neoliberal paradigm (the individual, competition and profit) but on ethical considerations (animal welfare) and the broader society (public health).

Although it may not be immediately apparent, television chefs and satirical film-makers have produced the most creative, inclusive and compelling examples of economics and business journalism of recent years.

The future of alternatives

Gretchen Morgenson, of *The New York Times*, said that the media's failure to ring the warning bells about Enron should have promoted a new era of 'widespread scepticism' among business journalists (in Sherman 2002: 28). A decade later, with the world's economies still suffering from the 2008 Financial Crisis, there are precious few signs of a critical instinct (Schechter 2009:20, Manning 2010, Marron et al 2010).

When three centuries of the EBF media's contribution to booms and busts is considered, it is hardly surprising that journalism failed the public in 2008. Furthermore, over the last three decades, and irrespective of the trajectory of the stock market, there has been little indication that EBF journalisms in the UK or US have paid much attention to the views of those who dispute the merits of neoliberalism or indeed the informational needs of the full spectrum of stakeholders. The neglect of structural problems and an apparent lack of interest in alternative economic and business models strongly suggest the problems in journalism stretch far beyond micro-factors such as routines and training.

In his 2009 Richard Dunn Memorial Lecture, BBC business editor Robert Peston said financial journalism needs 'to empower people to participate fully in democracy' (Peston 2009: 18). Few would disagree with this statement but it is unfortunate that probing the foundations of the dominant ideology is seemingly out of bounds for many journalists. This is painfully ironic: if there were ever a time when the world needed to dissect neoliberalism and assess its alternatives, it is now.

Although the media are not simply 'passive transmission belts of capitalist propaganda' (Dreier 1982: 123) and theories of elite domination are far from infallible, we are evidently a long way from a truly democratic and inclusive media that might facilitate greater public debate. Reporting from the point of view of citizens, rather than consumers or shareholders, would obviously necessitate a widespread change in emphasis of the news product: whereas investors want enthusiasm, citizens need a high level of scepticism (Henriques in Harber 2009). But as things stand 'commercial-

ly-led financial news production... is not really designed for and is unlikely to succeed in any public educational role' (Doyle 2006: 451).

But it is not all doom and gloom. The mainstream broadcast media occasionally produce exceptional documentaries that investigate errant companies or analyse elements of the broader economic world. In the printed media, progressive publications such as the *Guardian*, the *New Internationalist* and the *New Statesman* in the UK, and *The New York Times*, the *Nation* and *Mother Jones* in the US often cast big business and neoliberalism in a critical light. And then, of course, there's the satirists and television chefs who have taken economic and business journalism in a new direction.

But the fact remains that, when compared to viewpoints that support neoliberalism, dissident voices are rare in the mainstream EBF media (Payne 2008, Cottle 2003: 161-162). What's more, progressive publications are unlikely to reach a mass audience and television documentaries provide only infrequent criticism, and typically chip away at small parts of the neoliberal edifice. The internet offers some salvation and there is certainly a surfeit of online opinion but the internet is not (yet) a primary news source (Fenton 2011: 68). Furthermore, the larger, more established news providers continue to dominate in a way 'that limits the possibilities for increased pluralism' (ibid: 64).

Thanks to the near monopoly of the commercial news media in the US (and the reasons outlined above) it is unlikely that American citizens will receive regular critiques of neoliberalism. In the UK, however, the BBC's commitment to impartiality, the quality of its reporting, and relative freedom from the profit imperative makes it arguably the likeliest candidate to air dissident views on a regular basis.

There is widespread agreement among journalists and academics alike that the EBF media needs to improve its game, and the first step to a increased pluralism is to acknowledge that neoliberalism is not the only economic model. Politics extends far beyond the walls of parliament and, to fulfil their fourth estate duties, journalists need to regularly give airtime, page space and credence to ideas beyond the mainstream. Only then will the public be able to make up their own minds about the merits of the dominant economic ideology and its alternatives.

Note

¹ Although they are interrelated and often cover similar territory, economic, business and financial journalism are not synonymous. For the purposes of this study, the following delineations apply: 'economic journalism' applies to macro-economic issues (inflation, trade, unemployment, wages, poverty, etc.). 'Business journalism' relates to the activities of companies and industries; and 'financial journalism' applies to financial markets, investments and consumer finance reporting.

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Myth-making on the business pages: Local press and glocal crisis

The role news media played in the global financial crisis has been widely examined. However, there has been little investigation into ways in which the corporate structure of the news media may have influenced the tone and framing of coverage. This paper interrogates the reporting by a local newspaper, the Journal, owned by one of Britain's largest newspaper companies, of the collapse of local bank Northern Rock which precipitated the UK's banking crisis; the misconduct of senior executives, and their punishment by industry regulator the Financial Services Authority. We show the Journal framed the bank predominantly as a victim of circumstance and the executives' actions as lapses, rather than calculated deceptions

Key words: Local journalism, financial journalism, business news, corporate media, political economy, CDA (critical discourse analysis)

Introduction

The banking crisis in Britain was precipitated in September 2007 by the collapse of Newcastle-based bank Northern Rock (NR), then Britain's fifth largest mortgage lender. NR was rescued by the government but subsequently robustly criticised for risky lending strategies and senior executives fined for having misrepresented its liabilities. The role the news media played in the banking crisis has been widely examined: for example, journalists in Britain were called before a House of Commons Treasury Select Committee to account for their failure to alert audiences to signs of impending collapse, and how they subsequently covered that collapse.

