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Are You There, Robert Downey Jr.? It's Me, Your Biographer: Mainstreaming entertainment journalism across literary genres

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**Are You There, Robert Downey Jr.? It's**

**Me, Your Biographer:**

**Mainstreaming entertainment journalism across literary**

**genres**

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PhD by Publication 2019 (including amendments following viva)

**Abstract**

This project is a commentary accompanying three of my published books – two unauthorised celebrity biographies about movie star Robert Downey Jr. and TV scientist Professor Brian Cox and a textbook about entertainment journalism. Using these three texts, this piece of work explores how my background as a showbusiness journalist informs both their execution and my wider writing practice. It examines how entertainment journalism is currently perceived by the public and why it should be given sufficient weight in terms of its adherence to Galtung and Ruge's (1965) and Harcup and O'Neill's (2001) taxonomies of news values and its impact on society. Looking at theorists across celebrity culture, journalism and linguistics, alongside various practitioners, it will explore how the construction of unauthorised celebrity biography responds to myth-making and narrative theory and how that feeds into my academic writing. Then, utilising different methodologies including persona, narrative, showbusiness journalism tropes and the teaching of so-called soft skills required by modern employers, as well as considering the goal of media textbooks, it will demonstrate how I have used my style of writing to create 'tribridity' within the textbook form by introducing celebrity journalism into the format, alongside memoir and how that is reflected in my teaching practice.

Are You There, Robert Downey Jr.? It's Me, Your Biographer

Are You There, Robert Downey Jr.? It's Me, Your Biographer: Mainstreaming  
entertainment journalism across literary genres

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC, HUMANITIES AND  
MEDIA, UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD, IN FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DECEMBER 2019

DECLARATION

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the  
award of Higher Degree at any other educational institution.

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## **Introduction**

“This is not a textbook. I mean it is, kind of...”

(Falk, 2018:1)

When you are a journalist and author and you are asked to write a textbook by an academic publisher about your chosen field, it can be daunting. Despite being what some describe as a ‘hackademic’ (a journalist-cum-teacher), there is a fear about treading into uncharted waters. Textbooks are archives, authoritative forms of written communication that preserve significant ideas and their meaning for generations (Olson, 1980). It is one thing talking about your craft in a classroom, it is quite another to codify that in a form which demands academic study. That requires a writing strategy, that is a series of conscious and articulable decisions so that the finished work has a better chance of achieving what you intended it to do (Perrin, 2013).

I have spent twenty years as an entertainment and celebrity journalist, writing unauthorised biographies of movie star Robert Downey Jr. and TV physicist Professor Brian Cox (Falk 2010, 2012). These forays into celebrity biography and the skills it gave me in long-form writing as well as the confidence in publishing, in turn led me to approach academic publisher Routledge and them subsequently agreeing to publish a collation of those skills, knowledge and experience into a textbook called *Entertainment Journalism: Making It Your Career* (Falk, 2018). It is using these three books that I will attempt to codify my approach to writing and contribution to knowledge, as well as how these texts are connected, in this commentary, specifically what I call the ‘tribridity’ that exists between the frameworks of showbusiness journalism, academic writing and biography.

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My goal is to contribute to the acceptance of the mainstreaming of popular culture writing – recognising showbiz journalism as literature. When the world of entertainment and journalism have combined historically, the result has always been perceived as less valuable, less noble. Van den Bulck et al. (2017) ask, “Does celebrity news as a hybrid genre adhere to professional standards and values generally considered part of ‘good’ journalism?” (46). This is despite their popular impact and the extent to which so-called yellow journalism outlets, forged in the era of media owners William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, fundamentally helped broaden newspapers’ appeal (Marshall, 2005) and even protected them from the encroaching new media as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed (Conboy, 2014). Hard news is vital, but being distracted from your problems and focused on others via avenues like celebrity and entertainment also serves a purpose (Falk, 2018). The latter is, “the location for the exploration of the ‘politics of the personal’ in our transformed and shifting public sphere” (Marshall, 2005: 28). I will examine why there is cause for trumpeting showbiz reporting, its position as a hybrid journalism practice (Van den Bulck et al., 2017) and its associated techniques not as ephemeral work, but as literature in its own right, which can be applied to traditional forms such as textbooks, alongside biography. Why, in fact, the type of material generally dismissively termed as ‘celebrity journalism’ owes as much to Samuel Johnson as more high-minded fare thanks to Johnson’s explanations about the need to cover vice as much as virtue (Johnson, 1750).

Commentators who argue that celebrity and entertainment fuel the debasement of our culture and will drive us to extinction can reach such a level of hysteria over the most recent series of British reality dating show *Love Island* as to be considered a moral

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panic. This is ironic considering Stanley Cohen demonstrated how the popular (or mass) media were the ones who created moral panics and as he explains, using that phrase “implies the societal reaction is disproportionate to the actual seriousness (risk, damage, threat) of the event” (Cohen, 2002: xxxiv). My hope is that the existence of my textbook helps assuage the fear that this genre is bad by giving it cultural weight and acknowledging its validity. Distinguished scholars in this field like P. David Marshall continue to insist that celebrity is a “pedagogical aid in the discourse of the self” (Marshall, 2010: 36) and writing about it continues to fuel discussion about how we present ourselves to the public (ibid.). Examining a celebrity through textual, alongside extra-textual forms, helps us clarify the nature of a public persona (Marshall and Barbour, 2015) and its level of authenticity, while Umberto Eco’s insistence that we reject “intellectual passivity toward popular culture” (Bondanella, 1997:48) and explore the power relationships intrinsic within mass culture (ibid.) demand academic literature in this genre. Sociologist Erving Goffman, who argued that everyone’s public identity is essentially a self-created mask adapted for different scenarios and spoke in terms of dramatic personas, will be relevant here and will help to establish the value of my books to that discourse. Reflecting critically and pedagogically on my own textbook within the academic book tradition, I hope to show how I have merged two forms – one of high culture (textbooks) and one of low culture (showbiz journalism) to create something new. I will also explore explicit narrative theory in building an authentic biographical character and how that same sense of crafting a persona is necessary when creating an academic text within the genre of entertainment writing. By doing this, I hope to demonstrate how my journalistic and biographical writing directly influenced the creation of something published by “the world's leading academic publisher in the Humanities and Social Sciences”



(Routledge, 2019). Furthermore, by using techniques from entertainment writing such as easy to read sentence construction – including a relaxed authorial persona – listicles and Q&As, as well as celebrity anecdote and examples from my own professional life as a showbusiness journalist that mean the book contains elements of memoir, I have produced a ‘tribrid’ literary form.

### **The perception of entertainment writing and its value as source material**

Writing about entertainment is often perceived as an ephemeral pursuit, even though the culture usually associated with celebrities and showbiz has spread to political, sport and business reporting (Turner, 2010). The rise in transmedia storytelling has facilitated fresh ways to disseminate this kind of material, while newspapers’ online editions lead with celebrity content, even as their print siblings disavow it (Arcy, 2018, Turner, 2010). Despite this proliferation, audiences who thrive on these kinds of stories are frequently looked down on. This is not a new attitude. Cultural pessimists like Q.D. Leavis wrote in the early 1930s about the debasement of mass culture, while post-structuralist historians argued late-20<sup>th</sup> century identity was wrapped up in popular – read unworthy – entertainment (Spalding, 2007). Meanwhile, writers like Umberto Eco fought against the people he described as “apocalyptic intellectuals”, who he felt criticised popular culture without genuinely attempting to interrogate it (Bondanella, 1997). He railed against the calcification of what is considered high and low culture, one that is good for you and the other bad, one a passive experience and the other active (Eco, 1986). Today, we live in a unique celebrity landscape. The study of them as reflections of humanity and modernity is now an academic discipline. Graeme Turner argues we are living in the era of the ‘demotic turn’, which formalises the role of an ‘ordinary person’ who becomes media-worthy, a description that can be

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ascribed to Professor Brian Cox as a previously-anonymous journeyman scientist at CERN who became well-known when he appeared on the BBC explaining the Large Hadron Collider. Let us be clear however that celebrities as we intuit them, even these transient, self-propelled ones, are not a modern phenomenon. Sixteenth century German merchant Jakob Fugger handed out his portrait carved in wood in a bid to raise his profile, while as Western universities grew around the same time, so did “star scholars” (Rublack, 2015: 400) like Erasmus. What is Cox if not a celebrity scholar?

Part of the paradox is that just as the rise of reality television and social media has facilitated a new way to build famous people who mostly have an “unmediated forum for self-representation” (Arcy, 2018: 490) and are known and followed by the public, these systems of celebrity are like factories churning out products that usually have built-in sell-by dates (Turner, 2006). They are creating ‘celetoids’, the name coined by Chris Rojek for minor names whose fame is media-constructed (Rojek, 2001) and who disappear quickly from public view (Deller, 2016), rather than enduring celebrities like Robert Downey Jr. who have been famous for over 20 years and whose celebrity has, if anything, increased during that time. It is interesting, in fact, that Downey’s fame was born in the period before social media, particularly considering that since he has become one of the most successful and richest stars in the world, social media has exacerbated the dilution of mediated personas across online culture in pandemic proportions (Marshall and Barbour, 2015). Not only did his timing help him by minimising the impact his drug addiction, arrests and court appearances had on his public persona since they were not able to be globally and instantaneously disseminated in quite the same way as they would be now, but it

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meant he avoided having to indulge in what Arcy calls the “digital money shot” by maximising his presence online and in over-the-top fashion (Arcy, 2018: 498) so beloved of reality TV stars. Nevertheless, he does still present what P. David Marshall calls the “public private self” (Marshall, 2010: 44) on his Facebook and Twitter feeds, utilising that parasocial relationship to build connections with his audience, though not as explicitly or clinically as reality TV stars the Kardashian family might. In other words, while it remains exclusive, the sense of celebrity as solely an elite profession has broken down. The rise of stars who are Insta-influencers and YouTube vloggers means that ‘average’ people now see it as not just an aspirational career choice, but a viable one (Turner, 2006).

Of course, this perpetuates the belief that entertainment journalism is ‘lesser’. That it is low culture. People rely on the media using its editorial filtering system “to organise and hierarchise what is valuable, significant and important” (Marshall, 2010: 45), but if you are writing about ordinary people creating free-to-view content on the internet, how does that have value? If the new popular culture, particularly online, has dispersed that traditional representative system (ibid.), then why should what is categorised within it be considered worthwhile and newsworthy? But as Marshall contends, journalists have merged the way they have traditionally written about celebrities with the way they interrogate and explore other more conventionally high-brow topics, while the celebs themselves have been one of the methods to expand our understanding of the public sphere. In short, “entertainment journalism’s emergence and evolution has directly affected the way all journalists work and how audiences interact with the material they produce” (Falk, 2018: 29). I contend on the very first page of my textbook, “The entertainment sphere is worth billions around the globe

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and it involves deals which shape government policy. The depictions in movies and the actions of celebrities...help people decide what to wear and how to act as well as being barometers of social equality, arbiters of change and predictors of technological shifts” (Falk, 2018: 1). These very celebrities contribute to people’s understanding of what constitutes an “everyday persona” (Marshall et. al.: 302), that is how the populace self-identifies in front of everybody else, thereby influencing our behaviour. Entertainment journalism then surely adheres to all the guidelines for newsworthiness set out by theorists Galtung and Ruge in 1965 and latterly Harcup and O’Neill in 2001. What might be considered by some to be ordinary, even trifling events, in fact demonstrate high levels of meaningfulness (Brottman, 2005), making showbusiness, the business of entertainment, a genre which demands public coverage.

