'Easily the best introduction to being a reporter' —PA TRAINING

The Universal JOURNALIST

6TH EDITION

Voted the all-time best how-to book on journalism by a *Press Gazette* readers' poll, and now includes a chapter on social media and its opportunities and challenges. It is the only book written by journalists working at the top level who know what it

David Randall with Jemma Crew

This is a major revision and expansion of The Universal Journalist

'What I admire about this book is that it is not simply a 'how to' manual, it is also a wise, witty and extremely entertaining read. Anyone who aspires to be a journalist should read it'

—DAME ANN LESLIE, BRITISH JOURNALISM REVIEW

The Universal Journalist

'Easily the best introduction to being a reporter'
Paul Jones, PA Media

'What I admire about this book is that it is not simply a "how to" manual, it is also a wise, witty and extremely entertaining read. Anyone who aspires to be a journalist should read it'
Dame Ann Leslie, *British Journalism Review*

'Packed with handy hints and anecdotes ... An essential, down-to-earth guide to what the job is all about'
Press Wise Bulletin

'The go-to guide for any up and coming journalist, shining a light on every element of the job in an engaging, insightful way. And with the likes of social media and data covered too, it's also a compelling read for the established reporter'
Peter Clifton, Editor-in-Chief, PA Training

The Universal Journalist

Sixth Edition

David Randall
with Jemma Crew

PLUTO PRESS

First published 1996
Sixth edition published 2021 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 4326 6 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4325 9 Paperback
ISBN 978 0 7453 4329 7 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 0 7453 4328 0 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 0 7453 4327 3 EPUB eBook

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

To the memory of
JOHN MERRITT,
the best reporter I ever met.

Contents

Acknowledgements

At the risk of sounding like an Oscars-night bore, there is a long trail of people whose advice and spirit inhabit this book. It begins, at the first newspaper I worked on, with the late Geoff Collard (from whom I learned that journalism without a sense of honour is not worth the name) and news editor Cathryn Sansom, whose hectoring lessons in professionalism seemed a curse at the time but have proved a rich blessing ever since. At the *Observer*, Peter Corrigan (by careful supervision) and writers like Peter Dobereiner, Hugh McIlvanney and the late Lawrence Marks (by example) showed me what sharp, clear writing really is. At the same paper, Paul Routledge and John Merritt gave me permanent lessons in how the best reporters think and breathe. On lecture tours in Russia, John Shirley taught me so much about 'how to take command of the material'. And at the *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, where I spent my fourth decade in journalism, I learned yet again that you never stop learning. In particular, Simon Ritter's running commentary on each day's content improved my ability to spot written nonsense, working with Michael Williams was akin to attending a private master class in handling daily news, and Keith Howitt was a constant reminder that quality journalism begins and ends with attention to detail. Barely a day goes by without me testing in my head some potential intro, headline or news judgement against the standards these people set.

Thanks to Giovanni De Mauro, editor of *Internazionale* in Italy, for letting me reproduce parts of my columns on journalism from that magazine. And thanks, too, to Independent Print Ltd for giving me permission to quote from articles I wrote for the *Independent on Sunday*.

Preface

This book contains all the best advice I have learned or collected in four decades as a journalist. Some of it came direct and uninvited from wise old heads, some from observing classy reporters at work, some from picking their brains, some from books, some from websites and a lot from making mistakes and learning the hard way what was the best, most inventive way to do the job. But whatever the origins of the lessons contained here, they have helped to save my skin on numerous occasions and have earned me some wonderful jobs on others.

The book has always been called *The Universal Journalist,* a title designed to be an answer to those who think that each type of publication produces its own distinct form of journalism, inevitably regarded by its practitioners as superior to other kinds. It doesn't. If you write and read enough stories, in the end you realise that there really are only two types of journalism: good and bad. The bad is practised by those who rush faster to judgement than they do to find out, indulge themselves rather than the reader, write between the lines rather than on them, write and think in the dead terms of the formula, stereotype and cliché, regard accuracy as a bonus and exaggeration as a tool, preferring vagueness to precision, comment to information and cynicism to ideals. The good is intelligent, entertaining, reliably informative, properly set in context, honest in intent and effect, expressed in fresh language and serves no cause but the discernible truth. Whatever the audience. Whatever the culture. Whatever the language. Whatever the circumstances. Such journalism could be printed in any publication, because it is, in every sense of the word, universal. This book sets out to tell you how to achieve it.

The second rationale for the title is that these days, in a world where both the available media and the amount of information bombarding us are multiplying all the time, anyone hoping to be a good journalist needs to acquire a range of new skills. A facility with words is no longer enough, You also have to be a sharp and sceptical questioner, be comfortable with statistics, understand how online media works,

be able to use the internet for research, know how to handle increasingly sophisticated sources and their spin doctors, and be able to produce journalism that is more informative, fresh and reliable than that of the proliferating competition. If that sounds like a tall order, that's because it is. This book aims to describe these new techniques which, when added to the more traditional ones, make a universally skilled journalist.

