1 Background and issues

Introduction

Journalism covers a huge range of output across all media and is recognizable as a form of communication in almost every country of the world. It is estimated that 80 per cent of adults in Britain read at least one national newspaper regularly and 75 per cent read a Sunday newspaper (McNair, 1999: 19). Most people rely on journalism for surveillance – to inform them about what is going on in the world. Clearly very few have direct experience of events and, just as importantly, they need to know what has not happened – if, when they wake and hear the breakfast-time bulletin leading on a relatively ‘unexciting’ story, they can be satisfied that ‘nothing much’ has happened overnight. Journalism also has an important influence in their views and attitudes.

Most people cite television as their most important source of news (ibid.) even if, as we have seen, audiences for the main TV news programmes have apparently declined in recent years. As will be argued in Chapter 7, radio remains an important source of news for most people, with almost all stations carrying a regular news service, and has a unique strength as well as some limitations as a news media. Then, of course, there are hundreds of local and regional newspapers, periodicals of all kinds and, increasingly important, online/Internet services (Peak and Fisher, 2002).
All of these outlets require journalists. Journalism is an expanding profession and, judged from the numbers of applicants to university, college and training courses, an ever more desirable career. Because of the diversity in both employers and types of journalism employment it is hard to determine precise numbers employed as journalists. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) – the main journalism trades union in the UK – had around 25 000 paid-up members in 2001 but union membership varies widely in different sectors. For reasons that will be explored in Chapter 9 freelance journalists are more likely to feel the need of union membership than are employees and the BBC’s continued recognition of the union means that broadcasting has a relatively high proportion of union membership. However, the NUJ believes that the magazine and online sectors are relatively under-represented. NUJ membership by sector in rounded figures is as in Figure 1.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Members</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freelance</td>
<td>6000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial newspapers</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcasting</td>
<td>4800</td>
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<tr>
<td>National newspapers</td>
<td>3200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>2800</td>
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<td>PR</td>
<td>1600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News agencies</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: NUJ.*

**What kind of people are journalists?**

The most detailed survey into the make-up and background of journalists in the UK was carried out by Delano and Henningham (1995). It showed that journalism is predominantly practised by white people, mostly (75 per cent) male, on average in their young middle age or late youth (mid to late 30s, but females being significantly younger on average than males). The figures supplied by the NUJ indicate that since this survey broadcasting in particular has seen a sharp rise in the proportion of females. About two-thirds of all journalists were married and just under half were brought up in the Church of England. Further analysis by the authors into the background, attitudes and motivations of British journalists (Henningham and Delano, 1998: 145) indicated that nearly one-quarter had decided they wanted to pursue a career in journalism by the age of 14 and fully two-thirds by 19. The largest proportion – 23 per cent – became journalists because of their writing skills. This is emphasized by the choice of the increasing numbers of journalists who are graduates: 48 per cent of journalists’ degrees were in the arts,
science was the discipline of just 5 per cent and commerce/business only 3 per cent (ibid: 149). Only 14 per cent said they had an ‘intrinsic interest’ in news and current affairs and just 2 per cent were motivated by a desire to influence public life.

A clear majority intended voting Labour at the next election, only 6 per cent being Conservative voters. This presents an interesting variance between the political allegiance of the national press at that time and that of the journalists. Clearly not every journalist at that time believed everything they wrote! This statistic also gives credence to complaints by the Conservative Party that most journalists are unsympathetic to their views. The gap between Labour- and Conservative-supporting journalists is likely to have widened still further since then, if it has followed the change in general public support for those parties. Furthermore, this may have implications not just for reporting of party politics as such but for the overall attitudes and sets of assumptions made by journalists. The journalists generally took liberal positions on a range of social, economic and moral issues (ibid: 151). The reason for this is probably not so much that journalists become ‘corrupted’ by being in the journalistic trade but more that journalism disproportionately attracts those who are suspicious of the establishment, are more likely to be personalities who question the ‘status quo’ and may be hostile to those holding and controlling wealth, as well as being more ‘relaxed’ than most in the population about moral/social issues. As we shall see in the section on the history of the press this is not a new phenomenon: political radicalism and constitutional change has been linked with the development of journalism.