Galtung and Ruge’s identification of twelve conditions that lend a piece of information value as news are reflected throughout entertainment journalism and thus through my biographies, in turn making it a subject worthy of an academic textbook. Both Robert Downey Jr. and Professor Brian Cox (once he had become a television personality) are elite persons due to the fact they are in the public eye and they are from the U.S.A. and the U.K. respectively, which are generally considered elite nations, particularly for a Western audience. One of the reasons I chose Downey Jr. is because his troubled background would demonstrate negativity, while the narrative of his life I describe in the book, which resembles a Hollywood biopic in its tale of Icarus-style crash and subsequent redemption, demonstrates consonance (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). However, there are critics of this approach, who contend it does not adequately cover events that are not international crises (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). In fact, they go so far as to specifically include celebrity and entertainment in their

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own taxonomy, declaring “no contemporary set of news values is complete without an entertainment factor” (ibid.: 17). Both sets of values speak of how personalising stories increase their newsworthiness and this is something that is very much apparent in my biographies, as well as my textbook. *The Fall and Rise of the Comeback Kid* is not about criminal justice reform and the system’s treatment of non-violent drug offenders, even if Downey Jr.’s case and his time in prison brought up these arguments. Instead, it is a book about a man, who is an addict, who among other things goes to prison. Similarly, *The Wonder of Brian Cox* is about celebrating the life and success of a man who has become one of the U.K.’s pre-eminent science communicators, rather than a treatise about a country’s failure to advocate strongly enough on behalf of STEM subjects, or certain political groups’ rebuke of scientific expertise. Not only does this personalisation increase its salience, it is also an ethical decision as an author. For one, I do not see myself as a science writer and thus commentary on science funding and education would come from a place of comparative ignorance. *The Wonder of Brian Cox* is not intended as a polemic. Perhaps it would have been different were I writing about a historical life, when you are considering more deeply the “historical nexuses that guided these people” (Breisach, 2007). But science funding is a political issue and it felt like impressing one’s political views in a text like this was unethical or inappropriate. *Entertainment Journalism*, similarly, hands out its advice and knowledge with an individual in mind, a ‘you’ or ‘we’ that is the reader and the author in order to lend it greater credence.

As someone who writes in this field then, I am required to challenge any assertion that it is a flippant genre. As W. Joseph Campbell said of the so-called yellow aka tabloid press, an enduring myth is of it as primarily an entertainment medium, that it

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“frivolously discounted and even corrupted fact-based journalism in order to merely titillate and distract its readers” (Campbell, 2001: 2). This simply is not true.

Campbell notes this kind of journalism can be flamboyant and even self-indulgent, but it's also energetic, complex and enterprising (Campbell, 2001). It requires deep research, as was the case with both of my biographies, which each featured more than 50 interviewees, some on the record and some off (Falk, 2010, 2012). It requires someone to take it seriously. Further, Turner (2010) argues that it's now incumbent upon those who work in this area to be more ambitious in our research, which is why producing the first textbook in its subject was an important next step. Not just because it is an analytical piece of work as well as descriptive, but also because it concentrates on the “industrial production, as well as the audience consumption, of celebrity” (Turner, 2010: 19).

I also have the power however, within the construct of my book, to frame my entertainment subjects as important, something I also did as a showbiz journalist. If McCombs and Shaw (1972) are correct and the media are good at telling its readers what to think about, then I did engage in my own agenda-setting. I do not believe this to be deceptive, as I was focused on disseminating truthful and what I perceived to be salient information across all three books (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). The counterpoint to this would be that the proliferation of entertainment and its stature within Harcup and O'Neill's news taxonomy is not organic or audience-driven, but instead promoted by media conglomerates pre-occupied with making money (ibid.) I would argue both are true concurrently. The media can indeed decide to force audiences' attention to particular issues and affect their cognitive understanding of them (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and sometimes they are less worried about what is

reported than the manner in which those things are depicted (Weaver, 2007). But that is to forget journalists are also people who bring their own passions and viewpoints to their work. We are also part of the audience as well as part of the media. I am a movie fan and a television watcher, someone who probably cares more about actors, directors and writers than I do about politics and sociological issues. So while my biographies and textbook might be agenda-setting by emphasising the perceived salience of my subjects to my audience (Weaver, 2007), it is also true that I have been primed to believe this genre matters through experience and access to this kind of material; “affect dominant” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 186). My “interpretive schema” (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007: 12) as derived from Goffman, is that I interpret entertainment meaningfully, which I do not believe negates the genre’s credibility as a primary modern news value.

Nevertheless, producing work within this genre has its issues. Dyer (1998) argues that our understanding of a star’s image – that is, what we know about them – comes about through different forms of media texts, which he terms promotion, publicity, criticism and commentaries and films. If one is to contribute to knowledge and push research in a new direction, one has to be careful that one is not participating in pure promotion, which is merely “part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star” (Dyer, 1998: 60). I needed to use my journalistic abilities to write about what I found out through my research, even if it went against the image, especially the supposedly rehabilitated, drug-free image that Downey Jr. was trying to project. Dyer suggests this so-called publicity is not always as authentic as it might appear and is in some ways still controlled by the people cultivating a star’s image. That may be true of short newspaper stories, or even

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magazine features, but I do not believe it is the case when someone has the time and space to explore a subject more deeply than you normally would when writing a straightforward article. In a book of this kind done properly, publicity and criticism and commentaries hybridise to create a media product that while helping to “construct a response to the star” (Dyer, 1998: 63) does not operate in the same space as those who “construct the image in promotion and films” (ibid: 63). This is done by challenging the narrative of his/her life that the star has curated and that has been perpetuated by promotional media. For example, a prevalent story amongst the materials you might read about Robert Downey Jr., is the one he tells of when he and his family lived for a while in London when he was about 10.

“I don’t want to say I did anything correctly at Perry House because the truth is that I spent my whole time there with my nose in the corner, being a moron. But yes, part of the studies there required that boys and girls did ballet.”

Robert Downey Jr., *WENN*, 2005

His tale makes for a nice celebrity anecdote – A-list movie star did ballet when he was at a school in England. The problem is, Perry House does not exist. While researching the book, I simply could not find it. The closest is Parayhouse School in west London, but it was set up in 1983 (several years after the Downeys were in the UK) and is for students with special educational needs. This is, of course, not an isolated phenomenon. Sally Cline describes sifting through the manipulated memories of Lillian Hellman, who altered the fundamentals of her marriage to Dashiell Hammett, airbrushing out his previous connection to future wife Jose Dolan and erasing any suggestion that she maintained a relationship with her first husband



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Arthur Kober (Cline, 2010). Unauthorised biography allows greater scope here to diverge from the subject's own narrative. It also means the writer can point out 'alternative facts' and clarify them, as I did in my book (Falk, 2010). With both of my biographies, I did not want to just join up a series of self-serving platitudes (Morton, 2010), but to create something that was about complexity and was able to be read with complexity (Angier, 2010). As such, I needed to approach both my subjects if not adversarially, then at least focused on avoiding puffery. My proposal document (Falk, 2009: see Appendix 1) positioned the book as the definitive document of an actor whose life had been a tabloid staple for years, without any longform analysis or collation. He had tried to throw the people charting his life off the scent through misdirection, deflective humour, charisma and plain forgetfulness. "My God, how does one write a biography?" cries Virginia Woolf (Caine, 2010: 85) when charged – against her will – with writing a book about her friend Roger Fry, a book she did not want to write because of the restrictions imposed on her about Fry's private life and which ended as one of Woolf's rare failures (Hamilton, 2007).

Author Hermione Lee cites Carlyle, who argued a biographer should open their heart to their subject (Lee, 2005) and some go further, expressing their joy at sharing beliefs and interest with whom they are writing about (Anderson Smith, 1998), introjecting part of their subject into themselves (Symington, 2018). Robert Downey Jr. returned the advance on his autobiography and did not respond to my email requests for interview, while Professor Brian Cox also declined to participate in my book about him, suggesting they were not interested in having their life story written. They were not ready for promotion to become publicity (Dyer, 1998), or in the former's case, they are likely worried the publicity element will extinguish what

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promotion they have undertaken in more recent years. “The incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind,” writes Johnson (1750: 2) and he is correct – it is about finding out new things that may cause readers to take pause or even gasp as well as providing a fresh perspective on someone’s life. This can be at odds with the concept of finding something to love about your subject – although not necessarily a problem that those writing about the dead have to worry about, apart from possible interference by next of kin (Hamilton, 2007) – but a potential burden for those recording the living. What if you are worried about disrespecting the wishes of your potential subject, of committing a form of treachery (Reid, 1998)? How does one proceed without distorting the work (Anderson Smith, 1998) when anger can occur at what is sometimes perceived to be betrayal (Lee, 2005)? Author David McCullough was planning to write a biography of Pablo Picasso, but decided not to after a few months of research because he thought the artist was a terrible person and he felt the writing of his life would not be an enjoyable and satisfying experience (Hamilton, 2007).

I did not care desperately about either Robert Downey Jr. or Professor Brian Cox. The latter was a commission from a publisher and the former was a conscious decision to choose someone with an amazing life story that would help me break into biography (Falk, 2009). It was about the book, about the writing of the book, rather than the topic. With *The Wonder of Brian Cox* (2012), I had interviewed Cox for an article, but never watched his programmes. I was aware that popular science writing had become an important genre in bookshops (Holmes, 2016) and that Cox was at the forefront of that, but otherwise I was not fixated on him to the point where I was about to smooth any edges he might have (Hamilton, 2007). Indeed, with both, I was prepared for it to

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be an unpleasant story, that fans might dislike and attack me for, like they did for author Robert Caro after he'd produced his biography of Lyndon Johnson (Hamilton, 2007). But while Joyce Carol Oates may decry modern denigratory biography as "pathography" (Oates, cited in Brownley, 2011: 81) where the reason behind them was malevolent, I would counter that these celebrity profiles (for that is what they are) help reveal something hidden (Marshall, 2005). The relationship with the subject may be more adversarial, but if you are able as an author to tread the line between muckraking – or scandal-mongering – and the real story, then it is a success (Marshall, 2005), even if you are "listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail" (Malcolm, cited in Hamilton, 2007). Further, you participate in a genuine elevation of the discussion around that star's image as described by Dyer, because you are finding out new things and contributing to the "complexity, contradictoriness and 'polysemy' of the star" (Dyer, 1998: 63) within modern culture.

### **Academizing showbiz journalism**

If one is attempting to marry forms perceived to be situated within different strata of culture, how does one do that in practice? *Entertainment Journalism: Making it your career* needed to a creative communicative act disseminating my ideas (Strongman, 2013), but also needed to produce a telementational effect from the author to the reader (Harris, 2014). My personal experience of journalism textbooks as an educator has generally been negative. Indeed, my involvement was similar to the survey carried out by Hartley (2008) – the results of which many academics may think a little unfair – which found that academic writing was unnecessarily complicated, elitist, humourless and pompous amongst others (Hartley, 2008). Sword (2012) adds impersonal and abstract to that list, though suggests there are some which are

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compelling or contain humour. At their worst, or sometimes at their usual, they are perceived as dry or boring (Swain, 2007), traditionally utilising formal language such as passive verbs, avoiding contractions and phrasal (multi-word) verbs and the first person (Coventry University, 2018). As a higher education journalism teacher, I have found that while some published textbooks may work as background reading material, particularly in the first year of university, most are ineffective as a genuine pedagogical tool in the classroom environment. This is down to several factors. For starters, there is, argues Sword (2012), “a massive gap between what most readers consider to be good writing and what academics typically produce and publish” (Sword, 2012: 3). There has long been a misconception that the rules of textbook reflect desirable usage, going back to Harold B. Allen’s 1935 study that argued that not to be true (Meyers, 1995). Indeed, it could be said that the conventions of academic writing came about as a result of “the tendency to use literature unreflectively as the model for language, to construct rules of grammar on the basis of written texts” (Olson, 1980: 186). Sword (2012) quotes Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *New York Times Book Review* article, which opines, “professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic skill because they think that is what editors want, both editors of academic journals and editors of university presses. What we have here is a chain of misunderstanding and misinformation...” (Limerick, 1993, cited in Sword, 2012: 7).

