We are all, or ought to be, subjective now: new challenges for journalism educators

by

Ivor Gaber

City University London and University of Bedfordshire

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For correspondence contact the author at ivorgaber@gmail.com

Abstract

It is a truism to state that new technology has changed journalism profoundly. But many traditional journalists maintain that despite all the technological developments – and in particular the rise of the blogosphere – the practice of journalism remains essentially unchanged with 'objectivity' as the fundamental ethical divide between 'journalists' and others producing online content. This paper challenges this view and argues, using the UK's political blogosphere as a case study, that as a result of the digital revolution the line between those who call themselves 'journalists' and the bloggers, campaigners, commentators and all the rest has become ever more blurred. And this blurring does not just relate to the expression of opinion and the transmission of rumour and gossip, but also reaches into the dissemination of news – indeed in some cases bloggers now do news better than journalists. This blurring, which creates real challenges for journalism educators, throws into doubt traditional journalistic conventions of objectivity, truth etc. and requires, the creation of a new ethical creed to guide journalists and bloggers alike.

Key Words: Journalism, Journalism education, bloggers, online journalism, objectivity, subjectivity, fairness, journalism ethics, UK political reporting

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"As we begin the 21st century, journalism strikes an unsteady chord in the public imagination." [i]
Barbie Zelizer

"Much of journalism's decline in public esteem is due to the public's perception that journalists don't live up to [this] objectivity standard."[ii]
Alex S. Jones

Introduction

The central argument of this paper is that 'objectivity' the central (if unspoken) core of most Anglo-American journalistic codes of practice is dead (indeed, never existed) and now needs replacing by a new code that puts subjectivity at its heart. This process has become ever more urgent, and more obvious, because of the communications and information revolution brought about by the digital revolution and its concomitant rise in online interactivity. And this in turn has brought into sharp focus the vexed question of who is, and who is not, a journalist. All of which creates enormous challenges for journalists and for journalism educators.

Objectivity is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the Anglo-American model of journalism – according to sociologist Michael Schudson, it is "a kind of industrial discipline [for journalists]"[iii] and for Judith Liechtenberg "..objectivity is a cornerstone of the professional ideology of journalists in a liberal democracy." [iv] But American newspaper editor (and proprietor) Alex S. Jones is concerned about the future of this 'cornerstone'. He writes:

> "I believe it is essential that genuine objectivity should remain the American journalistic standard, but we may be living through what could be considered objectivity's last stand."[v]

But before examining the current positioning of 'objectivity' within the journalistic canon it is important to stress that the argument being made here in favour of 'subjectivity' is not a plea for self-indulgent journalism, but a call for journalism educators to recognise, and teach, the importance of learning the discipline of rigorous

editorial self-interrogation, with the aim of teaching would-be journalists to be constantly asking themselves the deceptively simple, but in fact highly complex, question of 'Am I being fair?'

To some extent this parallels the argument of American journalists Kovach and Rosenstiel's who state that "objectivity is not a fundamental principle of journalism, merely a voice, or device, to persuade the audience of one's accuracy or fairness"[vi] In other words objectivity, they suggest, is more a method of journalistic inquiry, rather than an end in itself. This author agrees, though the method advocated here is 'subjectivity' not 'objectivity'.

The Beginnings

At the core of the notion of objectivity, certainly in terms of traditional journalism education, lies the idea that for most, if not all, news stories, there is a 'truth' waiting to be revealed. As newspaper editor Alex Jones puts it: "Reporters seeking genuine objectivity search out the best truth possible from the evidence that the reporter, in good faith, can find."[vii] And the means devised for presenting this 'truth' is the well-known 'inverted pyramid, which itself is underpinned by the belief that there is only one 'correct' way to structure a news story - with the most important aspects of the story coming first. This is done by ensuring that the opening paragraph answers the classic '5W' questions - 'Who, What, Where, When and Why". Subsequent paragraphs, the mantra goes, should contain the next most important information, with the least important at the bottom – awaiting the sub-editors ready knife.[viii] This format superseded the idea that journalists told their 'stories' either in a partisan way to suit the politics of their newspaper, or even more traditionally, in a narrative chronology.

