

THE JOURNALIST

Good journalists enjoy finding things out and then telling people what they have discovered. At work the journalist will

- ask the questions to which the public want answers
- persevere to find the truth of events
- be accurate and balanced when constructing the story
- present it in the clearest and most powerful way
- have an extensive network of sources.

Journalism is full of lying, cheating, drunken, cocaine-sniffing, unethical people. It's a wonderful profession. (Piers Morgan, then editor of the *Daily Mirror*, quoted in *GQ*, April 2002)

When journalists of my generation first entered newspapers in Britain in the 1980s, there was still a suspicion of graduates among news editors. Graduates were considered soft, lacking in life experience and practical common sense and, worse still, they were seen as expecting special treatment. On my first local paper there were journalists without degrees, some with no A-levels. Journalism was seen as a craft, which was more about natural instinct and talent than it was about education. A journalist, or 'hack', was a hard-bitten operator who could smell a story at 200 paces and was not averse to the odd questionable practice to sniff it out.

There are still editors around who adhere to this view, but when I joined the BBC a few years later, all the recent entrants were graduates. Many things were changing. No longer were newsrooms full of the clatter of typewriters and there were no hunching, chain-smoking, hacks stinking of booze (although this was always a stereotype beloved of Hollywood and Broadway). The journalists I work with are more likely to go running than

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drinking at lunchtime and the classic view of the journalist as grubby, hard-drinking and lacking in any of the social graces is incorrect, at least most of the time.

Some of the changes no doubt can be put down to new and faster technologies and we will be talking more about these later in the chapter. It is now possible to transmit a report from the most remote parts of the globe and have it on air minutes later. This is exciting, but it is also a challenge to the journalist who has little time to assess the significance of an incident or situation before they have to explain it to the general public. In addition, the online news organisations and 24-hour broadcast news channels press for constant updates, presenting huge demands (and opportunities) for the journalist.

Being a journalist

Journalism is about telling real-life stories and explaining the world beyond a person's direct experience. Good journalists shine lights where the public cannot see, they bring knowledge where there was ignorance and, if they are very good, empathy where there was antipathy and action where there was inertia.

The journalist gathers facts about the story; decides which of those to include and which to omit; how to structure the story and which words to use to tell it. But it is all a waste of time if they fail to communicate what they have found to the audience. If nobody is reading or listening or watching, then the journalist cannot inform, educate or enthuse. Therefore we have to find stories that people will be interested in and tell them in the most exciting but truthful way possible.

In essence the journalist is a pedlar of information. It has to be packaged attractively to be inviting to the reader, listener or viewer and it has to be accurate and fair to be a quality product. And journalists share many of the same characteristics whether they are weekly newspaper reporters covering council meetings, journalists on regional evening papers writing about important court cases, national radio reporters covering Parliament, or writers on a broadsheet or compact reporting a natural disaster on the other side of the world.

That is not to say that all working journalists are conscientious or moral. There are those who are sloppy and as lazy, for example, the one who admitted to colleagues that when he worked on a national tabloid newspaper he would sometimes make up quotes rather than go out and collect them. He could predict, he said, what people would say. There are those who will take the credit for other people's work and those who abuse the trust of interviewees by lying about their true intentions, even stealing photos of loved ones once they have conned their way inside the house. I wish I could say these people do not prosper in the profession, but many do. So let's not be starry-eyed.

If journalism is to remain a profession that people can rely upon to help them make decisions about their lives, then journalists must resist the temptation to create content or alter the tone of an article. The latter can be particularly hard to resist.

There are editors who put pressure on reporters to 'jazz up' their accounts. And there are owners and advertisers who want to influence what is written (see Chapter 2). Many

journalists work on under-resourced newspapers, internet sites and radio stations, and have little time to check out stories. Some rarely get out of the office and must conduct nearly all their interviews over the telephone.

But good journalists are badly needed. Public confidence in journalists and their journalism is at rock bottom. The exposure of Jayson Blair, the *New York Times* reporter found to be fabricating stories, and the fallout from the Hutton Inquiry into a BBC journalist's report that the Government made false claims in its dossier on the threat from the then Iraq President Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destructions (WMD) have only added to public suspicion of the media. (See Chapters 5 and 12 for more about these cases.)

An ICM poll for the National Council of Voluntary Organisations in July 2002 found that half of the 1,000 people questioned believed journalists would not be honest when interviewed.¹ Moreover, research by the University of Leeds shows that while people rely heavily on the media for information, most of them distrust the media's motives and operational methods. They feel the news organisations are 'just looking for a story' and are driven primarily by circulation and audience figures. The scepticism affected all media, but mostly the press, and the tabloid press in particular.² The media ethics organisation, PressWise, reports that around 10,000 complaints a year in Britain are being made to regulatory bodies by people unhappy about what is reported about them.³

Yet journalists need the public to trust them, otherwise the very reason for their existence – to inform – is negated. Fortunately, despite poor pay, long hours and often difficult working conditions, there are excellent journalists doing sterling work. Most would not want to do any other job, because for anyone who wants to be where the action is, it is the best work going.

What makes a good journalist?

So what qualities does a good journalist need? It has to be noted that in talking to journalists while researching this book, many found it quite a challenge to explain how they do their job and what it is that makes them effective. For most practitioners, journalism and the skills needed to recognise and report news become over the years instinctive. However, when pushed they came up with the following qualities: being a people person, a questioner, a verifier, accurate, persevering, courageous, a good judge of news, curious, an able writer, creative, competitive, ethical, fair, balanced, objective, cultivating of contacts, well informed.

A people person

Journalism often involves dabbling in the stuff of other people's lives.⁴ Good journalists do so responsibly and ethically.

Journalists have a fascination with the affairs of men – they are people-watchers and many love nothing better than sitting alone in a café or on a bus listening to other

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people's conversations. As well as being good listeners, journalists should be good communicators, able to deal with a wide variety of people and situations, from cabinet ministers to homeless people. They should be sensitive to people's feelings and able to win their confidence while recognising the news angle and pursuing it.