In order to produce the optimal text then, recognising the function of one’s textbook is vital, since there is a “link between function and form” (Guthrie, 1981: 556).

Nikonova et. al. (2016) believe it needs to stimulate thinking, contain educational material, think about the how the field will develop in the future and concentrate on

problem topics, while activities should be organised sensibly (Beilinson, 1986) and students should be able to read and assimilate the material independently so they may self-educate (Zuev, 1983). One needs also to consider how the book itself will be utilised, as the only method of study, or a major reference alongside others (Guthrie, 1981). What kind of book is one intending to write? One with specific goals and didactically developed content, or one that I think better illustrates the plan for my own, which is what Nikonova (2016) describes as “dogmatic (without diagnostically set goals, but with a didactically developed content” (3766)? That is, a book which does not require the reader to be at a specific end point pedagogically by the time they have finished, but whose content is borne from educational materials and disseminates several years of first-hand, hard-learned experience via the text. Unlike certain areas of journalism however, I was not able to research previous efforts in the field for inspiration, since my book was the first academic book of its kind. Instead, I started by scrutinising textbooks in other connected areas which I had previously used as teaching aids.

*The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Journalism Handbook* (2013) by Holmes, Hadwin and Mottershead and *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (2012) by Hudson and Rowlands are both laid out in similar ways – they share a publisher – and had some positive elements. The former has a supporting website, a feature of this evolving genre, but it seemed to dilute the content of the print artefact and while it was something I considered for myself, it became clear that it was unsustainable considering the advance on offer from Routledge. From a design perspective, it was quite busy with multiple box-out elements including “Thinking it through” and “Remember” sections, which were all differently-shaded. These contained some valuable insights and again were something

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I wanted to nod to in my textbook because of how important it is to signpost content, but the sheer amount of them felt overwhelming. In *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Journalism Handbook* in particular, the variety of information reflected the broad title. In discussions with my editors during the development process, broader journalism topics were discussed, but it was clear that lent my book open to this kind of vagueness, which was something I wanted to avoid.

*The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* included a page near the beginning called 'a guided tour' which explained more clearly what all the different box-out sections were and what they meant. For example, "Thinkpiece boxes encourage the reader to consider some of the issues central to working as an informed broadcast journalist" (viii). This was useful, but pointed in my view to the fact that there were too many of these sections in the first place. Having some of them would be good, but to be effective, they needed to be used comparatively sparingly and in a more ordered fashion. Both books contain suggested activities and workshops. They made both texts feel more like French textbooks that were written to be read and followed in class, which is not what I was trying to achieve with my own book. In Hudson and Rowlands especially, there was an entire segment of the book dedicated to personal/class exercises. But if you are not studying this specifically in class, which I did not think would be the case with *Entertainment Journalism*, then would you even turn to Section Three? Holmes et. al. feature a chapter called "Working as a journalist", but it was again hamstrung by the broad nature of the subject matter which meant the advice often sounded like descriptive *Wikipedia* entries, rather than feeling more inclusive to the reader. While I wanted to include similar material, it

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needed to be written in a way that said, 'we are in this together, this is what we think and this is how you do it', which is what I tried to do.

I quoted directly from the preceding edition of *The Magazines Handbook* by Jenny McKay, which published its fourth edition exclusively online in 2019. "This book is for people who want to work as magazine journalists" (3) was a sentiment I tried to emulate in my own, while also admitting, like McKay, that what we have written is "for people who don't yet know which branch of journalism they want to work in" (3).

Unlike another book I researched called *The Online Journalism Handbook* by Bradshaw and Rohumaa (2011), which felt very much of its time and barely features fundamentals like Facebook and YouTube (there was a second edition published in 2017 but I did not have access to it when I was writing mine), McKay's book has a more timeless feel. This is not surprising considering it is unlikely the magazine world will become obsolescent any time soon, but while things change with the field, it is more stable than something like social, or video, or even newspapers. It shared with my book what I hoped was a universality, which I do not think is the case with topics like Broadcast with a capital B, or Social. However, like many of the other books I looked at, there are lots of recommended reading lists, which are good (and I use them myself occasionally), but some of the textbooks rely perhaps a bit too heavily on assuming the reader is going to be able to go off and look at other textbooks/books rather than the author solving the problem themselves. Perhaps this shows that journalism in its broadest sense is a difficult subject to cover in a textbook? Indeed the recommended reading list comes in my book at the end of the chapter entitled "Entertainment Journalism in Context" which is essentially a history of entertainment journalism. It was recommended by my editor (as was the chapter

itself) and speaks to the clarity of purpose some textbooks do not have, since you could have an entire book about the history of entertainment journalism, so synopsis-ing it into a short chapter is almost impossible. Allan Luke (1989) argues that curricular text is “a specialised form of text intentionally authored and edited to serve pedagogical ends” (54). To my mind, this means its goal is to teach, to help its reader learn.

*The Online Journalism Handbook* (2011), despite its faults, does this more effectively than me in several ways. The media law chapter is completely handed over to a separate writer, a legal trainer and in-house counsel who authors this section by himself. The book does a very good job at signposting where you will find what you are looking for via a descriptive contents page. The authors do not shy away from technical skills' sections, almost in the manner of a book from the ...*For Dummies* series. At the same time, Luke says that if you are going to critically reflect on a textbook effectively, you need to consider two schools of thought – that of textual analysis, that is how it is written and then what it is trying to say ideologically (ibid.) Of course, this can be perceived from a political perspective. Indeed, he suggests that many researchers have “come to see pedagogical text as an ideologically neutral means for passing on a non-problematic world view and sensibility” (55). I would argue that while I am not necessarily looking for political ideology in a textbook, particularly one about journalism, I am not averse to one that integrates a point of view. I tried to do that in my own book, trumpeting the value of this ephemeral thing we call showbusiness and on occasion criticising, both overtly and subconsciously, the kind of methods used in textbooks I felt did the form a disservice.



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This is perhaps why I responded more positively to books like Sharon Wheeler's *Feature Writing for Journalists* (2009) and *Sports Journalism: A Multimedia Primer* (2015) by Rob Steen, both of which were chosen not just for their style, but because their content felt relevant to what I was trying to achieve – the former because feature writing is a big part of entertainment journalism and the latter as a specialism within the industry. There is a kind of integrated intellectuality (Bondanella, 1997) in Steen's book that fosters the sort of open-minded tolerance desired by Eco (ibid.) as he codifies his love for sports journalism and the reason you as a reader should love it too. He is not afraid to be honest, writing in the introduction, "After a dozen non-fiction books, writing one for an academic publisher was always going to be a steep learning curve" (xiv). Both he and Wheeler have glossaries, which I did not and which might have helped in *Entertainment Journalism* as I do use language specific to the genre as well as journalism generally. Placing a series of interviews with professionals into a single chapter was an interesting choice by Steen, creating an oral history with a different set of people answering the same question in Q&A form. If I was to write a second edition of my textbook, I think this is probably the way I would do it as it feels concise, although an issue Steen faces is that sometimes, when he poses questions, for example when he asks what makes a good investigative reporter, the answers are just a list of qualities and do not provide any context or an example of how that manifests in practice. Similarly, asking whether newspapers have another century in them does not add anything to the sports journalism discussion and feels redundant for the reader.

Above all, what Steen does and which I tried to emulate in some way is that it's clear it's a book written with a lot of knowledge about the specialist subject and also good,

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current connections with the sports journalism industry. It does not feel like an old dinosaur writing about times gone by. Meanwhile, Wheeler's (2009) effort is part of what is called a 'Media Skills' series which are pitched as "essential guides for students and media professionals" (ibid.) as well as offering "helpful advice and information" (ibid.). This felt like an area I wanted to be close to when I was writing my book, but at the same time, it meant that she stays away from any kind of academic material at all – there's no sections about regulatory bodies and minimal bits about law and ethics despite that being a large part of feature writing and interviewing – and this is something I felt it was necessary to include as it is a fundamental part of being effective in entertainment journalism.

Of course, if I am going to critically reflect on other people's books, then it is necessary to do so with my own. After all, an effective practitioner is a reflective one and if I wanted to write the best textbook possible, considering how my previous longform work had been received had evaluative use. By asking myself questions about my work using Barthes' hermeneutic code, then perhaps I might find hidden attitudes within myself about my writing (Tohar et. al., 2007). The subjects may have been different – biography to textbook – but the manner and efficacy in which I conveyed the information I wanted to impart was similar. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle relies on one experiencing or doing something concrete, making and having observations and reflections made on it, formulating abstract ideas as a result of those observations and reflections and then testing the results of these in a new situation. Reflection-on-action is a learning process that requires thinking about how practice can be changed and improved once that initial action has taken place (Schon, 1983), which in my case is assisted by examining how editors, reviewers and readers

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received my books. While the responses could be considered out of my control, reflective learning works best when the learner (me) engages and is proactive in the reflection (Brown et. al., 2002).

It should be made clear that none of my books were reviewed widely in the mainstream media and they have not been overtly commercial, at least the biographies. Where they have been consistent is in libraries and educational institutions. This is reflected in my earnings from Public Lending Right (PLR) and Authors' Licensing and Collection Society (ALCS), which pay out when a writer's books are borrowed from a library, or officially photocopied. This has served to re-enforce the belief that making a living as an author is incredibly difficult with the average U.K. writer earning £10,000 per year (Flood, 2019). It made me realise that I must not rely on it as a sole source of income, a decision that has facilitated my career as an academic. *The Fall and Rise of the Comeback Kid* received generally favourable feedback, although it was not unilateral. *Empire* (2010) gave it four stars, writing, "Ben Falk unearths lots of detail...and peppers the book with fresh quotes from acquaintances and confidants of his subject." Meanwhile *Booklist* said, "Falk obviously has a great deal of respect for his subject, which he weaves throughout this even-handed portrait. Downey's mid-career comeback is also given fair shrift in this absorbing account of one man's amazing triumph over his voracious demons." There were negative reviews, both from *Total Film* (2010) which wrote, "...without RDJ's contributions it may as well be Wikipedia...the results resemble reverse alchemy, turning a brilliant tale to lead" and from online customer reviews, most of whom echoed their disappointment at it being unauthorised, such as B. Trotter's, "No input at all from RD Jnr (sic), so

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it's basically nothing more than someone pulling together already documented information from wherever they can" (Amazon, 2010).