There has been little investigation, however, into ways in which the corporate structure of the media, and particularly local and regional newspapers, may have influenced, even deter-

mined, the tone and framing of that coverage. The NR coverage became a space in which global, national and local socio-political discourses intersected and cross-fertilised and the study presented here bridged some of the gaps between global, national and regional levels of analysis of credit-crisis reporting. The crisis offered an illuminating context within which to reassert the value of critical media theory and engage in further research into the ideological limits of marketised journalism, in particular, local journalism.

This paper interrogates from a dialectical-relational perspective (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Fairclough 2003, 2006, 2009) the relationship between institutional and structural aspects of the press, professional practices and strategies of journalists and the semiotic manifestations of the coverage of this crisis. Our analysis focuses on coverage by Newcastle-based regional morning newspaper, the *Journal*, published by Trinity Mirror (one of Britain's biggest media companies) of three critical episodes: the collapse of the city's 'local bank'; publication of the report criticising the bank's and regulators' failings; the punishment of NR executives. The *Journal* predominantly framed the bank as a victim of circumstance, privileged sources favourable to it and marginalised critical voices.

This paper draws on existing literature to map out the cultural political economy of the press. It identifies structural explanations for journalistic deficiencies; provides textual evidence for these claims, and uses this as an elucidatory foundation from which to mount a critical analysis of advanced capitalist news discourse. It seeks to both 'explore some of the institutionalised forces...dominating today's news-making practices in general and their discursive dimension in particular' (Jacobs et al 2008: 4) and go beyond a critical analysis of linguistic representation (Barkho 2008: 279). It draws on Marxist theoretical traditions to interrogate relationships between the material realities of capitalism and ideological character of a media establishment embedded within that system. To facilitate critical engagement with local press coverage of the NR story, the paper reviews some theoretical insights into the political economy of the media and relates this to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. It then identifies key issues affecting local journalism and business/financial reporting. From this foundation, it confronts a selection of relevant news texts through a dialectical-relational version of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Methodology

Fairclough identifies four 'essential', but not 'mechanical', elements of a methodology for conducting a dialectical-relational CDA in trans-disciplinary social research (2009: 167):

1. to focus on a social wrong in its semi-otic aspect;
2. to identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong;
3. to consider whether the social order 'needs' the social wrong;
4. and identify possible ways past the obstacle.

The 'social wrong' identified in this paper is the failure of corporate journalism to alert audiences to impending financial crisis and the semiotic privileging of corporate hegemony and suppression or marginalisation of critical discourses in the public sphere, thereby limiting its ability to properly investigate and report on abuses of corporate power. Obstacles to addressing these failings are explored within the analysis of corporate structures and ideology of commercial media industries, and the semiotic dimensions embedded within and constitutive of the relationships between media and other corporate institutions. In considering 'whether the social order needs the social wrong', the paper explores the naturalisation of meanings which identify the interests of the community with those of corporate structures and institutions. To 'identify possible ways past the obstacles', is beyond the scope of this paper, but our inquiry invites comparison between discursive themes within the corporate press and in the non-corporate media sector (such as the *Guardian*, owned by the Scott Trust); discourses emerging from the academy and the subversive voices of individual journalists, their trade unions and professional associations.

To explore these issues, the study focused on dialectical relations between a commercial local newspaper, events connected with the collapse of NR, and those relations which hold force within each of these elements. Key news texts relating to three critical episodes in the development of events were analysed, drawing on the dialectical-relational approach which 'focuses not just upon semiosis as such, but on the relations between semiotic and other social elements' within a cultural political economy framework (Fairclough 2009: 163). These episodes were:

1. the story breaking and launching of the campaign to rescue NR (September 2007);
2. the parliamentary investigation of NR's collapse and regulatory failings and the subsequent resignation of the NR chairman (October-November 2007);
3. the punishment by the Financial Services Authority of three senior NR executives for providing misleading figures relating to its liabilities (April-July 2010).

Analysis of 'critical instances' can be revealing of underlying trends, motives and structures (Tripp 1994, Berlak and Berlak 1981, Sykes et al 1993). Such incidents can also entail modelled reactions which embed values which the actors concerned (in this study, the journalists) may not espouse – may even contest – but which are conditioned by structures, context and practice (Tripp 1994: 69-70). The semiotic dimensions of these episodes are embedded in wider social practices and Richardson (2007: 24) advocates a functionalist definition of discourse, where 'to properly interpret...a newspaper report... we need to work out what the...writer is doing through discourse, and how this "doing" is linked to wider...institutional, socio-cultural and material contexts'. In this approach, the institutional, socio-cultural and material levels of analysis that feature throughout this study are very much a prerequisite to and component of any meaningful examination of particular texts and the discursive practices manifest therein.

Corporate media and the free market

Herman and Chomsky (2002: 298) argue that 'the "societal" purpose of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate...society and the state'. They posit five systemic filters in their propaganda model, the first two of which (relating to ownership and advertising) critically inform this study.

By linking media texts to economic imperatives, the structural influence on 'form, content, and ideology' become 'visible' (Craig 2004: 236). Craig (ibid: 237) observes that long and short-term trends have ushered in an era of corporate media management, and warns that 'the media's reliance on advertising revenues does not bode well for an informed and actively engaged public and a democratic society' (ibid: 250). Habermas's concept of the public sphere (1989, 1996) has been much criticised, but nevertheless provides a useful concept against which to critique the normative function of corporate media. Fairclough argues that in modern democracies 'oligarchy and democracy are

opposing principles in tension and any regime is an unstable compromise between them. The public sphere is the sphere of encounters and conflicts between these principles' (2009: 172). But Moore (2007: 39) holds that 'in the current news media revolution some of the basic principles underpinning good journalism [depth, context, objectivity, balance and accuracy] are being lost'. And Staats suggests that profit-motivated media have generated 'a media-based technofeudalism' which has transformed the public sphere into a place where manipulation of public attitudes is more in evidence than democratic dialogue (2004: 593).