A questioner

The journalist wants and needs to know everything they can about the events on which they report or the issues that catch their interest. They must be full of questions and intent on establishing as many facts as possible. Sometimes that means asking a string of questions until the crux of the matter is clear, as only by understanding can they pass on the story to the general public.

Never be afraid to ask the obvious question, even if it makes you look stupid, says Mike McCarthy, bureau chief at Sky News in Manchester, who spent time covering the war in Afghanistan in 2001:

When I arrived in Kabul, I had to go to a military briefing in a hotel. I got there a bit late and missed the introductions so I didn't know the name of the man leading the briefing who was also the military commander. I absolutely had to know his name, because it was a very important fact. For one thing, I didn't want to get caught out on air speaking live to a presenter and not know who had given out the information I was referring to. So I asked his name, I did feel stupid but not as stupid as I would have looked had I not known on air.

There are two lessons here – one is having the courage to ask and the other is being punctual. As Mike himself points out, if you arrive late to the event, as a journalist you are likely to miss the main story.

Accurate/a verifier

Asking questions is often to do with verifying the facts, not only questioning the people but questioning what they tell you. Always be sceptical of what people say and be willing to ask yourself why they are saying it. Never just accept what you are being told, especially by governments – even more so if those governments are at war.

Journalists have a duty to do all they can to present as accurate a picture as possible to the public. Every journalist I spoke to considered accuracy to be crucial. Ian Lockwood, editor of the *Craven Herald* in Skipton, says that journalists are often unfairly accused of making mistakes:

People have to have some confidence that what they're reading is correct. There are some who believe there are lots of mistakes, but actually there are very few. For example, last week we wrote about a local boy who had a part in a television programme. We said he'd got the part because he could play the piano and he had curly blonde

hair. His grandmother rang up and said we'd got it all wrong. Yet when we went through it line by line there was actually nothing wrong. The problem for the grandmother was that she believed we'd implied he'd only got the part because of his piano playing and blonde hair, not because he could act.

In the era of instant news, getting it right all the time is becoming harder to achieve. Derek Crawshaw, who spent several years as a BBC 5-Live reporter in Belfast, explains that working for a station that prides itself on its 'live' nature gives the reporter special problems:

You have got to be there, be first and be live. But there are times when it's difficult to get as much information as you'd like. You have got to be secure and confident in knowing that what you're saying is correct and you've got to be confident enough to say 'I don't know enough yet'. You come under great pressure as a live reporter to go on air. You've got to be first and be accurate. It's an easy thing to say, but it's a hard thing to do.

Being able to say to a news editor that you're not ready to go on air or to hand in a story is an important part of the job of a reporter. Never publish facts you are not certain of but find out as much as possible in the time available.

By striving to uncover what you can, the journalist discharges their duty towards the people who cannot be there themselves, says Cathy Killick, a television reporter with BBC *Look North* in Leeds:

There was a bad crash on the A1 'Hundreds of vehicles were involved. I knew nobody would know exactly how many, so with the help of a reporter from the *Yorkshire Post* newspaper I counted them. We found it was 600 vehicles spread over three-quarters of a mile of motorway. You could see the chaos from the pictures, but I wanted to verify the facts. I had the time; often you don't in this sort of situation. I think this is what my job is about. I am the eyes and ears of the public and I want to get it right. To do this you have to apply yourself.

Persevering

Without perseverance, a news journalist will never uncover anything but the most run-of-the-mill stories.

You have got to have your quarry in view and to keep going and get it or as close to it as you can. So you don't fall at the first hurdle, you don't knock on someone's door and if they don't answer think that person isn't in and give up. You leave a note, you try someone else who may be able to help you, you go back later. (Cathy Killick, BBC *Look North*)

However, never mistake persistence for harassment. A journalist should not try to obtain information through intimidation.

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For some journalists it was determination that secured them a job in the first place. I was told by one foreign editor that as a young journalist he sat on the steps of the newspaper's building and accosted the editor every day until he agreed to take him on and give him a chance.

Persistence by the editor of a local paper resulted in freedom for a man wrongly convicted of murder. It took *Matlock Mercury* editor Don Hale nearly eight years of campaigning and investigating until he won an appeal hearing for Stephen Downing. The Court of Appeal quashed the conviction and Downing was freed after serving 27 years in jail for the murder of a Derbyshire woman, Wendy Sewell.

The miscarriage of justice that put Stephen Downing, then only 17 years old, behind bars came to light only because Don Hale decided to go against the advice of his superiors and investigate. By then Downing had been in jail 20 years and the case was largely forgotten. Hale's investigations found that although Downing had admitted the murder, he had a mental age of 11 and had told his father that he only admitted it so he could go home. Hale also discovered new witnesses who said they'd seen another bloodstained man leave the graveyard on the night of the murder.

When Don Hale started publishing stories about his findings, he suffered threats and intimidation and he was nearly killed by a speeding sports car, but he didn't give up. He said the intimidation only strengthened his belief that he was on the right track.

I can think of nothing more frightening than to be locked away for life for a crime you haven't committed. Who can you turn to? Who is prepared to listen to a convicted killer? I was continually told that it was not my job to take on this sort of challenge. So whose job was it? Who else was prepared to endure years of persecution?⁵

Courageous

Journalists need courage in many situations. Sometimes it is the courage to go where you are not welcome and face very real dangers; at other times it might be the courage to ask the right questions.