Nearly 70 per cent of journalists in the 1995 survey had attended university or college – far more than the national average – and the proportion of graduates has increased still further since then. Journalism is now overwhelmingly a graduate profession: a huge change on the position 20 years earlier when Richard Rudin began his career!

The Delano and Henningham survey indicated that almost all journalists felt their job entailed delivering information to the public as quickly as possible; nearly 90 per cent put a high value on scrutinizing government claims and statements and almost as many in providing analysis and interpretation of complex problems. Over half thought it important to give ‘ordinary people’ a chance to express views on public affairs and almost half thought the provision of entertainment was an important part of their function.

Heroes or villains?

The image of the journalist – like others in the public eye such as doctors and police officers – has varied widely through different periods of time and amongst different sectors of the population. Many people seem to hold contradictory views about journalists: applauded when they uncover wrongdoing, fighting bureaucracy and
tackle powerful, corrupt figures on behalf of the ‘common person’ – often putting
themselves at risk of physical harm or harassment by the authorities; derided and
condemned when they appear to have grossly invaded people’s privacy or been
rude, aggressive or devious.

The question of trust seems crucial here: if the public don’t believe what they
read, see and hear from the journalistic media, then the whole basis of journalism
would seem to be undermined. As it will be argued in other chapters in this book,
for journalists credibility is everything. Yet a pan-European survey by the TV
Strategy Group reported in the Press Gazette (20 November 1998) showed that
journalists had the lowest ‘trust rating’, not only over Europe but also when
compared with audiences and readers in the USA. Of the different sectors,
magazine journalists came off worst – only 28 per cent of readers said they believed
or partially believed news reported in magazines. Across Europe radio was shown
to be the most trusted medium.

Not surprisingly this survey, which reinforced others in the same vein (the same
article also quoted a British Social Attitude Survey that found just 15 per cent of
national newspaper readers trusted journalists in this sector to pursue the truth
above getting a good story), offended many UK journalists. The Guardian’s editor
Alan Rusbridger listed a whole range of cases in which journalists had played a
positive, even heroic, role in exposing government propaganda and secrecy over
vital issues of public interest, political sleaze, cover-ups and corruption in industry
and public services, and in publishing miscarriages of justice – resulting in the
release of those who had been wrongfully convicted. Not surprisingly Rusbridger
was hurt and a little peeved by such surveys. He told the Guild of Editors ‘If you
had any official agency like that, they would be heroes. It would be a hailed and
respected organisation. And yet we in the press are unhailed, unrespected,
untrusted’ (Reeves, 1998).

The heroic status of journalists was enhanced by the reporting of the war in
Afghanistan from October 2001. Correspondents from the western media endured
great hardship as well as enormous danger – seven western journalists were killed
in the first few weeks of the war – to bring the story to their readers and audiences.
The value of independent journalism was easily recognized at a time when the
western allies – chiefly the USA and UK – and the Taliban regime were making
contradictory claims about the conduct and effects of the conflict. The reporting
seemed to have had an effect on the development of the war itself – the BBC’s
World Affairs Editor John Simpson even claimed that the BBC had liberated Kabul!
(A few days later though he explained that what he had meant to say was that the
population heard of their liberation first from the BBC (BBC, 2001). The use of
new technology, especially the satellite videophone, which enabled ‘live’ pictures
and reports to be broadcast, was a significant factor in the reporting.

There can be no doubt that those in government and other powerful institutions
believe journalism has a powerful – perhaps crucial – influence on society, on
Background and issues

attitudes, values and loyalties. The phenomenon of ‘spin doctors’ (see Chapter 11 on central government) testifies that politicians believe that seizing the news agenda – what gets reported and what does not, as well as the way those stories are reported – is a vital job of government.

Journalists are often criticized for becoming too closely involved with their subjects, of becoming part of the establishment, even involved in a conspiracy with the various elites in society – politicians, celebrities of all kinds, business leaders, Royalty, etc. One claim close to most journalists’ hearts is that they are distinct from other groups in that they retain their independence, distance and detachment. Although they may have to strike ‘deals’ with (often) highly paid, highly influential, insistent and even bullying PR types, agents and the rest of the ‘cast of characters’, journalists should always remember they are working for their audience.