But the problem with the inverted pyramid – and the notion of objectivity that underpins it - is that it conceals more than it reveals. For the plain fact of the matter is that for many news stories journalists, in deciding the lead - and hence what should come first - make essentially subjective, judgements. 'Who, What, Where, When and Why', far from being simple observable facts, are hugely problematic. Who, for example, is the most important character in the story? What (and according to whom) happened? Where is the most important location for this story? When was the

significant moment and.... Why, oh why, oh why??? All of which lends weight to Bonnie Brennan's observation that "Facts are messy, difficult to determine and they are often dependent on interpretation," [ix]

However, this argument – central to the debate about objectivity - concerning the relevance, or otherwise, of the inverted pyramid is accompanied by an equally passionate discussion as to 'what is journalism' and 'who is a journalist'?

In the pre-digital era these issues were less troublesome - if somebody was paid to write, broadcast, or photograph and they had access to a mass audience via print, radio or television, then they were a journalist and what they did was journalism. But the dramatic changes wrought in the media ecology by the digital revolution have challenged these assumptions. Is a blogger, a Facebook contributor or even a twitterer a journalist? Alan Knight, in an article based on discussions that took pace at the World Journalism Education Congress in 2008 observed that:

> " Before the World Wide Web, journalism was defined by mainstream news agencies, newspapers, radio and televisions stations. But the Internet has raised questions about who journalists are, what they should do, where they can report from, why they choose particular stories, and even when they report. Who should be considered journalists in an age when anyone can publish a blog? How might traditional publishers catch up when anyone can establish a practice and try to earn a living in this digitalised market of ideas?"[x]

The Political Blogosphere – a case study

The challenges facing journalism educators can best be elucidated by means of a case study.

In the UK, according to *Total Politics* magazine, the political blogosphere currently (June 2010) consists of 2,387active blogs[xi] *Order-order* is the blog of right-wing libertarian Paul Staines, who blogs as Guido Fawkes (named after the man who tried to blow up the British Parliament in the 17th century 'the only man to enter Parliament with honest intentions' says Staines[xii]). According to *Total Politics* and a range of other sources (including *The Economist* and the *Guardian*) *Order-order* is the UK's most read political blog.[xiii] On the day, in May 2010, when the coalition government was formed in Britain, Guido claimed 168,672 separate visits; and over the preceding seven days he reported that his site had received 99,200 unique visitors who viewed

705,255 pages.[xiv] These figures give Guido Fawkes's musings, a reach exceeding that of many of the journalists writing for the mainstream national press. But is Guido Fawkes a journalist?

Here's an extract from his reporting of the events of May 10th, the day when negotiations between the leaderships of the UK Conservative and Liberal Democrats appeared to be close to fruition, but doubts remained as to whether a deal would be acceptable to the Liberal Democrats as a whole.

> **Lib Dem MPs and Fed Ex to Meet at 19.30**
>
> Looks like there is real movement – Gus O'Donnell [Head of the Civil Service] has joined the Cabinet Office negotiations. A meeting has just been called for the Liberal Democrat MPs and crucially their Federal Executive tonight at 19.30.
> *It seems that a Tory/Liberal deal is nearly ready to be put to them.*
>
> Just nine members of the Federal Executive could cause a real headache. If they, or fifteen MPs, vote against the deal then this has to drag on until the weekend where Clegg [Lib Dem leader] would need the support of a simple majority of members at a Special Conference. *Very doable but a long delay.*
>
> ***UPDATE:*** 25 minutes later Sky and the BBC now reporting the meeting. Lib/Lab talks are over. *You read it here first.*
>
> ***UPDATE II:*** Cars are being packed up on Downing Street. Labour are spinning that the negotiations never got off the ground.
>
> ***UPDATE III:*** *Standard* splash that "*Brown Quits as Prime Minister!*[xv]

The above post, fairly typical of Guido's election coverage, does contain real news about the progress of the coalition negotiations, although admittedly news written with 'attitude'. This extract also demonstrates a number of other characteristics that differentiate bloggers from traditional journalists. The writer's own views are made clear. Not just in how the news is written but by the addition of his own views in italics; it also clearly indicates updates and shows which sources have been used; finally it contains that slight touch of hubris - "You read it here first' – that is not uncommon in the blogosphere.