In delineating 'ideological dynamics' (see Allan 2001: 65) of the profit-driven media system, this paper demonstrates that in the 'conflict' between oligarchy and democracy within the public sphere, democratic principle is undermined.

The British regional press and the economics of campaigns

It is well documented that journalism is experiencing its 'most cataclysmic financial crisis... since the beginnings of an unfettered press' (for example, Barnett 2010: 13, McMillan 2009). Much of Britain's provincial newspaper sector has been consolidated into large groups, which have been criticised on grounds of editorial quality, diversity, independence and robustness (Barnett 2010: 17, Franklin 2008: 14).

Drawing on experience, Pecke (2004: 27) talks about 'endemic ... problems of low pay, poor working conditions, the complete absence of training, long hours, understaffed newsrooms, and a managerial emphasis on quantity rather than quality'.

There is often a focus on personalities over issues, but in some cases issues are given apparent weight. In covering the NR collapse, Newcastle's *Journal* launched a campaign to save the bank, drawing on the local community having shared interest in its survival. Aldridge (ibid: 492) suggests that when such a campaign is initiated, normal economic logic still applies: appealing to a sense of community or shared experience can help drive newspaper sales and commodify audiences to be sold to advertisers. As such, the local press campaign to save NR can be seen as a profit-motivated exercise, the significance of which is amplified by the fact that it uncritically defends an organisation which turned out to be reckless in its own profit-seeking. Such campaigns are also indicative of the regional press's tendency to simplify complex

social issues in a populist interpretive frame and sustain 'the papers' self-definition as important movers and shakers with whom a loyal readership will identify' (ibid: 500).

How business and financial journalism works

Fraser (2009: 82) points to a culture of tacit complicity between media and money and Schechter (2009: 21) observes that 'not only were there few investigations of sub-prime predatory practices between 2002 and 2007, media companies took billions ... in advertising revenue from dodgy lenders and credit card companies'. At the level of local journalism, Aldridge found that 'reluctance to disturb old friendships and vital contacts, fear of losing advertising revenue from local firms and lack of resources all combine to leave...local business interests largely unchallenged' (op cit: 495).

There are, however, problems with the production of business and financial news other than advertisers' influence. Doyle (2006: 433) suggests that while reporters are strongly inclined to highlight instances of corporate underperformance, constraints within which they work make it unlikely that they will consistently detect irregularities obscured within company accounts. She states:

The notion that business news coverage is heavily influenced by powerful and self-interested corporations accords with the radical critique offered by economist J. K. Galbraith [where] economists, politicians and media are all party to an 'innocent fraud' in their interpretation of economic and financial events and all have colluded in myths (such as that of a benign 'market') that obscure rather than illuminate the grip of big business over public life (2006: 435).

The perpetuation of these myths is inimical to civic empowerment and democracy. The tendency in the local press is, on the business pages as elsewhere, centred on actors, events and intrigues at the expense of 'the more analytical and penetrating forms of journalism through which public comprehension of events in the financial world might be strengthened' (ibid: 437-8).

While most journalists may well be suspicious of hypercapitalist greed, they often lack training, resources and editorial freedom to investigate corporate crime or analyse the 'financialisation of the economic system' (Schechter 2009: 20). But too often, in relation to the recent crisis, business journalists weren't suspicious, and

were 'swept up in the irrational exuberance that drives markets upwards towards their inevitable collapse' (Fraser 2009: 78). A collapse which cost many journalists' jobs, exacerbating the lack of depth and resources.

There is, however, a deeper ideological process operating through the business/journalism axis: the media shape perceptions of commerce and situate audiences ontologically. The power of the corporate business sector is such, argues Staats (2004: 591), as to cause citizens to think of themselves primarily as creatures of economics, consumers of goods and services, and political leaders as stewards of the economy.

Shared interests, shared agendas: NR and Trinity Mirror

On 13 September 2007, BBC business editor Robert Peston revealed that Northern Rock was seeking emergency Bank of England support. Customers immediately queued to withdraw deposits and hundreds of jobs were at risk. The government eventually bailed out the bank and, on 22 February 2008, nationalised it. Until then its fate had remained uncertain. The *Journal* launched a campaign to save the bank (Wood 2007) and, reflecting on that campaign a year later, said it had been clear that 'support rather than neutral coverage would be needed' (Pearson 2008).

When NR collapsed, Sir Ian Gibson, chairman of *Journal*-owner Trinity Mirror, was a senior non-executive director at NR and the bank was sponsoring the region's football, rugby and cricket teams, and the *Journal's* business pages. UK broadcast regulator Ofcom bans sponsorship of broadcast news and current affairs programmes, but no such restrictions are imposed on the press. The 'Advertising Solutions' website¹ of ncjMedia (Trinity Mirror's subsidiary which publishes the *Journal*) states: 'Sponsorship [of sections of the publications] gives you a sustained presence in the newspaper for your message with repetition helping to build your reputation.' It also offers 'advertorials', 'designed to mimic the editorial content, style and layout of the publication in which they appear'.

The charitable NR Foundation gave (and gives) the bank a substantial involvement in the regional community, but there is a body of research which shows that corporate philanthropy and social responsibility build up social capital and enhance profitability, and that self-interest is the critical motivation behind businesses engaging in such activity (Husted

and Salazar 2006, Kapoor and Sandhu 2010: 200). Communities benefit from such activities, regardless of motivation, but the NR Foundation can be seen as a continuing PR exercise. The foundation's £175m spending in the region featured in sympathetic accounts of NR's collapse in 2007 when the bank was largely portrayed as hapless – a victim of the US sub-prime crisis – rather than reckless.

