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Communications and Digital Select Committee – inquiry into the future of journalism

Reflections Insights and Commentary on the press industry.

A little bit about myself. Despite a lifetime interest in the news and newspapers, I came to journalism late in life.

I started my career as an actor training at RADA and going on to appear in stage and TV from my early twenties. At 39 I decided I wanted a change and enrolled at university taking first an Honours, then a Masters degree in International relations. I then went on to take a six month post graduate National Council for the Training of Journalists, diploma.

My entry into newspaper journalism (2006) had already begun as I was writing for a hugely respected community magazine which had at its core campaigning and investigations and is known for holding the local council to account. Especially in relation to an £88 million pound Housing Market Renewal policy taking place in Salford. I also did several months work experience with the Manchester Evening News and was fortunate enough to be mentored by an “old time reporter” in a “district office” in Salford.

Following my NCTJ graduation I was offered a post in an “independent” local paper, 'The Tameside Reporter'. The paper had a long history dating from the mid-19th century and covered a large part of East Manchester, Tameside, parts of Stockport and Oldham a potential reach covering an area populated by 750,000.

It was 2007 and we were at the end of an economic boom that had fuelled rising house prices from which local papers had done very very well by providing estate agents with pictorial supplements. Despite the high revenues the owners running the newspaper did not re-invest for the downturn that was going to come. They did not invest in journalism that is for sure, it was just in general churnalism meant to fill the pages full of smiling faces of school kids on litter campaigns and community groups on charity fundraising drives. There was crime reporting if a murder or something equally serious occurred locally, but court reporting had largely been ignored for many years.

Reporting on the council was erratic and it was generally thought that showing the council in a negative light had to be balanced by equally presenting the council and councillors in a good way. This often amounted to reporting the council in a heroic way for merely doing the basics of what councils should do like delivering basic services. More often than not reporters were expected to be mere mouth pieces of the council and spoon-fed council speak.

At this time there was also an exponential rise of the “press officer” in every institution and business over a certain size. Therefore a reporter was faced with repeating the contents of a press release or scrutinising and deconstructing the press release in order to pick out the truth and reject the spin. In my first week at the Manchester Evening news I received a press release from the press office of Peel Holdings a firm that had replaced the Old Manchester Ship Canal Company. The press release boldly stated that some regeneration investment scheme it was undertaking would create 200 jobs in the next two years. Great I thought but on examining the content of the press release I felt if I was to write it up, I would need more detail. When I eventually got through to an irate press officer who had written the release, she was indignant that I had dared to question the reliability of her claims. However I was no 23 year-old junior reporter and I persisted

and when we had done, the number of jobs that could realistically be said to come out of the scheme amounted to no more than twenty!

I realised how print Journalism and copy publishing could often amount to a trade off between inexperienced reporters pressured in to filling copy space by news editors and press officers pedalling low intensity propaganda and spin for their respective councils and companies. All the while the newspaper owners were happy because their titles were commercially driven with revenue coming in from advertising and council notices. In the main they did not need original journalism to create an awkward relationship with their revenue sources. And critically there was no response to the looming threat from the internet which in my experience was largely unforeseen or ignored.

The owners and managing editors really did not foresee the emergence of Social Media as a potential replacement for traditional news harvesting and consumption. Any attempts to put news content online were halfhearted and clumsy.

At the Tameside Reporter back then it was like a news-sheet with the best stories of the week pared down with no pictures and absolutely no streaming of videos. I left the Tameside Reporter after around 18 months and went to work for a national tabloid the Daily Star Sunday. There the length of story could be longer and you could spend more time on them.

I continued to work for the Daily Star Sunday while also building up reputation as a freelancer. One of the most depressingly important lessons I learnt at the DSS was that a story's chances of being published would be greatly enhanced if it could be linked to a celebrity. An example of this came about when I submitted a story relating to a survey that exposed hundreds of brothels (often staffed by trafficked girls) were in close proximity to schools, churches, mosques and synagogues. I excitedly called the editor with my pitch and he said: "Look Nigel if you can get a credible link with Billy Piper (A series she was appearing in "Belle du Jour" was about to start its run on TV) and this survey then you've got a page lead otherwise we are NOT really interested."