A note about this edition

A new chapter called 'Journalism in an Age of Social Media' has been added, written with the help of a panel of four young national newspaper or agency reporters. Their observations and experiences have also been used in other chapters. This is a very extensive revision of the book, with more than 10,000 words of new content. And Jemma Crew, a young, award-winning national news reporter, has joined me as assistant author to add her expertise to the text and make sure it is totally up to date.

1
Journalism in an Age of Social Media

Innovations in everyday technology have always changed how the job of reporting is done. The telephone, once it was widely adopted (and that took decades), meant you no longer had to leave the office to speak to a source. The car gave reporters the ability to cover a lot more ground when out on a story. The personal computer made writing much quicker – you could cut, paste and delete without having to retype. The mobile phone allowed you to call people wherever there was a signal and, more importantly, catch potential sources wherever they were. And then came the internet: billions of web pages brimming with information, email, video, podcasts, social media and, of course, large dollops of misleading nonsense.

For all the obvious advantages these technologies brought, each had unforeseeable effects. The phone meant face-to-face chats with sources became less common; reporters in a car were less likely to have chance encounters; computers, with their speed of writing, deleting and shunting text around, made unwary writers more verbose than with pen or typewriter (which is why several leading novelists hand-write a novel's draft before committing it to a screen); and mobile phones have meant reporters are always contactable by the office (and couldn't, as they used to do, go AWOL for several hours, or even, in the case of foreign correspondents, several days). And the internet – quite apart from its devastating effects on newspaper sales, revenues and staffing levels – has had impacts on how reporting is done that were not immediately apparent. And that is what this chapter is about.

I was always an early adopter, getting a personal computer soon after they came on the market, and plunging into the online world when it was in its infancy. So, whatever faults I may – and do – have, I always knew that getting to grips with new technologies and skills was

an essential part of being a good reporter. And being, for the past few years, less a reporter than a media columnist (for Italian news magazine *Internazionale*), I've had to think more deeply about the implications of each new part of online communications as they arrived. And one of the things I thought was that, to inform this chapter, I needed the views and experiences of reporters much younger than myself. So I recruited a panel of four national newspaper or press agency journalists: a political reporter for a quality title, a tabloid feature writer, an agency foreign correspondent and an agency news reporter. I sent them a questionnaire, and then interviewed them. So they could speak freely, I guaranteed anonymity. Their responses give a varied picture of how younger top journalists use – or are expected to use – social media.

Journalism and social media: the reality

What social media do you look at to find stories?
The panel all cited Twitter, Facebook and Instagram as potential sources – with the former being used, in the words of the political reporter, 'to keep abreast of live/breaking developments'. The agency foreign correspondent said: 'Almost entirely Twitter and Instagram. I work in showbiz, and celebrities now use their social media feeds as basically an avenue to share press releases. When I worked in local news, Facebook was much more important as "normal" people are more likely to share things there.'

The agency reporter, who has a specific field to cover, said: 'WhatsApp messages are encrypted and I am increasingly finding sources are more likely to share tips and off the record guidance on this than over email. WhatsApp groups can also be a good source of stories, but as they are private this requires someone inside the group to leak its contents to you.'

What social media do you use to promote your stories?
They all said Twitter and Facebook; and occasionally Instagram. The political reporter added – and it's a valuable point – 'I enjoy doing punditry on TV, for which you need to build a bit of a "brand" on social media – that is where producers look you up. Increasingly it looks a bit odd to have no profile on social media as a journalist.' The

agency reporter echoed this and said she would sometimes share a story she was particularly proud of on LinkedIn.

Does your organisation insist you post on social media?
The agency and quality reporters all said no, but the agency reporter added: 'It would be frowned upon if I didn't have a Twitter account. The unspoken expectation where I work is for journalists to use Twitter to promote their work and to help them report. So much now is announced on Twitter (out-of-hours police press officers will often refer a journalist to their social media platforms for updates) that not having an account or access to an account would be problematic in a breaking news situation.'

The feature writer said: 'I was asked to set up a work Facebook page and regularly post my articles. I was also asked to become verified/blue ticked on Twitter (which lets viewers know the account is authentic), and we are asked to post stories, retweet and quote articles from my paper, directing traffic there where possible. We've had training on best hashtags etc.' These, obviously, depend on what kind of stories you write, and the title you work for.

Does your editor stipulate a minimum number of posts per story, per day?
All the panel said no. The feature writer: 'No stipulations or minimums, just encouragement to post in general and advice on what times of day work best. Until recently my paper sent a Twitter leaderboard around the entire company once a week.' She was the only one required to post on social media. The agency reporter said the social team is required to tweet every news alert and top story.

Are you required to tweet while out covering stories?
Most said they were not, but the agency reporter said: 'I would be expected to tweet anything interesting and any colour. But it's always been made clear to me that the news wire comes first, anything posted on social media must come after.'

All had some reservations about this, pointing out, as the agency reporter put it: 'The immediacy that social media demands can result in inaccuracy.' And the feature writer added: 'You're encouraged to

tweet coverage, although on features often I'm asked not to in case it reveals our plans for exclusives later on.'