To return to the question posed – is Guido a journalist? According to him he is; he writes:

"Guido sees himself as a journalist, a campaigning journalist who publishes via a website. He campaigns against political sleaze and hypocrisy. He doesn't believe in impartiality nor pretend to it."[xvi]

It's a stance that might not appeal to traditional news reporters, or journalist educators, for that matter, but it's a description that might well fit the activities of many UK political journalists working on newspapers that take a strong political line, the *Daily Mail* or the *Sun* for example.

To further emphasis the blurring of boundaries, here is an extract, not from a blogger, as such, but from the Deputy Political Editor of the London *Evening Standard.* If anything, this breaks more of the traditional journalistic rules than does the extract from Guido Fawkes - though it retains two key characteristics of the bloggers, transparency of sourcing and a willingness to admit a mistake and correct it as soon as it has come to light (though in this particular case it might have had more to do with the possible attention of lawyers for Mr Cameron than any sense of blogging ethics).

Charlie Kennedy: he 'aint a fan of the coalition

Well, we knew that Charles Kennedy [former Liberal Democrat leader] had abstained on the original vote on the coalition.

But it sounds like he's even less enamoured of the whole idea than we thought.

I'm told that when David Cameron [new Conservative Prime Minister] offered his hand to the ex Lib Dem leader in the Commons recently, Kennedy did not rise from his seat. Instead, he hissed: "Don't expect me to fucking support you."

UPDATE: Ach, the tale - which has been relayed among Labour MPs - is not as good as it seems. Sources close to the PM insist that he felt he had had a perfectly amicable conversation with Mr Kennedy in the chamber. There remains the possibility that Mr Kennedy muttered something under his breath afterwards but it certainly wasn't heard by Mr Cameron…[xvii]

Hence, the new digital ecology, and the growth in the blogosphere in particular, raises very acute questions about notions of who is a journalist and what constitutes 'journalism'.

Friend and Singer, in their book 'Online Journalism Ethics, argue that bloggers and journalists are not the same but they are "complementary rather than contradictory."[xviii] They suggest that the two can, and in most cases do, exist in a symbiotic relationship. Some journalists might resent the way that much , perhaps

most, of the copy used by political bloggers emanates from the mainstream media, but Friend and Singer see this as a part of a healthy symbiotic relationship.

"They (bloggers) serve as watchdogs on the watchdogs in a variety of ways, holding journalists accountable for what they report – and what they do not report but should."[xix]

Indeed, some political bloggers claim that their ethical standards are, in fact, higher than those of the mainstream media. One anonymous political blogger interviewed by Nick Couldry told him: "My own values are at least as high as those of the average journalist – I think of myself as a blogger but doing a better job than some journalists"[xx] And the editorial team of the They Work for You website, which monitors the activities of politicians told Couldry:

"We always link back to the source of our data, so people can check it if they want...I wish the mainstream media and independent news sources were as trusted and always linked back to the sources of their data"[xxi]

But perhaps the most telling point in this debate is made by Dan Berkovitz who notes that the 'decision' as to who is, and is not, a journalist is made neither by journalists, bloggers, academics nor journalism educators but by the audience:

"For somebody working within journalism it would be easy to decide that blogging isn't journalism ...But journalists are not the holders of that decision – again, it's the media audience, construed in broad terms, that deals with these decisions"[xxii]

Seven pillars of traditional journalistic wisdom

Yet many traditional journalists still seek to distinguish what they do from the activities of the bloggers by asserting that their ethical standards are very different from those to be found in the blogosphere. Obviously, such protestations ignore journalists who blog (as above) and the fact that many bloggers describe themselves as 'journalists.[xxiii]

However, in order to interrogate this issue in more depth consider the following formalised articulation of how a traditional journalist might defend his or her craft and practices against the ethical, and other, claims emanating from the blogosphere and other social media:

1. Journalists seek to be objective, bloggers are subjective.
2. Journalists are unbiased, bloggers are proudly biased.

3. Journalists prioritise ‘the truth’, bloggers prioritise opinion.
4. Journalists are impartial, bloggers don’t claim to be.
5. Journalists seek balance, bloggers ignore it.
6. Journalists are independent, bloggers are not.
7. Journalists strive to ‘get it right’, bloggers don’t.

All of these are today, and probably always have been, misconceived.