The primary conclusion I drew from these and the others I received was that I was capable of writing and publishing a book. As someone whose longest piece of writing was a 2000-word feature, knowing that I had the capability to write 80,000 words was satisfactory. The achievement was the reward. However, the criticism I received saying it was purely culled from the internet when I had actually interviewed dozens of first-hand sources made me reflect on future writing. Unauthorised biographies often do feature either anonymous or recycled quotes – the first because interviewees do not want to be seen to be talking ill of the subject and the latter because an unauthorised author often fails to get close to the subject's immediate family and friends. If I was going to convince readers that I had done my research and that the quotes were not cut from elsewhere, I needed to be clearer in the writing, either in the body or the introduction. I am not sure I succeeded in that way when I wrote *The Wonder of Brian Cox*. Although I mention the people who "let me talk to them" (Falk, 2012: x), I was not specific enough when I wrote up the original interviews in the main text about them being personally carried out by me for the purposes of writing the book. I differentiate between 'said' for second-hand material and 'says' for interviews I did myself, but I do not write about the characteristics of an interviewee as I, the author, sees them and do not clarify that they are talking directly to me. Still, the reviews were generally good and were various in their praise and criticism whether it was someone giving it five stars, writing "enjoying the book so far" (Amazon, 2012) or a two-star review on *Goodreads* saying they "didn't get on with the narrative". But perhaps the most useful review was a three-star one on the *Popular*

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*Science* website, which suggested, “My main criticism of the book is that it’s a shame Falk couldn’t do a bit more with the science... This isn’t a book that’s going to explain Cox’s science to you, it’s very much about Cox the man, Cox the musician and Cox the media star” (Clegg, 2012). It was an accurate piece of analysis and made me resolve as a non-fiction author not to tackle a subject that I did not have complete knowledge or control over again. The Kolbian result of that slightly abstract conclusion was *Entertainment Journalism*. Tohar et. al.’s (2007) investigation into individual educator narratives using Barthes’ hermeneutic code suggested applying it there rather than to Balzac’s novella meant “beyond the individual narratives there is a metanarrative of a teacher educators’ career development” (ibid.: 67). If one is to accept this, then one can plot a path through these reflections and see my authorial progression – from news and feature journalist to biographical writer to an educator worthy of being an academic textbook author.

Previously, the art of entertainment journalism had been confined to memoirs and I examined several of those before embarking on my own textbook. “*Wicked Whispers* is an unintentional primer for would-be diarists and showbiz writers,” writes Reed (2007: 87) when reviewing the autobiography of Jessica Callan, a former gossip journalist for *The Mirror* and one of the infamous 3A.M. girls. This is not intended as an educational guide, it is certainly not marketed and on the shelves for that purpose. In fact, it is about Callan revealing her experience participating in “the sorts of experiences your readers would die for” (Reed, 2007). My textbook’s bibliography features several similar books, including *Tabloid Girl* (2010) by Sharon Marshall, *The Celeb Diaries: The Sensational Inside Story of the Celebrity Decade* (2008) by Mark Frith and *Confessions of a showbiz reporter* (2013) by Holly Forrest. An online

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review described Marshall's book as "delightfully frank tale of life on a tabloid newspaper. Marshall's chatty, confessional style of writing is perfect for the sort of stories she's telling..." (Steven, 2010), an *Amazon* user called Forrest's "a good insight into the business" (Tracey, 2014) and *The Guardian* wrote about Frith's effort, "In a celebrity-obsessed society, this is a fascinating document" (Clary, 2008). These were not textbooks aimed at a student market and yet they were doing what I wanted to do better and in more depth. Their authors used a conspiratorial voice with their reader, exploiting Barthes' hermeneutic and proairetic codes in their mix of salacious, anonymous gossip about British soap operas and Hollywood stars and some of the capers they embarked upon to get their scoops. The former produces "questions and puzzling elements" (Tohar et. al., 2007) that require deciphering by the reader, while the latter not only allows us to map their actions, but also understand the implications these have in terms of the author's work (ibid.) My plan was to attempt the same. If I was to succeed "like an artisan bent over the workbench of meaning and selecting the best expressions for the concept he has already formed" (Barthes, 1974), then my 'topos' would involve sections where I would be conveying meaning through real-life anecdotal stories I participated in (ACT) as well as moments when I was suggesting ideas and challenging the reader with open-ended questions (HER) (ibid.) Essentially then, I needed to emulate these autobiographical texts in concrete ways (Sword, 2012). This involved thinking about how to activate the audience's prior knowledge of this kind of writing style and language and then using my professional knowledge to create practical solutions (Perrin, 2013), for both form and content define genre (Ongstad, 2005).

### **Method 1 – Persona and Narrative**

In order to achieve the textbook form I planned, I first created an authorial persona. Maguire (2014) suggests an authorial persona is a 'package' and argues that it is separate from the act of simply writing a book – it is a form of self-representation. The discipline of persona studies, popularised by people like Kim Barbour and P. David Marshall and drawing on work by Erving Goffman and others, interrogates the agency of the individual constructing that persona and believes they are intentional, created in response to so-called 'micro-publics', which represent the network to which the individual is presenting themselves (Marshall et. al., 2015). In other words, the term persona "helps describe and articulate the relationship between the individual and the social" (Marshall & Barbour, 2015: 1). Writers such as Hannah Arendt during her study of the ancient Greeks argued this is not something to be looked down on, this performative gesture to fashion a negotiated identity (Barbour et. al., 2014, Klaus, 2013). Indeed Roland Barthes said the author is a performer "at the moment he evidences his power of conducting meaning" (Barthes, 1974: 174) which he – or should it be I – do when my idea materialises onto the page and when I express my knowledge and passion.

Ironically, in this era of the 'demotic turn', self-branding as an academic is potentially just as vital to promote oneself and one's university course particularly in an unstable jobs market that is "responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences" (Khamis et. al., 2017: 191). Creating a persona at work (as a teacher and author) can be a helpful asset (Lee, 2015). Barbour and Marshall (2012) broke the academic persona (focusing on how they presented themselves online) into five types, although acknowledged categorisations were malleable. These "formal", "networked",

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“comprehensive”, “teaching” and “uncontainable” selves demonstrated that academics recognised their roles were changing as digital fluency increased and were navigating this evolving environment by choosing how they wanted to self-represent within the academic micro-public. My academic persona involved elements of three of these as I tried to demonstrate my experience and knowledge in the field of entertainment journalism (formal), while at the same time promoting the sharing of ideas between peers and students (networked and teaching) (ibid.). It is, of course, an idealised persona, generally presenting the best elements of my skillset and obscuring the worst (Goffman, 1959), while, as Goffman continues, it is primarily concerned with making the audience believe you have something in common with them. That is, in essence, false – though Goffman would have us believe all self-presentation is inherently false – but a textbook of this kind required that the audience felt as though it were an authentic manifestation of the author since I was asking the reader to come on a journey with me through the subject matter. What I can do as the author of a text of this nature is control the definition of the situation, because I am the one who am choosing, or at least able to strongly suggest through the style of writing and the structure of the book, as well as the amount of personal information I give out, how a reader should approach the book (Goffman, 1959). This promotes coherence in the interaction between the audience and me. And so it is both truthful because the information I am revealing is real and designed to be pedagogically useful, but is also artificially crafted (Klaus, 2013).

While I do not consider the persona presented in my textbook to be a “hall of mirrors” (Klaus, 2013: 4), it is nonetheless, a representation. But I believe it is a representation that can be considered authentic and creates an authentic authorial voice that helps the



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intended audience to relate to the material. If authenticity is “about being true to one’s self” (Vannini & Franzese, 2008: 1633) and the person in question is suitably cynical about their chosen persona rather than completely taken in by it (Goffman, 1959), then the self I present as an author can be considered authentic. Yes, that is evaluative and self-referential – Vannini and Franzese (2008) delineate between authenticity and sincerity by arguing that the former is self-referential and the latter is “behaviour in response to another” (1625) – but if that self is consistent and only changes by slowly evolving and maturing rather than lurching into something else, it can be accepted (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Authenticity means people can trust you and if people trust you, your status, in this case as a presenter of facts and narrative, is improved (Krotoski, 2017). If that authentic persona is seen as strong enough, it means, says Goffman, that audiences can even forgive the occasional discrepancy between that impression and the reality (Goffman, 1959). It is about validity (Van Leeuwen, 2001). In fact, it is a similar persona to the one I adopted during the writing of my biographies of Robert Downey Jr. and Professor Brian Cox. Part of this is because “the persona in a specific piece of writing is also influenced by its author’s distinctive slant on things, by thoughts and feelings that are expressed or implied...” (Klaus, 2013: 11). Both of the biographies, while ostensibly third person accounts of celebrity lives, contain my judgement of films and television shows, as well as my attempts to draw some conclusions about my two protagonists.

My background as a journalist made me err towards making sure what the reader got was a “collation of facts” (Amazon, 2010) and while I was aware of being the narrator of the story, I did feel less comfortable as the interpreter who tries to make sense of it and the protagonist (Barrington, 2007). This was a challenge that arose several times,

but most notably in the investigation and subsequent presentation of Robert Downey Jr.'s sexuality, specifically whether he may have had homosexual experiences. After all, in circumstances like this, when you are dealing with such a sensitive issue, biographers must not underestimate the consequences (Barrington, 2007). Downey Jr. is married to a woman and has never publicly had any homosexual relationships, even if he has said things like, "a lot of my peer group think I'm an eccentric bisexual" (Rolling Stone, 2008), while also mentioning intimate homosexual experiences he apparently had as a young man, seemingly in a jocular fashion but in quite intense detail. During my research, I received an email from a well-placed Hollywood source who said he had been at a party in 1987 or 1988 when a young man came in who was rumoured to be the Downey Jr.'s lover (Protected source, 2009), although I was told to take the story "with a grain of salt" (Protected source, 2009). Then, while he was in state prison at Corcoran in 2000, a *National Enquirer* story broke which said that Downey had been choked and threatened with stabbing after he "angered a Native American inmate known as Water Buffalo by 'sashaying around without any clothes on'" (Garbarino, 2000). In a *Vanity Fair* profile in which he gave interviews from prison, Downey responded by saying, "They can say that I was wearing a skirt, or that 'that faggot actor was going down with the Water Buffalo,' but I'm not going to comment" (Garbarino, 2000). Had I been a more experienced author, a more battle-hardened campaigner and above all a better researcher, I might have been able to, or been prepared to put this in the manuscript and interpret it effectively as 'proof' of Robert Downey Jr.'s flexibility when it comes to his sexuality. This would certainly have precipitated more headlines for the book, but I chose not to include it in this fashion, only reporting the story using the second-hand source, presenting it as something for the reader to look at and decide on their own without me giving it any

meaning (Angier, 2010). This was because I did not want to re-enforce the aforementioned negative stereotype of celeb journalist as amoral gossipmonger, the kind of person who would happily try and insinuate something for the purpose of selling more books.

This is clearly an ethical decision too. Unethical conduct can be a consequence of competition in the market (Shleifer, 2004) and there is certainly a popular belief that amongst journalists and media outlets market forces override ethics or any other values, that any empathy one might have for a subject can be put aside if one will be better off doing so like Adam Smith believed (King, 2018). As a journalist, I am bound by a code of conduct, primarily that of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), while in *Entertainment Journalism* I also mention the Society of Professional Journalists' (SPJ) Code of Ethics, which is an American institution. While ethics depend on many variables, including your moral compass, your belief system and what your employer expects of you (Falk, 2018), the NUJ and SPJ documents – a list of commandments if you will (King, 2018) – offer transparent guidelines that affected me consciously in a decision like this. The NUJ (2018) says one must differentiate between fact and opinion, while producing no material “likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation” (ibid.) Personally, ‘outing’ someone in print violates this, despite the commercial gains that might be forthcoming. This equates to an Aristotelian principle of ethical behaviour, one that is “about having the right character” (King, 2018) and requires internal moral suasion (Shleifer, 2004). I write in *Entertainment Journalism* of Keeble’s three approaches to journalistic ethics. One is the cynical approach where one does not care about the

consequences of one's actions as long as the law is not being broken. My decisions around the passage about Robert Downey Jr.'s sexuality coalesce with his other two approaches, which together represent my ethical position. First, one must rely on one's humanity and second is to recognise that what one writes has potentially wider implications, both, as I have said, in terms of how journalists are perceived and also "that your behaviour is part of something bigger, more important and more long-lasting than you as an individual" (Falk, 2018:123, Keeble 2008). It is here where removing oneself as a writer and presenting the facts – albeit facts which have been selected as part of the narrative (Tridgell, 2004) – rather than "explaining actions and motivations" (Osborne, 2004) felt correct and ethical.