What is journalism?

It is sometimes suggested that any communication of information or the relaying of ‘real’ events is journalism. This is certainly wrong. For example, the broadcasting of proceedings in Parliament, unvarnished and unadorned by any form of editing or commentary, is not journalism – it is merely the relaying of an event. The publication or broadcasting of football results is not journalism, it is merely information. As we shall see in Chapter 13, this concept is important when it comes to the question of copyright. Journalism involves the sifting and editing of information, comments and events into a form that is recognizably different from the pure form in which they first occurred. Journalism is about putting events, ideas, information and controversies into context. It is about selection and presentation. Above all, perhaps, it is about the assessment of the validity, truthfulness or representativeness of actions or comments.

News is a noun clearly linked with journalism – and therefore a good starting point for analysing the whole concept of journalism.

What is news?

The usual definition of news is something that is ‘new, interesting and true’. But that definition is not sufficient to categorize journalism and becomes progressively more problematic.

New is the least difficult; there is unlikely to be an argument over whether something has just or recently happened.

Interesting is a little bit more difficult because the obvious question arises ‘interesting to whom?’. Our interest in a story is likely to be determined partly by
where we live and by our economic and social position. Nevertheless, there will
probably be broad agreement about some stories. For example, it is unlikely that
anyone would seriously argue that the fact that hundreds of jumbo jets took off,
flew and landed without incident is not news, whereas a jumbo jet that crashes with
the loss of hundreds of lives lost is news.

Even so, why is it that only a tiny fraction of the billions of events that happen
in the world each day that might pass the basic criteria – and would certainly be
‘new’ and ‘interesting’ to at least the direct participants in the ‘story’ – do not make
it into even the local media, with even fewer making it to national and international
news media? Academics Galtung and Ruge (van Ginneken, 1998: 28–29) have
suggested there are 11 factors that influence whether an event is regarded as news
and, if so, what importance is given to it (Figure 1.2).

But what is true? As anyone who has been involved either as a participant or
professional in a road traffic accident knows, almost everyone involved in has
a different perspective and account of what happened. Presuming they are not
lying – saying something they know to be untrue – we can see that all their
accounts are ‘true’ and yet all different. The job of the journalist is to assess
those different accounts and to try to find a coherent, concise and objective
account of what happened. This, of course, presumes that the journalist has
no bias or direct involvement in the story or its participants or for any other

1. Frequency when the event happened related to the frequency of publication.
2. Threshold the event must be of a certain size – two people killed in a road
accident would be less newsworthy than the deaths of 12.
3. Clarity it must be clear and easy to understand what happened.
4. Meaningful it must relate to the culture of the society in which it is reported.
5. Consonance perhaps surprisingly, if the news is predictable and even expected it has
more chance of being included in journalistic media – except when it
is:
6. Unexpected and rare.
7. Continuity once it is news it will continue to be news.
8. Composition news overall is balanced so that there is a range of stories to interest
the consumer depending on the readership or audience profile and
particularly on the demands of advertisers.
9. Concentration on elite nations and individuals (the most obvious example being the
President of the USA who clearly fits both categories).
11. Negativity bad news is ‘better’ than good.
reason maybe less than objective. Indeed, as we shall see, the whole notion of journalists being impartial and objective, even if they genuinely wish to be so, is highly contentious.

**Influences on journalism**

As well as the factors identified by Galtung and Ruge, there are many important – often decisive – influences that affect both process and product. Most scholars and commentators agree that the chief influences are:

- **Ownership and control.** Most journalistic output is subject to the influence of the political, economic and ideology of a relatively few powerful companies and organizations. Journalists are likely to have their work ‘amended’ to fit in with these interests and, even if starting off with high ideals, operate ‘self-censorship’ in order to gain promotion and favour with the ‘bosses’.

- **Financial:** linked to the above. The amount of money devoted to journalism will – at least in capitalist enterprises – be limited in order to produce maximum profitability. Journalism is still a relatively expensive, labour-intensive, operation. The need to produce a profit and/or meet audience targets is clearly a major influence in the form and content of journalism output.

