



# Ethics & Journalism

KAREN SANDERS

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For my parents, Terence and Dolores Sanders.



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# Ethics and journalism? 1

A reporter is 'a man without virtue who writes lies . . . for his profit.'

Dr Samuel Johnson

## THE REPORTING BESTIARY: WATCHDOGS, VULTURES AND GADFLYS

In polls conducted in 1993 estate agents received the lowest rating in British public esteem; journalists were just above them. And yet the lure of a career in the media is stronger than ever. Reporters repel and attract; they are the twenty-first century equivalent of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the 'hack' for whom, in the words of foreign correspondent, Nicholas Tomalin, the only necessary qualifications are 'a plausible manner, rat-like cunning and a little literary ability (26 October, 1969).'

Little trusted, little loved (but often secretly admired), the reporter is seen as the cynical, ruthless figure parodied in the Channel 4 series *Drop the Dead Donkey* (1990–98) and films such as *Broadcast News* (1987) and *Network* (1976). Described by the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, and the Royal Family as 'the reptiles', compared to jackals and vultures feeding on human carrion, this image of the journalist reached its apotheosis at the time of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997. The presence and behaviour of the paparazzi at the scene of the accident and Earl Spencer's public accusation that 'editors have blood on their hands – I always believed the press would kill her in the end,' was a low-water mark for British journalism.

Earlier that same year, the white-suited Martin Bell, a former BBC correspondent, won election to Parliament as the unofficial, anti-corruption candidate against the discredited Conservative contender, Neil Hamilton. Here was the journalist as figure of integrity, crusader for truth, exposing evil to the discomfit of the powerful, exemplified by the *Sunday Times*' campaign for justice for victims of the thalidomide drug and John Pilger's coverage of East Timor.

Surveys in Britain show a more favourable perception of broadcast journalists than journalists in general, findings which are reversed in the rest of Europe and the United States. A Harris Poll conducted in the United States in 1998, using virtually identical questions to those asked in a 1997 UK MORI survey, showed that in the United States only 44 per cent of adults say they would generally believe newsreaders, while in Britain 74 per cent would trust newsreaders to tell them the truth. However, only 15 per cent of the British population would trust journalists to tell them the truth compared to 43 per cent of Americans ([www.mori.com/polls/1998/harris.html](http://www.mori.com/polls/1998/harris.html)). A MORI survey carried out in February 2000 for the British Medical Association confirmed the British public's ambivalent attitude to its journalists: 78 per cent of us believe that journalists do not tell the truth, although 73 per cent believe that news readers

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**TABLE 1.1**

Trust in  
occupational  
groups in the UK  
February 2000

Q: For each of these different types of people would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?

	Tell the truth	Not tell the truth	Don't know
	%	%	%
Doctors	87	9	4
Teachers	85	10	5
Television News Readers	73	18	10
Professors	76	11	13
Judges	77	15	8
Clergymen/Priests	78	16	6
Scientists	63	25	12
The Police	60	33	8
The ordinary man/woman in the street	52	34	14
Pollsters	46	35	19
Civil Servants	47	40	14
Trade Union officials	38	47	15
Business Leaders	28	60	12
Politicians generally	20	74	6
Government Ministers	21	72	7
Journalists	15	78	6

Source: MORI poll in February 2000 on behalf of the British Medical Association. A total of 2,072 adults aged 15 and over were interviewed face-to-face during the period February 3–7 at 156 sampling points throughout Great Britain. Data was weighted to the known profile of the British population ([www.mori.com/polls/2000/bma2000.shtml](http://www.mori.com/polls/2000/bma2000.shtml)).

do (see Table 1.1). And yet we have one of the highest newspaper circulation figures in Europe (see Table 1.2). On an average week-day twelve million copies of national newspapers are sold in Britain, compared to almost two million in France, just over seven million in Germany and about 1.6 million in Spain.

As with most caricatures, there is something of truth and much distortion in the Janus-like image we have of journalists. And our continued, although declining, newspaper buying habits point to more ambivalence in our attitudes than the polls would indicate. Nevertheless, few would disagree that British journalists have, in the words of *Sky News*'s political editor, Adam Boulton (1997), 'a slightly more Grub Street underbelly' than their American and continental counterparts, reflecting the vigorous traditions of the popular press (see Engel, 1996; Williams, 1998). Partly for this reason perhaps, they have been less prone to make claims to be a Fourth Estate acting in the national interest. According to this peculiarly British, unromanticized understanding of what journalists do and the impact they can have, journalism is a trade not a profession, journalists are 'reporters' and are more gadflies than watchdogs, reptiles than rottweilers.

