

“HAS ANYONE SEEN THE EDITOR?”
**AN EVALUATION OF EDITORIAL LEADERSHIP IN THE UK
REGIONAL PRESS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand and explain the role of editors in the UK regional press and sets out to determine whether ‘editorial leadership’ is still a valid term following changes brought about by technological advancements and economic necessities.

The research concludes that editors are still an effective and valued part of the media machinery. However, they are now expected to be business all-rounders, taking greater responsibility for commercial performance, maybe at the expense of direct involvement with undertaking any journalism, which has become a secondary function. They have an appreciation of other wider business functions, such as human resources and finance, but are able to increasingly rely on professional support.

Editorial leaders play a key role in the dissemination of journalism and its wider role in the democratic distribution of news and information. This study provides indications of where editorial leadership now sits from both an academic and industry perspective. Primary material consists of existing publications by the researcher himself, presented and reflected upon within a reflexive theoretical framework. Alongside this approach, original interviews were conducted with editorial leaders by way of top-up research.

A limited number of studies have touched on the role of leadership in the newsroom but the contribution of editorial leadership has received little attention within the academic community. Because the role continues to evolve, the position of ‘leadership’ is pivotal in the development of journalism and deserves greater attention from scholars, who have so far been reticent to engage with the role and its responsibilities. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of editorial leadership and afford a perspective on how the role could develop as the newspaper landscape continues to evolve.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Journalism is under pressure as never before. The previous drift towards digital by the legacy newspaper publishers has now become a headlong rush. Both ‘big-tech’ like Google and Facebook (Taplin, 2017) and low-cost start-ups such as hyperlocal titles (Harte and Williams, 2016) have taken revenue from all directions, and the audience has abundant choice. Through it all the person in charge – traditionally the editor, and here referred to as the ‘editorial leader’ – has to negotiate the competing attentions of newsroom staff, employer, audience and the wider community.

Moreover, the traditional business model of newspaper publishing, based on a combination of advertising revenue and copy sale, is thought by some to now be largely redundant and replaced by digital revenue, subscription sales and other financial lifelines offered by ‘ambidextrous’ publishing (Kolo, 2016). Again, editorial leaders find themselves more engaged in these economic activities than their predecessors.

The main stimulus to engage with the topic as a research project was the increased propensity for large publishers to consolidate editors across several newspapers and therefore leave titles and the communities served without a dedicated editor. One newspaper previously edited by the researcher, a 255-year-old weekly title, is now overseen by a ‘brands editor’. Another, a regional daily, has no editor at all but a ‘head of digital’, who is directed by a senior editor from 140 miles away.

The change in work practices, even before the pandemic of 2020-21, also informs the inquiry into the role of the editorial leader. For instance, Reach plc told most of its journalists (Sharman, 2021) they will permanently work from home in future, prompting office closures across the country. Reach says it will instead maintain hub offices filled with meeting rooms in Belfast, Bristol, Birmingham, Dublin, Cardiff, Glasgow, Newcastle, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Greater Manchester, Nottingham, Plymouth and an office in the South-East of England. ‘Hubs with meeting rooms’, but not newsrooms, which are the traditional domains of the editorial leader.

These ‘hubs’ are essentially a concentration of meeting spaces, where according to company employees will be able to “recapture face-to-face collaboration and a social element” but not,

in the case of journalism, perform professional tasks such as interviewing, writing up or page design.

Reach (2021) said it arrived at this decision after conducting a survey of employees which showed “a majority found home working suited their needs”. Consequently ‘colleagues’ will either be home-based or working mainly from home with regular office attendance, and around a quarter permanently office-based, working from one of the 15 hubs. This working practice, the company tellingly maintains, means it “will be investing more in our strategy and our journalism and less in buildings”. How this impacts on the ability of the editorial leader to influence and direct an increasingly diverse (in a geographic sense) body of employees will exercise both media watchers and scholars as the change of working practice gains traction.

To address the question of the validity of editorial leadership, editors who served with the ‘large publishers’ referred to earlier were selected for scrutiny via the semi-structured interview technique. Their experience covered Northcliffe, Local World, Trinity Mirror, Iliffe and Newsquest, while further editors questioned for a series published online (Alan Geere Online, 2020a,b,c) represented JPI and Aberdeen Journals. This top-up research was conducted before the full effects of COVID-19 became evident so therefore reflect the business environment and working practices as existed pre-pandemic.

These publishers claim to be truly ‘multi-media’ combining the traditional printed product with digital output, including website, social media and audience enhancements such as podcasts and email newsletters. The editorial leaders under review largely inherited the digital function and subsumed it into their role, so no distinction is made in this study between ‘print’ and ‘online’ as the origination and decision-making processes are largely compatible even if the delivery is different.

This research engages with academic theories to contribute to the body of knowledge and advance awareness and understanding of the editor’s role. As Duffy (2021) says, the editor has often been hidden in scholarship under the catch-all term of ‘journalist’ so this study examines that premise while answering the research question: *Is the term editorial leadership still valid?* These issues are addressed by drawing on a portfolio of professional experience (documented in Appendix A) and via semi-structured interviews with five experienced industry figures (Appendix B).

The contribution of editorial leadership has received little attention within the academic community with Duffy (2021) contending that “the editor is a curiously indistinct figure in the academe” while Goyanes and Gentile (2018) conclude that “empirical research on the social construction of leadership [in the context of news organisations] continues to be scarce”.

Work on this thesis started in October 2017 allowing for the research to sit naturally in the decade 2010-20, when the researcher was still an active media practitioner (Northcliffe Newspapers, Nottingham Post). Some experiences prior to 2010 do appear as reflexive input where relevant and a deadline was imposed of December 2020, to ensure the research does not continually chase developments in the fast-moving media world.

What is editorial leadership?

Like many industries, journalism has its own jargon and nomenclature. ‘Editor’ has traditionally sufficed as shorthand for “the principal person in charge of a newspaper, magazine, or similar publication, having overall responsibility for its content and policies” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021a) – although there is opportunity for confusion with ‘editor’ also describing a person who “prepares an edition of written work by one or more authors for publication, by selecting and arranging the contents, adding commentary, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021a).

Section heads – sport, features, business etc – also include ‘editor’ in their description, while other titles such as political editor and diplomatic editor are conferred to convey status rather than any leadership or managerial responsibilities. In the United Kingdom, sub-editor is a production journalist dealing with manipulating words and pictures, the same role performed in the United States by a copy editor. Other titles that contribute to a general obfuscation of the terminology include editor-in-chief, editor-at-large, managing editor, executive editor and editorial director. Entering the lexicon in the years largely following the switch to include digital, are new naming conventions like creative content director, brand editor, engagement editor and audience editor.

Consequently, it was decided to define this research under the umbrella of ‘editorial leadership’, which identifies with the reality of the role performed rather than any designation. In this sense ‘editorial’ is used to describe “those contents of a newspaper, magazine, etc., that are written or edited by its editors, as distinct from advertisements”

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2021b) and leadership “the ability to select, equip, train, and influence one or more followers” (Winston and Patterson, 2006). “These followers (sic) have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and the leader focuses the follower to the organisation’s mission and objectives causing the follower to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (Winston and Patterson, 2006, 7).

In their *Integrative Definition of Leadership*, Winston and Patterson (2006) list 90 ‘Leadership dimensions’ from encouragement, trust and togetherness through to fresh-thinking, problem-solving and empowerment. It is not difficult to translate these skills and qualities to the newsroom environment where the ‘editorial leaders’ are expected to perform.

As Frei and Morris (2020) outline, leadership at the top is discernibly shifting from a focus on the single individual who does the analysis and decides what happens, to leaders who draw on the expertise of their team and engage the talents in the organisation. This approach, known as ‘service leadership’, is a long way removed from the dictatorial, top-down leadership style traditionally employed by editors.

Kueng¹ (2020) explains that those at the top of news organisations are frequently also top journalists. “Journalists’ role is to know more about things, and those at the top are meant to know the most of all.” The pace and scope of change in the industry means that, says Kueng, journalists who are top leaders must suddenly be able also ‘not to know’ – to listen to and learn from younger colleagues, as well as to audiences.

The research

This research addresses the supposition that the role of editorial leader continues to be of key significance in a variety of aspects, even in a period of perceived ‘revolution’. Semi-structured interviews with experienced editorial leaders are combined with the reflective portfolio of the researcher who has pursued a 40-year career in journalism. The collected database provides a substantial body of work to make an original contribution to current debates about the performance and practice of editorial leadership.

¹ Lucy Küng restyled the spelling of her name to Lucy Kueng in 2017

CHAPTERS

Literature review

The literature review is an examination of the landscape for how editorial leadership is situated both within the overall media environment and the leadership traits displayed. While revealing in its overall nature it does expose the lack of studies concerning UK-based entities in general and the regional media in particular. The United States and Scandinavia are both well represented and, although the general themes have resonance for this UK-focused study, one of the guiding objectives for this thesis was to redress that imbalance.

Methodology

This chapter explores the choices of research methods available and defends the decision to choose in-depth semi-structured interviews with experienced practitioners. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their experience and relevance to the overall study. All had a substantial background in editorial leadership and were able to reflect accurately and honestly on the issues under discussion. The criteria for selection of portfolio evidence is explained in the methodology chapter.

By building on the scholarly conclusions that start with Tunstall's ground-breaking study *Journalists at Work* (1971), the analysis of data looks in this thesis at three distinct themes: Editor as journalist, the commercial editor and editor as personnel manager. Tunstall's research shaped academic inquiry into the practices of working journalists and, although now 50 years since publication, the work still holds a resonance for the role of editor.

Editor as journalist

By Tunstall's definition (1971, 42) one of the three main constituent roles of the editor is "performing a traditional journalistic role on a daily basis in the newsroom". Actually 'doing journalism' is where it all started for most editorial leaders and there is an innate compulsion to continue performing even though it may not be to the most benefit of both the title and the business. It also brings into play the nature of delegation, which is a management trait that is also rooted in leadership. One recurring theme is how editorial leaders are expected to assimilate the practical elements of the role, like delegation, rather than overtly learn or be taught them.

The premise is that doing actual journalism has become a discretionary rather than essential part of the role, and may actually have a negative effect as editorial leaders use their position rather than their perceived ability to make an active contribution to journalistic output.

The commercial editor

The realities of how editors “interact with business executives in charge of finance, advertising, circulation, production and promotion” (Tunstall, 1971, 43) are still exercising media management teams, but it is the ever-increasing importance of commercial interests that is dominating the behaviours of editorial leaders. While a seemingly straightforward proposition to generate revenue and preserve profit, newspapers, as Edge (2019) points out, are “deceptively complex economic commodities”.

This chapter explores the notion that rather than simply “interacting with business executives in charge of finance, advertising, circulation, production and promotion” many editors now encapsulate all those positions as well as leadership in the newsroom and enquires into how they take on this latest multi-faceted role.