Interestingly, this exploration around persona was something I had already encountered during my biographical writing since I was adding to the public personas that already existed of both Robert Downey Jr. and Professor Brian Cox. If nothing, as Barthes argues, is safe from myth (Leak, 1994) and the media uses celebrity to "reconstruct American 'myths' of success" (Mislán et. al., 2018), then I did nothing to quell Downey's reputation as a subversive or rebel (Dyer, 1998), a man who was taken in by (Goffman, 1959) and in some ways relied on that representation to fuel his career because he was perceived as edgy and dangerous. And although he did it consciously as well, most notably by walking out of interviews when his drug past was brought up, I also helped in his recuperation to mainstream star (ibid.), acknowledging his hero's journey by calling my book, *The Fall and Rise of the Comeback Kid*.

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Similarly, by writing about Professor Cox's science programmes in the awed way that I do in *The Wonder of Brian Cox*, I promote the notion of product as persona, in which we view Cox's shows as featuring "some inclination of the persona that produced the work" (Lee, 2015). But, says legendary Hollywood story expert Syd Field (2005), "To tell a story, you have to set up your characters, introduce a dramatic premise (what the story is about) and the dramatic situation (the circumstances surrounding the action), create obstacles for your characters to confront and overcome, then resolve the story" (3). In other words, if you are writing a story about a person, a biography, it is incumbent on the writer to create a narrative that engages the reader, especially if they have a sense of what the ending might be already, as might be the case with Robert Downey Jr. and Professor Brian Cox. To make them vivid, they must be "designed to be clear and knowable" (McKee, 2014: 375) rather than "enigmatic" (ibid.), if indeed the 'single most fundamental human cognitive process is narrative' (Mancing, 2010). It is, perhaps, a messy process. Because if biography is a genre of historiography and that is a scholarly pursuit concerned with trying to allow history's details and idiosyncrasies to shine through (Kindt, 2010, Rodgers, 2015), a writer's drive to respect and entertain his audience (McKee, 2014) means that he will be using literary techniques unfamiliar to academic historiographers, especially if they are trying to escape hagiography (Kindt, 2010). Myth and myth-making form a fundamental part of this writerly process, even if Campbell (2008) worries myth is destroyed the moment it comes into contact with biography. But if, as Segal (2010) suggests, that myth is conscious, then it is intuitive and that is why it commands such an emotional response (Walker, 2010). In choosing biographical subjects, an author looks for "mythic protagonists" (ibid.) and then considers how to shape their story.

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Within that “confluence of content and form” (McKee, 2014:8) lies originality – and a good story.

It is not a fluke that I chose Robert Downey Jr. as my first biographical subject, since his narrative arc adheres to so much of Campbell’s seminal diagnostic analysis of myth in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (2008). Campbell writes that the mistakes which launch the hero onto his previously-unsuspected narrative path are not accidental. Downey Jr.’s descent into drug addiction was seemingly an error, but reflecting on his life from a historical perspective, it enabled him to ultimately transcend that persona and become the comeback kid of my title. The “tyrant-monster” (ibid.:11) provides a necessary scapegoat in myth that echoes Downey Jr.’s predominantly absent father and the havoc he wrought upon his son by introducing him to drugs and hedonism (ibid.), even though that negative imagery is in fact just a reflection of the child’s inner self. Similarly, Campbell suggests, “the father is the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world” (115). Downey Jr. also refused the hero’s call – his call to stardom that he was choosing to throw away by refusing to abide by the typical hero’s behaviour. It is what makes his narrative journey even more enticing, as he was rebelling against it initially (Campbell, 2008). Luckily, “not all who hesitate are lost” (ibid.:53). Campbell here is referring to *Sleeping Beauty* and other great myths, but it is true of the story I was trying to tell in *The Fall and Rise of the Comeback Kid*. His story is a fairy tale, but if as Zipes suggests fairy tales are also myths (Walker, 2010), then the narrative process remains the same. The happy ending of this fairy tale, the ‘rise’, occurs after a descent into darkness and subsequent transcendence that symbolises not just his own redemption and atonement, but that of mankind (Campbell, 2008).

Professor Brian Cox also adheres to several of Campbell's tropes, making him a different but effective mythical protagonist. Cox too always painted his career trajectory to being Britain's foremost scientific communicator as a fluke, that he fell into broadcasting by accident. As my biography explains, this is simply not true, it was all part of his personal myth-building – the nerdy musician who likes science and became the nation's physicist. Not only did he pursue a life in the public eye as part of two bands, he worked at an early broadband television station as a presenter (Falk, 2012). This 'blunder' "may amount to the opening of a destiny" (Campbell, 2008:42) and his experience shows he always had a plan to become a hero. A myth is told and retold (Walker, 2010) and certainly Cox was content to perpetuate the myth of the accidental star to the point where he probably believed it. It was my book which revealed his first stint as a presenter elsewhere. Thus, one can see that by considering narrative and character in my biographies' structure, as opposed to treating history simply as "objective science" (Pihlainen, 2010:109), I had a better chance of connecting with readers and elevating the stories to a level of critical engagement as historiographical documents (ibid.). The same is true of my textbook.

## **Method 2 – Language**

Orthodox linguistic theorists posit the concept of a 'fixed code' (Davis, 2014) – a set of rules like you might have in a board game. As an entertainment journalist of twenty years experience writing about entertainment journalism, writing a textbook in a traditional academic way felt like the wrong approach and I knew journalism had not been afraid to use the kinds of techniques used to create showbusiness feature articles in other areas of writing (Marshall, 2005). I felt that the intended audience for the

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book did not share the fixed code of academic writing and that mistakenly believing it did would cause a communication breakdown between author and reader, resulting in serious consequences for the success of the finished product (Harris, 2014). Not only that, I did not think I was capable of it. I am used to writing journalistically, eschewing “pomposity, academic complexity, obscurity...” (Hicks, 2013:1). Initially, this felt at odds with the requirements of Routledge, who were expecting a certain style. Their guidelines asked for chapter abstracts, ORCID numbers, something that I felt sat uncomfortably with whom I perceived as the audience for the book. There was then, an opportunity to play with genre, which traditionally has normative definitions (Ongstad, 2005). After all, genre should be culture dependent as well as about textual conventions and if, for example, I needed to consider the medium within which my work would appear (modern textbooks are generally read online as much as in tangible form) (Strongman, 2013), then it was imperative I recognise the balance between epistemology and aesthetics (Ongstad, 2005). If celebrity journalism is a hybrid genre, then it is fluid, just like other types of journalism (Van den Bulck et al., 2017).

Undergraduate journalism, while studied at university and therefore an academic discipline, is a vocational subject. Its teachers are often long-time industry practitioners, rather than primarily academic researchers. My assumptive leap when creating the structure and format for the *Entertainment Journalism: Making it your career* (Falk, 2018) was thinking a successful journalistic textbook would think of its readers not simply as ‘students’ the modern sense of the word, but like its historical etymology – from the Latin meaning to be diligent or eager to study (Open University, 2015). In other words, employability-focused people who would find my book in



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Waterstone's as well as the university library (Falk, 2017) and would look to my words as a way to grasp the conceptual nature of the subjects within, but also as a guide to the execution of them in practice. How I wrote my book was fundamental to its efficacy. I wanted it to feel familiar linguistically, understanding my ideal reader and making the book seem familiar in terms of its vocabulary (Conboy, 2014) despite its subject angle. Language can be a bridge between ideas and the articulation and communication of them and the transparency or opacity of that language impacts how lucid the concept becomes to the reader (Strongman, 2013). Furthermore, I wanted its textual microstructure to create a sense of solidarity (Luke, 1989) with the reader, while proffering a glimpse of other worlds to them as well, inviting them "to generate hypotheses, to 'foresee' possible motivations, resolutions, consequences and so forth" (ibid.: 67). In other words, attempt to create what Eco might call an open text, that is one which opens up interpretations and ideas to the person reading it, while writing in a way that Barthes might interpret as using his hermeneutic code to encourage creativity and provoke ideas. For a textbook to 'work', it needs to recognise "knowledge transformation is the process of mediating knowledge between stakeholders in a way that those addressed can link the new knowledge to their existing knowledge and apply it in their contexts to solve relevant problems" (Perrin, 2013: 38).

John Locke's five normative rules for correct imperfect language (Taylor, 2014) – essentially based around what Strongman (2013) might call a "'straightforward' prose style" (Strongman, 2013: 73) – were a good starting point, even if there were likely to be some compromises along the way in the pursuit of clarity and succinctness (Swain, 2007). What is more, what many textbooks fail to do is recognise the tiny differences

in their audience. After all, the larger the community, the less likely any kind of 'fixed code' is to be universal (Harris, 2014). I felt this is where I had an advantage over other textbooks in the area because of my deep knowledge of the entertainment journalism genre and why I felt it would be different from the rest when I initially pitched it. My pedagogical background would obviously help, otherwise, says Swain (2007), quoting academic writer Andrew Heywood, "[one] would be in danger of writing what you now understand as opposed to taking someone on a journey" (Swain, 2007). But what would be much more intrinsic to success was me taking the language I was familiar with – that of journalists, which is different from academic language (Timuçin, 2010) – and employing it on this project. This is applying small elements, essentially, what Perrin (2013) dubs media linguistics, a "subdiscipline of (applied) linguistics that deals with the relationship between language and the media" (Perrin, 2013: 29) and what others have called the mediatization of language (Hout & Burger, 2015). I wanted my readers to perceive me as being on the inside or 'emic' of what I was writing about – an expert who was still part of the entertainment journalism world, rather than an academic more interested in being a journalism scholar than a working practitioner (Hout & Burger, 2015).

Therefore, it was about ensuring the suitability of the text to meet the needs of the reader as well as match the subject. Combining simplicity with poise – that is pleasant and rhythmical sentences – adds impact and increases the awareness of the reader to the words and lessons contained in the book (Hicks, 2013), rather than getting bogged down in "educational jargon and serpentine syntax" (Sword, 2012: 5). After all, it is obvious that a fully engaged reader is a more focused one (Strongman, 2013). This meant echoing that so-called mediatized language in my text, which is why I used

colloquial aphorisms like “fake it till you make it” (Falk, 2018: 14) or slang such as “pussyfooting” (Falk, 2018: 27). Further suitability was tested by my Flesch Reading Ease score, a scale created by Rudolph Flesch in 1943 to measure magazine article readability (Klare, 1963, cited in Hartley, 2008). Based on scores out of 100, the Flesch number indicates the reading level of the material: the higher the score, the easier it is perceived to be. Hence, 90-100 is equivalent to a children’s story, while 0-29 is an academic article aimed at graduates (Hartley, Sotto and Fox, 2004, cited in Hartley, 2008). The score can be checked via third-party apps, or using Microsoft Word, which is what I did on the original word processor document version of my textbook. According to two separate measurements, the text had a Reading Ease score of either 59.5 or 60.0. According to Hartley, Sotto and Fox’s (2004) scale, that equates to either an introductory textbook for 16-17-year-olds with a difficulty level of fairly difficult or a tabloid newspaper with a difficulty level of average aimed at people with a reading age of 14-15-years-old (Hartley, Sotto and Fox, 2004, cited in Hartley, 2008). This is far removed from a difficult graduate academic article, but much more appropriate for who I wanted my target audience to be. Other than an algorithmic readability score, I also relied for pre-publication feedback from two reviewers chosen by the publisher Routledge, allowing for an expert-based response to the book’s difficulty and suitability (Hartley, 2008). Ultimately, as a purveyor of entertainment journalism across a variety of outlets and also as a fan of writing in that genre, I was happy to model my own academic outpourings on that kind of work, a style that I believe to be valuable and effective (Sword, 2012).