Scepticism about journalism's aims and means does not lead to a quiescent industry. The *News of The World*'s reporters who, in April 2001 exposed the blurring of royal and business affairs in the Countess of Wessex's PR activities by posing as rich Arabs, could not be further removed from their Spanish

counterparts whose own Royals are treated with extreme deference. Journalism in Britain is anything but boring.

However, scepticism exacts a business as well as an ethical price. A resistance to reflection, a permutation of the anti-intellectualism which runs through much of British culture, serves no one. Journalists and editors lose their jobs, people's lives are badly damaged, share prices are hit and circulation and viewing figures can fall in a climate where reflection on the practices and principles of journalism is actively discouraged.<sup>1</sup> As *The Times* journalist, Raymond Snoddy, put it, 'talking about and encouraging high standards and ethics in newspapers . . . is not some sort of self-indulgence for amateur moral philosophers or journalists with sensitive psyches: it is a very practical matter, involving customer relations, product improvement and profit' (1992: 203). This statement stands for all media, although it is undoubtedly the print industry which has been most loath to contemplate the larger implications of what it does.

### THE HACK'S PROGRESS

Thinking about ethics is to think about what journalism is and what journalists do. One of the cherished beliefs of most British journalists is that their calling is not a profession nor ever should be. Professional status requires command of a specific area of knowledge which partly determines entry into the profession. Lawyers must know the law. But what body of knowledge is required of the journalist? Journalism, it is said, is more akin to a craft or trade, learned by doing. It should be open to all those who show the right aptitudes, usually summarized as a nose for news, a plausible manner and an ability to write and deliver concise, accurate copy to deadline.

This approach to journalism has meant that journalism training in Britain has been primarily trade-based. Unlike counterparts in the United States and the rest of Europe, training standards have traditionally been set by industry bodies: the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) for the print industry and the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) for the broadcast industry. Training in skills and knowledge of the law and the workings of government are fundamental. Ethics is not a compulsory separate subject. Training bodies stipulate that ethical reflection be addressed throughout training and that students be fully acquainted with industry codes of practice (the Press Complaint Commission's Code for the print industry and the BBC's Producer Guidelines and Codes of the Broadcasting Standards Commission, Independent Television Commission and Radio Authority for the broadcast industry). These training requirements have been incorporated into a variety of diploma courses at non-university institutions. Increasingly they form part of university courses which range beyond the immediate constraints of the traditional industrial training bodies.

The '*Columbia-Journalism-Review-School of Journalism*', as it has been disparagingly described, arrived in Britain in 1970 when Cardiff became the first university to offer journalism courses (Thomaß, 1998). By 2001 there were 31 undergraduate journalism degrees and six had industry accreditation. This

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**TABLE 1.2**

National newspaper  
circulation in  
Europe, 2000/2001

Title	2000	2001
<b>Spanish daily nationals</b>		
El País	562,821	
La Vanguardia	244,644	
El Mundo	379,657	
ABC	378,965	
Diario 16	48,512	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,614,599</b>	
<b>UK daily nationals</b>		
The Mirror		2,203,815
Daily Star		591,392
The Sun		3,487,015
Daily Express		960,543
The Daily Mail		2,427,464
The Daily Telegraph		1,015,906
The Guardian		401,519
The Independent		225,496
The Times		710,709
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>12,023,859</b>
<b>UK Sunday newspapers</b>		
News of the World		3,980,544
Sunday Mirror		1,855,258
Sunday People		1,404,313
Sunday Sport		195,220
Sunday Express		914,360
The Mail on Sunday		2,367,529
Independent on Sunday		247,544
The Observer		454,462
The Sunday Telegraph		802,483
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>12,221,713</b>
<b>French daily nationals</b>		
Le Figaro	367,595	
France Soir	125,462	
L'Humanité	55,113	
Liberation	171,336	
Le Monde	402,444	
Le Parisien/Aujourd'hui en France	492,518	
La Tribune	104,359	
La Croix	90,232	
Les Echos	153,968	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,963,027</b>	
<b>German national newspapers</b>		
Deutsche Tagespost mit ASZ		14,478
Die Tageszeitung, Berlin		58,738
Die Welt		255,159
Financial Times Deutschland		72,433
Frankfurter Allgemeine		408,641
Frankfurter Rundschau		192,182
Handelsblatt		155,660

