

Sports journalist Daniel Taylor [wrote an article](#) highlighting questions that still needed answering about the Valley Parade stadium fire of 1985 in which 56 people died. But publishing it was just the beginning of the story.

The furore it provoked is part and parcel of [shifts in the industry](#) that requires journalists to be even more public facing. But it also highlights the need for employers to recognise the new demands required of their staff.

Taylor's article raised questions over how the tragedy was dealt with and commemorated by the club and this attracted the ire of fans over Twitter and in the comments section under The Guardian article. A heated debate ensued. Other readers tweeted links to the article arguing that it was an important work of journalism which brought back into the public consciousness a tragedy which took place nearly 30 years ago.

Taylor responded both in the comments section of his web article and on social media:

He hit back at accusations of inaccurate and irresponsible journalism by providing supporting evidence from his source – a friend who was at Valley Parade that day and lost four family members in the fire – who testified the claims were true.

Transparency and accountability

The audience's ability to challenge journalism through social and digital media is nothing new, but the Valley Parade story brings journalist-reader interaction into sharp focus. The Guardian encourages its journalists to converse with audiences - and Taylor did exactly that.

But determining how exactly to respond and engage with the audience can be problematic. Who do I respond to? What do I say? When do I stop interacting? How do I go about defending my journalism?

Also, some journalists are often under pressure to constantly produce stories – a process known within the industry as “churnalism”. So there isn't always the opportunity to engage with deep and meaningful discussions about the article. There simply isn't time because the next story needs to be worked on.

The transparency and accountability that comes with journalist-audience interaction can help to ensure quality reporting. Sports journalists often write on emotive and highly-charged issues and need to be able to deal with the reaction in a sensitive matter. They are also called upon to regularly defend themselves against accusations of bias and partisanship. Silence is not an option because it can be interpreted as aloof, indifferent, secretive or even an admission of guilt.

Wider labour challenges

But the principle of open journalism – forward-thinking and democratic though it may be – presents wider labour challenges. News organisations must be clear over what their expectations are from journalists and establish whether or not and to what extent engaging with the public online can be considered journalistic production. After all, it can be a lengthy and time-consuming process. Media companies then need to be able to give journalists the scope within their terms of employment to pursue and build this relationship rather than expect it to happen on the side.

Also, news organisations have a corporate and moral responsibility to train and develop journalists' skills in this manner. This is not simply a case of staff development but is about improving the standard of journalism through meaningful interaction with audiences. [A University of Texas-based](#)

[study](#) that analysed Facebook comments found readers were more likely to be civil and constructive if journalists engaged with them.

Journalism schools also have a role in preparing graduates for interaction with readers. The City University of New York recognised this shift by [announcing plans to run a Master's in Social Journalism](#) degree. But journalism schools should be thinking carefully about how they can embed online social interaction and engagement into existing programmes because these elements are now an integral part of all journalism – they do not exist as separate strands.

Stories continue to run long after the article is written and journalists must be prepared to go the extra mile to ensure credibility and authority. It is vital that news organisations and educators recognise journalist-audience communication has become a critically important aspect of journalism and give specific and detailed guidance to ensure staff operate in open, transparent, sensitive and responsible ways. The audience is fully entitled to challenge journalism – but journalists must be given the support and scope to meet those demands effectively.

This article was corrected to reflect Daniel Taylor's Guardian article, which did not criticise Bradford City AFC for not doing enough.

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