### **Method 3 – Entertainment Journalism techniques**

What else aside from language can one use to emulate the gossipy, readable journalistic writing you find in Frith et. al. as well as the entertainment journalism world as a whole and translate it to a textbook? I chose four ways. First was (sometimes suggestive) celebrity anecdotage. Johnson's biography of Richard Savage in 1744 helped change the way writers approached the genre, concentrating almost exclusively on the more salacious details of the poet's life, a method Johnson's biographer Boswell subsequently employed in his treatment of Johnson's life (Renders, 2014). This was not always the way writers tackled celebrity. Brownley (2011) points to the fact that there have been widespread disagreements in early biography whether to treat the famous subject as a human being, including all their faults, or a model figure. She cites John Dryden's 1683 book *The Life of Plutarch*, which argued that focusing on the small, often character-based or moral concerns was debasing and inappropriate to record (Brownley, 2011). It was Carl Rollyson who categorised the two methods as 'low' and 'high' biography, the second of which might also be called commemorative (Renders, 2014). Latterly, we have come to expect a level of gossip in our coverage of celebrities and so if I were to elucidate my pedagogy with a showbusiness journalism style of writing, introducing elements of this would be a valid – and different – approach to communication in this context. Due to the nature of the form however, I decided it would be more sensible to generally present the anecdotes anonymously, which in fact emulates the 'Wicked Whispers' section often found in tabloid celebrity pages, though I did not do this all the time. As such, my textbook included stories about how I was threatened with a lawsuit by the former girlfriend of a rock star, was embarrassed about my appearance by an A-list movie star when I came to interview her and then terrified in front of pop

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star Mariah Carey and sweaty in a photo with former singer and reality show star Kerry Katona (Falk, 2018). Not only that, but several of the fellow journalists I featured in the book remembered gossipy stories in their interviews with me.

“I once flew all the way to Kalamazoo to knock on Verne Troyer’s parents’ door.”

Hargrave, cited in Falk, 2018

This sort of journalistic story, told to me by freelance gossip writer Hannah Hargrave as one of the expert interviews I presented in my textbook, was familiar from those in the memoirs of journalists, which regaled the reader with stories of duplicitous attempts to get stories such as infiltrating the set of sitcom *Friends* and hiding the mother of reality star Jade Goody away from other reporters (Marshall, 2010), but is not the norm in academic publishing.

Listicles and paragraphs containing short soundbites (Reed, 2007) are another style of writing typical to the entertainment journalism sector, particularly in terms of feature articles (Falk, 2018), rather than textbooks. They are, however, the foundation of *Entertainment Journalism: Making it your Career*. I use them in various ways, whether it is bullet points explaining “How to get the best out of a junket” (Falk, 2018: 52) or “What makes a great entertainment social media story” (Falk, 2018: 81), or in the getting and breaking stories chapter where I go through the nuts and bolts of a features ideas meeting (Falk, 2018: 9-12).

Reed (2007) also notes the use of question and answer (Q&A) interviews within entertainment journalism, which is a central part of my professional background.

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Throughout *Entertainment Journalism* are Q&A interviews with professional journalists and media professionals within the entertainment field. This elaborates on the idea of journalist as celebrity yet also means I am choosing not just to relay pieced-together stories from colleagues and peers, but utilise direct interviews with those 'celebrities' (Marshall, 2005). Marshall (2005) describes how Durkheim coined the term anomie when regular people felt disconnected from the rest of urban society. Celebrity profiles (both at the time Durkheim was writing and subsequently) helped with that sense of normlessness, just as I intended my journalist Q&As to help readers relate to the topic of the book. It is not entirely surprising that entertainment and celebrity journalism got a fillip in the months and years following the 9/11 atrocity, or after the credit crunch of 2008/9, for Durkheim argues economic conditions and wealth inequality result in anomie (Puffer, 2009) or when 'society' is in a state of disorganisation (Durkheim, 1979). If an "unexpected event...disrupts the social order" (Lutter et.al., 2018: 3), then people are more likely to crave connection (anomie theory), as well as being more conditioned to look to celebrities as role models (imitation theory) (ibid.). These interviews also provide another purpose – that of giving the book a series of 'protagonists'. If a textbook is a codification of facts and indeed a certain kind of history, giving it a sense of human connection rather than being "full of facts without protagonists" (Loriga, 2014: 76) helps create empathy and engagement. Embedding the idea of celebrity in a text has "become an essential structuring device of much of the contemporary information flow" (Conboy, 2014: 174) and helps market appeal, even if some might think it means unworthy subjects become important enough to warrant sustained examination (West, 2004). It could also be a form of prosopography, if indeed you can only explain broader social facts, such as journalism, by examining individuals and their behaviour (Loriga, 2014).

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George Sarton tried to illustrate how science bettered humankind by recording the names and exploits of those who furthered the field (Shapin & Thackray, 1974), in essence helping to celebritize relatively anonymous people in order to shine a light on the area as a whole. It is about considering individual lives as microcosm, rather than a straightforward focus on the life itself (Meister, 2017) as a form of social narrative (Lee, 2005).

Finally, I demonstrated how valuable social media is as a journalistic search and story mechanism, something that was borne out of my experience as an entertainment journalist working in the offices of *Look* magazine and *Press Association*, as well as being a freelance for various celebrity outlets between 2007 and 2010. The Internet has been a valuable research tool for journalists as far back as the beginning of the Noughties and the birth of Web 2.0, facilitating the involvement of citizens in the media, helping to build a participatory journalism culture and enabling non-media professionals to cooperate in the gathering of information (Hermida, 2012). It is a form of hybridity – joining legacy media and ‘new’ media together (Mast et al., 2017). This ability increased with the advent of social media, a term dating back to 2004 according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Meikle, 2016) as the categorisation for an opaque collection of technologies and platforms for communication (Hermida, 2012). But as recently as 2013, researchers have been arguing that social media was being under-utilised as a research tool for stories by media organisations (Standley, 2013), even though it behoves biographers – that is chroniclers of human life – to look at events using modern tools like it (Yeager, 2011). That is because the majority of working journalists at the time were social media immigrants rather than natives, but understood the need to be “pragmatic conformists” (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre,

2013: 382) as regards the medium. Showbusiness journalists were better than most, primarily thanks to the rise of reality shows like *Big Brother* that featured non-celebrities, access to whom relied not on agents and Equity, but direct contact, which meant that showbusiness journalists were encouraged to engage in deviation from norms and experimentation (Mast et al.) to make things work.

As social media usage increased, so the de facto way to make contact with a contestant on such a show became via social media. This was so prevalent by 2008 that programme-makers were routinely deactivating the Facebook presence of someone scheduled to appear on a show of this kind once the decision to cast them had been made or announced. As Assistant News Editor at *Look* magazine, one of my jobs when the new cast of a show of this kind was revealed was to navigate as many social platforms as quickly as possible to try and find pictures of a particular participant and try to make contact with them. We used social media as a vital tool for executing traditional tasks such as getting in touch with sources, as well as for “environmental scanning and ‘information gathering’” (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013: 376). During the period I researched and wrote *Robert Downey Jr.* from April to December 2009, MySpace was still the biggest social network in the world (Wikipedia, 2018) pioneering the social media landscape. While Facebook did not invent social media convergence (Meikle, 2016), it did become the most-visited site in the United States in May 2009, achieving 70.278million unique visitors compared to MySpace’s 70.237million (Albanesius, 2009). However, it was still, comparatively, in its infancy as a journalistic tool. The process of authoring *Robert Downey Jr. ...* was driven largely by its budget. The lack of money available to travel – the chance to physically pursue my subject (Holmes, 2016) – meant social media had to become a



viable method of remote research. Not having unfettered access to tangible documents with which to build my entire narrative meant looking for new sources in new places (Levi, 2014).

That first occurred via the Santa Monica High Alumni message boards, where I found the initial data for a number of sources, including one of Downey Jr.'s high school best friends (Falk, 2010). Facebook subsequently enabled me to broaden my list of sources by adding unexpected ones (Paulussen & Harder, 2014), exploring the communities that often hinge on what Ferrara et al. call the "strength of weak ties" (Ferrara et al., 2012: 1), which succeed by pulling together disparate friendship groups. By finding peers who spent time with my subject as children and young adults, partly, in truth, because users were frank about their personal data then in a way that has probably changed thanks to ongoing privacy concerns with the platform (Debatin et al., 2009), I was able to build anecdotes about Downey Jr. being drawn to the magicians at Stagedoor theatre camp in upstate New York or gaining the nickname 'Studley Moore' at high school in Los Angeles (Falk, 2010). Ultimately, while broad social media usage to find sources amongst journalists in 2018 might be widespread, during my research period it was not, though it appeared to be starting to take off. You could find sites like *The Journalist's Guide to Facebook* published in August 2009, which encouraged reporters to use the platform as a way into a community (Betancourt, 2009). Meanwhile, a Cision/George Washington University survey amongst US journalists published in 2010 declared usage was increasing, with 60% of respondents (though there were only 371 surveyed) revealing they used social media sites for research, although that included other social media destinations like LinkedIn alongside Facebook (Bunz, 2010). Indeed, despite Facebook's large user base, even in

2011 it was seen as a less natural place to find content than Twitter (Fisher, 2011) meaning its utilisation as a journalistic tool in 2008/9 was still in its early stages. Taking this experience, which has increased exponentially in the decade since, I tried to ensure *Entertainment Journalism* was clear about its value, which I do throughout chapter six which concentrates on social media. I also weave discussion of it throughout the book, in chapter eight when I discuss socially-native video; in chapters one and ten when I am exploring how to find stories, what to think about when honing that idea and how to pitch it; then in chapter eleven where I warn readers against revealing what Marshall describes as the “transgressive intimate self” (Marshall, 2010: 45), that is the kind of unfiltered content one’s posted about oneself “motivated by temporary emotion” (ibid.) that can come back to bite you later in your career (Falk, 2018).

#### **Method 4 – Teaching soft skills**

There is an ongoing battle in the journalism education sector about what skills we should be teaching our students. Because journalism is recognised as a university discipline, there are those who think the teaching of it should be primarily situated within an academic context, whereas it has traditionally been more vocationally-focused (Canter, 2015). The early years of journalism degrees followed the model of short-form accreditation body courses that essentially prepared young people for a career that would begin as a local news reporter, while most journalism lecturers in 2019 are former industry practitioners who started their careers when a career in the media was less precarious (Bromley, 2015). This has now fundamentally changed. We live in a post-credit crunch world where permanent teams are smaller, media is disparate and outlets that seem outwardly successful like *Buzzfeed* and *HuffPost* spend

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2019 enduring huge rounds of staff cuts. Meanwhile, iconic and previously-bestselling brands like *Glamour* and *Look* go online-only and *Esquire* moves bi-monthly. Francois Nel has argued that “journalism training in Britain is entrenched in a 20th century system that has a simple goal: to provide junior employees in the news industry” (Albeanu, 2015) and that has frequently been my experience of university journalism education, primarily because so many of the instructors continue to believe this is the ‘way into’ the business. But what does that even mean any more?