Reporters Without Borders' (www.rsf.org) Annual Report, published in 2005, highlighted some of the dangers facing journalists worldwide during the previous year. Fifty-three journalists and 15 media assistants (fixers, drivers, translators, technicians, security staff and others) were killed worldwide in 2004 while doing their job or for the stories they wrote. This was up from the 40 journalists and 2 media assistants that were killed in 2003. Things were not looking much better for 2005, as in the first four months 19 journalists lost their lives. Many others are imprisoned or threatened every year. In 2004 at least 1,140 journalists were attacked or received threats and more than 900 were imprisoned.⁶

Despite the dangers, journalists continue to work to bring accurate information to the people. Marie Colvin, a *Sunday Times* reporter who lost an eye while reporting in 2001 in Sri Lanka, says journalism has become more dangerous and at the same time more important. In a speech to World Press Freedom Day in May 2002, she said that while in Israel the only way she could prove the Israeli Government was lying about Jenin Refugee camp on the West

Bank was to get out there and see. That was a dangerous undertaking. Israeli forces had invaded the camp in April and dozens of people were killed in the ensuing fighting.⁷

If it takes a lot of guts for international reporters to uphold the right to report freely and honestly, it possibly takes even more courage and fortitude when you are the local media and you do not have a plane ticket out of the situation. Speaking at World Press Freedom Day in 2001 was Mark Chavunduka, a journalist from Zimbabwe. He and another reporter were jailed and tortured by President Robert Mugabe's regime for reporting that an alleged plot to overthrow the Government had been foiled. They were charged with publishing information likely to cause alarm and despondency.

What happened to us was a barbaric assault, which was worsened by the fact that the state never disproved the article that led to our arrest. What prolonged our incarceration was that we refused to reveal our sources. The military emphasised throughout that the reason we were being held was because we refused to reveal our sources in the military and I'm very proud to say that two years later that is still the case.⁸

Both men were released on bail because of the huge international outcry. They challenged the law under which they were arrested in the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe, and were successful. The Government has since been introducing new laws to restrict the media.

Refusing to name sources in a democratic country where you are not likely to face torture is less obviously courageous, but it takes a brave man to uphold a principle and face imprisonment. Individual journalists confront this dilemma every year. A *Manchester Evening News* journalist, Steve Panter, faced a possible jail sentence for contempt of court (see Chapter 10 for more on contempt of court) when he repeatedly refused to disclose the identity of the source of a story. The article named the prime suspect of the Manchester IRA bombing in 1996. The attorney general decided in July 2002 not to bring contempt proceedings, saying it was not in the public interest to prosecute.

Manchester Evening News editor, Paul Horrocks, said about the case:

It took great personal strength [by Steve Panter] not to reveal his source when ordered to do so by a judge. He was standing by our basic code of journalism and we are proud of him.

The public must be able to trust us not to reveal confidential sources, unless there are exceptional circumstances. There is a worrying trend in this country of courts wanting to know media sources. This must be resisted.⁹

Journalists need mettle to refuse to answer questions, and on occasion also when they have to ask questions that people do not want to answer. The journalist needs to be able to walk into a meeting full of high-powered politicians and be capable of dealing with them on an equal basis.

Often young or inexperienced journalists are afraid of asking questions that they think they should already know the answer to. A good rule of thumb is that if you don't know or understand something, there will be others who don't. It also takes confidence to telephone

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someone or knock on the door of someone you know doesn't want to speak to you and ask them awkward questions.

A good judge of news

A journalist who does not recognise a story when faced with one is no good to their editor or news organisation.

When I was on work experience I was told about a young reporter on a broadsheet newspaper who returned after a lunch break to find the office in a state of high excitement. She was told that a bank had been robbed very close by and they were making calls to try to find out more about it. The trainee said that she knew about the robbery as she had been in the bank when it happened. When asked why she hadn't told the newsdesk straight away, she said she hadn't realised it was important. Unsurprisingly she was fired then and there.

Her mistake was to think that because her field was business and finance, other sorts of news stories, such as crime, were of no consequence. When the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001 and around 3,000 people lost their lives, many news organisations had to rely on reporters who just happened to be in New York. Some were on other assignments, others on holiday. Everyone was expected to be up to the challenge.

The *Daily Telegraph's* deputy editor, Sarah Sands, was there for New York fashion week. She was walking towards the World Trade Center when the attack started and was able to file a very detailed eyewitness piece for the paper.¹⁰

The *Sun's* new New York correspondent, Brian Flynn, was flat hunting in the city and was on the phone to his London office when he saw the first plane hit the towers.¹¹ Similarly, *Shropshire Star* deputy chief reporter Tracey O'Sullivan was in New York for a family wedding when the attack happened.¹² Both were able to provide personal accounts.

In its analysis of the reporting of the attacks on America a few days after they happened, the *Press Gazette*, a trade paper for journalists, points out that it was perhaps the first time that the same story appeared on the front pages of the world's newspapers. It also led the world's television and radio bulletins.¹³ It was a day when all journalists knew without a doubt which story, among all the other events that day, was the most important. In fact many editors even used the identical photograph to illustrate the attacks, taken by Spencer Platt, a photographer with Getty Images.

As a journalist you are almost never off duty. If you are on holiday and happen to witness or be part of a news story, then you should take out your notebook and start work. We will be looking at the question 'What is news?' in Chapter 2, but throughout your career you will be developing your news sense, learning which stories are the important ones, which angles the most interesting, which details should be highlighted and which ignored.

Curious

Much that has already been said is about being curious: curious about people and curious about events. Journalists are *what? how? when? where?* and *why?* people. In the last instance curiosity is the motivation for everything the journalist does.

Nosiness is what made a young BBC regional reporter, Clarence Mitchell, wonder why a fleet of police cars was speeding down the M1 motorway late one Friday night and behind them the motorway was being closed. Mitchell, who was then a reporter in Hull, increased his speed and followed the police cars until they reached the scene of a plane crash near the Leicestershire village of Kegworth. A British Midland passenger jet en route from Heathrow to Northern Ireland had crashed a few hundred yards from the runway at East Midlands airport. It had ploughed into an embankment of the M1 motorway, killing 47 people.

Clarence was the only reporter to reach the wreckage before a security cordon was put up. He was able to ring the BBC newsdesk in London and describe what he could see for listeners and viewers until a camera crew arrived to get shots to go with his reports. His resourcefulness led to a job with the national reporter pool in London.