Editor as personnel manager

Tunstall (1971, 43), chose to feature the ‘personnel management decisions’ in his dissection of the constituent roles of the editor. Calling these decisions ‘considerable’ he highlights the ‘hiring and promoting of wide range of journalists’ and the financial responsibility of controlling salaries and expenses.

The contention is that recruitment decisions have become a defining moment for editorial leaders. Creating and maintaining a ‘team’ that deliver the vision, ambition and objective while also being mindful of shrinking budgets is a considerable responsibility that may, to the untutored eye, seem far removed from any strictly editorial responsibility.

Research overview

Few published studies have adequately tested either the construction or effectiveness of editorial leadership. How do editorial leaders arrive in their position of influence? Is greatness thrust upon them or have they worked hard to achieve what may be seen as the pinnacle of their profession? Fiedler (1981) contends that to the layman, leadership is “something a person has; an inherited or acquired trait which, therefore, remains with the

person”. There is, however, very little evidence to support this widely held belief (Stogdill, 1975). This research looks at the qualities and competencies needed to perform the role, but also investigates how relationships with publishers and media business owners could shape potential appointments.

In terms of ‘effectiveness’, there is no one benchmark to measure the editorial leader. Traditional indicators are now a fraught landscape. Audience (or circulation as it once was) is a fickle measurement. Coverage of a big moment for the local football team or up-to-the-minute reporting of a dramatic local incident like a murder or fire can drive digital traffic, but so too can dashcam footage of a speeding driver or film of baby animals, which require no journalistic input.

Profitability can only be influenced by the editorial leader, not dictated. Yes, they can cut costs by reducing staff numbers and using less outside material from freelancers and agencies. They can also seek to increase revenue by developing platforms (property, food & drink etc) that commercial departments can leverage. But to judge editorial leaders ‘by the numbers’ would be to misunderstand their sphere of influence.

Some metrics point to turnover of staff as a measure of effectiveness, citing the negative impact of cost of recruitment and the positive effect of maintaining a settled staffing structure. But this does not take into account personnel changes driven by changing working practices or updated skills assessments.

Research into leadership effectiveness (Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003) has largely overlooked the implications that leadership processes are enacted in the context of a shared group membership, where leaders, as group members, ask followers, as group members, to exert themselves on behalf of the collective. Editorial leaders, therefore, may assess the value of ‘team players’ and exert their influence in the recruitment process accordingly.

What follows occupies a niche in the study of journalism, opening up a discussion on the work of the editor and providing insight into the arcane, even secretive, yet fast-changing world of editorial leadership.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Editorial Leadership

The starting point for this thesis is a definition of the phrase ‘editorial leadership’. It is not, however, an area that has attracted much attention from the academy. In the foreword to *Leadership in the Media Industry*, Küng² (2006, 2) contends that the topic of leadership in the media industry is a “compelling one” but also admits it is an “under-researched field”. Mierzewska & Hollifield (2006) concur, noting that leadership has been described as the single most neglected area of research and theory development in the field of media management studies.

This is not because leadership issues are unimportant to media companies, says Hang (2006, 161). The problem, as defined by Hang, is that despite of the awareness of the relationship between leadership and media organization’s performance, there is still very limited systematic research that is either theoretically sound or primary-data based, like this thesis.

Duffy (2021) points out that there have been studies of the reporter, professionalisation and managers but while a powerful force in the newsroom, “the editor is a curiously indistinct figure in the academe”. He argues that the editorial function – embodied in the person of the editor – is one of the most significant and defining characteristics of journalism that gives it legitimacy as a form of cultural production, and consequently call for the “reinstatement of the editor as a person of scholarly interest”.

Of direct interest to this study is Duffy’s central proposition that different interests meet, merge and are negotiated by the editor, and his assertion:

A starting point [to test this proposition] would be qualitative research comprising interviews with editors to examine how they negotiate their complex roles and how digitisation changes those negotiations. (Duffy, 2021, 644)

This research will go some way to satisfying that demand.

² Lucy Küng restyled the spelling of her name to Lucy Kueng in 2017

Gentry (1997) identified ‘strong leadership’ as the first of five elements essential for successful newspaper organisational change, ahead of management communication, staff involvement, management behaviour and anticipating problems.

While acknowledging that development efforts are “characterized by dispersing power throughout an organization” Gade concludes that “management’s ability to provide leadership remains a key to organizational success”. (Gade, 2004, 21).

Leadership and professional cultures

“Journalism, as it is, is coming to an end” announces Deuze (2007, 141) rather portentously, before going on to explain that commercialism and cross-media mergers have gradually eroded the distinct professional identities of newsrooms and their publications. Schudson (2003, 90) is also concerned about the critical style of reporting and the growing role of entertainment values, as opposed to traditional news judgment which he says signal “an intrusion of marketplace values into the professionalism of journalists”.

With a similar downbeat assessment Bromley (1997, 341) singles out technological convergence for the blame in advancing ‘the end of journalism’ citing “the dismantling of demarcations between journalists and technicians, news gatherers and news processors and between print, radio and television journalism”. This convergence of technologies leads to multi-skilling, which Bromley attributes to economic pressures and fewer resources. Bromley, however, concludes on a more positive note: “Ultimately, journalism is not going to end because of technological or cultural convergence.”

Deuze (2007, 159) maintains that for a media profession “so central to society’s sense of self” it is crucially important to understand the influences of:

- Changing labor (sic) conditions
- Professional cultures
- The appropriation of technologies

In terms of those ‘professional cultures’ Deuze says: “Although journalists, much like other professionals in the media industries, like to think of themselves as autonomous and creative individuals, in fact most of the work at news outlets is based on a set of routine, standardized,

activities.... Newsrooms, whether in print, broadcasting or online, look remarkably the same all over the world.” (Deuze, 2007, 162)

Role of a leader and its difference from a manager

In a study of culture, leadership and management at Google, Tran (2017) maintains that “in every social interaction, whether we are aware of it or not, we function as a leader”. Tran contends that cultural dynamics are influenced when introducing new cultural elements based on values, beliefs and associated actions and behaviours. “Over time, these new elements have the ability to strengthen and enhance culture or eroding and weaken it,” he says. (Tran, 2017, 8)

According to Bertocci (2009) leaders are individuals who motivate or influence other individuals to do what they might not do in the absence of the leader’s influence. By contrast, good management brings calmness and stability to an organization and tries to eliminate what sometimes can be chaotic circumstances that threaten their very existence, pointing out: “Good management brings a degree of order and consistency to the quality and profitability of products or services.” Leadership, however, is about vision, big picture views, and coping with change, argues Bertocci saying that art of the reason leadership has become so important in recent years is that the business world has become more global, more competitive and more volatile.

However, Tran (2017) suggests that when the responsibility for creating and preserving organizational culture ultimately lies with a senior leadership, it is important to recognize that every employee plays a unique role as “culture creator, evolver, manager, and leader”. At Google, Tran contends, they have created a dynamic culture for getting the creativity from their engineers, noting “as a result, the employees feel free and really enjoy their work”. Management as an editorial function is routinely written about in more pragmatic and less idealistic terms than the journalism that is being managed (Bunce, 2017) while Soloski (1989) says the editor is “...caught between management and the news department”.

The concept that online news requires far less money to produce than news on more established platforms is identified by Harte and Williams (2016) as “manifestly true, except in the area of human resources”. Newsroom managers have power, in part, because they

oversee the distribution of capital at their news organisation, says Bunce: “They make decisions about hiring, promotions and pay (economic capital), and they can also distribute cultural capital by, for example, giving certain journalists public praise and awards.” (Bunce, 2017, 893)

Where once the audience was imagined (Gans, 1979) metrics mean they have become an increasingly real force in newsrooms (Anderson, 2011). Maintaining a focus on audience metrics runs the risk of decoupling journalism from its civic duty by being more concerned with what the audience wants rather than what the audience needs (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018).

Much has been written about the future of journalism (Deuze and Witschge, 2018) and the part that established legacy media, which makes up most of the UK regional press, will have to play (Newman, 2019). Much less, however, puts this uncertain future in the context of editorial leadership and the role that editors, or their inheritors, will have to play.

Nothing has concentrated the minds of editorial leaders more than technological change and economic necessity which Hardt (2000, 209) theorises have “pushed the practice of journalism beyond traditional expectations”. Although the demise of newspapers as a medium has long been prophesied by industry analysts such as Claire Enders (Brook, 2009) what Edge (2019) calls “the inescapable conclusion” is that newspapers as a medium will endure, but individual newspapers will likely find different ways to adapt.

Editors, themselves, have a range of views. Alan Rusbridger (2020), editor of *The Guardian* for 20 years, contends that some editors have “great commercial instincts”. But others, he said, “have (and want) no say at all in the paper’s P&L [profit and loss balance sheet]. The former may work well – or can lead to ethical deep waters.”

Former Independent editor Chris Blackhurst says that journalists are not businesspeople. “They may be employed by a business but they’re not interested in business. They don’t understand business, they don’t want to. For many, theirs is a calling, not a route to making lots of money.” (Blackhurst, 2021, no page number)

Scott recalls that many editors want to be managers when it suits them. “They want to be a directors even, yet they believe they can retain a defined right to withdraw into a shell when they are asked to become a commercially minded.” (Scott, 1987, 117)

This study will examine the leadership role within the regional press, which also encompasses some management responsibilities. It will, however, continue to differentiate between ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ and ensure that the exploration of the leadership position does not get side-tracked by the day-to-day management function.

How is editorial leadership to be conducted?

Kets de Vries (1993), a psychologist who focuses on the ‘psychodynamics of organizations’, says that organizational culture depends on the psychological contract that exists between its leaders and followers.

His formula for effective leaders is the need to:

- articulate a vision of the future
- create symbolic impressions to communicate the vision
- build networks
- empower followers
- make choices (often painful ones)
- keep perspectives of the followers based in reality

He warns that the leader/follower relationship – “a process of social comparison that involves power, authority, hero worship, flattery, ambition, and attention seeking” – provides tremendous opportunities for distorted management reasoning.

The pre-eminent quality, according to Kets de Vries (1993, 176), is to “preserve their hold on reality.” Trust is essential for a healthy organization, and trust is dependent upon communication, support, respect, fairness, competence, and consistency on the part of the leaders. He concluded, “In order for the leader to understand the meaning of [trust], it is important that he or she realize what it means to be a follower, how it feels to be in that position”.

Individual media leaders can be ascribed to each leadership approach according to van Weezel (2006, 159):

Trait approach (Rupert Murdoch) - Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) introduced a model that contains six key traits important to leadership success: drive, leadership motivation, honesty

and integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability and knowledge of business. However, Hang (2006, 163) warns “though we should not get stuck in the trap of believing that those who do not possess specific traits are not leaders, giving more credits on personality traits can still help us to get closer to the essence of leadership”.

