

JOURNALISM

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

FOURTH EDITION

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When I was coming out of university in 2008–9, there was very much a sense of, “You should get out there and start writing a blog”, and that was a way of differentiating yourself from all the other people who *said* they wanted to be a journalist but weren’t actually *doing* it. And I think for me the same applies for podcasting now. And not only just doing it but doing it in a really deliberate and thoughtful way. I think it’s very easy to start a podcast where it’s you and a couple of your friends talking about books, and you might be passionate about it and you make each other laugh and you have a really good time doing it, but there are a lot of people doing that and it’s quite hard to make it stand out. Whereas I think, one of the reasons why my show has been so successful, for what it is, is that there are not that many people doing it. ... I wanted to do something that would be a little bit different...

If you’re interested in working one day for the BBC, or a production company or something like that, and you have ideas about the kinds of things you would make once you had that sort of job, I think you should start trying to make them *now*. ... Somebody who is 19 or 20 and is going to be applying for jobs in this field, they will go into it so much more strongly if they can say, “Well, I had a go at making my own documentary, and it might not be the best but here’s all the things I learned while I was doing it”. Lots of young people do this really well with YouTube, but podcasting really is even more accessible. A half decent camera for YouTube is five or six hundred quid, whereas you can get a decent podcast microphone, and the headphones you would need to edit, and the software you would need to edit it on, all for £75, probably. ... At a push you can use your phone.

As discussed in Chapter 11, though, it is a good idea to think about what you are going to *say* before you speak into the microphone.

SAFEGUARDING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Technological developments have made it easier for individuals to publish things directly, but that definitely has its downsides as well as its positives. Something that today’s journalists have to contend with – and tomorrow’s potential journalists have to

think about – that was never an issue during most of journalism’s existence, is the impact of negative audience engagement and online trolling. It can be very draining, says Beaver. Worse, it can threaten your mental wellbeing:

You get so many people writing throwaway comments, “Is this journalism?”, “Is this a slow news day?”, or whatever, and things like that over time can actually chip away at your confidence. Why wouldn’t it? Can you imagine if, say for example you owned your own bakery business and someone was leaving a comment every time you posted a picture of your cake, saying, like, “Call this a cake?”, “My three-year-old could make a better cake than that”? Of course it’s going to affect your confidence, because at times you can become quite invested in things, so you can be writing a story about something that you care about, so when people rubbish it and just leave nasty comments... You know that it’s some loser because it’s really pathetic that you spend like three seconds of your life spreading unnecessary negativity...

These are just the silly comments – sometimes it can get really nasty. Nowadays there’s a lot of misunderstanding as well about what journalists can report on. When journalists report on inquests and court cases, people don’t understand that you have every right to be reporting on them, but obviously a lot of these cases can involve very sensitive issues, or people who are very loyal to one another, and it can get very nasty. Suicide inquests are going to always just bring out so many raw emotions, people will get very defensive, and people love to hate the media. Being on the receiving end of that can be really difficult, because you are just doing your job and you’ve not gone along to that inquest because you’ve wanted to be nosy and spill someone’s secrets to the public, you’ve gone along because there could be mishandling of someone’s mental health treatment, or opportunities that were missed... The hardest thing is being on the receiving end of that, when it’s loads of people piling in...

Some advice I was given when I started, and it’s really solid advice in the world of digital journalism now, is to remember that, say for example 10,000 people have read a story and there might be, say, 100 comments on it on Facebook, that seems like a lot – but if you remember that 10,000 people have

read it, that is 1% of the people who've read it, and the other 99% read it and carried on with their day. Even if they didn't like it they didn't leave a comment because they just decided to scroll on.

One study of journalists in the UK who have faced online trolling came up with a number of practical suggestions, which include acknowledging that it is OK to admit to being upset; reporting abuse to management and speaking with colleagues about it; "swarming" on social media in positive support of a journalist who is being picked on; and remembering to switch off from social media and online comments after working hours (Kean and Maclure, 2021: 79–80). Due to the pressure of working in today's digital environment, Beever agrees that journalists now need to learn how to switch off:

**"Nothing is more important than your mental health."
– Susie Beever.**

I think sometimes it's important to care *less*. I think it's important to care about stories, and to care about the people you're writing about, but once you leave the office you leave that behind you. I know there's this conception that to be a journalist it's a lifestyle rather than a job, but nothing is more important than your mental health, and if you don't have that you can't go into work. So once you leave at the end of the day – I mean unless there's a pressing reason like an unmissable opportunity or emails that urgently need answering or something – you've got to put some space there.