An able writer

It's pretty obvious that words are the journalist's tools. No matter what medium the journalist works in, be it television, radio, print or online, they need to be able to express ideas and information in writing. So a clear, grammatically correct writing style is a basic requirement. And while a journalistic style can be taught, good spelling and punctuation are a prerequisite. Any mistakes in an application form will result in it going straight in the bin.

Gillian Hargreaves, a reporter with BBC Radio 4's *World at One* and *PM*, says the journalist has to love language: 'Your writing skills have to be lyrical. You don't need to use big words but you need to be able to explain the complicated simply and to convey the story whether it is the drama or the enormity.'

Creative

Being creative can mean using language in an original manner or thinking of new ways of manipulating pictures and sound. It can also mean creative ways of covering stories.

Output editor of the BBC's *Six O'Clock News*, Jon Williams, believes that looking at things in an original way is a key skill:

Don't be formulaic – we want imaginative and creative reporters. I will never get angry with someone who tries to do something different and it doesn't work. If someone tries to be original, that's good. We covered the story of the GCSE results. The standard story is that girls do better than boys. Yet yesterday 30,000 people left with no GCSEs at all. That was our angle.

ITN's *5 News* were able to secure an unusual exclusive when they used a satellite videophone during the foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001. This allowed a farmer who was unable to leave his farm during the outbreak to file a regular diary for the programme. The farmer in Cumbria was in isolation for several weeks, but after neighbours delivered the videophone

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he could be interviewed regularly on the six o'clock news programme. It meant the programme could talk to the people living through the crisis as it unfolded. For example, the farmer was interviewed the day he received a letter saying his animals were included in a pre-emptive cull.

Competitive

Most journalists are competitive by nature and delight in beating other news organisations to an exclusive. Being first and fastest is a large part of the job.

Take John Simpson, the BBC's world affairs editor, who walked into Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, on 13 November 2001 after the Taliban fighters had retreated and ahead of Northern Alliance troops. He gleefully told a Radio 4 audience that he and his team were the first into the city: 'It was BBC people who liberated the city – we got in ahead of the Northern Alliance. We passed through and walked in, and the scenes of rejoicing and delight were extraordinary.'¹⁴

Ethical and fair

What constitutes 'ethical' is one of the most vexed questions in journalism. Do the ends justify the means? Is it ever fair to trick someone into giving you a story? If the person will tell you their story only if you pay them, is that right?

Journalists talk little about ethics, but most face ethical decisions of one kind or another every day. Should they knock on the door of the family who have just lost two children in a car crash to ask for an interview and a photo, or telephone first or leave a note? Should they use the rash quote by the headteacher that most of her pupils are impossible to teach or the more reasonable quote, which more accurately reflects what she thinks, in which she says it is a challenge? The second is truer but less colourful. It is also less hurtful to the children.

Bureau chief of Sky News in Manchester, Mike McCarthy, says:

You are the audience's representative, you're there to represent them. You are in a privileged position and you've got to do what the vast majority of people would find acceptable in the circumstances. In this way you are being ethical.

As John Herbert writes in *Journalism in the Digital Age* (2000: ix), ethics infuses all news gathering, reporting and communicating. If you ask a journalist whether they are ethical, the vast majority will say they are, but few can explain in any detail how. Most take each situation as it comes and have a personal set of ethical rules that works for them. Jon Williams agrees:

Being ethical is the bottom line of anything. Some ethical beliefs are personal and there are some that are shared. But I'd be lying if I said I had a plastic card on which they are all written. But then if everyone is just following a corporate rule book, then

ethics would mean nothing. You have to ask yourself if you can sleep at night, then they mean everything.

Some organisations give guidelines to reporters. The *Guardian* in its editorial guidelines explains that journalists should be sensitive to any outside interests they have which may come into conflict with the integrity of the paper's journalism. Staff are warned they must not use their position for private benefit and that no payment, gift or other advantage should undermine accuracy, fairness or independence. Any 'freebies' can only be accepted on the understanding that the journalist will report the assignment as he or she sees fit.¹⁵

Most journalists will make ethical mistakes at one time or another during their career. Many do things as a young reporter that they later wish they hadn't.

Mike McCarthy has a typical story. In 1989, while working for the BBC's local television news station, he covered the Hillsborough disaster, in which 96 football fans were crushed to death in Sheffield. In the evening BBC Network News in London asked him to film the bereaved families being counselled in a nearby church hall.

I didn't want to do it, but I was relatively new to television journalism and too green to say no. I didn't feel confident to question their judgement. So I went along. It was disastrous. Even though the vicar agreed for us to go inside, some of the friends and relatives were very upset. We intruded into their grief. Now, in a similar situation, I would say no. I'm not saying you can't film people in grief but you have to be very sensitive to their experience and how they are likely to react.

Covering grief is one of the hardest parts of the job of a journalist, especially if it comes in the form of a 'death-knock', where you are asked to go to the house of someone involved in a tragedy. Some journalists never feel comfortable with this aspect of the job. Yet if you can get it right, interviews gained this way can lead to moving, emotionally raw news stories. Some people in this situation want to talk about their loved ones and tell others what a wonderful person they were.

If you borrow a photograph, make sure it is returned. A colleague once lost the only photograph of a dead husband. Think about how hard that would be to explain. It is a mistake they have always regretted and can never put right. Be aware that a photograph such as the annual school photo may have been taken by a professional photographer and will be copyright.

There are other forms of 'doorstepping', as it is called, and they too can cause ethical problems. Doorstepping is when a reporter approaches or confronts someone without prior arrangement. This can happen in public, say on the street, or when the reporter knocks on the door of their house. It is used in cases where it is felt this is the only way this person may speak to the reporter. Perhaps they are someone involved in a crime or anti-social behaviour and have repeatedly refused an interview on unreasonable grounds or they are a public figure involved in a scandal. They can also be, as is mentioned above, ordinary people involved in a tragedy.