Behavioural approach (Michael Eisner) - van Weezel (2006, 171) explains the behavioural or ‘style’ approach to leadership is based on the simple reasoning that it is not necessary to understand why the leader behaves the way they do, but rather to explore the actual effects of a leader’s behaviour. Stogdill (1975) says the emphasis is on what the leader does instead of what he/she is. “The focus is on understanding the relationship between the leader’s behaviour and the satisfaction and performance of the group,” he says.

Transformational approach (Steve Jobs) - Transformational leadership is focused on change, change in organisations as well as change and growth by the individuals within organisations, says Wikström (2006, 189). Bass (1984, 29), an influential writer on transformational leadership defines a transformational leader as: “...someone who raises [followers’] awareness about issues of consequence, shifts them to higher-level needs, influences them to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group or organization, and to work harder than they originally had expected they would.”

Power approach (Robert Maxwell) – Power is the capacity to influence the attitudes of people in the desired direction, and to make them execute orders they might not otherwise obey, explains Bjurstedt (2006, 181). “The concept is needed to understand how people or managers may influence each other in organizations,” he writes. “Leadership is related to power because it is dependent on the level of influence a person might have in an organization. A leader with little power will have little or no influence or authority, and authority is the right to influence others in a specific way. Thus, power is an important basis for influence in formal organizations.”

In a study exploring editorial leadership at the BBC, Fowler-Watt and Wilson (2013, 207) identified what was described as the ‘top 5 challenges for BBC editorial leaders’:

- I know intuitively what I want but I’m not always good at explaining it clearly
- There seem to be lots of obstacles in the way of making original journalism happen

- Fear of getting things wrong stops me being bold
- I'm not as confident as I should be about managing poor performance or delivering difficult messages
- I feel more comfortable with the tried and tested than with taking what feel like unnecessary risks

Introducing the concept of 'Being a leader all the time' Fowler-Watt and Wilson (2013, 217) challenge the assumption among many editors that they are only able to act as a leader on the days they are occupying a leadership role on the newsroom rota. "Editorial leadership is a mindset and a set of behaviours, rather than a slot on the rota. It's about who you are rather than what you do on a given day. Leadership is a continuum," she writes.

Hadwin (2006, 140) says editors must get their hands dirty – "literally and figuratively". Noting that even the aloof find themselves "embroiled in production" she says that constant change of the manufacturing process generates judgment calls. "It is never long before a decision is required from the ultimate arbiter: the editor." For Hadwin the working role of the editor is unequivocal "An editor remains a working journalist involved in the day-to-day production of the newspaper," she writes. "That an editor delegates many jobs to the editorial staff does not mean that she should not write a wedding report or sub the television programmes." (Hadwin, 2006, 141).

The future of editorial leadership

Much has been written about the future of journalism (Deuze and Witschge 2018) and the part that established legacy media, which makes up most of the UK regional press, will have to play (Newman 2019). Much less, however, puts this uncertain future in the context of editorial leadership and the role that editors, or their inheritors, will have to play.

Anderson et al (2018) assert that "every journalist can now be a publisher" and one very obvious side effect of newsroom automation is the lowering in value and utility of the role of editors. "Visionaries at the top of organizations will still set the tone and editorial direction for brands, and perhaps each topic will have a specialist editor. Time saved by the automatic organization and editing of pieces, however, dramatically reduces the need for editors to oversee every part of the process," they note. (Anderson et al, 2018, 44)

In a cautionary notice to the current crop of editorial leaders assessed in this study, who maintain the more traditional overview position, Anderson et al (2018, 44) conclude that “newsrooms can no longer afford senior staff who do not produce content”.

However, Anderson et al do concede that the erosion of the old way of doing things is accompanied by an increase in new opportunities and new needs for journalistically important work. “The journalist has not been replaced but displaced, moved higher up the editorial chain from the production of initial observations to a role that emphasizes verification and interpretation, bringing sense to the streams of text, audio, photos and video produced by the public,” they say. (Anderson et al, 2018, 22) Does this mean that previous models presenting categories for analysis are now out of date, or need to be challenged in the light of the research findings of this thesis? Before this question can be adequately answered, the various models merit further scrutiny, especially in terms of how they relate to the concept of editorial leadership.

Towards a market model of journalism

News organizations have traditionally been seen as divided into business-oriented and journalism-oriented parts of the enterprise (McManus, 1994). News media thus function in the tension field between politics and markets, combining two different logics in governing journalistic work; a public sphere model and a market model (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). Now, that market model is evolving. Bakker (2012), looking at content models in both the US and Europe, argues that increasing pressures to produce cheaper content for digital platforms by using “aggregation, content farms and Huffinization” have given rise to a “low-pay and no-pay journalism” where content is no longer king and, following its abdication, “part-timers and amateurs” rather than professional journalists proliferate.

This study will build on that work, examining the growing dissonance between the traditional concepts of professional journalism and the notion that “anyone and everyone can be a journalist” (Gerlis, 2008).

Looking at what he calls the ‘Psychology of News Decisions’ Donsbach (2004) distinguishes between the subject sphere and the professional sphere. In the subject sphere, he locates values and norms, factors that influence the journalists as an individual. In the professional sphere he identifies professional norms and roles, news selection criteria, and social orientation.

Importantly for this thesis he says the roles journalists conceive may matter more as an organizational outcome than an individual decision over news coverage. For example, the newsroom culture and the majority of journalists within a newsroom and their preference of role conceptions seem more likely to matter for news stories than individual preferences and ideals leading to an even more crucial role for the ‘editorial leader’ who is instrumental in establishing the newsroom culture and whose position is thoroughly examined in this thesis. Changes in the professional journalism agenda are also under scrutiny from Franklin (2014), who deduces that developments “have reconfigured the scholarly agenda of journalism studies”. This is wholly appropriate, if not inevitable, Franklin contends, given that a good deal of research in the field seeks to reflect on changing professional practice and to be relevant to such changes.

Finance, income (or the lack of it) and the economic fortunes of the publisher never seem very far from the editor’s radar. This research tackles this issue and explores the negotiations an editorial leader must perform to satisfy the business realities. Maybe not a new issue, but certainly one that has evolved without much discussion.

Benson (2006) talks of a “cultural inertia of professional traditions rooted in contingent historical processes” and calls for a new unit of analysis for journalism studies between the individual news organization and the society as a whole, which he labels the “mezzo-level” interorganizational and professional environment of the field/institution. Benson appears to suggest that media professionals are not forward thinking enough, a notion repudiated here as editorial leaders explain how they grapple with emerging technologies, diversified audiences and economic necessities.

As mentioned earlier, Küng (2006, 2) says that the topic of leadership in the media industry is a “compelling one” but also admits it is an “under-researched field” while Mierzejewska & Hollifield (2006) concur, noting that leadership has been described as the single most neglected area of research and theory development in the field of media management studies. The findings here show that across the multi-disciplinary fields of journalism, management and commercial capacity the editorial leader continues to be figure of interest for journalism studies.

Journalism as professional practice

Scholars credit the origins of academic inquiry into the professional practice of journalism to Tunstall with the publication of his book 'Journalists at Work' in 1971. Indeed, Zelizer (2004, 19) concludes that: "Tunstall, almost single-handedly, developed the literature on the occupational life of journalists."

Tunstall (1971) himself wrote at the time in the introduction to the book: "There was no study of any type of specialist journalist, no study of a communications organisation, and no study of recruitment to the occupation." Going on to describe journalism as an 'indeterminate occupation' comparing it with both law and medicine which are relatively compact, uniform, and sharply defined, Tunstall (1971, 98) described "journalist" as a "label which people engaged in a very diverse range of activities apply to themselves".

The definition of 'journalist' is open to interpretation as never before, but there is still merit in exploring the debate around professionalism. Primary original research for this thesis has already shown that skills, values and approaches that could easily be construed as 'professional' are still valued by editorial leaders.

Tumber (2006) contends that Tunstall's suggestion that "only occupations which are fairly determinate have any chance of becoming professions" (Tunstall 1971, 98), probably relegates journalism's position even further nowadays from professional status. Using Greenwood's (1957) five attributes of a profession – systematic theory; authority; community sanction; ethical codes; and a culture – as a yardstick, Tunstall doubted that journalism "could ever acquire professional attributes to the extent of, for instance, medicine".

Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995, 273-274) are among scholars to recognise a significant revelation of the Tunstall study, by contrast with generations of journalistic memoirs which had preceded it, was the extent to which news was not an unpredictable and chaotic universe of events but was the steady and reliable prediction, preparation and routine management of 'institutionalised' news.

Tunstall instead suggested that news organisations should be seen neither as unitary nor dual but instead as having several types of goal: "A continual process of bargaining takes place as to which goals should be pursued."

Although Tunstall's observations are now 50 years old there is still much resonance for contemporary journalism. The element of 'routine management' of news is further examined in this thesis by way of questioning the editorial leaders in the original research.

Editorial autonomy

The history of academic inquiry into whether journalism should be classed as a profession is a divided body of work arriving at little consensus. Perhaps, as Tuchman's (1978) study of news work contends, professionalism has largely come to be defined according to the needs of the news organization itself.

Tumber and Prentoulis (2005, 58) admit that classifying the occupation of journalism is never an easy task. Unlike the classical professions, the depth of knowledge on which the practice of journalism is based is both limited and less clearly defined while the emphasis on practical skills brings journalism closer to a craft than a profession.

Among the efforts made to quantify journalism and professionalism McQuail (2013, 80) devises 'General criteria of a profession' that he says are most relevant to journalism:

- Having a core skill requiring high levels of training, skill and judgement plus access to a systematic body of knowledge
- Making a claim to monopoly of the service involved that is largely accepted by society
- Having and following a set of distinct norms of professional conduct
- Having an ethic of service to the society or to a 'public interest'; a claim to be occupying a position of public trust, with corresponding responsibility and accountability.
- Possessing a certain degree of freedom as an occupation, with personal autonomy of judgement for the practitioner

That element of 'personal autonomy' is an area Hallin and Mancini (2004, 35) explore noting that the autonomy of the journalist is not necessarily that of the individual but of the 'corps of journalists taken as a whole'. The so-called internal freedom of journalists does not extend to a right to free expression by way of the employing news organisation although it may support conscientious objection to certain tasks. Potential conflicts are usually avoided by selective or self-selective recruitment.

Knight (2008) provides a catalogue of objections to the claim of professionalism, citing:

- Journalists' mainstream agendas, as opposed to community interests.
- A touching faith in government sources.
- Susceptibility to propaganda.
- Corporate and careerist self-interest.
- Inaccuracies, unfairness and excluding language.
- Journalism's self-referencing culture. Journalists' virtual club often excludes outsiders including academics and the wider public.

Olen (1988) says that journalism should not become a profession since it involves the exercise of a right to freedom of expression that cannot be monopolized by an institution.

Eventually McQuail (2010, 287) decides that in the end, it may not greatly matter to those outside whether or not the occupation is classed as a profession, although the degree to which relevant criteria of professionalism are met does matter. These criteria have to do with the quality of work done, the reliability of information published, the honesty of purpose and the benefits for society that are sought.