Myth-making: 'The Rock' as victim; money markets as villain;

Stephen Karpman's 'drama triangle' (cited in Mrotek 2001: 147) is a transactional social and psychological model of human interaction which breaks down participants' roles into those of victim, persecutor and rescuer. This model offers a fertile metaphorical base from which to address the *Journal's* framing of the NR crisis in its earliest stages: NR as victim of the credit crunch – the *Journal* as rescuer. When the story broke, the *Journal's* first report was headlined 'Job loss warning as Rock calls for help' (Robinson 2007a): the company presented as a casualty, calling for help. The article opens: 'Mortgage lender Northern Rock confirmed today that it had agreed emergency funding from the Bank of England after *being rocked* by the credit crunch in financial markets' (emphasis added). From the outset, the cause is externalised: the 'credit crunch in the financial markets' seen as a malignant force to which NR fell prey. The report states: 'Banks fearful of potential losses from increasing defaults on higher risk US mortgages have hiked up the rates at which they lend to each other', reinforcing NR as victim of poor judgement overseas. Such discourses of externality are described by Hay as central features of an increasingly dominant 'necessitarian neoliberalism' (2004: 500).

By 18 September 2007, the *Journal's* campaign to save NR was in full swing with an article headlined 'Support the Rock' (Wood 2007). This addressed the audience directly and employed terms of 'obligation modality' (Richardson, 2007: 60) to promote a specific course of action among readers: depositing money with the bank. The article opens: 'Good causes in the North have received £175m from Northern Rock in the past 10 years – and now is the time, the *Journal* believes, to help repay that support.' This moral exhortation mobilises the transactional logic of capitalist discourse, and situates the audience in ideologically-loaded terms, stating that NR has 'helped some of the most vulnerable members of society'. Sources in this text are ideologically homogenous: NR Foundation beneficiaries voice gratitude and there is

no place for oppositional voices. An associated report featured the Chamber of Commerce and Treasury, institutions which had engaged in the same neoliberal adventure as NR, expressing support for NR. The latter announces that deposits would be guaranteed by the government. NR is the victim but the *Journal* is now its saviour, rallying the community to its defence.

These themes continued to define the coverage. On 19 September 2007, the *Journal* reported 'Savers return as crisis eases' (Pearson 2007). Language of conflict pervades the text: 'The Northern Rock fightback began in earnest yesterday, as bosses declared themselves "delighted" with the public response to their battle for survival.' Discourses deployed here, and throughout the campaign as a whole, exemplify the positioning of the newspaper as 'community commando' (Richardson 2007: 119). The article quotes an NR customer: 'What I want to do more than anything is to make sure that Newcastle doesn't lose thousands of jobs because of some irresponsible media scare-mongering.' This continues the externalisation of responsibility, exonerates NR and distances the *Journal* from the rest of 'the media', responsibly championing local institution and community. These initial narratives were adapted as the story became more complicated, mapping ideological boundaries within which these discourses continued in the face of mounting evidence of the hazards of neoliberalism.

Blaming the regulators

In the following months, the Treasury Select Committee inquiry into NR criticised the UK's tripartite financial sector regulatory system (Financial Services Authority, Treasury and Bank of England) but its report made clear that NR's directors 'were the principal authors of the difficulties that the company has faced' (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2007-08). In the Newcastle press, there was a shift from blaming unsustainable lending practices in the US, to blaming Britain's regulators. On 14 November 2007, the *Journal* published an article headlined 'Bank regulation system branded a disaster' (Green 2007). The regulators' response is described, no doubt accurately, as having been 'strewn with errors', but the focus on procedural oversight inhibits critical engagement with the governing ideology exemplified by the permissive regulatory conditions. As Richardson notes, 'the campaigns and appeals of local and regional newspapers focus almost universally on the symptoms rather than the causes' of social issues (2007: 126), and 'any discussion or critique of capitalism (as a concept, as a system,

as a material reality) is, almost universally, off the agenda' (ibid: 136). On 27 March 2008, the *Journal* reported the FSA's humiliating review of its supervision of Northern Rock under the headline 'Watchdog's failings let bank slide into crisis' (Decker 2008). The headline is unequivocal: NR is definitively absolved of responsibility. Thus, local press reporting of the findings of the Treasury Select Committee and FSA review rearticulated the construction of NR's blamelessness.

Uncomfortable revelations

As the story developed, it became increasingly clear that the bank was not simply a victim of global turmoil and regulatory failures but that senior executives had misrepresented the extent of its liabilities to its own Assets and Liabilities Committee, and market analysts. As a result of the Treasury Select Committee inquiry, Northern Rock chairman Matt Ridley resigned and, following subsequent FSA investigations, three former executives were fined for publishing false mortgage arrears figures (FSA 2010a, 2010b). Discourses both mobilised and excluded in the *Journal's* coverage of these events warrant further analysis.

On 20 October 2007, the *Journal* reported 'Rock chairman quits' (Robinson 2007b). 'Northern Rock chairman Matt Ridley quit the troubled bank yesterday, a month after the lender was plunged into crisis', sustains the discourse of bank-as-victim. Ridley is an advocate of neoliberal economic ideology and a strong critic of state interventionism. A *Journal* interview with him was headlined neutrally, 'Former Northern Rock chairman speaks to the *Journal*' (Wilson 2010). It highlights in the second paragraph that he was 'blamed for "damaging the good name of British banking" when the lender almost collapsed and needed a £26bn Government bailout'. It quotes him: 'I have nothing but remorse for my role in what happened. I've apologised and explained as much as I can what happened before the Treasury Select Committee.' But in the paragraph which follows Ridley reinforces the narrative within which the *Journal* had consistently framed the NR story:

We were all taken by surprise by that. There was almost nobody who saw it coming. Those who did were not in the right place to warn everyone else. Northern Rock ended up suffering a fate no different from any other mortgage bank.