Are you required to film and edit video while out covering stories?
Some mass-market reporters are expected to do this, as well as agency reporters. One said: 'I am, but the editing is done back in the office by a separate video team. I would usually film on my work iPhone but I am trained to use proper cameras.' The political reporter said: 'Video appeared a bigger deal several years ago. Many newsrooms appear to be scaling back on it. That may have something to do with the fact that if the quality isn't fantastic, it looks rubbish and not in keeping with aesthetic of well-designed, sleek websites.'

Does this affect your research and ability to observe?
The foreign correspondent (who specialises in celebrity and movie stories) said: 'Yes, massively. An example is I was recently sent abroad on a job but had to bring my camera with me. The camera and tripod immediately creates a barrier between you and the public, especially in an area where the press – in this instance the paparazzi – had made themselves persona non grata.' The agency reporter said: 'A video camera limits your mobility. For instance, it would make it harder to report on a protest march. You can't be taking notes while you film.'

Are you required to take pictures for publication?
Most said no or that this was rare, but the feature writer said: 'Occasionally I have to take a photo of me with the person I've interviewed. My desk would book a photographer for anything more involved than that.' The agency reporter said: 'Usually, I would take one or two pictures to put on social media anyway, regardless of whether a photographer is there.'

Do you need to upload stories to the web, or know how to do animated graphics etc.?
All the panel have been trained to upload stories, but none on how to do the more technically (and artistically) demanding creation of animated graphics etc.

The foreign correspondent said of uploading: 'I did this in a previous job. It's not something I enjoyed. I'd be sent agency copy then told to

upload it with my by-line. I found myself worrying more about picture captions and bullet points than the copy itself, as editors were more likely to spot an error in those than the story. It also made me feel like I was working in a warehouse, not a newsroom.' He doesn't ever have to deal with animated graphics, nor does he want to: 'Take on too many things and you become less a reporter and more a production manager.'

Has the pressure to post a story before others ever caused you to be inaccurate, or convey a false impression of a story?

The foreign correspondent said: 'Thankfully no. My organisation prizes accuracy above all else. Though I have worked in places where everything – including the truth – plays second fiddle to being first. I've seen first-hand instances where editors have knowingly published false information in order to be first.' Quality paper reporters seem unaffected, but the feature writer said: 'I haven't experienced this, but I think it's a huge pressure for the online team.' The agency reporter said: 'I'd rather be admonished by my news desk for being slow than put something out that is wrong. I have editors who truly value accuracy, which doesn't seem to always be the case elsewhere.'

She went on: 'Sometimes with breaking news you need to get something filed sharpish but you don't have all the information or need aspects clarified. In that situation you often have to get something running that is accurate based on what you have and fill in the gaps later. The beauty of online is you can keep adding bits in.'

Is 'clickbait' a sensible concept, since all journalism is designed, presumably, to be widely read and shared?

The political reporter said: 'There is a particular online site whose journalists there have been very dismayed at news editors changing copy, or refusing to correct false and untrue headlines, because they are scoring well on SEO [search engine optimisation].' The feature writer said: 'Clickbaits are a lazy way to make a reader click on the article for the one-line answer to a posed question. We are encouraged by the company not to do this when putting our articles online, although I've definitely seen it on our online edition.' However, the foreign correspondent said: 'Clickbait as a term is used incorrectly in about 99 per cent of cases. I hardly ever see headlines promising something that the story hiding behind it completely fails to deliver on.'

Do editors place too much importance on 'most read stories' lists?
The foreign correspondent said: 'I would say so. I'm fortunate where I work but in previous places there was an attitude of "do it to death" once a certain subject proved popular.' The feature writer said: 'The paper's editors don't, but online editors do. I understand this is how they measure the online traffic, but I don't think it gives a complete picture. The digital editor tells the editor in morning conference which stories had the most hits.' The political reporter on a quality title (which has a paywall and sells subscriptions) said more subtle standards are at work: 'In my newsroom, engagement is the key metric. That takes into account not just the number of page views but also how long readers stayed on the page, whether they commented etc.'

Have technologies changed the essentials of the job?
Most agreed on a no answer to this question. As the feature writer said: 'The essentials remain good interview, research and investigative skills, good communication etc.' The foreign correspondent said: 'I think too much emphasis is placed on being able to set up social media searches or such like. It would only take a day-long crash course to get up to speed, whereas the other essentials of the job – writing, building contacts, etc. – take years and years of hard work.'

The agency reporter thought social media had brought some subtle changes. 'It has helped bring more transparency to some sources and interviewees. It's much easier and quicker to research the person you are dealing with, look at their online history and gauge their reliability.' She added: 'Mining social media is essentially democratic – everyone has access to the same posts. In this scenario moving fast is key. It's a race to produce the story before someone else spots it.' The political reporter said: 'For me the essence of my job is to break exclusives, which mainly stem from talking to people. Turning in fast, clean copy about the affairs of the day is essential, but insufficient to being a senior reporter at a national paper.'

(The panel members were also asked if they ever do interviews by email. This is covered in a separate section in Chapter 8.)