But doorstepping is not the same as harassment and intimidation. If there are 15 or 20 people camped outside a house, looking through windows or prowling around the garden,

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they are bound to make those inside feel intimidated. The Editors' Code of Practice, which sets professional standards by which members of the press are expected to abide, includes sections on harassment and states: 'Journalists and photographers must neither obtain nor seek to obtain information or pictures through intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit.' (See Chapter 12 for a discussion of the Editors' Code of Practice, which is set out in full in the Appendix.)

Balanced/objective

There is controversy in the world of reporting over whether the professional requirement to try to be impartial or objective is possible or even desirable. Many such as Jason Burke, the *Observer's* chief reporter, accept that they cannot be objective no matter how hard they try to write the full story:

The journalist lays out the situation for the readers to make up their own mind, but a journalist's own reactions will inevitably colour how they will report. Good impassioned reporting, with genuine sympathy and a good knowledge of the context, should be enough. No one can be entirely objective. The editing process starts when you choose who to interview.¹⁶

Andrew Sullivan in the *Sunday Times* agrees:

Bias is inevitable in any grown-up journalist's work. You can try to be balanced (and you're a better journalist for it) but in your choice of topics, selection of guests, presentation of facts, you inevitably show your hand.

This isn't to say that journalism should degenerate into simple propaganda or out-right advocacy, at least not in the presentation of news rather than opinion.

Trying to present many sides of an issue is the mark of an honest journalist; maintaining a distinction between news and opinion is the mark of an honest editor.¹⁷

On the extreme of this argument is Geraldo Rivera, a former television presenter and chat-show host who donned a flak jacket and became Fox News's chief war correspondent in Afghanistan. He brought with him a new style of war reporting that was anything but impartial. He said during a broadcast in November 2001: 'I've got a New York City fire department hat that I want to put on the head of [Osama Bin Laden's] corpse. We want Osama Bin Laden to end up either behind bars or six feet under or maybe just one foot under.'¹⁸

For Reuters' Kabul correspondent, Sayed Salahuddin, however, impartiality is one of the most treasured tenets of journalism:

I have this belief in Reuters' accuracy and impartiality – I am very proud of that. We should continue to follow that line and not be bullied by lies and propaganda of people

in the world. If we can follow that pattern, we will be able to remain impartial and people will trust in what we do.¹⁹

All journalists can make sure they balance their stories by explaining as many of the arguments involved as possible. And if someone is accused of something, they should be allowed to respond.

Cultivating contacts

One of the first things any journalist should do is set up a contacts book. This should be indexed so you can file names alphabetically and if it is loose-leafed it is easier to keep relevant, as you can add pages or replace those that are out of date. It is sensible to keep a copy of your contacts book, either on paper or on a computer. If you can afford it, think about investing in a personal digital assistant (PDA). These make excellent and very portable contacts books.

The journalist should enter in their contacts book anyone they speak to whom they may wish to speak to again. They should include as many details about them as possible: the name in full and correctly spelled, their address, a work and a home phone number, their mobile number, an email address and perhaps fax number. It is wise to include a brief note about their interests or expertise.

A contacts book is likely to include:

- doctors, surgeons and scientists
- academics
- emergency services, victim support units, the detective leading a murder investigation
- local courts, hospitals, health authorities and their press officers
- victims or their families who could speak out in future for changes in the law or comment on similar cases (e.g. a family whose child was killed during a school trip or was run down by a drink driver)
- pressure groups, campaign groups and charities. They are always useful for comments and you will find there are groups covering many of the issues on which you will report. You need to know those that are run nationally and have spokesmen and women in your area, and who they are, and those specific to your area
- schools, their headteachers and parents' representatives
- churches and their leaders. Make sure you know their correct titles: is it Reverend, Right Reverend, Father?
- Politicians including MPs, local councillors and potential candidates
- those who know. These include shopkeepers, especially those working in the local post offices; postmen and women; milkmen and women; publicans; the neighbourhood watch; people who have lived somewhere for a long time
- representatives of any big companies or industries in the area and their unions.

There are many more, and we will be looking at sources for news in Chapter 8.

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You should carry your contacts book at all times – you never know when you might need it. It is also not wise to share too many of your contacts with your colleagues, especially those who are not regular interviewees.

One of my best contacts when I worked on local papers, and one of the most unusual, was a magician I met while doing a feature about children's parties. He was a member of the Magic Circle and gave me several exclusives that were picked up by national newspapers and television news programmes. He made it clear that he did not want it known where the stories were coming from or he could be thrown out of the Circle. I was careful to keep his confidence.

Keeping the anonymity of a source who speaks to you only on the understanding that their identity will be kept confidential is vital for journalists if they wish people to trust them. They may be risking the loss of their jobs or in some cases their lives. So if you promise not to reveal the identity of an interviewee, then you must keep that promise. In broadcasting this can mean obscuring the face of an interviewee and using an actor's voice. Anonymity is only really appropriate in a few cases and you should think hard before agreeing not to name someone. It may be warranted:

- for reasons of safety – a person may be risking their life by talking to you, for example, if they are a former member of a terrorist organisation
- if they may lose their job – for example, a whistle-blower in a big company
- to avoid undue embarrassment – this could mean someone with a medical complaint
- for legal reasons, although interviewing a criminal or someone trying to evade the law is not usually ethical
- because you will not be able to tell the story otherwise. You must think carefully whether the story is worth the promise.

Once a promise is given it must be kept, and that can mean the journalist coming under pressure from the police or the courts to show their notes or hand over pictures or names. It can lead to journalists facing a fine or jail for contempt of court. (See Chapter 10 for a full discussion of these issues.)

Well informed

Ben Bradlee, the legendary editor of the *Washington Post*, told a colleague of mine in an interview that the best thing a journalist can have is a good head.

Throughout their working life, the journalist will be scrutinising and interpreting the incidents on which they report. The reporting process involves the journalist deciding which people to interview and which facts are salient to telling the story. The general public relies upon the journalist to bring them a true interpretation of events.