And he endorses criticism of the regulators, saying: 'I've always been of the view that financial

markets were under regulated and commercial markets were over regulated.' Four months before this interview, the FSA fined and banned from working in the financial sector former NR deputy chief executive David Baker (£504,000), former finance director David Jones, (£320,000) and former managing credit director Richard Barclay (£140,000). These were, however, 'regulatory' rather than 'criminal' offences and, reflecting this, the *Journal's* coverage frames their actions as lapses, rather than deceptions, underling Croall's observation that 'public, political and criminological representations of white collar and corporate crime all illustrate its long recognized ambiguous criminal status' (2009: 175).

The reports examined encapsulate the complexities involved in the social construction and reproduction of mass-mediated notions of what should and should not be a 'crime', what should or should not constitute 'justice', and how both of these are also framed in relation to a mass articulation of legal order (Barak 2007: 102). On 13 April 2010, the *Journal* published an article headlined 'Former Northern Rock chief fined for "misreporting" figures' (Hill 2010). Misreporting, in quotes, comes from the FSA report, but is then woven into the news narrative. It implies error rather than intent, lexically mitigating Baker's (and Barclay's) wrongdoing. On 14 April, a follow-up ('Ex Northern Rock executive is handed record fine', McCusker 2010) opens by stating 'Northern Rock's former deputy chief executive has been *handed* a record fine and banned for life by the City regulator for "manipulating" mortgage arrears figures at the lender' (emphasis added). While 'manipulating' implies intent, the report quotes the FSA's press release and not the notice of finding, which states more forcefully: 'Mr Baker's conduct demonstrated a lack of integrity and he is therefore considered not fit and proper to perform any controlled function in relation to any regulated activity ...'.² David Jones was the final NR executive fined. On 27 July, the *Journal* (2010) reported: 'Northern Rock boss fined £320,000 over figures.' While the words 'manipulation' and 'misreporting' reappear, the report also states 'the FSA discovered that false mortgage arrears and possession figures had been reported before the bank's nationalisation', removing the agents from the narrative through use of the passive voice. Baker, Barclay and Jones made no personal profit, but the false figures inflated NR's share price and misled investors and regulators. Language used in the NR articles effectively neutralises the offences in moral terms, symbolically resolving

tensions between the *Journal's* support of NR and the revelations that emerged.

Conclusion

While the output of all profit-oriented media can fruitfully be analysed by interrogating the impact of ownership, advertising and other commercial factors, local newspapers are more visibly affected by the inadequacies associated with cost-cutting. By specifically interrogating the NR story, this study has delineated the economic and discursive features of a local newspaper campaign and bridged some of the gaps between global, national and regional levels of analysis of credit-crisis reporting. In covering a corporate story at a time of widespread corporate crisis, the corporate press was working in an echo-chamber where the ideological uniformity of private power resonated with reciprocal lucidity. We have shown that the discourses governing the *Journal's* news reports were constituted by hard economic realities, and explored the ways in which those discourses reproduce and intensify the dominant socio-economic order. Analysis has shown that the media's absorption into the apparatus of consumer capitalism has had a detrimental effect on its ability to articulate or challenge the 'worldwide romance with "free" markets' (Golding and Murdock 2000: 79), and that this has limited its ability properly to report on abuses of corporate power. Corporate power and the agents of that power were discursively absolved of or distanced from blame within texts relating to critical instances throughout the NR story, even represented as victims rather than as wrongdoers. As Hall and Winlow (2005: 42) argue, opposition to consumer capitalism is 'disappearing even as a utopian ideal as its language and images evaporate in the heat of mass-mediated neo-liberal culture'.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.trinity-mirror-north-east.co.uk/advertising-solutions.aspx>, accessed on 22 July 2011

² See http://www.fsa.gov.uk/pubs/final/david_baker.pdf, accessed on 22 July 2011

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PAPERS

REVIEWS

Mirage in the desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring'

John Mair and Richard Lance Keeble (eds),
2011

Bury St Edmunds, Abramis, 337pp
ISBN 978-1-84549-514-5

Mirage in the desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring', edited by John Mair and Richard Lance Keeble, is a timely, well-structured, informative book. It hosts contributions from Western journalists who covered the events that swept the Arab world in 2010-2011 and led to the overthrow of three Arab presidents/dictators, Ben Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt and Gaddafi of Libya.

The book also features contributions from well-known scholars and writers in the field of journalism studies, political communication, war reporting and propaganda. It is cleverly divided into seven sections. It starts with relatively short articles from journalists reporting from the frontline, then moves to question the term 'Arab Spring' and the problem with the notion of the 'tweeting revolutions'. One section looks into the role al Jazeera, the international television network, played in the uprisings and another section at women on the frontline in the Arab revolutions, be it reporter or activist.

After analysing the way Western media represented Gaddafi, the book ends with reflections on the long-term, political effects of the Arab revolutions. Apart from the section on al Jazeera, the book mainly captures and examines reporting on the Arab revolutions in the Western-British mainstream media and Libya is a main focus. The reason might be that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions took the Western media by surprise (the BBC kept calling the events in Egypt 'civil unrest' for the first few days of the revolution), or that the events in Libya were closer to home with the Nato intervention in support of the rebels.

The editors' decision to question the term 'Arab Spring' is important and significant. The authors who contributed on the issue shed light on the historical, political and cultural roots of the term. In the Arab world, the uprising took different names: originally it was the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, the 17 February Revolution in Libya – and then simply referred to as the Tunis revolution, the Egypt revolution and so on.