- **Time, space and technology.** All journalism has to be produced to an immovable deadline: this inevitably means that work often has to be published or broadcast in a less than ‘perfect’ state and before facts and other material can be properly checked. Journalism has to be cut to fit in with the space or time available. As we’ve seen in the Galtung and Ruge analysis there is a concentration on elite nations and individuals. There is a practical as well as an ideological reason for this – pictures and reports are more likely to be available from and about rich industrialized countries, so a disaster in the USA, for example, is likely to receive more coverage than one in, for example, a remote part of the Indian sub-continent partly because there is more likely to be material available from the former. Television, in particular, ‘needs’ moving pictures. Linked with these limitations are:

- **Bureaucratic and work routines.** Journalists have to fit in with pre-ordained and usually inflexible requirements of newsrooms. Copy, audio and pictures have to be ready for a set time and in a set form and this requires fairly inflexible organization and procedures.

**Journalism is about more than reporting ‘news’**

One of the main claims about journalism is that it has an important watchdog role: journalists are the eyes and ears of the public and help ensure that people,
particularly those in public life, are acting properly and honestly. Whereas few people will have the time or interest to attend meetings of law courts, councils and other public bodies, the journalist’s presence at such meetings ensures that business is conducted correctly and fairly. Furthermore, it is claimed that it is the knowledge that journalists are present and will check on how decisions are made that ‘encourages’ anyone who might be thinking of acting improperly to at least think again.

If we decide that journalism does not have to be all ‘serious’ or ‘hard’ news but can also be light, entertaining and about relatively obscure matters – or at least those that are of interest to only a small minority of people – then any definition must eschew defining journalism simply as news. Otherwise, we have to ask: what are all those people labouring away on magazines about small reptiles or particular types of antiques or indeed writing gossip items about celebrities if they are not journalists involved in something called journalism? Nor should any definition be specific to any type or types of media: someone working on an online service is as much a journalist as one working for a national newspaper, provided the work meets our broad definition, which is described in Figure 1.3.

Note the ‘defined audience’. Journalism is all about producing a product – sometimes discussed as commodification – and is a social construction, which is formed and limited by the dominant ideology of a society: a set of views and ideas that are presumed to be ‘normal’ and ‘common sense’. As in the production of any item, those manufacturing and producing it must know who is going to want that product. The audience – meant here to encompass viewers, readers, listeners, Web surfers, etc. – may be large or small, in a small geographical area

1. Selecting, assessing and editing information.
2. Describing events, which are of legitimate public interest or which are entertaining/non-serious, but are interesting to a defined audience.
3. Probing and testing claims and statements – especially those of authority figures (political, social, economic elites).
4. Acting as a ‘watchdog’ for the public benefit and investigating issues of concern and claims of wrong-doing that appear to be against the public interest.
5. Provide outlets for, and stimulating comment and opinion.

**ALL:**

6. Presented in an engaging way and appropriate to the medium of transmission.

**Figure 1.3**
or worldwide. But whatever the intended audience and whatever medium or media is used, journalism is a disciplined process having the end result always in mind.

The bit about ‘interesting’ is important too – we’ve already seen the importance of this adjective in relation to defining ‘news’ but it must be presented in such a way as to interest the audience – whether that is football fans, eminent surgeons, antique lovers, etc. Failure to recognize and meet this principle is the way to the bankruptcy court and the unemployment line.

The watchdog role is discussed above, but note the introduction of the idea of matters that are in the public interest: exactly what this public interest is (as opposed to what interests the public). This is one of the liveliest areas of debate in journalism today and is discussed further below in relation to privacy.

Finally, the medium (of transmission) may or may not be the message – but it is important. If a story is written for a newspaper it should be very different from the way it is presented for radio, TV, online, etc. As we shall see in this book, although there is a great deal of talk of convergence, different media do have different requirements and conventions and require different techniques. Multimedia presentations of a story require multimedia approaches and techniques.