Objectivity

It is frequently assumed that objectivity has always been at the centre of the Anglo-American model of journalism, but in fact it's a relatively modern construct. As Stuart Allen has noted:

> “In the years immediately following the close of the First World War in Europe, the necessary conditions were in place for a general affirmation of the tenets of ‘objectivity’ among both journalists and their critics.”[xxiv]

Gay Tuchman, almost a half a century ago, noted that objectivity was less a noble ideal and more, she characterised it as “a strategic ritual protecting newspapermen from the risks of their trade”[xxv]

Tuchman was one of the first scholars to identify how journalists used the camouflage of objectivity to create a veneer of professionalism that they hoped would protect them from allegations of bias and partiality. But it was always a mission doomed to fail, as Jackie Harrison has observed: “Objectivity means the elimination of subjective values from a news report, an impossible requirement for reporting a news event.”[xxvi]The American journalists Kovach and Rosensteil, in their important book ‘The Elements of Journalism’ talk about ‘the lost meaning of objectivity’[xxvii]. They identify three possible ‘positions’ on objectivity. The first is the traditional view, that it is seen as the ‘gold standard’ by which all reportage should be judged, a position that they argue is still common among many professional journalists in the USA and UK – and, I would add, many journalism academics and educators (see Allen 2002).

Second, as something that is not achievable in itself but should be the goal of all good reporting, this position represents something of a shared consensus between more reflective journalists, some academic researchers (frequently those with previous

professional journalistic experience) and an increasing number of journalism educators (see Harcup 2009) Finally, there is the position, that Kovach and Rosensteil attribute to 'postmodernists' but also to students of the 'Gonzo school of journalism'[xxviii] that there is no such thing as objectivity, since we are all subjective human beings and this affects everything we do see and write.

Kovach and Rosensteil posit that all three forms of are problematic and that objectivity is, in fact, not an ideal but a form of practice "a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work."[xxix]

As attractive as this argument appears, anything that leaves in place the notion of objectivity, whether as something to be aspired to or as a form of practice, is doing journalism a disservice.[xxx] Objectivity is, and has always been, a dangerous concept because it ignores the obvious - that journalists have a gender, an ethnicity, a family, a social background, a personal history, a set of prejudices and more, all of which affect their 'way of seeing'"[xxxi]. They also have an ingrained sense of 'professional' values and expectations which colour the way they go about their work.[xxxii] And journalists, like most professionals, are ambitious for promotion and that means ensuring that their output meets the approval of their superiors, and with objectivity established as the guiding principle of a news reporting, challenging this norm is not a good career move. Juan Gozalez, a columnist for the New York Post, describd the situation thus:

"Editors have a tendency to create people in their own image. If the editor doesn't like you for some reason, you don't rise. So there's a self-selection process that goes on within the profession" [xxxiii]

Every attempt by journalists to argue that they are able to put aside their own beliefs, feelings and so firth and become, or aspire to become, genuinely 'objective', strengthens a dangerous canard. For it is when journalists believe they have, attained Olympian objectivity that they are in greatest danger of failing to see how their own conscious and unconscious motivations are affecting what and how they report.

To take a simple example of a reporter covering a political gathering. To begin with he or she will probably be part of team, and hence might well be assigned to cover a

particular meeting, irrespective of whether he or she thinks it has any significance. So at the very outset his or her ability to decide what is the most important event/s of the day, is severely limited. Second, there is the editorial line of the paper (and the case of the broadcaster, the necessity of attracting and holding an audience) that has to be taken into account in deciding what stories are going to be of interest. Third, there is the prevailing mood of 'today's story' – 'Labour in disarray', or whatever – that colours news judgements. And all this before any consideration as to how the journalist reports the meeting, that might have taken place over two hours, involved 20 participants, speaking the equivalent of 10,000 words (easily done in two hours) into 250 crisp and accurate words.

Of course, the way he or she does it, is by making brutal selections of what quotes to use, and by summarising the broad thrust of the meeting in a couple of dozen words. And how is this selection made? "News judgement" is the usual response. But what is 'news judgement' if it is not a mix of providing the newspaper or broadcaster, with what is expected, based on past performance, professional rituals, prevailing moods and a soupcon of personal viewpoint.