The term 'Damascus Spring' was first used by late Lebanese journalist Samir Kasir (killed in June 2005). Kasir called for and predicted in his writings a 'Damascus Spring' similar to that of Prague Spring in 1968. Speak to journalists from Tunisia, and Egypt and they tell you that they are still in the midst of their revolutions. Defending and protecting the achievements of the uprisings have become the priority for the youth of both countries. For the people of these nations, the 'spring' is yet to come.

The journalists whose stories from the battlefield feature in the book do not seem to reflect on how they came to adopt such a term and from where it emerged. Some of the articles read as heroic self-promotions (see the chapter by Stuart Ramsay, chief correspondent of Sky News) while others appear as fascinating narratives – but with little reflective commentary (see the eye-witness reporting from the Libyan frontline by Oliver Poole, of the *Independent* and London *Evening Standard*).

Comprehensive reflections

Lindsey Hilsum and Alex Crawford (who gained enormous fame for being the first Western journalist to enter Green Square in Tripoli as Gaddafi's regime fell in late August 2011) succeed in their short contributions in highlighting some of the problems journalists face while reporting such complex situations. Wrye Davies, BBC Middle East correspondent, and Alan Fisher, senior correspondent of al Jazeera, reflect comprehensively on their institutions' performances during the revolutions.

The chapter by Mashaal Mir, a Danish-Pakistani journalist studying at Kingston University, needs to make a clearer distinction between al Jazeera Arabic and al Jazeera English – and that criticism could also apply to the whole section on al Jazeera. There have been significant differences in the editorial policies of the two channels – largely because their respective target audiences are very different. The Arabic channel follows closely Qatar's foreign policy positions while al Jazeera English seems to adopt a far more flexible news agenda.

David Hayward, of the BBC College of Journalism, challenges the tendency to highlight the similarities between the events in the Arab world and those that took place in Eastern Europe in 1989 – but his writing at times can be over-generalised and simplistic (particularly when he is talking of events in Bahrain and Lebanon).

Some of the chapters are excellent starting points for further research: for instance, Simon Cottle's chapter on democratising media and communications, John Jewell's chapter on how the war was communicated in Libya, Alexander Kazamias's on how Edward Said's Orientalism thesis applies to the way Western media reported the 'Arab Spring' and Julie Tomlin's on how Arab women of the revolutions defied the Western stereotypes.

Mirage in the desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring' is a must read and a good reference book for academics and researchers interested in studying media, communications and journalism. It is also a must read for journalists who report on the Middle East and conflicts in general. It is accessible reading to the general public interested in the Middle East too. Mair and Keeble's book is guaranteed a place on my 'Reporting the Middle East' class reading list.

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PR today: The authoritative guide to public relations

Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy
Palgrave MacMillan 370 pp
ISBN 978 0 230 24009 4

There is no doubt that the pedigree of the authors – Trevor Morris, former CEO of one of the UK's biggest PR groups, and Simon Goldsworthy, senior academic and founder of Westminster University's MA in PR – gives them credibility and authority. But to say that *PR Today* is 'the Authoritative Guide to Public Relations' might be rather over-stating matters. It is, however, a very readable and well reasoned overview of a much maligned profession.

PR Today ranges from meaningful discussions about how PR is defined and sees itself through to simple, practical tips and tools for planning, practising and even securing a job in PR. The debate about propaganda is excellent and pops up at relevant and challenging places throughout the book, poking a finger at PRs who insist that it is others who engage in propaganda – and not them. The assertion that PR is amoral is well reasoned and accurate while the thorny subject of 'truth and ethics in PR' is also handled honestly and well.

Public Relations has an uncomfortable time in academia as this book points out because it comes from practice, is too often considered light weight – even fluffy – and lacks rigour. But what do we want to achieve from an academic study of PR? The theories will be scant because we are looking at – in relative terms – a new discipline which needs time to build up its academic credentials.

The nature of PR requires practitioners to be able to draw from a wide variety of underpinning knowledge and theory ranging across persuasion, ethics, politics, social sciences, creativity, law, business disciplines and – possibly most of all – reason. A successful PR practitioner will be able to marshal their thoughts coherently, write and speak eloquently, command respect at all levels of an organisation and to deliver their strategies.

You could argue that there is no need to study PR in and of itself but a programme of study that brings all these elements of knowledge and skills together produces a well rounded graduate rather than one with specialist knowledge of just one discipline. The future for PR in academia is bright if this book is anything to go by with its willingness to challenge the practice and to encourage deep, critical thinking.

One of the major roles of PR, it has to be stressed, is helping organisations and individuals think through the implications of their decisions and actions and how best to present the same. Some of that will require the media and other third-parties, but much of it will be around presentation and tackling crucial questions. For instance, are the messages aligned across the organisation? Is the time and the place right? Do we need to move the goal posts? PR also crosses boundaries, keeping an eye on what is going on that could affect the organisations and individuals ensuring that issues are identified and managed, avoiding the need to delve into the crisis management tool kit.

Dividing the book into three sections, covering theory and analysis, planning and strategy and finally practice, allows PR to be considered from all angles leading to a realistic conclusion that bodes well for the future. It is disappointing that *PR Today* spends so little time on integrated communications – where PR, marketing and advertising come together in a powerful combination. It would have been a great opportunity to consider the power struggles – particularly with marketing – and debate where the emphasis could lie with each.

The future is rosy according to *PR Today* and growth in PR is something to be welcomed as a source of employment not just for young practitioners but also for the necessary growth in the industries that nurture, educate and train the practitioners of the future. I do, however, take issue with the authors' assertion that reduced state ownership is a prerequisite for this growth. They seem to forget that PR is also about providing well presented public information with its roots, certainly in the UK, in national and local government campaigns to help the citizen live a better, healthier, safer life.