To discharge the role well, the journalist needs to be able to make judgements about what is significant and what is not. They cannot do this well without a good general knowledge and familiarity with current events.

Aspiring young journalists sometimes lack the necessary broader perspective, possibly because they are the products of an age of niche marketing and personalised information. They take all they can get on their favourite subject but leave the rest. As a result, they may know little about nine-tenths of what is going on around them. What hope has a teenager of reaching a person aged 40 if he or she knows every scrap of minutiae about a film star or sports personality, but thinks the NASDAQ is a rock band from Seattle?²⁰

A general awareness of how government and society works will help the journalist to establish quickly where to go for information. If you have a story about asylum seekers, you will be a lot quicker at collecting the information if you know the places to contact, such as the Home Office, British Refugee Council, Human Rights Watch and MigrationWatch UK.

Journalists should also know what stories their own newspaper, radio or television station is following. This means keeping up with the organisation's output and being aware of ongoing campaigns. There is little more irritating to an editor than having to explain a story that should be familiar to a reporter before they can set them to work.

Being aware of the news agenda of your organisation will also help you to pitch ideas at the morning meeting and the planning meeting if there is one.

The digital newsroom

New technology has transformed the way news is gathered and relayed to the public. An event across the globe can be on air as it happens or within minutes. This demands of the journalist an ability to respond to and sum up a situation more quickly than ever before.

On occasion you will still have to send a story through the post or fax it, but nowadays copy, even pictures and sound, can be phoned in or sent by computer from anywhere in the world, including the most lonely or inhospitable places. All you need is a satellite phone or a laptop attached to a phone line, mobile or satellite phone to transmit your story.

During the war in Afghanistan in the winter of 2001, lightweight and portable satellite videophones were vital for getting reports out for television. We saw regular live reports by satellite phone from Nic Robertson of CNN and others. He used a videophone to transmit pictures from inside the Afghan capital, Kabul.

The BBC's Emma Simpson filed a broadcast quality television report via the internet from Antigua in January 2003 about a 15-year-old schoolboy who had become the youngest person ever to sail the Atlantic Ocean single-handed. She also supplied a written report for the BBC's online news service.

Multi-skilling

This is the way the profession is moving; reporters are increasingly expected to file stories quickly from wherever they are and to be able to work across any medium. Whereas in

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the past you were a newspaper reporter, a radio reporter or a television reporter, now you are expected to be flexible and multi-skilled.

New digital technology is thus also affecting the way journalists gather and present information. If you work for a newspaper and are sent out to report an event, you could be asked to take still photos as well as to write a story for the paper. You may also be asked to supply a version of your story for the paper's internet site, including perhaps recorded interviews and moving pictures. You could, in addition, be expected to serve text services such as Ceefax and mobile phone news services.

As a broadcast journalist, you may need to supply a report for both television and radio and be expected to film and edit your own television pieces. Ian Myatt, a senior producer in new media for BBC English Regions, believes this is a positive move:

Multi-skilling gives you more creative input into how you present ideas. A journalist will set up a story, go out and film it, conduct the interviews and collect some soundbites, come back and write it up. So you've got audio video, still images and text. The journalist puts all that into a database and the computer will display the information on whatever platform the user wishes, PC, Wap phone, TV.

He acknowledges that currently some working journalists don't see the need for multi-skilling: 'People have got to take the blinkers off in newsrooms that say I work for TV or radio. There has got to be cultural change in all news organisations.'

With our 24/7 news operations, some journalists complain they are pulled in all directions and are unable properly to gather the information because they are fielding demands from too many outlets. Online news organisations and 24-hour broadcast news allow news to be accessible when people want it, not when news organisations and journalists wish to present it. These outlets are voracious, insatiable beasts that constantly need to be updated, imposing huge demands on the journalist.

Much of what the journalists do is what they've always done, only faster. For example, using the internet allows the journalist to locate information fast. But they still need to select only the relevant information and verify it. Knowing how to search for information on the web and turn it into news is an important skill for the journalist in the digital age.

Is journalism for you?

Journalism is not a nine-to-five occupation. You've just logged out of your computer and are packing your bag when a call comes in to say there's a fire or a siege or a riot and you are on your way. You are not home for dinner; you may not be home all night. The unpredictability of the work and the shift systems operated in many organisations can put a strain on personal relationships.

Many people want to go into journalism because they are good at English and like writing. That's fine, but it is not enough. You need to have a love of current events. If you have

never read a newspaper or would prefer to watch Desperate Housewives rather than the evening news, then this is not the right job.

Sophie Raworth, presenter of BBC's *Six O'Clock News*, insists it's not a job for those chasing fame and glamour:

You have to have a passion for news and current affairs and for getting information together. You can't be in a newsroom and be obsessed with getting your face on screen or people will think that's all you want. You've got to have a good grounding in journalism and reporting.

I never intended to present, I fell into it. I was working as a radio reporter and then as a producer in Brussels and I planned to be a producer. Then by accident I met a man who was a regional head of centre and he said I should go and work for him as a reporter. Through that I got on-screen experience and then I started presenting. To be honest I found it a very difficult transition to make but you have to be determined and never give up.

It's an exciting job and a great business to be in. It's given me access to places, events and people I'd never have had. It's permanently interesting.

Editors look for people who do not need spoon-feeding, according to Ian Lockwood, editor of the *Craven Herald*:

I look for an enquiring mind and someone who can come up with ideas. They have to be interested in what's going on and have the ability to supply us with stories.

We give interviewees a simple test to see if they can recognise a story. We present them with some facts and see if they choose the correct angle.

The worst kind of applicants are the ones that sit there and say they like writing. They might be able to write a beautiful 2,500 word essay on *The Tempest* but can they write four paragraphs on a charity race?

Zenobia Tilley graduated in 2001 having done a politics degree and has worked as a freelance journalist since then:

What university doesn't teach you is how to survive 12-hour days and it doesn't show you how to think on your feet. I never realised what a constant battle it would be to get a story. When you're a student, people go out of their way to help you, and they're less suspicious. I've just spent a whole morning trying to reach people on the phone who don't want to talk to me.