The lynchpin of objectivity is the notion that there is – somewhere out there – the truth, and the simple job of the journalist is to fnd it and reflect it back to the audience. But as Kovach and Rosenstiel observe "News is not a mirror of reality. It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective."[xxxiv] (and hence not objective) Or, as political scientist Leon Sigal has noted: "News is not what happens, but what someone says has happened or will happen."[xxxv]

But perhaps most problematic of all, the ideology of objectivity leads to the very problems it is supposed to resolve - as Brian MacNair observes:

"Although designed to win audience credibility the professional ethic of objectivity can, under normal circumstances, lead to bias in favour of the powerful. The pursuit of objectivity, in other words, does not mean freedom from political or ideological bias"[xxxvi]

Bias

For all the reasons outlined in the discussion above, journalists are rarely genuinely unbiased. Perhaps in reporting a football match between two teams about which the reporter has no strong feelings, he or she might begin with an unbiased approach. But

during the 90 minutes biases can, and do, develop – this team is playing unfairly, that team is showing more determination, the referee is biased and so on. All (or most) journalists start determined to be unbiased but by the time it has come to start putting the story together, bias - unseen and unheard - will start to rear its ugly head. Online, on the other hand, the biases scream out to be seen and heard.

Truth

The notion of the 'truth' is highly problematic - in most situations, there are many truths not one. As Karen Sanders notes: "Our ability to discover the whole truth about any matter is severely circumscribed by our own intelligence, perspicacity, time and resources."[xxxvii] Deliberate falsity is rare but arguments as to what are the most important elements of a particular event are not. To return to the example of the political gathering – the journalist reporting the fringe meeting at which 19 speakers say that Labour should stick with Gordon Brown as leader and one says he should go, would see the 'truth' of the meeting being an overwhelming show of support for Brown. But if the one speaker against was a former cabinet minister, then undoubtedly, that will lead the reporter's story – whose 'truth' is right? Bloggers represent the 'truth' by simply reporting everything they hear and then correcting items when they discover them to be untrue.

Impartiality

Impartiality is equally problematic. The BBC's Editorial Guidelines simply state, in an entirely unproblematic way, that "Impartiality lies at the heart of the BBC's commitment to its audiences."[xxxviii] But should a journalist be 'impartial' between the racist and the non-racist, the climate scientist and the climate-change denier, the eminent historian and the holocaust denier? If the answer is no –as it surely must be - how does the journalist then decide which stories require impartiality and which do not? Clearly political stories ought to demonstrate impartiality, but what happens when the journalist works for a newspaper with a political line that requires not just reportage but 'informed comment' as well. And what of the category of 'campaigning journalist' – a badge that many now wear with pride? Is the journalist campaigning against pollution from a local factory required to be impartial in the controversy? And

what happens if his or her newspaper, or TV station, decides that it is going to formally back the campaign? Whither impartiality then? The blogger doesn't seek to be impartial and so has no agonising about being objectivity

Balance

The problem with balance is that it implies that all stories have two, more or less valid, sides. As the discussion about impartiality suggests, providing equality of treatment between two sides of a dispute can be highly problematic. And there is another issue. Many, if not most, controversies that catch the attention of the media have more than two sides to them – situations, once investigated in depth, are generally more nuanced than they might first appear and hence do not lend themselves to simple 'on the one hand, on the other hand', treatments.

Independence

Are journalists independent, whilst bloggers are not? 'Up to a point Lord Copper', as journalists down the ages have mumbled[xxxix]. Independence implies writing or broadcasting without let or hindrance. But journalists need to reach audiences in order to be journalists. But if the TV channel won't commission the programme, the programme does not exist (unless it is streamed on the internet – as millions of video bloggers are now doing on sites such as Youtube). The columnist might demand that not a word of his or her copy is altered, but if what the writer is writing ceases to please the editor or proprietor, then he or she will lose their column – a thought that is undoubtedly in the back (if not further forward) of the minds of every working columnist. As for the mere mortal hacks labouring away in the foothills of the news, they too have editors and owners and thus no real independence. Conversely, it can be argued that the blogger, with no concerns about being sacked, is far more independent than the journalist. He or she is freer to pursue stories or to vent spleen - freer to write whatever catches their fancy, than their more traditional journalistic cousins.

Accuracy

Finally, do journalists strive for accuracy whilst bloggers don't? On this charge I would argue that both journalists and bloggers try and get it right all the time, even if they also try to put their own spin on the events and select the facts that suit their own particular purposes. The earlier example of the reporter at a political gathering

covering a two-hour meeting in 250 words is one example – his or her report might have accurately reported the words he or she chose to select but for anyone who attended the meeting they would, in all probability find that the newspaper report of the meeting bore little relationship to the meeting as they had experienced.