PR Today is an excellent textbook covering many of the crucial areas. The exercises dotted around the text are useful to stimulate the application of the theories and ideas. As yet the web resources on the companion website are unavailable but I will look forward to exploring those in due course. I shall have no trouble at all recommending it to my students, to new practitioners and, indeed, to organisations who need to understand what PR can do for them.

Let's be honest: any book with a list of sources of useful information that includes *The girl with the dragon tattoo* (Larsson), *Salmon fishing in the Yemen* (Torday) and *Absolute power* (BBC) has to be worth a second look.

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Ethics and the media: An introduction

Stephen J. A. Ward
Montreal, Cambridge University Press pp 290
ISBN 978 0 521 71816 5

In Professor Stephen J. A. Ward's latest book, he accomplishes a rarity in scholarship: he delivers more than he promises. For this volume, his third in two years (2010a, 2010b), is far more than the media ethics introduction promised by the title. Yes, it is a primer on news media ethics, and a very good one, but it also takes a serious look at two tough problems that 21st-century journalists are grappling with. One is trying to come up with a single ethical framework that can encompass the practices of new media and old. The second takes on one of the most vexing problems of all: how to build, or at least start building, a new journalism ethic that is as global as contemporary journalism's reach.

Note to instructors: this work is clearly intended to be a journalism textbook. It is clearly written – accessible to students without pandering to them – and provides conclusions and thoughtful discussion questions at the end of each of the seven chapters. Further, it has a most welcome focus on journalism, not on the much broader topic of mass media or, broader still, mediated communication. The reporter that Ward used to be still, thankfully, shines through, and the resulting book should appeal to both students and professionals, within academia or outside.

As a teaching text, the strongest part of the book is near the start. The concept of 'ethics' is nicely distinguished from prudence, custom, etiquette and related concepts. Ward presents in capsule form much of his first book, *The invention of journalism ethics: The path to objectivity and beyond* (2005). The major schools of thought, particularly the consequentialism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and the deontology of Immanuel Kant, are clearly and economically explained.

In this portion of the book, Ward also provides a robust defence of journalistic objectivity that, in itself, is worth the cover price, in the opinion of this unrepentant hack who cut his reportorial teeth on the wire service conviction that it is possible, and necessary, to get things right. Ward has become a major champion of the concept of objectivity in recent years. Aside from the history book, Ward has several journal articles and book chapters on the topic, including *Inventing objectivity* (2010: 137-152) and *Truth and objectivity* (2009: 71-83). Such work is particularly needed at a time when assaults upon the concept of objectivity have pushed even some of its strongest defenders to talk instead about 'fairness' or 'balance', even though the concepts are not the same thing at all.

Two meanings of 'objectivity'

As Ward points out, 'objectivity' means at least two things. The first dates from the 1920s in the US, where objectivity became a defining characteristic of the emerging journalism profession and came to mean a reporting method. To counter inherent human bias, journalists tried to adopt approaches from the hard sciences that we lump under the name 'scientific method': the disinterested examination of empirical evidence, transparency, full disclosure and so on. Journalists use objective methods in their reporting because they know they are not utterly neutral, not because they believe they are.

Ward presents the other sense of the term as what he calls 'pragmatic objectivity'. This he describes as the analysis and interpretation that are an alternative to or evolution of the 'just the facts' neutrality associated with wire service or press agency journalism. When analysis and interpretation are done honestly and fairly, Ward maintains, they qualify as pragmatic objectivity.

Although the name is new and some of its details differ in Ward's telling, the concept of pragmatic objectivity has been around since at least the 1940s. In 1943, Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* magazine, created a blue-ribbon study group, the Commission on Freedom of the Press, to examine the US press system. In 1947, it produced what is usually known as the *Hutchins Commission Report*, named after its chief author, Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago. The report reasserted an 18th-century principle that democracy was possible only with a robust and unfettered press – not so that press barons could get rich on celebrity gossip. So citizens are entitled to 'a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning', the report said.

A leading Hutchins Commission authority, Stephen Bates, has concluded that the report 'has appreciably influenced academic thinking about journalism', but that journalists have either ignored or opposed it. He said the report 'has proved, as a call to action, a magnificent failure' (Bates 1995). One can still, however, see the report's legacy in the growing role of news analysis in today's journalism, which is surely an effort to present events 'in a context that gives them meaning'.

Ward's pragmatic objectivity idea builds upon the social responsibility concept of the Hutchins Commission by elaborating on ways to make interpretive articles fair. To Ward, journalists are just as honour-bound to be truthful and accurate when providing interpretation and analysis as when they are writing straight news articles.

Elitist sense of omniscience of bigfoot journalism

The middle portion of the book is more contentious as Ward endeavours to bring new media and old media under one ethical framework. He argues that the world of staid verify-before-publishing print journalism and the snazzy Twitter/Facebook/blogosphere world can more or less happily co-exist, even under the same nameplate or on the same website. Ward

inveighs against the elitist sense of omniscience that bigfoot journalism has tended to display and is positive about the technology that allows citizen-journalists and ordinary people to weigh in on issues.

Up to a point, the broadening of access is good. Journalism has tended to cover institutions better than it has covered the lives and problems of the people those institutions are supposed to serve, so it is good that ordinary people can now publish their own information and opinions. However, journalists spend years learning how to cut through clutter and spin so they can do their jobs responsibly. Verifying before publishing is not just a quaint relic of the days of hot type and 'Sweetheart – get me rewrite!' Verifying before publishing is part of the absolute core of what good journalists do, and that kind of reliability is often lost in new media.

Journalists are also taught to weigh the chances of doing harm against the positive effects of their work. Ward argues that reporters may legitimately give trivial offence, but not profound offence, and he offers a way to think about such questions. One is reminded of the line from the crusty old editor in the classic journalism film *Absence of malice*: 'I know how to tell the truth. And I know how not to hurt people. I just don't know how do both at the same time.'