'Everyone can be a publisher'

Knight (2008) argues that journalism paradigms are in transition as bloggers are providing competition through their often eye-witness reports. Quality blogs are influencing journalism practices. Knight says that journalists must adapt to and embrace the Internet.

While journalists were once defined by where they worked - in newspapers, or radio and television stations - the Internet promises everyone can be a publisher, says Knight. "But not everyone has the skills or training to be a journalist; defined by their professional practices and codes of ethics. Such journalists will continue to authorise information, providing signposts for discerning audiences," writes Knight.

Asserting that good governance, whether it be democratic or authoritarian, demands quality information on which decisions are grounded Knight maintains that journalists should be trained to produce fair and accurate stories about their communities.

"If journalism educators make ethics and professional practices the core of their courses, journalists should still be the best equipped to deliver such information. If they do so,

journalists will adapt to the Internet, in the same ways they embraced the telephone, the telegraph and the printing press.”

Gerlis (2008) proposes that when we now ask ‘Who Is a Journalist’, the answer is no longer anyone who is employed as journalist. The answer is that potentially, anyone and everyone can be a journalist. Gerlis maintains that with the advent of citizen journalism, UGC [user generated content] and blogs, it is now more important than ever for the role of the professional journalist to be properly defined.

This means that journalism will have to move from its traditional image as a ‘trade’ to become more of a profession. Training and higher professional standards will become increasingly important as we have to strive harder to distinguish ourselves from the new competition out there and work harder to be trusted. (Gerlis, 2008, 126)

Defining professional journalists as ‘paid’ Gerlis says they now need to differentiate themselves from ‘amateur’ journalists and a key element of that is ensuring proper ethical standards are maintained.

I am not saying that come what may, professional journalism is good, amateur journalism is bad. On the contrary. A good blogger or citizen journalist will be preferable to a shoddy or unethical professional journalist. The onus is on news organisations to ensure a culture and training so that journalists always work to the highest professional standards. (Gerlis, 2008, 126)

Referencing what has been called the third age of journalism, from the 1980s onwards – the ‘information age’ – Tumber (2006) infers that aspects of professional journalism are being challenged with a blurring between the public and journalists. He feels there is a widening of professional practice and an incorporation of new channels of communication and interactive communications enabling the public itself to be a distributor of information.

George (2008) warns against uncritically invoking professional standards as the dividing line that separates journalists from non-journalists. He professes that ‘many self-righteous though well-meaning mainstream professionals’ want to protect the sanctity of journalism against insurgents trying to align their work with their own particular agendas.

What the professionals may be unwittingly protecting, however, are rather prosaic industrial and commercial imperatives; in particular, the imperative to alienate the journalist and publisher from their own work. (George, 2008, 129)

George (2008), defining a journalist is someone who “applies his or her powers of observation, investigation and enterprise to provide the public with intelligence and commentary about current affairs” concludes that large news organizations with a daily output require a certain standardization of inputs to ensure an efficient flow of copy. “Some aspects of professionalism may be little more than this: a bureaucratic necessity for efficient operation of large-scale commercial news enterprises,” he says.

Of particular relevance to the role of editorial leader is when what Robinson (2007) describes as the “institutional dynamics shift” because technology allows the audience to take over some control. “Eventually, the changes in news production will have implications for the press’s ultimate authority as a societal institution,” says Robinson.

Now a new set of roles is being introduced in the newsroom primarily focused on navigating audience data say Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc (2018). Emphasising the impact that analytics is now having on news judgment they do acknowledge that “while audience-oriented editors take part in the editorial process, their role is to help journalists negotiate between the information obtained by their metrics and their journalistic intuition to make editorial decisions”. It is that element of ‘journalistic intuition’ that is under scrutiny in this study of editorial leadership.

‘Interloper’ media

The editorial leaders under examination in this study are increasingly having to focus on digital as well as traditional print content so may well have an appreciation of ‘Interlopers’ which Eldridge (2018) defines as “a class of digital-peripheral journalists and outlets who position their work as journalism, but who have struggled to be recognized as such.”

It is not surprising that in this enforced relaxation of the boundaries of journalism that new definitions find their way into the academic lexicon. Eldridge (2014) examines the way a self-defined in-group of traditional journalism protects its perceived professional identity against entities – Interloper Media – who claim belonging. “This is achieved through distinct processes that echo but diverge from traditional boundary maintenance,” he maintains.

The process of change and the response from editorial leaders in this study of the UK regional press is confined to established ‘legacy media’, dominant actors that have been able to paint a vision of what journalism is, contends Eldridge.

We now see new actors expressing journalistic identities which challenge that vision... interlopers have antagonized the boundaries which have surrounded the journalistic field by performing journalistic roles while pointedly criticizing their would-be journalistic peers. (Eldridge, 2014, 12)

A recent phenomenon in the regional newspaper newsroom has been the introduction of ‘metrics’ which measure real-time in the digital output who is reading what and for how long. In a study called ‘Boundary Work, Interloper Media, and Analytics in Newsrooms’ Belair-Gagnon and Holton (2018) look at how web analytics companies seek to understand and address news production values and norms without assuming responsibility as journalists.

They conclude profit-oriented norms and values in newsrooms are fostered by introducing web analytics as “disruptive, connective, and routinized in news production”.

Rethinking the concept of professionalism

Aldridge and Evetts (2003) looked at ‘Rethinking the Concept of Professionalism: The Case of Journalism’ from a sociological perspective and concluded that changes in the occupation’s social composition and training may mean that journalists, who have always cherished a self-image as socially marginal, will aspire to conventional professional respectability. They argue that journalism provides a clear example of the discourse of professionalism as a mechanism of occupational change, and in particular its power as a form of self-discipline.

In a conclusion that is echoed by my original research interviews they suggest that the changing meaning of professionalism in the wider society, its multiple meanings in journalism’s own occupational ideology, demography and unplanned changes in journalism education are all combining to enfold journalists in a respectability that they have traditionally resisted.

Employers, managers and supervisors – the very ‘editorial leaders’ that this thesis is examining – are also mobilizing the discourse of professionalism unilaterally and

instrumentally. “High professional standards are required, but need to be achieved in others by a combination of individualized forms of self-control and organizational, hierarchical supervision, checking and correction,” they write (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003, ??)

Again, echoing earlier research findings, Aldridge and Evetts (2003) say that over the last 20 years the job of news journalist, whether in a small local weekly paper or on a national daily broadsheet or in broadcast news has undergone fundamental change, yet there has been relatively little resistance.

They conject that as in many industrial sectors the overarching motif has been intensification leading to the conclusion that in all news media, more news is being produced by the same number of people.

The other facet of intensification that is particularly pertinent for this thesis has been ‘multi-skilling’ facilitated by digital technology. In the regional press, say Aldridge and Evetts (2003), reporters are ‘entering’ (i.e., sub-editing) their own stories while in some newspaper groups the overall design of pages is being pooled at regional ‘hubs’ responsible for several papers. Being your own photographer is also taking hold.

In an important dimension for this study, they say stretched staff resources combined with electronic technology have also dramatically increased management surveillance.

Newsrooms are open-plan, so reporters are under the eye of middle-managers.

Aldridge and Evetts (2003) conclude:

“This quiet, carpeted Foucauldian panopticon is a long way from the noisy comings and goings of recent historical reality and continuing occupational mythology,”. “An unusually romantic and self-referential world could mean that journalists have simply (and grudgingly) incorporated their new tools and techniques into their craft-style construction of the job. The operational meaning of being ‘professional’ opened up spaces for radical change in what the job is, what it ought to be and how it is done.” (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003, 560)

Development of editorial leadership

Editorial leadership is finally beginning to gain traction among the professional development community. The University of Central Lancashire has devised a Postgraduate Certificate in

Journalism Innovation and Leadership (UCLan, 2021) which they say is “ideal if you’re an experienced news professional who’s looking to develop advanced knowledge and skills which will enable you to thrive and innovate at the forefront of today’s rapidly changing media industry”. Editors from across 12 time zones enrolled on the programme, which started in January 2021.

In the United States, the Poynter Institute offers what they call “numerous, intense seminars throughout the year to coach managers” (Poynter, 2021) and also hosts the Poynter Leadership Academy for Women in Media. One webinar, entitled ‘Leading a Local Newsroom Through Uncertain Times’, was aimed at people “who are growing into leadership and management roles” and available for \$500, so there was at least a perceived demand for such a service.

Leadership, or even management, training and coaching has traditionally been in short supply in the UK regional newspaper industry. The researcher was Editorial Development Consultant for Thomson Newspapers offering just that service under the aegis of enlightened North American ownership and has written widely on the topic of editorial leadership including *What makes a great editor?*, *Energise the newsroom* and *View from the hot seat* (Geere, 2018a, 2014b, 2009b). His leadership style was dissected by a Pew Institute researcher (Prochnau, 1998) in the *American Journalism Review*.

This experience, coupled with the evidence from this research revealing the almost accidental nature of acquiring leadership skills leads to the conclusion that there is both a gap and an appetite for more knowledge about editorial leadership – and people to impart that expertise.

Further Theoretical Perspectives

Although it is now more than 65 years since publication by Siebert et al (1956) of *Four Theories of the Press* – “one of the classics in journalism research” says Zelizer (2004, p167) – the text still offers a coherent introduction to establishing a theoretical framework for this research. Their four basic theories – authoritarian approach, libertarian, totalitarian and social responsibility theory – continue to resonate with current journalism practices.

Their main thesis was that “the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social

control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted.” (Siebert et al., 1956, 1–2)

Many have pointed out its oversimplified framing of history and its analytical inadequacy (Nordenstreng, 2006) and others say the approach has been strongly criticized by international scholars for its idealism and its poverty of empiricism (Ostini and Ostini, 2009). But as Nerone (1995) points out “no framework of understanding international media has been more influential in communication education than the Four Theories model”.

Altschull (1984) subsequently argued that a mix of the libertarian and social responsibility models formed the ‘First World’, or ‘market’ journalism of liberal-capitalist nations, exactly where the UK regional press is still placed today.

Bringing the debate a more contemporary focus, McQuail (2010, p 184) includes social responsibility in his four models of normative media theory – along with liberal-pluralist, professional and alternative media. McQuail defines normative theory as referring to the ideas of right and responsibility that underlie “expectations of benefit” from the media to individuals and society. He provides a summary of the main sources of normative expectation on media conduct and performance, which are pertinent to the role of the regional press in the UK in general and this study of editorial leaders in particular. Among the sources are:

- The public as citizens (public opinion)
- The public as audience
- The media market
- Interested parties in the society affected by media

In the professional model McQuail (2010) says the press and journalistic profession are the “inheritors of the fruits of struggles for freedom and democracy in past times” and are still the best guarantors of the interest of the public.

Looking at regional newspapers today it is still largely possible to concur with McQuail (2010) that “their primary concern is serving the public’s need for information and comment and providing the platforms for expression of diverse views”. He follows that with another observation that “the institutional and professional autonomy of journalism is also the best guarantee of an adequate watch being kept on those in power” which introduces the principal of ‘autonomy’ (that this study also intends to examine).