The BA Journalism recruitment page at my own university tells prospective students the course, “is designed to prepare you for an exciting and evolving environment that, while still offering traditional journalism opportunities, increasingly expects those operating within the field to move into new areas, display entrepreneurial innovation and respond to the emerging needs of both audiences and industry” (Coventry University, 2019). If trainees are increasingly turning away from mainstream media careers (Albeanu, 2015) then what exactly are we trying to teach them? Bromley (2015) suggests the socially responsible thing to do is not focus on their immediate employment prospects, but think about what makes someone successful in employment so they can make a broader social and economic contribution to society (Yorke, 2006). That requires modelling a good employee, including teaching and training that provides “a wealth of transferrable skills including excellent written and verbal communications that can be applied within broader communications contexts” (Coventry University, 2019), as well as developing “graduates who can operate across multiple platforms, are context aware and equally comfortable in a traditional journalism environment as they are working with disruptive forms of media practice” (ibid.). Journalism employers have agreed that studying journalism gives potential

employees a “readiness to work” and “greater confidence” (Canter, 2015: 49) and internal university goals (at least that I have experienced) are focused on stimulating and honing these kinds of “graduate characteristics” (Bromley, 2015).

Business social network LinkedIn identified the five top soft skills companies need in 2019 and they are creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability and time management. These sit alongside highly-desired hard skills such as video and audio production, social and digital media marketing, people management and journalism (Petrone, 2019). Whether that is because seventy per cent of all consumer web traffic is video streaming or because being able to “tell compelling stories” (ibid.) is crucial to navigating a world that is constantly evolving and requires people to have a versatile skill and mind-set, these are the real qualities that those people who hire graduates are seeking in successful applicants. Also vital are characteristics like positivity, integrity, social sensitivity and self-insight (Bromley, 2015). So if I were to write a pedagogical text for would-be journalists, in essence ‘journalism students’, I would need to recognise this progress and respond to it in the book by building in these soft skills. Examining Canter’s (2015) poll of journalism employers, when asked what they looked for in a jobseeker, they mentioned media law and finding a story, as well as ideas, ethics and social media. These were all specific areas I covered in detail within the book (Falk, 2018). I also feature video and audio production (if not technologically), while also accentuating the need to be flexible and understand time management (“Do it on time...” (Falk, 2018: 129)). Creativity is also an innate part of the book as it encourages readers to literally create content and come up with original material of different types, while integrity and self-insight can be inferred in the section on ethics. Positivity and collaboration too can be seen in the moments I

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discuss working as a freelancer and communicating with an editor, what I describe as “solutions journalism” (Falk, 2018: 129).

These types of skills are not encouraged via lecture, or even traditional seminar. Rather, they are best assimilated through workshops, discursive feedback sessions and production days. This kind of experiential learning and teaching fosters teamwork through group activities and people management via student-led editorial hierarchies, while regular deadlines require planning and a nebulous news agenda which ebbs and flows on any particular day requires adaptability and decision-making. This is how I teach journalism as a university subject, eschewing dense reading and slide-decks in favour of bullet point lists that are filled in in-person through question and answer sessions and by the entire class working together to complete a task. Valuing the students' originality, providing a stimulus-rich environment and emphasising practical learning (Brown et. al., 2002). This is even true of curriculum elements like exploring and interpreting media industries, both in an academic and employability context. I have my opinion and experience and that is what I espouse in class, but often what I say and how I say it is a reaction to how students perform and what they want to know. It would be ridiculous to suggest reading *Entertainment Journalism* would imbue the reader with all of the “person-centred qualities” (Bromley, 2015) in LinkedIn's list. But by ensuring that several of these were contained within the book and complementing them with an academic history of entertainment journalism, as well as discussions about the media industries and presenting the material in a conversational, almost discursive way which echoes the manner I present my teaching materials in class, I lend pedagogic weight to my work.

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The book is a reaction to what has worked during my tenure as a hackademic. It is a response to the most pertinent questions I have been asked, it is filling in the gaps of things I have begun in class but have not had time to clarify or interpret. It is reacting to the kind of learners I have met, whether they enjoy problem-solving and work well with others, or prefer to skim read and not be a creative thinker (Brown et. al., 2002). It is, in essence, a continuation and extension of my teaching persona that is pedagogically motivated but savvy about how and what a student will ingest when embarking on a new discipline, or even adding to their knowledge of one. By recognising the function of my textbook and choosing its form using the methods explained above, making it readable and at a length that would not put off a potential reader (Guthrie, 1981), as well as ensuring it is methodical and what Nikonova calls systematized, that is “designed to structure the knowledge, abilities and skills in a system that ensures their availability, integrated perception and assimilation” (3767), which I demonstrate here and within the text, I am creating the best and most appropriate version of a textbook that I can.

### **Hybridity and ‘Tribridity’**

Peim (2013) argues “education is the master myth of our time” (32) because those outside it are considered inferior or other, that to be educated “correlates with *being* itself” (ibid.) Barthes’ ideas around myth turn the functional into the meaningful and serve to fuel a desire for deconstruction (ibid.) Meanwhile, our media ecology has become hybridised as different media actors and processes have emerged with the power to distribute content in new and unique ways (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). It is, say those authors, beholden on academics to help their audience recognise and ally behind this change (ibid.) Different kinds of journalisms have begun to coalesce

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(Deuze, 2003), particularly around the framework of entertainment journalism. These are primarily platform and layout-based, as social media becomes standard and content shifts to online platforms and apps, meaning that news has to be more affecting than ever before (Ruotsalainen and Villi, 2018). Timuçin (2010) posits the language of broadsheet and tabloid journalists is completely different and indeed there are significant variables, particularly in headlines and page design. But actually, within the fabric of entertainment writing, there is homogeneity regardless of where the material is being published. And because audiences are now so conditioned to read that sort of subject matter online, the differences in the writing are few. The protagonists of the stories are different depending on who is publishing them, but the fundamental way of writing about them remains fairly constant. It would be by bringing these different genres of writing together, the entertainment journalism and the academic, that I would create something hybrid in my textbook.

Also, as I have previously discussed, I was prepared to defy some traditional news journalistic conventions (and indeed ones that are simpatico with academic writing), but which find more solace in showbiz or celebrity stories. One was occasionally eschewing objectivity and recognising the importance of emotionality. Although objectivity in prose academic writing may be desirable, I would not shirk from betraying a set of expectations to the reader (Strongman, 2013). As Conboy (2014) writes, “Journalism has always been a complex conflation of complementary and contradictory impulses...Celebrity is one area of that contemporary complexity which can present the world as a more emotionalized, personalised place, very unlike traditional journalistic views of the world” (Conboy, 2014, 183). Because while I was planning to write journalistically, I would not be following the archetypal media

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structure associated with a journalism story. That is, I would not be able to outsource my emotion to my sources (Hout & Burger, 2015). Hout & Burger (2015) argue that “journalism’s claim to reliability has always been tied to the use of sources” (9), but in the case of *Entertainment Journalism: Making it your career* (2018), I was the primary source and as such I had to convince the reader I was imparting authoritative knowledge (Hout & Burger, 2015), which I made sure to do. What this means is that I also took elements of celebrity biography and memoir and applied them to *Entertainment Journalism* and in doing so was hoping to create something more authentic to the reader than they might usually associate with academic material. Traditional textbooks and their contents are considered “not so much the original intellectual product of their author(s), but rather as the portrayal and presentation of knowledge deemed consolidated and relevant by society as a whole” (Sammler et. al., 2016:6).

Taking elements of my career and weaving them into the fabric of the narrative, by autobiographising myself and spilling the beans on my professional life, I was attempting to write a new kind of textbook, a ‘tribrid’ form which encompasses knowledge transfer, reporting and confession, while retaining autonomy (Phillips, 2018, Sammler et. al., 2016). I hoped to “maintain two identities – that of a protagonist in a memoir and that of a journalist” (Phillips, 2018:26). But I also tried to do more. The book was the culmination of a pedagogic dialogue I had been having with my students around journalism and specifically entertainment journalism. This “hybrid engagement” (Ruotsalainen and Vikki, 2018:79) sits within the modern practice of hybrid journalism, that is a combination of “journalistic objectivity and audience-centred dialogue” (ibid.) It is a practice familiar to entertainment and



celebrity journalists since the output of this merger works so effectively on social media platforms (ibid.). As I hybridised linguistically and in genre, I also brought the narrative structure I applied to my biographies, around the hero's journey, to the textbook. I pictured a reader beginning their journey, heading out on their quest to find ideas and stories. I took the potential confusion around memories and imposed order, "determining what information stays in the story and what gets sloughed off" (Phillips, 2018:32). And at the book's end, our hero returns home, the same person but changed. Now plied with information and new skills, ready, we hope, to integrate what they have learned into their life and use it in the world.

### **Conclusion**

In this commentary, I have attempted to demonstrate how my work is distinctive by examining several areas. I have explored how the mainstreaming of celebrity and entertainment culture – and the way it is written about – means that traditional forms are ready for a change. Conboy (2014) argues that celebrity has diversified and can be seen as infiltrating various sections of contemporary discourse, which is why it is not ridiculous that one might utilise some of the journalism that has derived from this proliferation on platforms that it might not normally be equated with, such as academic textbook writing. The rise of truths over truth (Calcutt, 2016) and the increased commercialisation of the academic sector, particularly in the UK where I work, means that it is more important than ever to consider how we write the books which teach our youth. Of course, there is space for variety within this platform and erudite, detailed books that help to lead researchers across disciplines in new and exciting directions are fundamental to the genre. But if young people are to be broken free from a world of "truthiness" (Colbert, 2005), it is worth continually interrogating

the ways in which academics can help with that through their writing. When an author writes something, it is likely they are thinking about how the publishers will receive the book. Will they like it? What are the chances of being successful? This suggests a publishing industry with no imagination, one afraid to try something new (Kearns, 2010). But by attempting to be an authentic author, being true to myself as an entertainment journalist and writing in the tone that I felt most resembled my natural voice (Vannini and Franzese, 2008, Van Leeuwen, 2001), I intended to create an artefact that spoke to an audience that continues to evolve. Facebook and other social media, such outliers when I began, have now made their way to the centre of the industry. This has no doubt had some form of detrimental effect on journalistic discourse, but it has also helped it flourish in new and exciting directions, as it is clear the very process of writing and researching has changed immeasurably. The audience for a book like *Entertainment Journalism* is different to what it might have been fifteen years ago and therefore the way I wrote it could be too. After all, says Guthrie (1981), “one’s goals...determine the kinds of meanings that are made of language” (555) – that is, what the intended audience for the book would get out of it directly affected the language I used within it.