TABLE 1.2  
(Continued)

Title	2000	2001
Hürriyet		81,219
Neues Deutschland, Berlin		57,743
Süddeutsche Zeitung		436,051
Abendzeitung		183,899
Berliner Kurier		165,506
BILD		4,396,309
B.Z.		259,018
Express		310,680
Hamburger Morgenpost		119,140
Morgenpost f. Sachsen, Dresden		110,342
T.Z.		149,500
TOTAL		7,426,698

Sources: Audit Bureau of Circulation, Oficina de Justificación de Difusión, Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW) and Asociación pour le Contrôle de la Diffusion des Média.

represents an important and not universally welcomed shift in the educational background of journalists.<sup>2</sup>

Some fear that the shift to university-based education might blunt the edge of hard reporting in the same way that journalism schools are said to have done in the United States. The legendary publisher of the *National Enquirer*, Generoso Pope, was said to prefer British journalists to American ones because they hadn't forgotten that they were in the business to sell newspapers and not simply to right the wrongs of society. This gave their reporting bite so that, according to one journalist, an American reporter sent to a plane crash would write, 'I wept over the funeral pyre of 199 people,' whereas his/her British counterpart would write, 'Dead, that's what 199 people were last night' (Taylor, 1991: 59). But (and this will be the central contention of this book) being a reflective journalist isn't inimical to good reporting. If we consider what skills and knowledge journalists should have, the reverse is likely to be true.

#### SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

In 1996 US newsroom supervisors were polled to see what importance they gave to different knowledge and skill areas for the potential journalist (Medsger, 1996: 25). The ten areas which received most approval were:

- 1 Basic newsgathering and writing skills – 98%
- 2 Clear writing skills – 97%
- 3 Understanding that accuracy and truthfulness are essential in journalism – 96%
- 4 Interviewing skills – 95%
- 5 Analysing information and ideas – 94%
- 6 Ability to organize complex stories with clarity and grace – 86%
- 7 Writing on deadline – 82%

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- 8 Well-informed about current events – 78%
- 9 Ability to recognize holes in coverage – 77%
- 10 Ability to develop story lines on your own – 76%

The American editors' list of qualities falls across several of the categories of understanding of knowledge identified by Aristotle as (i) *episteme*: scientific knowledge; (ii) *tekne*: art – making knowledge; (iii) *phronesis*: practical knowledge; (iv) *sophia*: philosophical knowledge; (v) *nous*: intuitive reason. They can help us to structure and understand the kind of knowledge journalists should have.

(i) *Technical knowledge*: The aim here is to learn how to *do* something. And, of course, the best way of learning how to do something is by doing it. Providing you with a theoretical book on how to ride a bicycle will be of little use in riding a bicycle. You will only learn how to cycle by *cycling*. Learning shorthand is an example of this kind of knowledge.

(ii) *Practical knowledge*: Ethics, politics and rhetoric, the art of persuasion, all require practical knowledge, knowing how to act, how to apply one's intellectual capacities in order to achieve the right outcome in the area concerned. A good doctor must not only know how to use a stethoscope but also have acquired intellectual habits of judgement and discernment which allow him/her to discriminate between chicken pox and what is just a particularly mottled complexion, and then prescribe the appropriate remedy.

Practical knowledge is about the correct application of acquired intellectual habits to one's chosen field for the attainment of particular goals. A journalist has to know what the story is and then know how to tell it. This involves technical knowledge but also powers of judgement and analysis: decisions about use and credibility of sources, appropriateness of tone, story interest, none of which are givens. Getting a story right, as the *Sunday Mirror* editor, Colin Myler, found over the Leeds football players' trial in spring 2001, can be critical to job security, a paper's reputation and share prices (see note 1).

(iii) *Philosophical knowledge*: In third place on the American editors' list of qualities was the awareness that accuracy and truthfulness are essential to the journalist's task. To understand why this should be considered so is to enter the realm of philosophical knowledge. Questions about what a journalist is and what reporting is for, are the often unexplored assumptions underlying practice. The view of one tabloid editor that, 'Information is only a commodity, like bread' will almost certainly influence the kind of stories printed in his paper.

Reflecting on ethics and journalism is about acquiring philosophical knowledge which is of intrinsic interest, self-sufficient, complete in itself. It is to say that education is more than training.