This element of ‘autonomy’ is also investigated by other theorists. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) categorise the concepts, values and elements said to be part of journalism’s ideology in the available literature into five ideal-typical traits or values:

- Public service: journalists provide a public service (as watchdogs or ‘newshounds’, active collectors and disseminators of information);
- Objectivity: journalists are impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible;
- Autonomy: journalists must be autonomous, free and independent in their work;
- Immediacy: journalists have a sense of immediacy, actuality and speed (inherent in the concept of ‘news’);
- Ethics: journalists have a sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy.

Deuze (2005) examines these elements in detail and adds that it is necessary to also study the convergence of media technologies (multimedia) and sociocultural complexity (multiculturalism) in order to “successfully study, describe and analyse contemporary journalism”.

Sylvie and Huang (2008) identified four value systems - social, journalistic, organizational, and audience – for their research into ‘decision-making styles of newspaper front-line editors’. A preference for “autonomy and detachment” over “dependency and involvement” is a guiding principle for quality journalism argues Costera Meijer (2001). The concept of the ideal citizen (or the ideal journalist) is still mainly associated with the ideal of the detached, objective outsider, she writes.

Deuze (2005) does, however, sound a note of caution. He says that any definition of journalism as a profession working truthfully, operating as a watchdog for the good of society as a whole and enabling citizens to be self-governing is “not only naïve, but also one-dimensional and sometimes nostalgic for perhaps the wrong reasons”. Detailed analysis of working practices involving aspects of editorial leadership – contained in later chapters, including the conclusion - will reveal whether or not this is the case.

3. METHODOLOGY

Background

The aim is to adopt a research method that will serve to answer the research question: What is the nature of editorial leadership in the regional press of UK and Ireland.

Scholars have acknowledged the difficulties faced by the presentational challenge of incorporating a practice-led approach, with Haseman (2006) conceptualizing new research paradigms generated by practice-led research as ‘performative research’ which he saw as distinct from both qualitative and quantitative research. Haseman was talking more specifically about performance-generated research such as an artwork or musical composition but there are sufficient parallels with the ‘PhD by Practice’ approach to warrant some attention to his model.

Assessing a quantitative research approach

One approach considered initially was a survey to establish exactly how many newspaper titles still retained a dedicated editor and whether ‘editorial leadership’ was actually taking place remotely by an increasingly remote figure. However, with 70 regional daily titles and hundreds of weeklies, this would be a big undertaking and one that was likely to prove unmanageable for a lone researcher pursuing a PhD thesis. There was also the bigger concern that any results, while quantifiable and maybe even interesting to both academia and industry, would not yield any great insight or contribute to understanding and knowledge beyond the bare numbers and facts.

A small pilot study was undertaken to test this approach in order to establish its suitability as a research model or whether the initial misgivings were well founded. Looking only at titles beginning with the letter ‘A’ – from Aberdeen to Antrim via Accrington and Andover – it was a complex task involving online research, emails and telephone calls. Even after considerable time and effort it was still very difficult to build an accurate picture of where the editorial leadership lay. Where an editor was in place it was reasonably straightforward but for other, mainly smaller, titles publishers were much more opaque about roles and responsibilities.

Moreover, the initial concern that the results would simply be a snapshot of data at that particular time was also borne out. The database would actually have been out of date by the time it was published leading to concerns about a lack of validity or expediency. While initially an appealing idea this survey approach was therefore eliminated as a possible methodology for this research.

The limitations of quantitative methods are outlined by Queirós et al (2017) who conclude that in this approach it can be difficult to replicate the same conditions of the study, original research is time consuming, complex and expensive, and the rigidity of the structure makes the reliability of data very dependent on the quality of answers.

Assessing a qualitative research approach

An early decision was made that a qualitative approach was more likely to yield the valued findings that will help make this research contribute to knowledge that is the overall objective. Several methods were scrutinised before the research design was formulated:

Field observation and ethnographic study: Described by Wimmer and Dominick (2003, 135) as the “study of a phenomenon in natural settings” this method was seriously considered as it has the benefit of viewing the research subject in their own habitat. The engagements completed by the researcher in his professional practice actually complement this approach, leading to meaningful data that while not necessarily suitable for a discrete ethnographic study can be incorporated in the case study approach.

There was also the opportunity, offered by interviewees, to undertake new ethnographic studies of editorial leadership and editorial practices from inside contemporary newsrooms. While initially appearing attractive, the practicalities of capturing enough data simply through observation were not so appealing. The time, travel and support costs would not justify the outcomes and this approach was rejected in favour of other, more workable, methodologies.

Questionnaires: Given the potential to gather data from hundreds of available ‘witnesses’ to this research consideration was given to framing a questionnaire that could be sent to ‘editorial leaders’ either by mail, as paper-based material to be completed and returned by mail, or via digital delivery, such as email or a proprietary survey platforms such as Poll Everywhere and SoGoSurvey. An analysis of response rates to paper-based and online

surveys by Nulty (2008) showed paper-based questionnaire response rates as high as 75% and online as low as 20% so there was potential to explore this as an option.

The concept of a telephone questionnaire was ignored as the target market has a long-held disdain for conducting any kind of business via the telephone and is notoriously difficult to reach.

Then there was the issue of deciding what sort of questions to look for answers to. While assessing the options of open questions, multiple choice questions, dichotomous questions (yes or no) and ranking questions, a prototype was developed to see how informative any responses were likely to be. The challenge was to achieve meaningful results without alienating potential respondents with an onerous task that they either completed in a hurried manner or indeed discarded altogether.

Given the completely unknown nature of both response rates and quality of respondent comments this approach was not taken up, although there is scope for follow-up work of this nature, maybe with funding support either direct from industry or from the growing band of ‘concerned citizens’ like Google and Facebook who are increasingly looking to cement an involvement with mainstream journalism.

Focus group or group interviewing: The research aims to examine the role of editorial leadership and by definition concentrates on the editorial leaders – nominally ‘editors’ – themselves. The researcher did establish that editors were available as a group on different occasions at industry proceedings, like the Society of Editors annual conference, or sponsored events such as those hosted by Google or Facebook. However, a natural distrust of a perceived competitor and an unwillingness to betray any commercial sensitivities would make this less viable than an individual interview.

Because by its very nature ‘editorial leadership’ refers to a single entity the real value in a focus group would be to elicit views on the leader and leadership from others in the organisation. A laudable aim, but probably a different study.

Case study: As a means to explain a phenomenon a case study may prove most useful in the data presentation of the portfolio material, and unlike the field observation can have a positive impact when directly assessing the current nature of editorial leadership.

Data collected by the researcher from inside the areas of operation proved to be suitable source material for interpretative design of case studies, which are consequently used to complement the original interviews

Semi-structured interviews: The in-depth semi-structured interviewing technique was considered due to the following advantages:

- The researcher is able to view behaviour in a natural setting, in most cases the interviewees office, avoiding the artificiality sometimes surrounding experimental or survey research.
- The researcher can discover facets that were not initially considered.
- The success of the interview session can depend on the rapport established between the interviewer and the respondent. In this case the researcher has sufficient reputational expertise to allow for this rapport to be quickly established.
- In-depth interviews provide more accurate responses on sensitive issues.

It is worth noting the operational limitations outlined by Wimmer and Dominick (2003) who advise that although a basic set of questions is designed to start the project, the researcher can change questions or ask follow-up questions at any time. While assessing the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative research they conclude that the only difference is in the style of questioning, with qualitative using flexible questions and quantitative standardised questions (2003, 48). The interviews may yield varying results given the direction taken making it difficult to arrive at any particular generalisation. There is also the issue of ‘interviewer bias’, where attitudes may be inadvertently communicated by the researcher through what Wimmer and Dominick (2003, 128) describe as “loaded questions, nonverbal clues or tone of voice”. This project seeks to avoid that issue by adhering to a format of standardized questions, while still allowing the opportunity for a more discursive approach.

In a further validation of this research method, Castellan (2010) says that in many quantitative research situations it is not feasible to involve all members of the population being studied, so a sample is usually randomly selected. However, those being researched in a qualitative study are selected by “purposeful sampling” where participants are chosen because they are “believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” as is the case with the selected editorial leaders in this study, where a rationale is provided for the choice of interviewees.

Pilot testing

A pilot was carried out to help detect potential problems in the research design. The initial semi-structured questions as devised were deployed in an interview and yielded interesting, and important, outcomes that shaped the subsequent interviews.

While the prepared interview questions largely proved to be worthwhile, the most insightful comments came from the respondent's own interpretation of the question and their subsequent explanations and descriptions of the issues under discussion. Also, there was a danger of the respondent significantly deviating from the particular topic under discussion, leaving the researcher with the decision whether to let that dialogue continue or revert to the prepared agenda.

For instance, there was a tendency for the interviewee to outline procedures and events that were particular and peculiar to them in great detail, often with a positive, or even self-congratulatory emphasis. While not immediately focussed on the research design objectives these episodes in the interview did have the advantage of making the interviewee feel more comfortable talking about positive aspects of their role and organisation.

It also became apparent that some of the questions as devised were phrased in academic language and were difficult for the respondent to immediately understand. Consequently, the questions were rewritten (see 'Sample Questions' below) in more straightforward language. This also helped ensure rapport continued and the respondent did not feel in any way awkward about not immediately understanding what was under discussion.

The questions were also devised to refer directly to the proposed chapter headings of the study in order to achieve relevant answers and comments that would contribute directly to the overall thesis.

Thus, the pilot study gave confirmation to the overall validity of the 'semi-structured interview' process, but also emphasised the requirement for the researcher to be always cognisant of the research design objectives and ensure that valid results were collected.

Sample questions:

1. We now have titles like audience and content director, marketplace publisher, head of print and curation. Does it matter that we don't have an editor anymore?
2. Does there need to be somebody steering the ship within the newsroom?

3. Do you think it's important the editorial leader gets their hands dirty and does some journalism?
4. There is an expectation that the editorial leader has a significant part to play in the commercial wellbeing of the business. How is that impacted on the editors role?
5. How important do you think it is that everybody in the newsroom has some understanding of media economics?
6. How important a role is recruitment to the editorial leader?
7. You have oversight of some very sophisticated and complicated technology. How important is it to be on top of that?
8. How important is it for the editorial leader to be visible in the community?
9. How difficult or otherwise did you find moving from a primarily operational role to a more strategic one?

Interview selection

A pool of suitable interview candidates was identified based on their experience and relevance to the overall study.

Tumber (2006, 60) reflects on one of the issues facing media researchers, that of access and response rates:

Nowadays of course media workers are inundated with requests for interviews and survey responses from students as well as academics and consequently are not as cooperative as they were forty years ago [when Tunstall's work was published].