**Serious versus non-serious journalism**

Central to much of the debates about the news media in the UK today is the concern over dumbing down and the apparent dominance of trivial, non-serious journalism at the expense of ‘serious’ matters – the latter is often described as journalism of the public sphere. Debates about the role and function of journalism have been going on for centuries but probably became more pressing and contentious at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, for it was this period that saw the development of democratic ideas, most obviously connected to the widening of the electoral franchise (the numbers and types of people eligible to vote) and with it the development of party politics. It was argued that if more of the population were to be given the vote then they needed both information and discussion of public issues to enable them to make a rational choice. Certainly, twenty-first century news media see this as very much their role: most obviously this tasks the form of leader, or comment/opinion columns in newspapers and in *Question Time*-type programmes on the radio and television. Because of the requirement on broadcasting to be fair and impartial, these media tend to be more facilitators of the debate: they set up the programmes that allow others to debate the issues, presided over by a neutral chairperson. The print media, having none of these restrictions, offer their own views (naturally these are nearly always those of the proprietors, senior editorial staff, or both).
**Classifying types of journalism**

There have been various attempts at classifying the news media, most commonly in the newspaper sector, between tabloid and broadsheet – which technically refer to the physical size of the newspapers but has been equated to the seriousness and depth of news coverage; tabloid equated with down-market, mostly trivia-led news and ‘broadsheet’ being serious newspapers, sometimes described even more contentiously as the ‘quality press’. This has been refined to include ‘mid-market’ tabloid newspapers on one hand and the ‘red tops’ (so called because of the red mast-head) as the least serious/most trivial. ‘Tabloid’ is often used as a piece of short-hand to describe other journalistic media.

Other typologies or classifications have divided newspapers – and some other journalistic media – between elite and non-elite, as the readerships or audiences of the former are mainly those in the higher socio-demographic categories in society. Another related and often interchangeable classification is based on ‘high’ ‘middle’ and ‘low’ brow, based on the intellectual level at which the journalism is aimed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most complex</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Least complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph/</td>
<td>Daily Mail-Mail on</td>
<td>The Sun; Mirror/</td>
<td>Daily Star;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday Telegraph;</td>
<td>Sunday; Express/</td>
<td>Sunday Mirror;</td>
<td>The Sport/</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Times/Sunday</td>
<td>Sunday Express;</td>
<td>News of the</td>
<td>Sunday Sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times; The</td>
<td>paid-for</td>
<td>World; The</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent/</td>
<td>evening/regional</td>
<td>People; daily</td>
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<td>Sunday press; paid-</td>
<td>regional free-</td>
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<tr>
<td>on Sunday; The</td>
<td>for weekly</td>
<td>sheets; weekly</td>
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<td>free-sheets</td>
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<td>The Observer; Sunday</td>
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<td>Business</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Scotsman;</td>
<td>The Week;</td>
<td>Woman’s Own</td>
<td>Hello!</td>
<td>What’s on TV</td>
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<td>daily morning</td>
<td>Radio Times</td>
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<tr>
<td>paid-for regional press</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newsnight (BBC 2);</td>
<td>10 O’Clock News</td>
<td>Channel 5 News;</td>
<td>Big Breakfast</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Channel 4 News;</td>
<td>(BBC 1); News at</td>
<td>local commercial</td>
<td>news</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The World Tonight</td>
<td>Ten (ITV); Sky News;</td>
<td>and national</td>
<td>(Channel 4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(BBC Radio 4)</td>
<td>Five Live Breakfast</td>
<td>commercial</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(BBC Radio 5 Live);</td>
<td>Virgin and</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>BBC local radio</td>
<td>talkSport radio</td>
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**Figure 1.4** Levels of complexity of journalistic media/products
Figure 1.4 synthesizes these various approaches into a classification based on complexity: what level of education – particularly vocabulary – is required to easily understand what is being presented? What level of knowledge is assumed or required to understand it? How much of the reader’s attention is needed in order to absorb its contents? What is the depth, breadth and range of material covered? What proportion of the output could be described as belonging to the public sphere? By considering these factors a five-tier classification is possible, ranging from 1: highest complexity, to 5: lowest complexity. Clearly, where a range of titles and/or output is described in one category (e.g., daily morning paid-for regional press) the level given is an average for that sector: individual examples could well be one category either side of that given. Although the second row gives examples of periodicals, in general these are so varied and specialist that is impossible to make even broad generalizations.