**"Whatever you see, there's a story behind it."
– Paul Foot.**

Certainly when it comes to the social media side of things, I think if you're going to be reading comments on your stories, don't do it while you're sat at home watching TV, having your tea in the evening. Put some distance there. It might be a job that is a bit more of a lifestyle than, say, working in marketing is, but that doesn't mean you should sacrifice your wellbeing for it. ... An ability to switch off, I suppose that goes for any job but certainly a job like this that's so people orientated and emotional, you write about a lot of difficult issues sometimes, so don't carry it around with you at the weekend.

On the plus side, receiving the occasional message from somebody who says a story moved them, or made a real difference in their lives, can make it all seem worthwhile.

“KEEP YOUR SENSE OF INDEPENDENT OBSERVATION”

Journalists now have to put up with even more public disdain than did the journalists of yesterday; more publicly expressed casual disdain, anyway. But, despite its many flaws, journalism continues to play an important role in informing society about itself, and the best journalists engage in **reflective practice** while contributing to the **public sphere**. What an immeasurably poorer place the world would be without journalism. So, if you (still) want to be a journalist, and if you strive to do it in an ethical way, don't feel the need to apologise for your choice. But don't neglect your mental health in the process. Be kind to yourself, as

well as to the nervous work experience people who follow in your wake.

For a last word, I turned to Paul Foot – veteran reporter, investigator and columnist – and asked what advice he had for aspiring young journalists in the 21st century. This is what he said:

I think people should join the NUJ and if there isn't a union where they work they should do their best to try and form one. That's the first thing. The other thing is, don't lose your sense of curiosity or your sense of scepticism.

Understand the way the industry works and do your best to apply yourself against that. The last thing I mean is young people rushing in and telling their editors how to run the world, that's absolutely fatal. There's nothing worse than the arrogant young person – who knows *everything* – going and telling people what to do. Even if they're right, which often they are, that's not the way to behave. That's the way to get sacked. You've got to keep your head, you've got to bite your lip, and you've got to do what you're told a lot of the time. Nine times out of 10 it's better to go ahead and do what you are told, but there's a tenth time when it is worth resisting.

The main thing is to keep your sense of independent observation as to what's happening around you, and

to try to use what ability you have to get those things into print. Whatever you see, there's a story behind it. There is a truth and there's no doubt there are facts. Facts are facts, you can't bend them.

And that seems to be as good a note as any on which to conclude a book on the principles and practice of journalism today. As for what it will be like tomorrow and the day after: over to you.

SUMMARY

The future of journalism is both uncertain and unwritten, but the social role of journalism in informing citizens, and contributing towards the health of the public sphere, means that journalists have an ethical responsibility to engage in a process of critical reflection. Despite the structural forces and constraints that bear down on journalists, individuals and groups of journalists retain elements of choice in their work. Recruits to journalism are advised to learn everything they can from more experienced journalists without ever losing their own sense of curiosity and independent observation. They are also advised to look after their mental health, including learning how to switch off.

QUESTIONS

Who is journalism for?

What is journalism for?

Where is journalism heading?

When is journalism at its best?

Why are journalists not trusted?

How can you become an ethical journalist?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You have learned a range of multimedia journalism skills and you know how to find, investigate and tell an accurate and interesting story. However, none of the media employers you approach are taking on new staff at the moment. What are you going to do?

FURTHER READING

You could usefully start by going back through this book and looking up the references and suggestions for further reading contained in each chapter. Then read David Randall's (2005) *The Great Reporters*, an enjoyable and inspiring introduction to the work of some, er, great reporters, including Nellie Bly and James Cameron. Further useful historical context can be found in *Journalists* by Tim Gopsill and Greg Neal (2007), which charts the first century of the NUJ and its members. Some different ways of doing journalism are explored in Susan Forde's (2011) *Challenging the News* as well as *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Harcup, 2013), and Barbie Zelizer's (2017) *What*

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