The researcher was able to access a network of senior industry figures to ensure a comprehensive array of interviews were conducted. All had a substantial background in editorial leadership and were able to reflect accurately and honestly on the issues under discussion. From the initial lists two people were 'unavailable', for their own reasons, and two declined to take part in the study. In all, 11 people were interviewed and five were selected to feature in this study. These interviewees provided the broadest range of experiences and views allowing the researcher to explore the themes, without repetition or resorting to bland platitudes.

The six interviews that were conducted and do not contribute to the primary research for this thesis were included in three substantial articles written by the researcher and published at

Alan Geere Online (2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Contributing to ‘The shape of editorial leadership’, ‘Editor update: Time for a commercial break’ and ‘The ‘hands-on’ role of the editor’ were Kent Messenger editor in chief Ian Carter, editor in chief of JPI Media Jeremy Clifford, digital editor for Reach in the North East Helen Dalby, DC Thomson editor Richard Neville, Reach Midlands editor in chief Marc Reeves and editor of JPI Media in the North East Joy Yates.

Interviewees were:

Neil Benson (interviewed September 16 2020):

Formerly group editorial director at Reach plc and interim editorial director at Express Newspapers. Editor of Newcastle Chronicle and Coventry Evening Telegraph. Chair of the UK Editors' Code of Practice Committee, which sets the professional standards for journalists. Visiting Professor at the University of Huddersfield.

He says: *“I am a highly-experienced media executive, now working with groups and individuals to unlock their leadership potential. Leader of more than 40 business transformation programmes as the news media migrated from print to digital delivery.”*

Alastair Machray (interviewed September 24 2020):

Editor, Liverpool Echo. Editor-in-Chief, Trinity Mirror Merseyside at Trinity Mirror Group PLC. Head of Editorial for Trinity Mirror's North West Region. responsible for editorial content and strategy across 22 daily and weekly titles and a range of companion websites. Editor of both the English and Welsh Daily Posts during their amalgamation and through to their splitting into separate titles in 2003.

He says: *“Responsible for all editorial strategy and decision making, as well as sales performance and product quality.”*

Mike Norton (interviewed September 16 2020):

Editor of the Bristol Post and Bristol Live and the Editor-in-Chief of the West region of Reach PLC (the UK’s biggest media group). Also, Deputy Managing Director of Trinity South West and responsible for the commercial success of Trinity titles from Gloucestershire, Bristol, Somerset, Dorset, Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall. Previously editor of Derby Evening Telegraph.

He says: *“I am adept at running multi-million-pound P&Ls, with extensive experience in both the hands-on and strategic management of teams. An experienced change manager, with particular knowledge of how to manage the technological and cultural disruption brought about by digitisation. A creative, accomplished writer with a deep understanding of the role of digital multi-media and analytics in modern communications.”*

Simon O’Neill (interviewed October 22 2020):

Editor of the Oxford Mail, The Oxford Times, three paid-for weekly titles, two monthly magazines, a range of niche publications and free newspapers, websites and social media channels. Responsibility for a team of up to 85 people and an annual budget of £3m. Editor of the Swindon Advertiser, a two-edition evening title, two paid-for weeklies, three free newspapers and associated websites. Editor, South London Press.

He says: *“I am a versatile and experienced journalist and editor who has worked on a range of projects covering digital editing and copywriting, social media management and website development. My skills include digital and print editing, writing and production, social media management, media relations, budget management, HR and change management.”*

Mike Sassi (interviewed October 9 2020):

Edited three big, regional daily newspapers – Nottingham Post, Stoke Sentinel, Lincolnshire Echo – and their websites. Ten years a member of the Editors' Code of Practice Committee, managing the code enforced by Press regulator IPSO.

He says: *“I am now lecturing in journalism at Nottingham Trent University and the University of Derby. Also, Honorary Visiting Professor of Arts and Humanities at NTU, Board Director at Notts TV and media consultant advising small and medium-sized enterprises on their communications and marketing.”*

Interview procedure

The interviews were carried out via Zoom, as face-to-face meetings were not possible during the Covid-19 restrictions. While not affording the rapport that a personal meeting would provide, the video platform was more than adequate for the interview purposes and also offered the opportunity to record the interview, which made transcription and more convenient process and made checking exactly what was said much less problematic than with an audio-only recording.

The intention was to follow the outline of the sample questions above, which was largely achieved, although some interviewees did tend to deviate from the issues under discussion. A decision was made to allow them to digress as it helped contribute to a more comfortable environment in what was for them the new experience of being interviewed for academic purposes.

Some of the responses did contain what may be described as ‘unacademic language’, which on transcription was unfortunate. Despite the interviewees appreciating the seriousness of the interviews, having received the information sheet and signed the consent form, there was still a tendency to couch their responses in the more straightforward language of the newsroom.

Portfolio methodology

The researcher’s primary data, by its very definition, is a diverse collection of published evidence accumulated over number of years. While tempting to view this through a quantitative paradigm as ‘hard evidence’ of events experienced, interviews conducted and conferences attended it feels more appropriate to follow the cautionary words of Dean and Smith (2009) who state that the two approaches, the quantitative and qualitative, differ in their assumptions about the possible degree of separation between the researcher and the researched. “The qualitative researcher, like the contemporary anthropologist, recognizes that the present inevitably influences the situation,” they say.

Published material written by the researcher give a public perception of his work undertaken as both an editor and consultant plus the challenges faced and potential resolutions. While initially published in small circulation trade publications the articles are available to the wider public via the publishers’ websites and the author’s blog ensuring a sense of responsibility and fairness prevails in both the content and tone of what is published. These articles directly address the issue of ‘editorial leadership’ and include observations, comments and quotes about those roles and make a valuable documentary addition to the blend of material in the portfolio. Further reflections are provided from published material examining events, views and perceptions of the researcher from other editorial leaders, media commentators and reviewers. Dyson (2010) demonstrates this in the column *Attention to detail wins the day* which examines newspapers the researcher edited and comments on leadership style.

Ethical concerns considered in the use of practice-based data include the obtaining of consent from people interviewed and quoted, possible conflicts of interests between the information

source and the target for the published material and ‘sources of funding’, in terms of payment for editorial supplied. Consent was obtained when interviews took place, or people were speaking on an open platform when quoted. The material has all been published and open to public scrutiny, and no concern were raised by any of the parties concerned. Conflicts of interest did not arise as the publication was on independent publishing platforms although it could be argued that the researcher’s own publishing platform (Alan Geere Online) is not subject to any external editing process and thus without merit, but his professional standing is such that he could not afford to be seen as anything but rigorous.

At total of 68 data references were initially identified, and after judicious selection 30 have been chosen to feature in this study as a coherent and compelling contribution to the overall thesis.

Conclusion

The collected database outlined above provides a substantial body of work to make an original contribution to current debates about the performance and practice of editorial leadership. By triangulating the concepts explored in this published portfolio with existing academic work and the new interviews the intention is to provide a valid perspective on the issues under discussion.

It is interesting to note that Niblock (2007) contended that doctoral students in journalism “are pioneering new methodologies and approaches to journalism practice, and exploring how we might represent practice-as-research and approach the documentation of research into practice”.

4. THE EDITOR AS JOURNALIST

By Tunstall's definition (1971, 42) the second of the three main constituent roles of the editor is "performing a traditional journalistic role on a daily basis in the newsroom". From his observations Tunstall deduces that the editor may choose to perform some of the functions of the 'chief gatherer' – such as directing specialists – or of the 'chief processor', which may include sitting at night with the 'back bench' of senior editorial executives handling raw copy.

An uncharitable interpretation of this role could involve the editor escaping from unfamiliar tasks and chores (i.e., business-wide meetings, engaging with community leaders) back to the comforting routine of journalism, which after all is what started this outwardly successful individual on the upward career trend. It also brings into play the nature of delegation, which is a management trait that is also rooted in leadership. One recurring theme is how editorial leaders are expected to assimilate the practical elements of the role, like delegation, rather than overtly learn or be taught them.

Tunstall (1971, 43), warming to his theme, writes: "Perhaps more common is to maintain an overview of both activities by presiding over morning and afternoon editorial conferences, choosing the front-page lead and taking a few other key decisions," he says. Acknowledging the practicalities of the role Tunstall contends that daily editors however "edit in this detailed sense considerably less than the possible 14 hours a day 6 days a week".

Hadwin (2006, 140) says editors must get their hands dirty – "literally and figuratively". Noting that even the aloof find themselves "embroiled in production" she says that constant change of the manufacturing process generates judgment calls. "It is never long before a decision is required from the ultimate arbiter: the editor." For Hadwin (2006, 141) the working role of the editor is unequivocal "An editor remains a working journalist involved in the day-to-day production of the newspaper," she writes. "That an editor delegates many jobs to the editorial staff does not mean that she should not write a wedding report or sub the television programmes."

The fundamental research question for this chapter is: What are the driving factors for editorial leaders to perform the function of journalists? leads to the hypothesis that Tunstall's definitions and divisions of labour are rather too simplistic for what is now a more nuanced

environment. The effect of moving from a primarily operational role to a more strategic position, leaves little time, appetite or inclination to ‘perform a journalistic role’.

Beyond the glib and maybe cynical reason referenced earlier of “escaping from unfamiliar tasks and chores back to the comforting routine of journalism” some key drivers emerge.

Credibility and respect

Not only is the editor “a curiously indistinct figure in the academe” (Duffy, 2021) but the role can also be viewed with suspicion, curiosity and even resentment from within the newsroom. There are time-honoured misgivings that the editor doesn’t actually ‘do anything’ beyond have meetings and entertain. For the reporter doing the ‘death knock’ [visiting the recently bereaved] or the photographer waiting in the rain to take a snatch picture, the life of the editor does indeed appear to be “curiously indistinct”.

As Duncan and Newton established in their study on intrusive reporting (2010) guidance from editors on the most appropriate actions to take in situations such as ‘death knocks’ appears to be rare. The common experience of the journalists surveyed for the research was that they were given no advice at all before they were sent to interview a bereaved family. This is possibly because editors believe their reporters are professional and to give such guidance, particularly to experienced reporters, would be patronizing says the study:

This perhaps reflects the view among editors that with experience comes the ability to handle complex and difficult situations, which is not necessarily the case with the death knock. Indeed, there tends to be an underlying assumption that young reporters “learn by doing”; that they somehow teach themselves to act with sensitivity and get the story. (Duncan and Newton, 2010, 424)

Whether handling these ‘complex and difficult situations’ is simply down to experience is questionable but appropriate Benson (2020) says he always felt that it was important for the editor to show they are a very good journalist. “It buys lots of credibility with your team,” he says. He subscribes to the notion that the editor should be seen to be the best journalist in the room:

“In my view if you are the best journalist in the room or one of them it definitely helps so I think getting your hands dirty from time to time is a) good fun and b) wins

points with your team and shows you're prepared to muck in as well and not sit in your office." (Benson, 2020, interview, no page number)

Sassi (2020) also contends it is important for editors to actually do some journalism or else they won't have the respect of the staff and if they don't have the respect of your staff then they can't go forward.