Always one for a challenge I went to a women's charity who deal with women trafficked in the sex industry and the production company Tiger Aspect, for comments, WHICH I am glad to say were forthcoming. I had my page lead and the story went round the world to India, Japan and Nepal no less. This celebrity obsession continues to be a factor and in my view skews, if not thwarts proper news journalism.

It is a viscous circle of celebrities feeding the media with their social media posts and appearances on ubiquitous reality TV and editor's slavish adherence to the notion that celebrity guarantees sales. I am not convinced and think that there are a lot of people especially among the younger generation who would be happy to forgo celebrity for real news. Though it would be a brave editor who was first to revert to a celebrity free, news only model.

In the two years following my departure from the local paper I wrote and presented four documentaries for the BBC "Inside Out" series and endeavoured to expand the subject range of my journalism. With this in mind and my Masters degree in international relations I moved to Turkey in 2010 taking the view that the tensions between the Islamic Government and the country's secular army would provide a stream of news. Within days of my arrival I reported a story about a putative Army coup 'Operation Balyoz'. I knew the only way this could get attention back home was to link the story with British holidaymakers and homeowners who in fact would have been targeted during the coup. Thereafter there was little interest in anything else that happened in Turkey, certainly not the slow moving consolidation of power by president Erdogan. And this was my next lesson, that all but a few titles are interested in copy that updates their readership with high politics and subtle shifts in power.

When a year later the situation in Syria was evolving, I along with a few other (mainly freelance) Journalists, due to our intense interest, were well ahead of the curve in relation to emerging events there. I submitted stories for the press from tabloid to broadsheet with only polite indifference as a response. The editors were not interested in anything that did not manifest itself in a certain way ie crisis point preferably of biblical proportions. It was only when events took a critical turn that they started to take an interest and when reporters were sent to the general area they were woefully ill informed and struggled to report the real story. At best they could provide only a basic narrative to events. There was little credible analysis or insights behind the stories and when it came it was only from the highest level at the BBC from the likes of Lyse Ducet who notwithstanding her excellent work would have had the best of access and resources befitting the top end of the BBC. With one notable exception Sky News contribution around 2012 amounted to one of their anchorman reporting from the roof of his hotel in Damascus well away from the action.

I was able to dispatch for the Mirror and the Catholic Herald, but after 2012 the environment was wholly hostile for reporters within rebel held Syria. During this time few if any of the major titles sent their staff people into hot zones, yet insisted on tinkering with copy to suit their agendas. This was an experience I encountered yet again when reporting from Donetsk and Mariupol in the Ukraine during the conflict there between pro Russian rebels and Ukraine forces. Bizarrely some office protocol dictated that copy I sent from the front line had to have some input from an office based reporter and a shared byline. I am sure if you had asked the journalist at the time to point to the area their byline credited them with reporting from, on he would have struggled. Byline stealing is a common practice in many of the papers across the spectrum. It is a dishonest practice and it is not only frustrating for freelancers at the coal face, it encourages a sedentary lazy approach and creates information gate keepers who are content to sit in their offices cream off information from freelancers and social media and are in effect completely out of touch with the realities beyond their offices. This can affect a wide range of subjects from council services to international conflict and emergencies. The result is that news agencies are way behind the curve of events rather than ahead of it, or at least up to speed with what is happening on the ground.

If anything this current horrendous crisis we are living through shows the importance of real time veritable information that would inform public opinion and help influence more accurate and timely political intervention and policy.