Has social media made it easier to produce good work?
The foreign correspondent said: 'An example would be on a big breaking news event – say a terror attack at a pop concert. Using

social media tools you could immediately get a list of people there, see what pictures/tweets/info they're sharing and get a better idea of what's going on.' The feature writer said: 'Tech like the internet and social media makes it easier to find info more quickly and research or source stories faster and in a different way.' Everyone echoed this, yet the political reporter added: 'But they've also made it easier for news outlets to rely on bad work – generating overhyped row stories from a few random comments on social media.'

The agency reporter said social media also increases the pressure on reporters beyond the need for speed: she said: 'It adds an extra level of accountability to fact check, because a story with inaccuracies can be immediately and publicly torn apart by any experts who see it online.'

How long did it take you to learn how to use social media and apps?
The feature writer's reply was typical: 'Not long. A few hours max, probably less. I was shown how to set up my work Facebook page in about 15 minutes. Occasionally we have training on social media and apps, but it's just a couple of hours. The actual initial usage is learned in minutes.' Several pointed out that, as billions of people around the world who are not journalists are adept users of social media, learning how to use them was obviously not something that required much training. As the foreign correspondent said: 'I grew up with it, certainly from 16 onwards, so don't remember a time I didn't know how to use it.'

The agency reporter said: 'There are tips and courses online to help make the most of platforms (posts with pics are more likely to be clicked on, when is the best time to post etc.).'

How long did it take you to learn how to report and write to a national newspaper standard?
Everyone said this took years. The feature writer said: 'A four-month journalism course, then two years as a trainee reporter, then a further 18 months as a senior, then national newspaper shift work. My first national newspaper job was four years after training began, and I was definitely still learning on the job.'

Some of the panel's experiences and tips are reported in other chapters, but a few issues emerged which are best dealt with here.

Building your brand

If you want to catch eyes, snare jobs, make a name for yourself, and be contacted by broadcasters for comments and appearances, you need to get some profile on social media. Twitter is the most popular outlet for this, and promoting your own stories the most obvious starting point. The panel's tips for building a brand on social media (or not having a potentially embarrassing one) are:

- The feature writer: 'Tweet regularly and at certain times (to tie in with commuting for example). Always "tag" people with large followings, and use popular hashtags. On Facebook, tag the correct pages to draw more people to your post. Always link back to your paper's website, always follow up, and retweet.'
- Agency reporter: 'Share your stories, engage with people who (constructively) engage with you, don't be afraid to show personality but stay professional.'
- Foreign correspondent: 'Go through any old tweets and make sure you've not said anything iffy. If you don't, someone else will, if you ever rise up the ranks or come to prominence for whatever reason.'

So much for deliberate brand building, but the agency reporter suggested that other forces may be at work. She said: 'I wonder if journalists are sometimes subtly (and on the whole not consciously) modifying the way they tell certain stories to maximise their chances of performing well on certain platforms?'

Finally, a health warning from the political reporter: 'I am amazed by people who post inappropriate comments (drunken posts, blue jokes, criticism of workplace) on their work accounts. It's very easy to feel as though you are sending messages into the ether and not realise your boss might be reading.'

Twitter as a news source

I was recently on a panel at a journalism conference in Italy, and the person chairing it began by saying that journalists now use Twitter as

a news source in preference to what he called 'old-style' news agencies like PA Media (or the Press Association, as it was called for a long time) and Associated Press. I begged to differ – and still do. While the first word of a big breaking story may appear on Twitter (which is one of the prime reasons for being on it), if you want to get things right in your story, you'd better use the information supplied by the agencies and broadcasters (although you might report what's said on Twitter as 'claims' or 'unconfirmed reports'). The agency's content is produced by professional reporters, whose work has to be sourced, and is then edited before being released. Tweets can be sent by anyone, and are not verified.

I remember being at my desk at the *Independent on Sunday* in 2012 when a colleague told me that someone on Twitter was saying that Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords had been shot in Tucson, Arizona. Within a minute or so, Associated Press was carrying a news alert that read something like: 'Congresswoman Giffords reported shot outside store near Tucson. More later.' Over the next 20 minutes or so (during which both Associated Press and CNN reported that she had indeed been shot, but her condition was unknown), tweets came in claiming she was dead, wounded, dead again etc. So, when I had to write a story within the hour, what did I use as my sources? The agencies and broadcasters? Or the tweets from people whose reliability (and true identity) was unknown, and who could have been in Tucson – or anywhere? Congresswoman Giffords, by the way, survived, but with life-changing head injuries. Six other people died in the attack.

Social media and public opinion

As everyone discovered after the 2019 UK general election results came in, what had been trending on Twitter the previous few weeks was not necessarily what had been trending in real life. A large number of people use Twitter (about 14 million in the UK), but they are by no means a representative sample. It pays to know the demographics of social media before thinking you can draw from postings any conclusions about the way public opinion is drifting. For instance, only about a third of Twitter users are female (whereas women are a majority of Facebook users); and about four-fifths of them are what you could classify as 'affluent millennials'. The under-representation of

women on Twitter is not a surprise, given the frequency that bullies, misogynists and the obviously unhinged use its anonymity to send rape threats and 'jokes', insults and unwanted graphic content from nameless accounts with no photograph.