"All of the good editors I ever knew were good journalists too, they were able to write a story, they were able to put a decent page together, they were able to carry out an interview, they were able to work out what an intro was, you know all those things so I think yes, it is important. They also had to be a good manager but yes the best editors were also, are also, good journalists." (Sassi, 2020, interview, no page number)

Good journalist, maybe, but there is always the possibility that someone on your team is better suited for that task. "I think you've also got to understand that there are journalists in the room who can do it better than you can," says Norton (2020). "The analogy that I always use is that Wayne Rooney can play football much better than Alex Ferguson but that didn't mean to say that Alex Ferguson couldn't tell him how to do his job."

There is also that element of failing to fulfil an onerous job description. While 'doing journalism' is interesting, important and even fun it may not be what is required of the role as Benson (2020) explains:

"The obvious flip side of that is if you're constantly wanting to sit down and write the splash headline and sort of craft the page four and five spread, that's not what you're paid for, you know, you're not paid to be to be an overpaid sub-editor you're there to edit the paper so yes, I think it's a matter of striking a balance." (Benson, 2020, interview, no page number)

Norton (2020) recalled conducting a prominent interview himself, more out of necessity than desire, as there was no one else of sufficient ability to do it. "On the other hand, I think what you don't want to do is be a news editor because you've got one of those, you know what I mean and I think the danger is that you undermine the person doing that job, so I think there's a fine balance between getting your hands dirty when necessary without making people feel that you're taking their authority away."

Norton also alludes to what he calls ‘an element of vanity publishing’. “Some editors think whatever they write, whatever they do is going to be good and it’s not always and I think sometimes you have to understand that as editor.”

Machray (2020) went a step further. Rather than just dipping in to perform journalistic tasks on an ad hoc basis he actually put himself on the newsroom rota to take on a designated function. He would sit in the ‘duty editor’ seat on a Friday night to “pull the strings and keep his hand in”. As he outlined: “It enabled me to have an influence and to draw the front page and the stuff I loved and that’s what I came into journalism to do, to write stories, meet famous people and ultimately to draw page ones and things like that.”

As evidenced by the departure of high-profile editors across the UK regional press in the late 2010s at major titles like the Derby Telegraph, Stoke Sentinel, Nottingham Post and Bristol Post the role of editorial leader could easily be regarded as precarious. As O’Neill (2020) recalled “editors are expensive” and when proprietors are looking at making savings the man at the top is an obvious place to start.

Machray (2020), therefore, took some comfort in making himself indispensable. “It is an era when every editor is looking over their shoulder and thinking ‘when is somebody going to come and do me because I’m expensive’ and so I always thought well if I’m on the rota once a week it’s a bit harder for them to do me!”

Not just ‘how’, but ‘where’

The physical location of the editorial leader can have immediate impact for both the individual and those he is working with. “Do I have an office? No, I can’t stand working in an office,” says Ian Carter, editorial director of KM Media Group (Alan Geere Online, 2020c). “There is an office that we share and we use it if someone is about to get hired or fired but by and large I like to sit on the news desk and be in the thick of it, because why on earth would you want to lock yourself away from where the fun is?”

But that fun can have a downside. “The toughest part of my job is the fact you are never, ever off duty and it is tough and it puts a strain on everything but equally its self-inflicted because I can’t ignore a story if it breaks. There’s no end point anymore. In one sense there’s no end to it,” says Carter.

Marc Reeves, West Midlands Editor-in-Chief, Reach Midlands Media Ltd. who has direct responsibility for eight daily titles, 30 weeklies and their attendant websites, says (Alan Geere Online, 2020c) he sits on the newsdesk rather than in an office as a conscious effort to find time to do some journalism. “I think that it’s really important for me to continue to be active, particularly in Birmingham with the titles I’m directly editing and managing. I think a good editor will walk down the street and come back with a few stories sticking to him or her and I think that you’ve got to be able to do that. It doesn’t mean that you’re writing all the time, of course it doesn’t.”

Echoing Tunstall’s observations of the editor as ‘chief processor’ Reeves says he no longer writes headlines. “I used to be a production sort of focussed editor, you just can’t do that anymore and neither should you be because there are people way better at doing those functional things than you are. But first and foremost, your job has to be rooted in the journalism that you’re doing.” One effect of backing away from practical journalism, as evidenced by Reeves saying you “just can’t do that anymore”, is that an experienced, competent and capable operator is removed from the production process. Speed as thought and action is a quality still much in demand, perhaps even more so in the digital environment, and to reduce or even nullify the efforts of a key performer could easily detract from the overall effectiveness of the product.

Sassi (2020) thinks there is no substitute for face-to-face contact and being visible:

“You don’t want to be sitting in an office, you don’t want to be permanently out to lunch, you don’t want to be an absentee editor, who were always hilarious. So, it’s finding that balance and if you are in an office nail the door open so people can wander in and tell you what the great stories of the day are.” (Sassi, 2020, interview, no page number)

There has been a marked trend towards ‘homeworking’ – some of it imposed by the pandemic – but Norton (2020) thinks this makes decision making much harder. “If you’re in your house and a big thing happens, you’re on your own. If you’re in the newsroom you can talk. You can turn to people you can discuss. You get this sort of discovery, serendipity of discussion and I found that a couple of times.”

Is working from home the ideal scenario? Not for Benson (2020), who thinks having some sort of opportunity to get together face to face has got to help the creative process. “I have sat

in newsrooms where you know you're struggling with a headline or you're trying to think of dream up a splash for the next edition and it's that sort of interaction, being able to bounce off people and sometimes randomly and not planned. It's just that odd conversation or something that triggers a thought and it's a creative process and I think that's the thing that maybe will get lost along the way if we were completely remote."

Not all editorial leaders have the luxury of deciding whether or not they present themselves as 'Editor as Journalist'. The researcher (Alan Geere Online, 2016) visited remote areas of northern Scotland to collect data for a consultancy project and wrote up some of the results under the heading 'The one-person office is alive and well'.

The places where people worked read like the lower reaches of the Highland League table – Buckie, Keith, Huntly etc – and it was charming to find they rejoiced under the title 'Chief Reporter'. Most of the time they were 'Only Reporter' filling the paper single-handedly from front to back and all points in between. And they approached that task with deftness, expertise and a sense of responsibility. (Geere, 2016)

In this lone, sometimes lonely, position the solo editorial leader not only performs all the journalistic tasks but by default is also accountable for extraneous responsibilities such as safety and security, estates functions like cleaning, dealing with inquiries from the public both in person and via phone or email and all the time acting as an ambassador for the business. This can take its toll on the quality of the journalism eventually produced, and has led some publishers to engage in the consolidation of single-person newsrooms into a 'hub' which offers the advantages of people working together but can result in journalists being removed from the communities they are servicing.

'Hands-on' editing – the legacy experience

Many of the working practices in smaller newsrooms develop because, or in spite of, the talent and interests of previous editorial leaders. If editors had a predisposition for a writing background, they were more likely to assume a chief reporter/news editor role. Conversely, those with a history of working in production were more likely to based their role around the chief sub/production editor competencies.

In Waterford (Alan Geere Online, 2008c), where there was no editor in position, the leadership vacuum afforded an opportunity to look at roles and responsibilities with a fresh

eye. The researcher was engaged as the part-time editor, working three days a week in the office, with the mandate to ensure the continued production of the weekly newspaper in a timely and efficient manner.

There was an experienced chief reporter, who ensured there was copy and pictures to fill the pages, but there was little oversight into what was being covered and how the potential stories were approached. The consultant was expected to perform the duties of ‘arbiter in chief’, deciding what was used where and also giving it a headline, before the copy was manhandled into shape by a very competent team of page designers who viewed themselves as ‘production’ as opposed to ‘journalists’.

As the researcher wrote:

There are no sub-editors, as such, at the News & Star. As editor for a couple of weeks my job was to decide what went where, choose the pictures and write the headlines – pretty much the old back bench job on a national newspaper. (Alan Geere Online, 2008c)

From a leadership perspective what was missing was the front-end decision-making process. There was no meeting – the traditional ‘news conference’ – to discuss what material was available and where the resources should be concentrated. Indeed, it was seen as a professional affront that a discussion should even take place about how an individual had responded to a particular event, happening, press release or information from the public, despite the fact that these ‘journalists’ often had limited training or experience.



Front page of the Waterford News & Star, June 27, 2008 (Alan Geere Online, 2008)

The front page displayed here – ‘Tragic Trisha’ – is the result of deploying hands-on leadership as well as hands-on journalism. As often is the case with a sudden death in a small community there was a reluctance by the editorial team to pursue inquiries for fear of being seen as intrusive. Indeed, the reporting of ‘sudden deaths’ in local newspapers has now reached such bizarre proportions that there can be a full tribute to the deceased without any explanation of how they died, so as not to appear to be intruding into

private grief that may have been the result of suicide. The problem here was that without some explanation about how a 14-year-old girl died suddenly in the street readers may have unwittingly been led to the wrong conclusions.

The bare facts were available from the emergency services but by encouraging the reporter to visit the area and simply talk to people more information was gleaned, including details of a memorial service to be held the next day. Pictures were also sourced via social media – a practice in its infancy in 2008 – resulting in the compelling image seen on the front page. As a lesson in journalism, it was fairly routine but as an example of editorial leadership in action it shows that the ‘Editor as Journalist’ under discussion in this chapter comes in many guises. The fact that the editor/consultant was instrumental in actually designing the page becomes immaterial when considering that it could not have been done without securing the content in the first place.

In this example the ‘driving factor’, as referenced in the research question, is the ability and willingness of the editorial leader to perform a range of journalistic functions to enhance the overall finished product. The opportunity to harness the skill and expertise of such an experienced practitioner can easily be overlooked in the tumult of day-to-day ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ but the contention here is that leadership need not be confined to a conceptual overview, but can also address purely practical journalistic tasks.

Technology: ‘A god from the machine’

Looking for further evidence to engage with the research question: What are the driving factors for editorial leaders to perform the function of journalists? it is impossible to avoid engaging with the impact and influence of technology on the journalistic process. The push and pull of computerised technology has fascinated and terrified journalists in equal measure since direct entry started in the United States in the 1970s. Writing, in what transpires to be a most prescient pamphlet in 1976, when most UK newspapers were still using the old ‘hot metal’ typesetting system from the previous century, Winsbury (1976, 2) pointed to the financial benefits that the then emerging technology would bring:

It is not too harsh to say that in the Great Britain especially it has become for newspapers a battle for survival, and in that battle new technology has seemed to come almost like the proverbial ‘god from the machine’ [Deus ex machina].
(Winsbury, 1976, 2).

Fast forward 44 years and that technology god is still smiling on newspaper publishers looking to leverage every financial advantage from the high-tech developments that continue to proliferate with abundance.