In this sense, reflection on ethics and journalism is distinctly out of tune with the temper of our utilitarian times. For it requires us to move beyond what the political philosopher, Michael Oakeshott (1993), has spoken of as the

condition of worldliness, the thought that what matters above all is success understood as the achievement of some external result, usually striving to have a successful career as evidence of achievement. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having a successful career. Oakeshott's point is that an excessive concern with reputation can mean that the present is sacrificed to the god of the future; he suggests that it is preferable that: 'Ambition and the greed for visible results, in which each stage is a mere approach to the goal . . . be superseded by a life which carried in each of its moments its whole meaning and value' (1993: 32). Lofty words and, some might say, unrealizable aims yet they express what many have felt to be true about human existence.

*Episteme* and *nous* have been left outside this account: the first, because there is no knowledge area (although it is possible, but not wise, to be a reporter without knowing any law) which a journalist *must* master (unless of course he or she is a specialist correspondent); the second, because intuitive knowledge is just that: it can be tutored and nurtured but either you've got it or you haven't. Technical and practical knowledge have been traditionally taught in industrial training courses and philosophical knowledge is the dimension which university-based courses seek to add so that, in the nineteenth century ideal of John Henry Newman:

It is the education which gives a man a clear, conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant. (1852/1987: 197)

Does the shift to the university mean that journalism is acquiring professional status? And is such status desirable? It might be argued that professionalism, with its concomitant requirement for self-regulation, would exercise a healthy ethical pressure on journalists. Evidence from an extensive survey-based study of newsroom cultures in twenty-one countries suggests that this might be so (Weaver, 1998).

Weaver's study showed that there is no consensus about professional roles or ethical values. Respecting source confidentiality is a generally shared rule but using personal documents is not: 92.5 per cent of Spanish journalists, for example, considered this to be wrong as against 51 per cent in Britain. The level of agreement about ethical norms within a country was highest in Spain and at its lowest in Britain and interestingly, the UK is the country with the lowest proportion of its workforce in possession of university-based journalism qualifications: 4 per cent as against the highest world figure of 92 per cent for Spanish journalists (Canel et al. 2000: 101–2). Of course, opinions expressed in surveys are not synonymous with ethical behaviour and divergent views about controversial practices may express genuinely different understandings of what journalism is for. Journalists in Britain are also obliged to negotiate a number of legal quagmires which may make them more relaxed about certain practices. At the present state of play, we can say that journalism is not a profession in Britain

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despite its shift to the university. In sociological terms professions are thought to have four characteristics (Donsbach, 1997):

- 1 primary orientation to the community rather than to self-interest
- 2 a high degree of generalized and systematic knowledge
- 3 a high degree of self-regulation through codes of standards absorbed through work socialization and associations operated by the professionals themselves
- 4 a system of rewards which are symbols of work achievement so that professionals usually have a high degree of freedom and high income levels

Most of these criteria are not fulfilled by British journalism. As *The Times* columnist, Simon Jenkins, put it:

. . . to apply the word profession to what appears in newspapers is pointless. Since the 17th century, the best guide to journalism has been to 'find out what the bastards are up to and tell the world'. A profession adheres to codes of practice, rules of fairness and confidentiality. Such constraints may apply in some reaches of journalism including, I pompously hope, my own. But the business of newspapers is so overwhelmed by market competition that most constraint has gone by the board. News is mixed with comment. Campaigning distorts coverage. Anonymous (that is, made-up) derogatory quotes are everywhere. Feeding frenzies consume all in their path. To their victims, reporters are a lynch mob in full cry. (11 April, 2001)

However, Jenkins would change little, concluding in the same article that he prefers 'the occasional stomach-churner to avoid the corrupt, establishment press of most of Europe and the bland local monopolies of America'. Although this is a little strongly stated, it expresses the dilemma when thinking about journalism and ethics. How can lively journalism be encouraged which at the same time is not blind to the very real damage that can be done by unethical practices? Without advocating professional status, neither feasible nor – in my view – desirable, it is possible to see how the university can provide a forum for a more considered reflection on journalism that is virtually impossible to achieve in the newsroom.

## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

There is a view that journalism matters very little. Many journalists have remarked on the humbling experience of seeing yesterday's newspaper as today's waste paper. Studies of television news show that we barely retain information from one bulletin to another let alone from one day to the next (Gunter, 1999). This 'limited effects' understanding of the media is countered by an extreme view, sometimes advanced by journalists, of the media's power. The campaigning Victorian journalist, William Thomas Stead, declared:

I have seen Cabinets upset, ministers driven into retirement, laws repealed, great social reforms initiated, Bills transformed, estimates remodelled, programmes