Leaving events in the troubled areas of Syria and Ukraine aside, in 2016 a personal financial crisis prompted me to seek regular employment away from freelancing and I got a position back at my old newspaper the Tameside Reporter as the Website Editor. On my return to the paper, saved from near closure by a local housing association who thought it would be a good tool with which to keep their sizeable clientele updated and informed with a community based newsletter. They were committed not to interfere in the editorial affairs of the newspaper, but the fact that the newspaper's new offices were in the basement of one of the Housing Association buildings with its staff using equipment purchased by them using the same servers created an underlying dependency on the parent provider. To an extent this went for the council as well which still had a sizeable influence in the Housing Association which had formerly been the council's Housing Department and was represented on the new entity's board. No that this created any conflict of interest whatsoever because when I arrived the so called newspaper what virtually moribund as what I can only describe as a cut and paste organisation, with three very young and inexperienced reporters straight from college. They were doing their best to fill space for weekly paper by copying and pasting all but the most basic of stories. When I asked where reports of crime had come from I appalled to discover they had been lifted from reports in the Manchester Evening News, published days earlier. The bulk of the reporter's copy was simply reports discovered by trawling the internet and copying and pasting under their own byline and 'TR' banner.

They had no or few direct links with the Greater Manchester Police Press office or similar press offices. I set about changing this and utilising some of these cub reporters excellent but underused technical talents in video reportage and editing. We then made dozens of video films of notablediary events and occurring incident news such as gas explosions fires murder scenes ecetera. When I reviewed their copy following re-establishing press office links I then discovered that they were merely copying and pasting from the press releases. I was confronted by a reporter pool that in general terms could not source, investigate and write an original story in the conventional way. My understanding was that these young people had spent three years at journalism college or university learning lots of technical skills in radio reporting and video making and tv reportage but sadly without the ability to find and create the story within the medium. They had to be coached in understanding and recognising the "top line" in a story, they told me they had never learnt how to do it.

In the days when I started on that paper a lot of time was spent by the editor and more experienced reporters showing us the ropes so speak – how to put together a story from scratch the importance of primary contacts and sources and proper archiving for future references. There was no ability to report from court which again I set about amending, ensuring that the reporters got to go to court, attend police conferences and appeals so that they were not just producing a pared down copy of the larger newspapers. The larger newspapers are not devoid of relying on online sources and agency copy themselves by the way. It seems to me that the reduction in experienced reporting staff over the years has led to a lazy and unhealthy reliance on online news and information sources from some credible news agencies, all the way down the food chain to Facebook and Instagram. It is not that there are not some pearls to be found among open source social media, there are and it can be a useful too but it is undeniably a poor master. The material found on social media is more often just here say or opinion ,it can never be a substitute for real news gathering, though sadly it has become so and given the basis to the claim of "Fake News" for an increasing number of people, who are rightly doubtful and cynical about a lot of news content.

To counter the social media driven 'Fake News' syndrome more experienced journalists need to be trained in it's technical aspects so they can utilise with their discretion. The younger element of the journalistic cohort need to be trained in how to source and write articles correctly so as to free themselves from the shackles of Social Media. If we can achieve that, then we can harmonise credible responsible journalism with the benefits of social media dissemination. This calls for increased and better post qualification training, which is is not forthcoming at an affordable rate economic.

But above all it is imperative that that journalism is led out of its current quagmire by editors and owners who should be determined to commit to reviving quality journalism at all levels. They can do this by rewarding original journalism and by returning to "slow journalism" where necessary, that will recognise investigative journalism, that will will serve people and resist the culture of celebrity obsessed "sexy journalism." It is this attitude to journalism in the last few years that has led to disasters like Windrush, Grenfell and Covid-19. Because these are exactly the type of subjects that are ignored in their early stages, until the reality of the problem becomes so huge the story can no longer be ignored.

But by then as we have seen it is too late, and one of the key roles of journalism to educate to inform, to act as a canary to impending scandals , disasters and catastrophes is wholly negated and the only role left for journalism in that context, is as a behind the curve narrator.

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