Facebook is by far the most popular social media outlet in the UK across all age groups, with nearly 80 per cent of connected UK residents using it. YouTube has around 37 million UK users; Instagram about 24 million, with a slight majority of women; Pinterest has far fewer users, but a Pin is estimated to have an active shelf life of around seven months. Tweets are said to have an average life of about seven minutes unless retweeted, but past tweets you believed long since buried can come back to haunt you with devastating consequences.

How to survive being trolled

When your stories are published or uploaded, you are – whether you like it or not – sticking your neck out in public. And that means people – via feedback on a website, Twitter or some other way – will let you know what they think of your article, and of you. Add social media's anonymity and the large numbers of users who are perpetually angry, psychotic or bullying single-issue obsessives, and you have trolling: abusive, threatening and deranged messages sent on a daily basis. You'd have to have a very thick skin not to find these tweets unsettling, if not upsetting. So how, apart from the extreme measure of closing your account, to cope? Most of the panel had been the target of trolling, and this is their advice:

- Never respond.
- Turn off your Twitter notifications and forget about it.
- Block senders of abusive and hateful messages.
- Consider asking your editor to have your Twitter link removed from the foot of your stories.
- If trolling is bad, report it to Twitter.
- If trolling is really threatening or otherwise criminal, report it to the police. Whatever silly name trolls give themselves, they can be traced, and virtual mobbing, along with cyber-bullying or trolling, is a crime.

- If you must respond, try the line used by American journalist H. L. Mencken. When people wrote intemperate responses to his articles, he would reply disarmingly: 'Thank you for your letter. You may be right. Yours H. L. Mencken.'

The agency reporter said: 'I have never been on the receiving end of severe trolling, but knowing it happens with such vitriol to other female journalists is enough to make me think twice before posting anything that could be construed as inflammatory. It seems to me the bar is set very low nowadays on Twitter. Offence-taking is almost unavoidable.' All of which might be much reduced if social media outlets banned anonymity by posters.

Coronavirus, misinformation and social media

Some of the social media postings about coronavirus in 2020 were jaw-dropping. We had American evangelists tweeting it was a punishment sent by God for sin, and especially transgenderism. (Odd that he/she would express his/her anger with transitioning Americans by visiting a plague on a city 11 time zones away.) We had those claiming the virus was developed in a germ warfare laboratory in Wuhan, which then escaped into the local food market. And, of course, the James Bond variants: that the virus was bottled up in a Canadian lab until two Chinese spies stole it, took it home, and weaponised it; or that an evil drugs company released the virus so they could then sell a vaccine.

We had the makers of the Spanish beer Corona having to issue a statement denying it was linked to the virus. (This is similar to those who, after Chechens were arrested for the bomb at the Boston Marathon, urged people to boycott the Czech Republic.) There were also the idiots who didn't know that coronavirus is the name for a group of viruses, milder ones of which cause the common cold. This accounted for all those posts from people who saw reference to coronavirus on the labels of everything from painkillers to cleaning products, and posted that there was an apparent cure available at your local supermarket. And there were those who saw land being cleared to build two new hospitals in Wuhan, and were certain that the earthworks were, in fact, mass graves being prepared.

None of this is surprising. Social media attracts those who like sounding off, and collecting 'likes' and 'followers', and who've found that the best way to do this is to up the volume and be more aggressive and sensational (much as mass media habitually is). Thus the voice of a virologist can carry no further (and often much less far) than the voice of a poster passing on the claim of the next-door neighbour of her boss's dentist's cousin's husband, who overheard it in a queue at the airport. Except, of course, this chain of gossipy sources is not cited; instead it'll probably be a simple 'I've been told', as if exclusive and rare information was being vouchsafed. And then there are those who simply want to be a part of a big worldwide news story – the kind of people who, when disaster or terrorism strikes, can't resist posting that their heart goes out to the victims and their families, however unconnected they are from them. See, they are saying, I care – oh god, how I care. All part of the dreary practice of virtue signalling.

However, what was surprising was the way social media companies reacted to this tsunami of nonsense. Ever since they were founded, they always insisted they had no more responsibility for what appears on their pages than phone companies had for what people said over their networks. They did this because they feared being held legally and morally responsible for their content, as are those who publish newspapers and magazines. A slow change on this began after the 2016 US Presidential Election; coronavirus accelerated this process. Facebook used third-party fact-checkers and said it would remove posts containing false information or conspiracy theories. Instagram (owned by Facebook) blocked some hashtags associated with postings about the virus, and WhatsApp (also owned by Facebook) tried to limit the extent to which messages can be forwarded. TikTok (part Chinese-owned, incidentally) banned what it calls 'health misinformation' (which obviously implies it was checking the content). Twitter was one of the firms adjusting its algorithms to give priority to postings from official sources, and also showed users a prompt urging them to see posts from the likes of the World Health Organization. YouTube and Reddit put up some warnings.

It remains to be seen if this was a spirited response to a worldwide health crisis, or a sign that these companies feel they have to do something both in the wake of social media users' ability to spread misinformation, and government threats to do something to curb trolling.