Seven Pillars of New Journalistic Wisdom

So having destroyed existing journalistic ethics, and even suggested that in the ethics stakes bloggers can claim to be 'ethical' by their own lights, where do we go from here? Here iss a suggested "Seven Pillars of New Journalistic Wisdom" – applicable to journalists and bloggers alike.

1. Thou shalt recognise one's own subjectivity
2. Thou shalt strive to be fair
3. Thou shalt strive to be thorough
4. Thou shalt seek verification
5. Thou shalt strive to be transparent
6. Thou shalt be accountable
7. Thou shalt strive to be accurate

Subjectivity

At the heart of this argument is the notion that journalists must have a strong sense of right and wrong, not necessarily in the stories they are covering, but in their own working methods. As Kovach and Rosenstiel put it: "Every journalist, from the newsroom to the boardroom, must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility – a moral compass."[xl] Given the previous arguments about the dangers of objectivity, it is incumbent on journalists and bloggers to recognise their own provenance. This does not mean writing or broadcasting from a particular perspective, but instead in recognising that, consciously or otherwise, we all have a perspective. In so doing both the journalist and blogger are thus much better equipped to counteract it whenever iit appears in their own work. The failure to recognise this can be problematic for journalists and bloggers alike.

Some years ago, the author, whilst working for the BBC at Westminster, would observe how some journalists, despite working in a political arena, would declare "I have no political views". Putting aside the issue that everyone in a democratic society

has a responsibility to have a view about politics, these journalists were potentially dangerous. They failed to recognise their own prejudices and were thus ill-equipped to monitor their own output to ensure its fairness – equally colleagues who openly declared their own personal politics were better able to monitor themselves to help ensure that their output was less affected (and their colleagues were well-placed to call 'foul' if they thought their prejudices were showing).

Fairness

Closely intertwined with subjectivity is the notion of fairness, together the two most important of the new pillars. For fairness, unlike impartiality, neutrality and so on, is not something that can be established, or experienced, objectively. By its very nature it is internalised by the journalist. This author, working as a broadcasting journalist, even under extreme time pressures, was always aware if his reporting had been 'fair', or otherwise. Sometimes that awareness would only crystallise watching or listening to the programme on transmission. The overwhelming majority of journalists, it is argued, do set out to be fair; but in the rough and tumble of a news story subjective judgements come to be made about 'good guys' and bad guys'. Being aware of such judgements is the key to transcending them. One of the UK's leading television journalists, Jon Snow, who presents the highly regarded Channel Four News on a nightly basis, summed up the paramount importance of fairness:

"I don't think there's such a thing as neutral journalist. Human beings are moved by what they see, either against it or for it. Admiringly or despairingly, or whatever else it is. And I think these qualities are essential, otherwise what the journalist reports becomes an unnatural event...I'm against neutrality. But I'm for fairness at the same time. Complete fairness. You've got to recognise what your dispositions are, and balance them by allowing other points of view." [xli]

Investigative journalism slightly complicates matters. Most investigations begin with the journalist having some notion of who the 'guilty' man, woman or organisation might be. The journalist then seeks to uncover the evidence that will sustain that charge. If, in the course of the investigation, he or she finds material that suggests that the original assumption about guilt was mistaken then, as a critical part of the fairness pillar, he or she either ceases the investigation, or produces a story vindicating the subject. If, on the other hand, the journalist does find sufficient evidence of 'guilt' (sufficient to satisfy him or her plus the editors and lawyers) then the story can be proceeded with. And whilst it is important that the subject is provided with some

space to state his or her defence, that does not mean equal time and prominence. Of course, should the journalist make the wrong call, then the consequences have to be faced.