Recognising celebrity news can be analysed as a hybrid genre (Van den Bulck et al., 2017) and considering the above, it is my belief that, in fact, all genre is hybrid. The reasons for this are several. Modern day publishing requires that books are presented in multiple formats, from hardback to audio and an audience responds differently to a text depending on the platform on which they receive it. Second, argues Chandler (2014), “the classification and hierarchical taxonomy of genres is not a neutral and ‘objective’ procedure.” As such, what even is genre? It is, Chandler suggests, a

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taxonomy governed by convention rather than a constitution. Indeed, in Hollywood today 'genre' is a (sometimes pejorative) term often assigned to any movie that isn't designed and released as a potential four-quadrant blockbuster, particularly horror. Similarly, dramas often contain laughs and comedies feature scares, what we intuit as a hybridised genre, even if the promotional material doesn't follow suit. Writing is the same. Richard Holmes' memoirs contain biography (Holmes, 2016), novels can be written in poetic form, as can be seen in the work of authors like Claudia Rankine. Textbooks, as I describe here, include elements from various other genres, from interview and memoir, to fiction. My commentary acknowledges this and codifies my approach to it. Breaking free from the embedded confines of the academic genre, I chose to embrace the possibilities of hybridity as a textbook writer. In fact, by following the conventions of academia (Harvard referencing, including theoretical concepts), allying it to skills attained as an entertainment journalist and biography writer (readability, salaciousness, empathy for the reader, personally revealing interviews) and then including honest revelations about myself (my personal journalism journey, my mistakes and successes) as seen in memoir, *Entertainment Journalism* becomes a 'tribrid' output that can reasonably be placed in several different sections of a bookshop – reference, education, media, even biography or non-fiction.

What else did my own writing teach me? During and after the writing of my biographies, while reading reviews and trying to reflect critically on my performance (Schon, 1983), it became increasingly clear what I had done right and what I had done wrong. My search for the truth about the lives of Robert Downey Jr. and Professor Brian Cox was thorough, but was always going to be hampered by the need to

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interpret and interrogate uncertain records as well as strategically build a compelling narrative so the books were exciting as well as informative to read (Albano, 2007). This realisation therefore influenced how I wrote *Entertainment Journalism*. There are technically no stars to mythologise or dissect (Dyer, 1998), yet it is a text that essentially attempts to codify pedagogically the world within which they reside and are interrogated using specific journalistic traits. My textbook needed to be informative, to search for and reveal truth, but it also needed to employ narrative strategies to ensure it was a satisfying and enjoyable book to read and work with. While not strictly myth-building, I am creating a world where the reader becomes a person who feels closer to celebrities, more comfortable around them, who sees them not as untouchable demi-gods, but as flawed humans alongside whom the reader should not feel so out of place, just like the characters I explore in my biographies. I ask the reader to understand that to become a successful entertainment journalist, they need to accept the call I make and follow the narrative journey of the book to its end. It is a policy I have inculcated in my teaching – acting as mentor and cheerleader to my students so they comprehend the trip required of them to succeed at university. It is not exactly Joseph Campbell, but it is definitely inspired by him. Ultimately, the writing of my biographies and my textbook and subsequently my teaching is essentially one continuous Kolbian learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) – feeding into and out of each other on a loop, hopefully improving my writing and teaching, as well as the student and reader experience.

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APPENDIX 1: Original Robert Downey Jr. book proposal, Ben Falk (2009).



# ROBERT DOWNEY JR.:

## THE COMEBACK KID

## **SYNOPSIS**

**“I’ve always felt like an outsider in this industry. Because I’m so insane I guess.”  
– Robert Downey Jr.**

Robert Downey Jr. now commands \$25 million a movie – not bad for someone who ten years ago was in prison, addicted to heroin and cocaine and one bad choice away from death. It is without doubt Hollywood’s greatest ever comeback.

He’s the mercurial genius who was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar for his performance in *Chaplin* at the age of 27, but fired from *Ally McBeal* a decade later thanks to the spectre of drug abuse which he says began at the age of eight. He’s the former Brat Packer who dated Sarah Jessica Parker and Marisa Tomei, whose best friend is Mel Gibson.

He made his acting debut aged five, was hired and fired from *Saturday Night Live* at 20 and now at 44 is a father and husband, a songwriter and star. His 2009 films *The Soloist* and *Sherlock Holmes* are expected to be the year’s most anticipated awards bait and biggest blockbuster respectively.

By turns brazenly honest and shrewdly enigmatic, Downey Jr. agreed to pen his memoirs in 2006, only to return the advance in 2008, when he realised his life was back on track and he didn’t want to delve into his dark past.

***Robert Downey Jr.: The Comeback Kid*** is our chance to do just that – an insightful, devastating, scathing and ultimately uplifting journey into the realms of Hollywood’s darkest excess and out the other side.

We will chart Downey Jr.’s unconventional upbringing as the son of an anti-establishment hippy. Find out why he turned to drugs. How it affected his relationships and family. Why it almost ruined his career. And why the film industry embraced him once again. As well as celebrating one of the best actors of his generation.

Robert Downey Jr.’s life isn’t a movie – but it could be.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

### **PROLOGUE**

A clever twist on the normal prologue, which re-imagines Downey Jr.’s life as a film script being pitched by two movie execs. This leads us into the story.

### **GROWING UP**

Born in Greenwich Village in 1965 to an agit-prop filmmaker father and actress mother, young Robert has his first on-screen appearance at the age of five in his Dad’s movie *Pound*. His Dad is the first person to offer him drugs, letting him smoke marijuana when he was eight. He attends stage school in New York, then his parents’ divorce and he moves to California, but heads back to the East Coast after dropping out of high school. “I never really had a childhood,” he says.



### BREAKING INTO THE BUSINESS

Already dating Sarah Jessica Parker after meeting her on the set of *Firstborn* in 1984, he gets hired for hit TV sketch show *Saturday Night Live*, but is fired after just one season when the ratings tank. He plays a bully in *Weird Science* and early bad boy behaviour creeps in when he defecates in co-star Kelly LeBrock's trailer after accusing the producers of not treating him properly. He is considered but misses out on the lead role in *Pretty In Pink*. However, he scores the lead opposite Molly Ringwald in *The Pick-Up Artist* and then the controversial adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, in which he plays a high-living, drug-taking yuppie. Downey Jr. has subsequently referred to the part as the "Ghost Of Christmas Future". He is already taking a lot of drugs and partying. He begins to get traction in the industry and is recognised as a great talent.

### THE BRAT PACK

He and Sarah Jessica are staples on the party circuit, eventually splitting up because of his addictions. He subsequently steps out with Marisa Tomei. With money in his pocket and praise aplenty, Downey Jr. is on the brink of major stardom, starring in *Air America* alongside friend and future mentor Mel Gibson and Hollywood satire *Soapdish*. However, behind-the-scenes, things are a different story and his drug use is spiralling out of control. He's generally recognised amongst his peer group as something of a kook and he's even accused of dabbling in homosexuality. "A lot of [them] think I'm an eccentric bisexual, like I may even have an ammonia-filled tentacle or something somewhere on my body. That's okay," he says.

### CHAPLIN – AND SUCCESS

The actor scores his biggest role to date, playing the titular role in biopic *Chaplin*. He wins the Best Actor BAFTA and is nominated for an Oscar, losing out to Al Pacino. He learns to play the violin and play tennis for the part and does all his own stunts, although it also makes him depressed when he believes he will never be as talented as the real Charlie. In a bid to throw off the past, he symbolically buries the clothes he wore in *Less Than Zero*. He also meets and marries his first wife Deborah Falconer after a 42-day courtship. The relationship produces a son, Indio. He works with some of the greats, including Robert Altman in *Short Cuts* and Oliver Stone in *Natural Born Killers*.

### FALLING INTO THE ABYSS

"It's like I have a loaded gun in my mouth and my finger's on the trigger and I like the taste of gun metal." This is how the star describes his descent into full-blown addiction. He's even doing it on set, as he starts smoking heroin, rather than snorting coke on the set of Jodie Foster's *Home For The Holidays* in 1995. She writes him a letter begging him to stop. In 1996, he is arrested for possession of heroin, cocaine and a Magnum handgun, speeding down Sunset Boulevard. While on parole a month later, he breaks into a neighbour's house and falls asleep in their bed. He's sentenced to three years probation. A year later he misses a mandatory drugs test and spends four months in prison. He later admits to be practically suicidal. He misses another drugs test in 1999 and spends almost a year in jail. Luckily, he had finished shooting *US Marshals* and was allowed to finish *In Dreams* with Annette Bening.

### ROCK BOTTOM

A week after being released, he is hired as the love interest on *Ally McBeal*. Though he later admits he was at his lowest ebb, he is nominated for an Emmy and wins a Golden Globe for his role. In October 2000, he is arrested in Palm Springs for drugs possession. While on parole six months later he is found wandering around Los Angeles barefoot. He is sacked from *Ally McBeal* and only thanks to a new law loophole, avoids jails and is sent to rehab for what could be the final time. He is helped by celebrity friends including Sean Penn, but shuns his advice. "Just hearing him [talk] reminded me I needed to go and score," says Downey Jr.

### THE COST OF DRUG ABUSE

Thanks to his drug arrests meaning it is practically impossible for him to get insured on a movie set, he loses out on several high-profile roles. Woody Allen reveals he wanted to cast him in *Melinda and Melinda* and he is also overlooked for *America's Sweethearts* alongside Julia Roberts. He only stars in *The Singing Detective* after friend and producer Mel Gibson pays for his bond and in *Gothika*, the filmmakers withhold 40% of his salary in case he relapses. His wife Deborah, fed up with his substance abuse, files for divorce. He considers filing for bankruptcy.

### THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Downey Jr. decides enough is enough and tries to turn his life around. He sticks with the drug rehabilitation programme, practises yoga and other martial arts, attends Alcoholics Anonymous and agrees to submit to random drug tests in order to share custody of son Indio. He also floats in an isolation tank and takes a daily regimen of herbal supplements and vitamins. Though a struggle, it works and he begins to get back on track. Though insurance is still a problem, film roles continue and he makes an album after signing a record deal. He also starts seeing producer Susan Levin and falls in love. They marry in 2005.

### HE'S BACK!

He takes parts in well-received action-comedy *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* and drama *Zodiac*. Then he's a left-field and controversial choice to play the lead in comic book movie *Iron Man*. The move pays off and the film is a gigantic commercial and critical hit. An Oscar-nominated performance in risqué comedy *Tropic Thunder* comes next, in which the actor daringly dons blackface and avoids any backlash. Once again, the former screw-up is a critical darling and thanks to *Iron Man*, he finally has leading man clout. Though maintaining his sobriety is a daily struggle, his life finally looks back on track. It is indeed a Hollywood miracle.

### THE FUTURE

With *Iron Man* taking over half a billion dollars at the worldwide box office, it has become a true superhero franchise. Downey Jr. will be playing the character again in the sequel and getting \$25 million for his efforts. He is also starring as the legendary *Sherlock Holmes* in an update of the detective for director Guy Ritchie, alongside Jude Law as Dr. Watson. And he will also be playing a journalist who befriends a homeless musical prodigy (Jamie Foxx) in *The Soloist* for British director Joe Wright. The film is already being tipped as an Oscar contender. "I have a sense of destiny that you are led to the things you are supposed to do," he says. In other words, Robert Downey Jr.'s been through hell – but now he's back.

**WHO AM I?**

I am a showbiz journalist and writer with ten years experience covering all facets of the entertainment industry. I have written news, interviews and features for dozens of magazines and newspapers, including *Empire*, *Total Film*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *Press Association*, *Grazia*, *Look* and the *BBC*. I was also *Press Association's* Los Angeles Bureau Chief, covering The Oscars, Golden Globes, Sundance Film Festival and Cannes.

I am the co-author of *Television's Strangest Moments*, published by Robson Books in 2005.

I know hundreds of people throughout the industry, from stylists and snitches, to publicists and nightclub doormen. They are the ones – along with interviews with people who knew and know him – who will help dish the dirt on Robert's past and present life.

**DELIVERY & WORDS**

90,000 words to be delivered 6 months from commission.