**Future of journalism: issues and developments**

Around the turn of the twenty-first century there was much excited talk about information technology, especially the Internet, leading journalism – and the media generally – into a brave new world in which the customer, citizen or consumer would be king: access to news and current affairs of all kinds would be available to all, any time, anywhere. Media companies large and small invested massively in the technology, many fearful that if they didn’t they would be left behind. Linked to this was the prospect of converging technologies, making the concept of ‘TV’, ‘computer’ and ‘telephone’ redundant: new or adapted devices would do everything in the one box.

Then, just as the millennium began there was the phenomenon of the ‘burst of the dot com bubble’: the stock market, investment fund-holders and financial institutions suddenly lost confidence in new companies that had borrowed huge amounts of money but had no assets – or profits. Many went bust. At the same time older, established media companies also cut back on their investment in new technology, leaving hundreds redundant. The death of newspapers – so often predicted in the past with the arrival of each new medium – proved once again to have been exaggerated. If anything the online versions of newspapers appear to have stimulated readership of ‘hard copies’.

Round-the-clock digital television news channels – whether operated by the established organizations such as BBC and ITN or by more recent arrivals – attracted a tiny fraction of the total TV audience. Digital radio (DAB), which offered round-the-clock news radio services for the first time in most parts of the UK had an even slower take-up, but audiences to old-fashioned analogue services – whether listened to via a conventional set or a modem – provided an enjoyable
accompaniment to Web ‘surfing’. RAJAR audience figures released in August 2001 suggested that, for the first time in at least three decades, radio listening exceeded TV viewing (RAJAR, 2001). News availability through WAP mobile phones appeared to offer novelty but not much more.

The Internet and the World Wide Web have, though, been extraordinary phenomena that have greatly changed the ways in which many people work and use their leisure time. Undoubtedly they are also extremely useful tools for the journalist, especially in researching stories. But almost everyone who has used the Internet has experienced great frustration in trying to find the news and information they want. The very lack of regulation and control, one of the main attractions of the Internet, is also one of its weaknesses. The most popular sites for news and information have turned out to be those operated by the oldest and most trusted media organizations, notably the BBC. The business of journalism – sifting, assessing, editing and summarizing – is as much valued in the Internet age as it was in the eighteenth century.

In the meantime many people who had hoped the Internet would ensure that many more ‘voices’, opinions and perspectives would break through into people’s consciousness have been sorely disappointed. Although some ‘Web-only’ news services have broken stories and provided a refreshingly different perspective on events, in general the new media has resulted in a consolidation in the power and influence of the ‘old’ media organizations.

The impact of new technology on journalism and journalists’ working practices has been enormous: multimedia and multi-skilling are the buzz-words that require and enable journalists to produce work across a number of media and to be technically proficient in those media. Digital technology has ‘freed’ journalists from reliance on a complex production process involving many different craft skills; increasingly journalists have direct production and editorial control of their material. But the demands of a 24-hour non-stop news world are voracious and many journalists complain that they have to cut corners in order to produce material for many outlets and that this leads to a superficial quality to their work; that they are increasingly tied to the news-desk or studio and unable to get out and find out the ‘real’ news. The danger of this is that journalists increasingly have to take official statements and information at face value – they don’t have time to question or probe what is really going on. Purdey (2000) suggests that there is now a sharp divide between the ethos and approach of BBC and commercial radio journalists, with implications for journalists’ training, recruitment and work practices in the two sectors.

Linked to this is that many journalists are becoming more like news processors: small newsrooms in local newspapers and commercial radio stations in particular rarely break news apart from stories picked up from the ‘calls’ to the emergency services: fires, crimes and road accidents. They are not primary news gatherers: they recycle news from local and national agencies, with perhaps the
occasional report picked up from press releases from local councils and the like. It is rare in these news media to read or hear authority figures being vigorously questioned: instead a bland sound bite, giving the no doubt media-trained official chance to give the approved ‘line’ or ‘spin’ on the story goes out unchallenged.