But even though it's badly paid I can't imagine doing any other job. I enjoy the buzz of the newsroom. I enjoy meeting people; I feel a part of society. It's a duty to fight for truth.

If you still wish to be a journalist, think long and hard about which area of journalism you wish to enter. If you wish to be a broadcast journalist, make an honest assessment of yourself – are you comfortable in front of a microphone and/or a camera and is your voice clear?

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Case Study

My career as a journalist by John McIntyre

The story of freelance reporter John McIntyre's career progression is a classic tale of someone determined to succeed and is worth repeating in full. When John decided to leave his job teaching physics, he didn't slip quietly away. Instead he shouted his decision in the loudest possible way – through a cartoon which he handed in on April 1. When it was reproduced in the *News of the World*, his landlord didn't see the funny side and asked him to leave. He set off with nowhere to go and no money. So when his car broke down in Liphook he found himself homeless, jobless and penniless. He was taken in by a local philanthropist and slept on the couch. The next day he saw an advert for a village correspondent in the local paper paying 4.5p a line – must be able to type.

I told them I could write and that I had a phone and a typewriter. They were so impressed with my enthusiasm they offered me 5p a line. Of course I had no experience, no phone and no typewriter.

My first job was to report on Liphook carnival queen. I wasn't quite sure what to do so I went and got some back copies of the newspaper and found the paragraphs that matched the stories and just changed the names and a few facts. My first intro read 'Sweet 16 and following in her sister's footsteps, Beverley ... is Liphook carnival queen.'

For weeks I worked in a local phone box putting money in to pay for calls. I didn't eat so I could pay for the calls, except when I'd steal milk from doorsteps and have pancakes. I stayed sleeping on the person's couch for about six months and used a child's typewriter I'd bought as I couldn't afford a real one.

During this time I rigorously read what the sub-editors did with my copy and learned. And I filed copy by the mountain. I went everywhere with my notebook. I went to all the parish council meetings and banged on doors talking to everyone. If somebody farted in Liphook, I reported it and the local paper printed it all. I then took on more villages until I had five in all.

Visiting the police and reporting on parish council meetings, you soon learn how important accuracy is. If you got anything wrong, they would slag you off in the next meeting so you become a stickler for accuracy. If I couldn't remember a quote, I'd ring the person and check. You need people to trust you will get it right. Soon people began to ring me before the police.

I then went to the *Portsmouth News* but the contacts I made on the local paper were crucial. The most important thing if you need a story quickly is to know who to ring.

I remember ringing the head of the NUT [National Union of Teachers] as he lived in Liphook and saying I need a story now. I know there has been a ballot on strike action and the results aren't in yet – it won't be from you but if there is going to be a teacher's strike put the phone down. He did. I was able to write 'Schools throughout Britain are bracing themselves for an all out strike.'

Another time there was a story in which a footballer had been arrested but we didn't know who, so I rang the police and said I'd read out the numbers of the players and

when I get to the right number give me a hint. When I got to number 7 he said 'I've got nothing more to say' so I knew which player it was.

From the *Portsmouth News* I went into local radio. An independent radio station was just opening up and I went to the launch party and managed to persuade the Friday afternoon presenter that he needed a 'What the Papers Say'. I turned up the first time and I didn't know what to say. I was dreadful but he didn't tell me to go away, he helped me to improve.

When he moved to the Breakfast Show, he rang me up and asked if I wanted a job in radio. I became a journalist at Ocean Sound. I started broadcasting on my 30 thirtieth birthday in 1988.

Within three weeks I was reading the news and learning all I could. I would listen to what other people were doing. I'd read copy, check how it was written. I always read out loud what I was writing for other people to check how it sounded.

Soon I was going out with a Uher [a tape recorder]. I made all the mistakes such as mike rattle but I was coming back with material the BBC didn't get near. My contacts were coming in handy. If a big story broke involving the police, I'd ring up and I'd be cheeky and not take 'no' from them. With perseverance I'd get the story.

I then got headhunted by another independent radio station, Southern Sound in Brighton. They increased my salary. I loved local radio; it was friendly and intimate. But I was itching to get into television. I'd had a hankering since working in the media resources centre as a student at university where we'd launched a television programme.

However, I thought to myself: who the hell would take an untrained journalist who was an ex-physics teacher? I rang a mate who was a cameraman and said I needed a showreel so I got some students from Basingstoke Technical College and we went into Winchester and did some mock news stories. They weren't serious at all, although I reported them straight. One was a court case of a teacher who was arrested for trying to raise standards of education in schools. The second was about crop circles which turned out not to be caused by men from Mars but by a break-away group of Morris Dancers. We interviewed one.

I sent it to ITV and the BBC and I was given work experience at BBC South Today in Southampton. They told me: 'You look a bit suspect but we'll give you a go.'

On the first day the programme editor gave me a story to look into on traffic and travel. There was a dispute at Sealink but we didn't know much. I rang a few contacts and I started hearing rumours of Sealink being involved in a take-over. I rang a few more contacts and found out Sealink was indeed about to be taken over in a £100 million deal.

I ended up writing the lead story for BBC South. I brought in plenty of other stories. I'd phone up my contacts and get them to spill the beans. So when a job came up as a regional journalist, I got it and they agreed to match my newspaper wage.

But I was desperate to get on air. Every day the planner would put up the stories on a white board and the newsroom secretary would assign them to reporters and so I'd wipe off the name that was up there and put mine against it. I didn't choose the big

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stories, just the medium ones. Then when a reporter was off, I'd get to act up as a reporter in their place. I loved working with pictures and I think it was instinctive on my part.

I spent three or four years as a reporter at BBC South and would pester the national programmes to take my stories. I always believed they'd take me on and I developed a rapport with the programme editors.