Thoroughness

Thoroughness can be problematic. At what point should the journalist draw the line? This author, on leaving full-time journalism for the academy, was asked what difference he observed between journalistic and academic research. He answered by saying that it is unlikely that an academic researcher would tell an informant, who had suggested another potential interviewee: "No thanks, I've got enough for the piece" In a journalistic context absolute thoroughness can never be achieved – time and space limitations are always an issue. But a proximity to absolute thoroughness is necessary if the journalist is running an investigation in which allegations of wrong-doing are involved; not only is it editorially necessary but without it, there is little legal cover.[xlii]

Verification

Verification is an important aspect of thoroughness - it is an injunction to journalists to only use material from sources they regard as 'reliable' - although this raises important issues about the use to be made of material obtained from the internet (Wikipedia extracts being only the most obvious example of the problems of verification and provenance online). For Kovach and Rosenstiel what they describe as "the discipline of verification" is what "separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction or art."[xliii] In terms of verification, establishing the provenance of the case study used here - UK political blogs – is relatively straightforward. Guido Fawkes[xliv] describes his blog as "...of plots, rumours and conspiracy" which, whilst it might not fully indicate his blogs' libertarian bent would not lead the casual reader to confuse it with, for example, BBC News Online. On the other hand, the world's most popular political blogspot/website the 'Drudge Report'[xlv] gives absolutely no indication of its right-wing stance, neither does its opposite number on the blogging left 'The Huffington Post'.[xlvi]

Transparency

From 'verification' to 'transparency' is not a great distance. Transparency has two meanings. One relates to the previous discussion about provenance, the other to the

journalist's working methods. It seems important, and relatively easy (particularly online), to maintain a position of revelation – not so much in terms of content but in terms of method. This involves enabling the audience to make judgements about how information was obtained and where more can be found. Kovach and Rosenstil argue that: "The only way in practice to level with people about what you know is to reveal as much as possible about your sources and methods" [xlvii] Journalists thinking about their working methods need only have one simple criterion in mind when deciding if a particular course of action would be 'ethical' – and that is, "Would I be comfortable if my working methods were made public, could I justify them in terms of the 'public interest'?"

Accountability

Accountability – also linked to transparency can be problematic. To what extent is the journalist - off or online – 'accountable' and to whom? Certainly he or she is accountable to whoever is paying him or her to be a journalist. But there is also, arguably, the more important issue of accountability to the audience. This can be complex. Journalists working for publicly funded or subsidised media – the BBC and the commercial public service broadcasting channels for example – have a direct line of accountability to their communities. This is an accountability to the public both as their paymasters and also the extent to which it enhances or detracts from the public sphere (mainly through its provision of news and current affairs).

But do journalists, working outside the public media, have accountability to society at large? This author would argue that in a pluralist liberal democracy, probably not. Certainly they are accountable to the courts for libel, breaches of privacy etc. but it is difficult to sustain the argument that they are any more accountable to the public than, say, are accountants, solicitors or doctors. Certainly all such groups are accountable to their 'clients' (not something that directly impacts on journalists as such) and also to the regulators and professional associations that police their professions. In this sense an argument can be made that there is an accountability, once removed. But most journalists – on or offline – would probably see their accountability being simply one of maintaining their audience, both in terms of numbers and of trust. Although, according to Adrian Monck, trust is now an outdated concern: "For me transparency and information supersede our need for trust." he argues.[xlviii]

Accuracy

Finally, we come to the common pillar, accuracy. Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that it is "… the foundation upon which everything else is built"[xlix] Accuracy is often assumed to be simply ensuring that the 'facts' are correct - names, numbers etc. However, it is worth noting that of the complaints to the UK Press Complaints Commission in 2009, 'accuracy' was by far and way the largest category, comprising 85% of complaints.[l] A cursory glance at some of theseshow that they involved issues such as whether the complainant had said the words attributed to them, or denying having given permission for certain information to be used. Thus the term' accuracy' can conceal as much as it reveals. However, a simple nostrum, in terms of this journalistic pillar, should be that when reporting matters of fact, journalists should take every reasonable care to ensure the accuracy of the information they are reporting – and if in doubt the source of the information should be identified. In an age when much of the information that journalists are using has been obtained online, both checking the information and revealing the sources of information to the audience, is significantly easier for journalists and bloggers alike. Accuracy is the key to establishing and mainataining trust between the journalist, the blogger and their audiences.