Thinking time

In researching my book *The Great Reporters* I read hundreds of articles by some of the best news and feature writers who've ever lived. One thing stood out: what made a piece great was not fancy phrases or witty lines, but the quality and originality of the sense that the writer had made of the material. Here, always, were sharp thoughts and observations. To produce these, you need – apart from outstanding intelligence – what so many of us are short of: thinking time. And one of the great thieves of that are the devices we all carry around and look at incessantly. Social media is wonderful, but we all know it's easy to be sidetracked into going down time-wasting alleyways, and so starving yourself of thinking time.

Filter bubbles

On social media most of us opt for contact with people, sites and content that reflect our interests and opinions. It's understandable, but inhabiting a filter bubble like this is not much of a preparation for real life where your beliefs can often be opposed; and it's certainly not a healthy environment for journalists, who need, above all, to stay open-minded. Journalists should not only guard against living inside bubbles of the like-minded, but actively pursue content and journalism that challenges their attitudes and preconceived ideas. The contrary is good medicine for the brain.

It's vital to keep up with new technologies, and learn how to use them. But doing so is no substitute for the much more demanding process of mastering the skills to produce intelligent and thorough research and turn it into compelling and fairly written reports. Becoming a good, reliable investigator and lively, confident writer – as all the members of my panel said – takes years. However swift you are at learning, the skills needed to do good journalism are not the kind picked up over a weekend, or even in a mere year or three. Acquiring them takes a long time, and the stage that follows – continuously improving your abilities – is a career-long project. That is why this book concentrates so much on these essentials, and draws on the experiences of those, including myself, who've done this job for top, national titles.

Note: throughout the book, when I write the words 'newspaper' or 'paper', I am referring to both online and paper editions.

2
What Makes a Good Reporter?

The heroes of journalism are reporters. What they do is find things out. They go in first, amid the chaos of now, battering at closed doors, sometimes taking risks, and capture the beginnings of the truth. And if they do not do that, who will? Editors? Commentators? There is only one alternative to reporters: accepting the authorised version, the one the businesses, bureaucrats and politicians choose to give us. After all, without reporters, what would commentators know?

Reporters are, like almost all heroes, flawed. As a group, they have a more soiled reputation than most; for enough of them routinely exaggerate, simplify and contort the truth to have made parts of the trade a by-word for calculated dishonesty. Not for nothing do screenwriters and dramatists, in search of a booable villain, regularly opt for a tabloid reporter. It saves time. They don't have to spend pages establishing a lack of morals, the mere announcement of the character's line of work is enough for audiences to grasp that this person is going to wheedle and deceive. Then there are the lazy – those who opt for spoon-feeding and the facile, rather than the hard, painstaking, often exposed job of getting it as right as they can. There is, to be sure, a lot of calculated malice and shoddy workmanship in the history of journalism.

But there is a lot that is heroic, and far, far more of it than most media critiques and journalism schools would have the beginner believe. There is John Tyas's exposure for *The Times* of British atrocities against demonstrators in Manchester in 1819; William Howard Russell's accounts of the bungling of the British army in the Crimea; William Leng's exposure in the *Sheffield Telegraph* of corruption and violence in that city (he was threatened so often that he kept a loaded revolver on his desk and had a police escort home every night); Emily Crawford, who incessantly risked her life to report the 1871 Paris Commune for the *Daily News* and then scooped the world at the subsequent Versailles Conference; Nellie Bly, who feigned mental

illness to get inside an asylum and wrote a series for the *New York World* that described the terrors and cruelties she found and which led to improved conditions; W.T. Stead's exposure in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of child prostitution; and Ida Tarbell's articles in *McClure's* that documented the corruption and intimidation of the Standard Oil Company 1902–4 and prepared the way for the dissolution of the firm.

Then there is Emilie Marshall, who broke several all-male preserves in becoming the first woman reporter in the House of Commons press gallery and the first woman staff reporter on both the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; John Reed's reporting of the Russian Revolution; the unmasking of the violently racist Ku Klux Klan by Roland Thomas of the *New York World;* the exposure by freelance George Seldes of the links between lung cancer and smoking – a decade before the mainstream press reported it. Ilya Ehrenburg's reporting for *Red Star* first revealed the Nazi extermination camps; John Hersey and Wilfred Burchett's reporting from Hiroshima disproved the official lie that there was no such thing as radiation sickness; and there was the courageous opposition of the *Observer* and *Manchester Guardian* to the Suez invasion of 1956; Alice Dunnigan facing down – and defeating – racial prejudice to report Washington in the 1950s; the relentless pursuit of high-level security breaches by the whole British press in the early 1960s; the uncovering by Seymour Hersh, then a young freelance, of the full horrors of the My Lai massacre in 1968; the *Sunday Times*' campaign for the limbless victims of the drug thalidomide; Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's Watergate investigation in the *Washington Post* that proved a US president a corrupt liar; Randy Shilts's reporting on the emergence of Aids for the *San Francisco Chronicle* that forced health authorities to wake up to the crisis; and Robert Fisk's refusal to swallow the Nato line (or, for that matter, anyone's line) in reporting the Kosovo conflict in the *Independent* in 1999 and the conflicts in the Middle East that still continue.