So journalism has not outgrown its need for standards of journalism ethics, and Ward is correct in arguing for codes that are more up to date. The National Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct, which covers the UK and Ireland, was first written in 1936. In the US, what is now called the Society of Professional Journalists (formerly called Sigma Delta Chi) adopted its first code a decade before. The codes were written in a world of print. Ward's basic principle is correct: codes of ethics should reflect the news technology world of today's journalists. Paying more attention to citizens and the information and insights they bring to stories can be worthwhile, but it also has its dangers.

In the last section of the book, Ward contends that ethical standards should also take into account the global stage where today's journalists work. Over three books now, he has argued for a universal ethical system, and he offers as a starting point what he calls cosmopolitanism, which asserts 'the equal value and dignity of all people as members of a common humanity'. This, he says, is connected to what he calls the 'ethical flourishing' of all humanity, the growth of individual, social, political and ethical dignity.

Ward is certainly aware of the problems with developing such a system. In his book, *Global journalism ethics*, and on his University of Wisconsin website (ethics.journalism.wisc.edu), he speaks regularly of the difficulties in getting journalists – even more than academics – on board with his vision.

Integrating partial and impartial perspectives

Ward says the questions to be answered include these: ‘What exactly do journalists “owe” citizens in a distant land? How can global journalists integrate their partial and impartial perspectives? How can journalists support global values while remaining impartial communicators?’ But he adds: ‘...[S]ome journalists may accuse global journalism ethicists of being unrealistic in thinking that news organizations will provide the education, expertise and extra resources needed to achieve a high-quality cosmopolitan journalism.’

Ward clearly knows the difficulties of creating a standard that would be essentially crowd-sourced – a standard that would emerge from the work of journalists from many cultures. Notably, there are some professional organisations that are working on the topic; the International Federation of Journalists began a huge project in 2008 called the Ethical Journalism Initiative (ethicaljournalisminitiative.org/en/). And the International Center for Journalists in Washington has worked with journalism groups in 180 countries for more than 25 years on improving journalism quality, including ethics. The bottom-up change Ward wants is deeply problematic. The frustrations inherent in such efforts were colourfully described by the second US President, John Adams:

If there is ever to be an amelioration of the condition of mankind, philosophers, theologians, legislators, politicians and moralists will find that the regulation of the press is the most difficult, dangerous and important problem they have to resolve. Mankind cannot now be governed without it, nor at present with it (Leigh 1947: iii).

A core problem in a global approach – and possibly an insurmountable one – is that journalism as we understand it in the West is clearly a child of the Enlightenment. Yes, when we look for antecedents, we can claim that the ancient Greek writer Herodotus was writing about current events when he wrote his *Histories* 2,500 years ago. But the idea of journalism as a watchdog – as an essential ingredient in democratic self-government – grew out of the same ether

as the world ushered in by Newton and Locke, Hume and Montesquieu. It is so much a part of Western democracy – the theory anyway, if not the practice – that it may be easily forgotten that the principles are not automatically transferable to areas of the world where the Enlightenment did not extend.

Despite that, it is not particularly difficult to come up with a short list of ethical principles that are universal. Every culture ever studied has some sort of sanction on the taking of human life without cause. What belongs on the list of exceptions to the ban is the stuff of heated or reasoned debate: war and capital punishment leading the list at the state level, self-defence being a major exception at the personal level. But nowhere can a citizen be simply gunned down with impunity.

Positive value of truth-telling

It is easy to see why. Any culture’s moral code is, by definition, a set of acceptable and unacceptable norms of behavior, built to help that culture survive and thrive. And a society that tolerated random homicide simply would not last very long. Similarly, all cultures place a positive value of truth-telling because the cohesion of a society depends upon meaningful communication among its members. Caring for the young is another universal moral imperative. (Is there a story that generates more moral outrage than one about a mother whose children perish in a house fire after she left them alone for a night out?)

But some things are not universal, such as respect for the tribal wisdom of elders and respect for private property. When it comes to ethical mores regarding journalism, nations that are not built around the concept of popular sovereignty are quite different working environments for journalists than countries that are. Even non-Western countries with considerable press freedom generally expect journalists to protect society and uphold its values to an extent not found in the more individualistic West. For example, the Jordanian ethics code calls on journalists to protect national unity and support freedom movements elsewhere in the world.

In conclusion, Ward offers much more to chew on in *Ethics and the media: An introduction* than might be expected for a journalism ethics textbook, even a couple of big problems for readers to ponder after they close the book. Will there be a new code of journalism ethics that will deal intelligently with digital news media, with its wide base of non-journalist contributors, as well

as with older news operations? Will there ever be a universal ethical system for journalism, or will the post-Enlightenment chasm prove too wide? Democracy as we understand it is a product of the Enlightenment, from John Locke's *Second treatise on government* straight through to the revolutionary documents of France and the American colonies. But there are other models for national progress in today's world, such as China's system of totalitarian politics and an increasingly capitalistic economy, where journalism relies on the good will of the government.

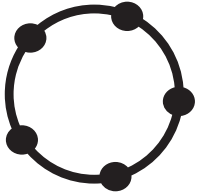
Finding points of agreement among nations on some general ethical points is not hard because of universal moral principles that have developed by accident or design, by selective advantage or dumb luck. But this is not the case with journalism, so Ward and any converts to his cause have their work cut out for them. The world of new media is a fast-moving target for would-be code proposers. And while Ward talks about de-Westernising the global ethics code he wants to see come into being, it is probably worth noting that nearly all of the efforts at building such a code come from either Western Europe or the US, the home of grand experiments in Enlightenment governance.

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