An even more fundamental and significant question has arisen as to whether all this extra news availability has led to the public becoming better informed or engaged in thinking about, discussing and participating in public affairs and the democratic process. Electoral turn-out in the 2001 general election was the lowest since the establishment of the universal adult franchise (see Chapter 11). A concept has arisen of the information rich and information poor. There has been much concern that an increasing minority, especially amongst the young, are ‘managing’ to avoid any engagement with serious journalism – this at a time when, at least when judged by examination success and university attendance, the population has never been so well educated. Far from the news media and education developing in tandem (as this chapter has argued happened during the age of enlightenment) the two elements now seem to be pulling apart.

In tandem with this there seems to be an increasing gap in both the public and in journalism between the serious and the non-serious; the latter becoming obsessed by trivia, celebrity-dominated gossip and titillation, fed by a consumerist ideology. However, the terrorist attacks on the USA in September 2001 and the events that followed led to a major shift in the editorial focus of many news outlets, particularly in the ‘red top’ tabloid press. These newspapers returned to more traditional types of journalism, concentrating on telling the audience what was going on in this major and disturbing and many-faceted ‘story’. There was evidence of increased investment in traditional journalistic activities, particularly in foreign correspondents – a number of whom put themselves in great danger. Just at the moment when it seemed that much British ‘tabloid’ journalism was in danger of being smothered in a sea of increasingly trivial stories – many based around the antics of ‘characters’ on ‘reality’ TV game shows – popular, accessible but nevertheless serious-minded journalism was making a come-back. As Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan told the Society of Editors:

I hear Mirror secretaries talking of anthrax not EastEnders, Bin Laden not Robbie Williams, the terrain of Northern Afghanistan not their next holiday in Crete . . . There is a sudden and prolonged hunger for serious news and information (Preston, 2001).

Whether this reversion to more serious, public-sphere journalism by the Mirror and other tabloid newspapers is a temporary phenomenon or a more permanent, fundamental shift in journalistic values will only become clear after some months, if not years have elapsed since 11 September 2001.
Suggested activities

1. Construct your own definition of a journalist.
2. Using a questionnaire, do a mini survey of journalists at your local newspaper or radio station: do they seem to fit with the Delano and Henningham findings? (You’ll need to be both tactful and discrete in how you do this!)
3. Study the Galtung and Ruge criteria of what makes news and apply them to an edition of a national newspaper or a television news broadcast – do these criteria seem to be justified in your example?
4. Use the same material to assess how objective is the coverage of a controversial topic.
5. Using the ‘complexity’ table (Figure 1.4) take three examples of different types of national newspapers and do a rough analysis of the editorial space devoted to serious/public sphere journalism and non-serious/trivial material.
6. Spend a day at your local newspaper: try to analyse what the main influences are on the journalists’ work, e.g., work routines, deadlines, commercial/advertising influences, understanding of readers’ needs/demands, legal/ethical considerations.
7. Using the information in this chapter and from the Sources and resources section below construct a chronology/timeline of the important developments in press and broadcast journalism in the UK.
8. Using the ‘search’ facilities on major news sites, investigate a current issue/controversy concerning journalistic regulation and/or ethics.
9. Find a news/feature story about the news media that portrays a journalist (or set of journalists) in the heroic mode (fearless, campaigning), and one that portrays them as villains (prying, immoral, insensitive). What are the underlying assumptions about what journalists and journalism ‘could’ or ‘should’ be?
10. Hold a debate on the proposition: ‘journalists have a unique role in shaping the public’s attitudes and values’.

Sources and resources


**Other recommended Web sites**

*CAR Park UK* (Computer-Assisted Reporting and research resources for journalism in the United Kingdom from Focal Press author Alan Rawlinson): http://www.rawlinson.co.uk
Columbia Journalism Review (from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, described as ‘America’s premiere media monitor’, is particularly good on ownership and control of news media): http://www.cjr.org

Hold the Front Page (site for and about regional UK journalists, with the background to many journalism issues): http://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/index.htm

International Federation of Journalists (described as the world’s largest journalists’ organization, discusses many current journalism issues): http://www.ifj.org/index-html

Thunderbird (produced by the Journalism School of the University of British Columbia, Canada: has many relevant articles about current journalism issues): http://www.journalism.ubc.ca/thunderbird.html

USC Annenberg Online Journalism Review: http://ascweb.usc.edu/home.php