Conclusion

We are in a time when journalism is undergoing more changes – both in terms of formats and content – than at any time in the past. It goes without saying that change has been a constant factor throughout the history of the media, ever since Johanes Gutenberg hit upon the idea of moveable type. However, the changes we are now witnessing is having a profound impact on our understanding of the very concept of journalism. Is it meaningful, any more, to try and distinguish between one set of information disseminators and another? And to attribute to them different sets of ethical standards? Kovach and Rosenstiel think not:

"Since there are no laws of journalism, no regulations, no licensing and no formal self-policing, and since journalism, by its very nature can be exploitative, a heavy burden rests on the ethics and judgement of the individual journalist and the individual organisation where he or she works."[li]

But the last word should go to a journalist and journalist educator bringing a view to the debate from outside the Anglo-American perspective, a reporting environment less free than the US or U. Cherian George a former journalist with the Singapore Straits Times, reminds us that unless these issues are resolved then it is the journalism and journalists who will eventually suffer. Writing after the 2008 World Journalism Education Congress he said:

"Singapore and elsewhere in the world needs to have both professionalism constrained by disinterest and industry-wide codes, as well as idiosyncratic morally engaged amateurism. Historically and normatively, both deserve a place at the table that we call journalism. Many self-righteous though well-meaning mainstream professionals want to protect the sanctity of journalism against insurgents trying to align their work with their own particular agendas. What the professionals may be unwittingly protecting, however, are rather prosaic industrial and commercial imperatives; in particular, the imperative to alienate the journalist and publisher from their own work."[lii]

Ends

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[i] Zelizer P 203

[ii] Jones A.S. p. 82

[iii] Schudson M. p 82

[iv] Lichtenberg 225

[vi] K & R 83

[vii] Jones 88

[viii] A typical example can be found in Niblock (1996) p.14

[ix] Breene p 301

[x] Knight I. P.118

[xi] http://www.totalpolitics.com/politicalblogs/ viewed 28 June 2010

[xii] http://order-order.com/2004/01/09/about-guidos-blog/ viewed 28 June 2010

[xiii] Ibid

[xiv] Ibid

[xv] http://order-order.com/page/19 viewed 28/06/10 . this author's additions in square brackets/

[xvi] http://order-order.com/2004/01/09/about-guidos-blog/ viewed 28 June 2010

[xvii] http://waugh.standard.co.uk/ 24 June 2010 Square brackets added by this writer

[xviii] Friend and Singer p 133

[xix] Ibid p. 136

[xx] Couldry in Fenton p. 143

[xxi] Ibid p. 144

[xxii] Berkovitz p 290

[xxiii] On the website 'Liberal Conspiracy' (http://www.liberalconspiracy.org), for example, of the 33 named contributors, 10 identify themselves as 'journalists'

[xxiv] Allen (2002) P 24

[xxv] Tuchman G (1972)

[xxvi] Harrison J (2006) P 146

[xxvii] Kovach and Rosentiel **Lost Meaning of Objectvity**

[xxviii] The first major example of this style of reporting was Hunter S.Thompson;s 1972 drug-fuelled narrative "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream"

[xxix] Ibid pp 81/2

[xxx] For an interesting discussion about the nature of objectivity in journalism, from a constructionist perspective, see Poerksen

[xxxi] See John Berger's classic text 'Ways of Seeing'

[xxxii] Herman and Chomsky (1994) summarise the pressures thus: "Most biased choices in the media arise from the preselection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions and the adaptation of personnel to the constraints of ownership, organization, market, and political power." (p. xii)

[xxxiii] Atributed Juan Gonzalez in Kocach and Rosenstiel p240

[xxxiv] Schudson 2003 p 33

[xxxv] Ibid p134

[xxxvi] Mcnair (1998) p 75 Brian McNair The Sociology of Journalism Arnold London 1998

[xxxvii] Sanders (2003) p 41|

[xxxviii] BBC Editorial Guidlinmes (2008)

[xxxix] Lord Copper was the no-nothing proprietor immortalised in Evelyn Waugh's classic pre-war novel about journalism 'Scoop'

[xl] Kovach and Rosenstiel p 231

[xli] Allen p 92

[xlii] See Welsh T. Et al (2007) pp 275 – 279 for exposition of the significance of the 'Reynolds Defence' which has made investigative journalism less likely to fall foul of the UK's stringent libel laws.

[xliii] Kovach and Rosenstiel P 79

[xliv] http://www.order-order.com/

[xlv] http://www.drudgereport.com/

[xlvi] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/

[xlvii] Ibid p 92

[xlviii] Monck p. 4

[xlix] Kovach and Rosenstiel p 43

[l] Press Complaints Commission (2009)
http://www.pcc.org.uk/review09/2009_statistics/statistics_conclusion.php

[li] K & R 230

[lii] George (2008)

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