In Southampton I'd now got a situation where I could, within reason, choose the stories I'd cover and I'd choose on the basis of which would sell to the national programmes. These were either the quirky stories or ones with children, the *Six* [O'clock News] liked these. So I'd go out on the story and ring the *Six* and sell it to them and then ring Southampton and say, oh the *Six* have been on to me and I'd do the report.

Then a job came up for two or three news correspondents nationally. I applied and worked my butt off for the board [interview]. I researched everything to do with current affairs. I talked to everyone and found out what the BBC believed in and who was on the board. I researched them as individuals, their hobbies. I felt fully prepared for the interview and had the courage of my convictions. In the board I stuck to my guns even though they tried to trip me up.

They called me that night and I was given the job. It was the culmination of everything: news correspondent on national news. I was soon trotting around the planet. My first foreign trip was Tahiti to cover rioting where I was tear-gassed during a live broadcast.

The biggest stories I've covered include the Dunblane massacre with Kate Adie [shooting in a school] and the Kosovo crisis. [We will look in more detail at John's coverage of these in a later chapter.]

One of the most fun things I've done was reporting from inside a shark tank, full of sharks, when the London Aquarium opened. I did ten minutes live for Breakfast News then for Radio 4 – without the pictures – and even BBC World. I used a 'Sea Trek' bubble hat to be able to transmit sound to viewers and listeners. I even had an interviewee.

My ethics were a bit dodgy to start with. But with experience they come. I was a comprehensive school kid and you weren't allowed to have dreams. Yet here I was broadcasting on the biggest programmes in the country. I was aware of the responsibility and I'd fought hard to get where I was and I wasn't about to lose it.

I recently decided to leave the BBC and make diving my career. I've now set up my own company, Bigfish Television and am making television about the sea, the marine life, the people, the wrecks.

Summing up

Journalists spend their lives trying to make sense of a complex and chaotic world. Using skill, tact and intellect, they cut through the official language of press releases and statements, obfuscation and disorder to bring understanding to the public.

We've seen in this chapter that the journalist needs to be knowledgeable, determined and diligent to carry out their role. They have also to strive to tell as close to the truth as

possible – although a cursory glance at *the Guardian's* corrections column shows that even the best journalists make mistakes.

The remainder of this book aims to show the mechanics of being a journalist. How do you recognise a news story, research it and write it and what are the legal pitfalls to watch out for?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the most important skills required of a journalist?
- 2 What do editors look for in a new recruit?
- 3 How important is fairness/balance in covering a story?

EXERCISES

- 1 List all the characteristics that you believe you have that a journalist should have.
- 2 Your editor asks you to cover a story about a 5-year-old girl who was killed when she fell into a canal while playing with friends. The canal bordered the playground and was not fenced off. Think whom you would want to interview and how you would approach the family. If you decide to visit the house, what would you say when they open the door?
- 3 How good is your general knowledge? Read one broadsheet, one tabloid and one local newspaper; listen to a radio news bulletin and watch a television news bulletin. Note how many of the stories you are already familiar with.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Randall, D., *The Universal Journalist*, London: Pluto Press, 1996.
 Bell, M., *In Harm's Way*, London: Penguin, 1995.
 Guardian's Editorial Code, *Guardian*, 2002, www.theguardian.co.uk.
www.NCTJ.com gives details and advice on how to enter journalism. The site is run by the National Council for the Training of Journalists. It points out that more than 60 per cent of new entrants to the profession are now graduates.
 Herbert, J., *Journalism in the Digital Age*, Oxford: Focal Press, 2000.

Notes

1 See www.icmresearch.co.uk. The question asked was, 'When you watch a news report on TV, how honest do you think a journalist is likely to be when interviewed?' 8% said very likely, 38% quite likely, 32% quite unlikely, 16% said very unlikely, 5% said don't know.

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2 *The Public Interest and Media Privacy*, by Prof. David Morrison and Michael Svennevig (2002), commissioned by the BBC, the Independent Television Commission, the Radio Authority, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services and the Institute for Public Policy Research, pp. 1–4 and 55–6.

3 www.presswise.org.uk, 'What can you do when a journalist gets things wrong?'

4 This is a corruption of a statement by Lord McGregor of Durris, founding chairman of the Press Complaints Commission from 1991 to 1995. The statement, released on the day Andrew Morton's book on Princess Diana began its serialisation in *The Times*, read: 'The most intrusive and speculative treatment by sections of the press (and, indeed, by broadcasters) of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales is an odious exhibition of journalists dabbling their fingers in the stuff of other people's souls in a manner which adds nothing to legitimate public interest in the situation of the heir to the throne.'

5 Don Hale, *The Journalist*, May 2002.

6 See www.ref.org.

7 Marie Colvin, 'Jenin: the bloody truth', *Sunday Times*, 21 April 2002.

8 Mark Chavunduka, World Press Freedom Day, 3 May 2001, taken from The Freedom Forum at www.freedomforum.org.

9 Paul Horrocks quoted from www.mediaguardian.co.uk on 17 July 2002, Ciar Byrne.

10 Sarah Sands, deputy editor in Manhattan, 'Look. Oh my God, they are jumping', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 2001.

11 Jean Morgan, *Press Gazette*, 14 September 2001.

12 *Press Gazette*, 21 September 2001.

13 Morgan, op. cit.

14 Oliver Burkeman, 'Simpson of Kabul', *Guardian* G2, 14 November 2001.

15 The guidelines are set out on the *Guardian's* website www.theguardian.co.uk. See also the BBC's Producer Guidelines on www.bbc.co.uk.

16 Quoted in 'Give peace a chance' by Mary Stevens, *Press Gazette*, 8 February 2002.

17 Andrew Sullivan, 'Let's hear it for prejudiced television news', *Sunday Times*, 17 November 2002.

18 Oliver Burkeman, 'The chat show host who went to war', *Guardian* 29 July 2002.

19 Mary Stevens, 'Truth amid the terror', *Press Gazette*, 29 March 2002.

20 Mike Ward, *Journalism Online*, Oxford: Focal Press, 2002, p. 43.