There are also those whose names are read fleetingly, but rarely remembered; the ones whose efforts to inform their communities are met, not with an obstructive official or evasive answer, but with intimidation or worse. Every year, thousands of reporters are arrested or threatened, hundreds imprisoned, and scores killed. In its most extreme form, this is what Peruvian journalist Sonia Goldenburg has called 'censorship by death'. Every year, scores of journalist die for

getting too close to the truth, or being where someone does not want them to be. In 2014, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 61 journalists were killed, no fewer than 17 of them in Syria. Each one of them is a definitive answer to those, both inside and outside the business, who think that journalism is a branch of marketing that organises and exaggerates trivia. After all, no authority would bother obstructing, jailing or murdering people for that. (In 2020, by September, the number of journalists killed, according to the CPJ, was 17. There were, however, some 250 journalists in prison in 2020.)

Finally, there are the tens of thousands of other, often local, journalists whose lot is nothing more glamorous or heroic than discovering the most complete version of what happened in their areas and reporting it. They don't expect gold or glory, and there is no particular reason why they should get it. But they are, nevertheless, an antidote, socially and professionally, to those who have traded in their credibility for a high salary or easy life.

And all these good reporters share something. They may keep it well hidden under the journalists' obligatory, hard-bitten mask, but the immortals, the persecuted and the unsung all share a belief in what the job is about. This is, above all things, to question; and, by so doing, then to:

- Discover and publish information that replaces rumour and speculation.
- Resist or evade government controls.
- Inform, and so empower, voters.
- Subvert those whose authority relies on a lack of public information.
- Scrutinise the action and inaction of governments, elected representatives and public services.
- Scrutinise businesses, their treatment of workers and customers, and the quality of their products.
- Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, providing a voice for those who cannot normally be heard in public.
- Hold up a mirror to society, reflecting its virtues and vices and also debunking its cherished myths.
- Ensure that justice is done, is seen to be done and investigations carried out where this is not so.

- Promote the free exchange of ideas, especially by providing a platform for those with philosophies alternative to the prevailing ones.

If you can read that list without the hairs on the back of your neck beginning to stand up, then maybe journalism is not for you.

Attitudes

To meet the aims listed above on a regular basis is a tough assignment. The idea, common among those outside journalism, that what a reporter needs more than anything is the ability to write well is not even the half of it. Literary ability is only part of the job, and often not the largest part. Neither is good reporting a matter of acquiring a little bag of tricks and tools, out of which the appropriate one is selected according to circumstance. What is needed to succeed as a reporter are the right attitudes and character.

The most important equipment reporters have is that which is carried around between their ears. Some of these attitudes are instinctive, others are learned quickly, but most are built up through years of experience – by researching and writing, reresearching and rewriting hundreds and hundreds of stories.

Reporting is one of those trades that you learn by making mistakes. In my first week in journalism, for instance, I was working on a small weekly paper in southern England and, by a combination of luck and my determination to make an impact, got on to a good story about river pollution. I went off, did the research and then rushed back to the office dreaming of the accolades that would be coming my way when I turned in the story. 'What the hell is this?' shouted the news editor when he read it, 'Where are all the names?' I had been so thrilled with the story that I had forgotten to ask the names of the people I had interviewed. There were lots of good quotes but all of them were from 'worried resident', 'water engineer', 'safety inspector', etc. I spent the next 24 hours rushing around, getting names, reinterviewing people and repairing most of the damage. And the story led the paper that week. I have since been so grateful for my stupidity, for I learned two invaluable lessons in my very first week. One was that quotes are not much good without names attached to them. The other, even

more important, was that reporting was a very difficult job. Clearly being enthusiastic and having a good degree was not enough; you also needed the right attitudes. The following are the key ones.

Keen news sense

You need this – and for three reasons. First, in the positive sense of knowing what makes a good story and the ability to find the essential news point in a mass of dross. Second, in the negative sense of not wasting time by pursuing stories that will never amount to much. Often you have to ask yourself: 'What is the best this story can be? What is the strongest news point it will have if I get all the information I need?' And sometimes the answer is that it will not be much of a tale. So drop it. The third reason is that if you don't have a news sense, or have it but don't use it, you will miss things and make a fool of yourself. Take the case of Duncombe Jewell, a reporter for the *Daily Mail* in its early days. He was sent to cover the launch of HMS *Albion* at the Thames Ironworks in London and in due course returned to the office with a piece of purple prose that was, in his own words, 'the nearest thing to a Turner sunset that you could get in manuscript'. As he handed it in, news reached the paper that 30 people had drowned at the launching. His news editor was beside himself with anger. 'Well,' said Jewell, 'I did see some people bobbing about in the water as I came away but ...'

Passion for precision

As a news editor, this is the one attribute I valued more than any other in reporters. Could I rely on their work and trust their accuracy? As a reporter you also speedily appreciate that your reputation for accuracy and not exaggerating, either in print or beforehand, is a valuable commodity. Lose it, and it will be very difficult to regain.

Precision means three things. First, the obvious one of recording and writing accurately what people tell you. Second, taking care that however accurate each little part of your story, the whole thing is true to the spirit and atmosphere of the situation or events – which means adding background and context. Third, not falling into the dangerous and widespread habit of saying, 'Well if that happened and the other

happened, then this other thing must be true.' You should not wish but report your stories into print. If there are any gaps in a sequence of events that you are reporting, find out precisely what is missing: don't think that if A happened, then something else and then C, then the missing part must be B. It may not be.

Determination to find out

There is no surer sign of a bad reporter than the one who keeps wimpishly going back to the news desk to say: 'I can't find out.' A determination not to be defeated by a few unanswered telephone calls or stonewalling sources is a hallmark of the decent reporter. What makes them a good one is the determination to go that little bit further (or longer) to get the story. In 1996, for instance, a man suspected of being the notorious Unabomber (whose campaign of letter bombs to universities and on planes killed three and wounded 29) was arrested in remote Lincoln, Montana. A stringer for *People* magazine called Cathy Free made a name for herself by asking a school secretary to fax her the Lincoln phone directory (fortunately only four pages long) and then rang everyone in it to collect information on the suspect. Extraordinary reporters will go a lot further than that. In 1917, Floyd Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* booked himself onto a ship likely to be sunk by the Germans so he could report its torpedoing. It was and he did. And then there was Evelyn Shuler of the *Philadelphia Ledger*, who knew she would beat the opposition on a murder case if she could witness the exhumation of a victim's body. So she stayed up for three days and nights keeping watch in a cemetery, and, early on the fourth morning, got her story.

Never make assumptions

This applies to all assumptions – either of logic, identity, fact or motives. The great problem with assumptions is that most of them turn out to be correct; that is what makes them so dangerous and tempting. Play safe, report only what you know, not what you think you know. That way you will avoid being inaccurate, dishonest and misleading – or sacked.

There was a famous occasion when a freelance photographer gave a British mass-market newspaper a picture of Prince Charles putting his arms around a lady who was not his wife at a time when he was known to be unhappily married. The paper published the picture under a headline that suggested a romantic relationship, because the editors assumed that was what was taking place. They were wrong. Unknown to them, the picture was taken at the funeral of the woman's child, who had died of leukaemia at the age of four. The Prince was doing what any of us might have done in a similar situation – he was comforting the distressed mother.

Never be afraid to look stupid

However rudimentary you may imagine your ignorance to be, if you don't know, ask; if you don't understand, request an explanation. Don't worry if anyone laughs at you. The really stupid reporters are the ones who pretend to know, who sit there nodding throughout an interview they only partly understand and who then try to write the story – and find that they can't. The place to show your ignorance is when questioning people – not on paper in your subsequent story.

Be suspicious of all sources

An essential general attitude for reporters, indeed all journalists, is to be suspicious of all sources. Why is this person telling me this? What is their motive? And are they really in a position to know what they claim to know? This complex issue is dealt with in Chapter 6.

Being resourceful

Using your wits and charm to overcome obstacles is part of the fun of reporting. Sometimes that means pushing your luck in asking for a phone number of an important potential source, or, maybe, blagging your way into where you are not really allowed. In 1989, *Daily Mail* reporter Ann Leslie was so disgusted at how far from the main action the press had been placed at Emperor Hirohito's funeral that she wore a luxuriant fur coat, marched imperiously past the security checks and found herself sitting by President George H. Bush. And then there

was the technique of Floyd Gibbons, when he needed to impress Polish border guards that he was someone important. He found a military-looking uniform, and hung on his chest a line of gaudy medals (a couple of which were actually awarded at dog shows). The guards saluted him through. On another occasion, during the Great War, he was about to write a story about the arrival of US general John J. Pershing, when he was told British censors would not permit reporters to say where Pershing landed. So Gibbons cabled his office: 'Pershing landed at British port today and was greeted by Lord Mayor of Liverpool.' Smart.

Leave your prejudices at home

You cannot be expected to shed all your cherished beliefs, but you should never allow them consciously to affect your work. Reporters should accurately relate what happened, not strain everything through the sieve of their own prejudices, cultured and intelligent though they imagine these to be.

This invocation applies to newly minted prejudices as well as old ones. Don't let the opinions you form early on in the research prematurely colour your judgement of the story. A great sin of some reporters, particularly those often asked to write colour and atmosphere pieces, is that they will write the intro in their heads on the way to an interview. Their intro may be smart, it may be a beautiful piece of writing, but the chances are that it will say more about them than their subject.

A certain toughness

Psychological resilience is required. Your work will often be judged at speed, and in public, by a news editor or other executive. Such people are not noted for their sensitivity. Newsrooms are open plan, and some editors, when under pressure, tend not to behave and talk (or shout) like well-being therapists. If your article is flawed, or not what they wanted, they are apt to make it known to the whole room. Contest their verdict by all means, but be strong enough not to flounce or start weeping. You'll find that accepting when you've screwed up, and admitting mistakes, will disarm the most demanding of editors. I once made a mistake when night editing the *Independent*, realised it over-