Reflecting on a visit to a regional newspaper newsroom in a piece entitled ‘Those blinking screens & 24-hour news’ the researcher (Geere, 2018f) saw how investment in technology was contributing to what Darren Thwaites, editor-in-chief of Trinity Mirror North East called “The economic reality”. He said: “It's never easy to make those kinds of decisions [cost cutting] but I'm pleased that our newsrooms have retained the skill and scale to do the job properly. Without our investment and belief in digital, we simply wouldn't have been able to maintain the quality we have.”

The audience is spread over five areas: print, desktop, mobile, app and distributed platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Different masters with different demands, wrote the researcher “but behind it all is the content generation that has always been the heart of the operation”.

How does a commitment to a hands-on role translate itself to the editor who has oversight of sophisticated and complicated technology? Quoted in *‘The ‘hands-on’ role of the Editor’* (Alan Geere Online, 2020c) Jeremy Clifford, editor-in-chief of Johnston Press, is concerned that editorial leaders do not spend time and effort keeping up with the latest technologies that drive the industry:

I don't know how to fix my car if it breaks...you just need to know how to drive it. If you waste your time trying to work out how to use Crowtag or learn Socialflow [analytical tools] and that sort of thing, you won't concentrate on the core part of what your job is, which is making sure that you find the best journalism. You create the best content that you can and that's all that a real leader needs to do, the tools of the job, they just need to know what tools and how to apply them.

Technology: ‘To guide and inform’

This attitude could be construed as a minimalist approach to challenges that might appear either too complicated, difficult to learn or time-consuming to perform. Professional engagement with craft skills or technical know-how is not a new issue for editorial leaders. Tasks as relatively simple as ‘cropping’ a picture [deciding which part of a full image to use for publication] and writing headlines that fit in the available space were often performed by

the editor, who was able to exert authority and gain credibility by executing them with a high degree of skill. With the advent of computerised newsrooms in the 1980s, some editors chose to engage with the ‘new technology’ while others remained outside.

The relentless advances and reliance on technology present editorial leaders with a practical dilemma. Just how much time, trouble and effort should they go to in a quest to keep up to date with the technology available and being used in their newsroom? “You need to know enough so that people can’t pull the wool over your eyes,” says Machray (2020). “They can’t say ‘I can’t do that it’ll take me three hours’. You need to be able to say I know how long that takes.”

However, Machray admits that he had trouble transitioning to the digital environment. “In print I knew it all, in digital I found it increasingly difficult, increasingly putting my faith and trust into digital natives and taking their word for it, I found that very, very difficult.”

Benson (2020) put himself through a sharp learning curve when editor in order to understand the editing and page make-up system better. “But the editor doesn’t need to be a super user. I guess it’s about knowing enough that you can spot the bulls**t when you hear it.”

Sassi (2020) thinks it’s impossible for editors to be totally conversant with the sophisticated and complicated technology “I think in many ways there is no point, you could die trying,” he says.

I don’t think it as important that an editor has to be able to upload to whatever; is good at search engine optimisation or even at Twitter. These things are helpful but in the final analysis you need to know what a story is and how to put it together and to give the audience what he or she wants. (Sassi, 2020, no page number).

But Norton (2020) thinks that technology is an area where some editors fall down:

I love data and analytics, it’s there to inform...it’s there to guide and inform. It’s not there to command. I think if you use it cleverly and learn from it then why wouldn’t you? I think it’s a really important part of a modern journalists tool kit. Of course, there are editors who fight it and that’s mainly because they don’t understand it. But I think if you understand it and you use it, it can be very powerful and helpful. (Norton, 2020, no page number).

For Helen Dalby, Senior Editor and Head of Digital Reach North East who is not a trained journalist but came up through a digital route, there are different concerns. “Moving from a primarily operational role to a more strategic one brings with it the difficulty of letting go of the reins, but I’m lucky to have an outstanding team of digital publishing editors and content editors to work with,” she tells the researcher (Alan Geere Online, 2020c).

The switch to digital is clearly concerning to the editorial leaders who may be apprehensive that their sphere of influence will be diluted. Robinson (2007) pointed out that the institution of the press is still fully functioning, but the news is no longer the sole purview of the press. But Robinson (2007) emphasised the continuing role of the editorial leader, quoting Geoff Gevalt, managing editor of The Burlington Free Press in her research: “We have to keep asking, who’s in charge? Newspapers must keep the same standards for fairness, accuracy and civility that it follows in the newspaper. Someone has gotta [sic] be in control here.”

The advances in technology are not simply a mechanical high-tech challenge for editorial leaders to understand, embrace and essentially use to advantage.

‘Latest News: Editor Is Journalist Shock’

By and large, says Duffy (2021) scholarship has subsumed editors under the label of ‘journalist’; as a result, their activities are obscured. “This is problematic as the two roles of journalist and editor are distinct – although they can overlap so that journalists may edit their own work and editors may sometimes report, particularly in newsrooms where personnel numbers have been reduced and individuals take on multiple roles.”

These ‘multiple roles’ were illustrated in a post entitled ‘Latest News: Editor Is Journalist Shock’ where the researcher (Alan Geere Online, 2010b) recounted his activities over just one week while editor of a regional newspaper:

Helped set up meeting with Union reps about pensions; Dealt with aftermath of over-exuberant office Christmas party; Held an inquiry into company car usage; Hired three staff, said no thanks to another three; Handled three angry readers, two upset MPs; wrote a panto review; penned a comment and took the front-page picture for the Essex Chronicle (below). (Alan Geere Online, 2010b)



Front page of the Essex Chronicle, December 9, 2010 (Alan Geere Online, 2010b)

Three of those activities could be classes as ‘journalism’ and Geere reflects that most editors started in journalism doing all the things they love best. “Reporting, writing, taking pictures, writing headlines and drawing pages are the building blocks of the newspaper game and we love them all.”

But just as you get quite good at that, he considers, someone comes along and tells you that you might also be quite good at recruitment, budgeting, going to meetings, making pearls from swine and sometimes cleaning the toilets. “So, off you go to the door marked 'Editor' and suddenly all that fun journalism seems from a different world.”

Perhaps Tunstall’s definitions and divisions of labour are rather too simplistic for what is now a more nuanced environment. The once clear-cut, unequivocal position of editor is now occupied by people from with a range of descriptions from ‘Brands Editor’ to ‘Marketplace Publisher’ or ‘Head of Curation’ who would not recognise the job descriptions that Tunstall provides. That is not to say that they do not ‘do journalism’, they just perform journalistic tasks with tools that were unimaginable in 1971 and with different outcomes.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that many editorial leaders want to keep their “hands dirty”. After all, many have worked their way up to the leadership role, as outlined by Tunstall (1971, 58) via the traditional route of trainee, junior, senior, departmental head, deputy and finally the top job. They feel comfortable either reporting and writing as ‘chief gatherer’ or designing pages and writing headlines as ‘chief processor’. Their status affords an implicit acknowledgement that they are the ‘best journalist’, that is why they are in the role.

However, that is not necessarily the case. Some editorial leaders find themselves in position either by chance or commercial convenience. They could be faithful servants who are an easy option to promote or may be seen as compliant employees who will do the bidding of senior

management. They are not always in post by virtue of the hard work, skills or imagination. Others, like Dalby (Alan Geere Online, 2020c) do not have a traditional background in journalism.

Also, as this study demonstrates, the evolving demands on the editorial leader – mainly driven by technological advances and commercial concerns – mean there is less available opportunity to ‘do journalism’. Indeed, the challenge of taking on journalistic tasks is to combine editorial work with the expected responsibilities of the modern editorial leader including recruitment, training, fostering commercial interests, budgetary control. There is also a sense that they need to be continually “showing by doing” and demonstrating to their team.

This chapter demonstrates that the driving factors for editorial leaders to perform the function of journalists range from credibility and respect to job preservation and demonstrably grappling with technology to ensure they are seen to be current and capable. Beyond the glib and maybe cynical reason referenced earlier of “escaping from unfamiliar tasks and chores back to the comforting routine of journalism” some key drivers emerge.

The recurring theme of ‘professionalism’ in journalism (Singer, 2003) continues to resonate with this approach of ‘editor as journalist’ yet the roles of editor and reporter, while overlapping, are distinct says Duffy (2021) who argues that distinction is essential to make because the editorial function is one of the defining characteristics of news journalism that separates it from ‘interloper media’ such as blogs, public relations (PR), government missives and citizen journalism.

Sumpter (2000) points out that ‘reporters harvest stories from a news net ... editors, on the other hand, decide how frequently and how prominently these stories will be offered’. But by and large, says Duffy (2019) scholarship has subsumed editors under the label of ‘journalist’; as a result, their activities are obscured.

Obscured, or not, the roles of editorial leaders will continue to come under scrutiny and their activities within a journalistic sphere, as examined here, will evolve and develop regardless of the means of delivery of the finished editorial product. As illustrated in this chapter it may not always be ground-breaking, award-winning journalism, but the pull to remain grounded in the craft remains strong.

5. THE COMMERCIAL EDITOR

Introduction

Tunstall (1971) was interested in how editors “interact with business executives in charge of finance, advertising, circulation, production and promotion”. All these relationships are still current but it is the ever-increasing importance of commercial interests that is dominating the behaviours of editorial leaders. While a seemingly straightforward proposition to generate revenue and preserve profit, newspapers, as Edge (2019) points out, are “deceptively complex economic commodities”.

Alan Rusbridger (2020), editor of *The Guardian* for 20 years, contends that some editors have “great commercial instincts”. But others, he said, “have (and want) no say at all in the paper’s P&L [profit and loss balance sheet]. The former may work well – or can lead to ethical deep waters.”

For editors steeped in editorial independence or even those that Rusbridger calls “The editor-as-public intellectual” (Rusbridger, 2020) the intrusion of commercial realities come as either a cross to be borne or a bullet to be dodged. But without economic survival, let alone prosperity, editorial leaders could easily find themselves without anything to lead.

This chapter uses as its guide the research question: Where does the ‘commercial editor’ now reside and has this facet of the role become the most important challenge for the editorial leaders?

The hypothesis is that rather than simply “interact with business executives in charge of finance, advertising, circulation, production and promotion” many editors now encapsulate all those roles as well as leadership in the newsroom.

Newsroom contribution to the bottom line

Newspapers have long had editorial staff whose role is to service commercial interests. Titles used to range from ‘commercial editor’ to ‘special projects editor’ and the more straightforward ‘advertising writer’, but now there is an expectation that the traditional editorial leader will take a much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title and business.

In what could be construed as perverse role reversal editorial leaders are now expected to make bold assertions about their commercial prowess, especially on social media, and also even take part in proposal negotiations with prospective advertisers. This probably says more about the editor's standing as a figurehead with perceived influence than their business acumen, which may not be as attuned as commercial colleagues.

Benson (2020) says he knows editors who will lead on pitches to big clients where there is significant money involved because the clients listen to the editors more than they listen to the same familiar commercial voices. "I think it's right because the money is not coming in the way it did, so if the editor can play a role to help generate extra cash for the business, I think that's a good thing."

Also "opening doors for commercial people" is Norton (2020). "I don't even mind having commercial conversations with commercial people present or even on my own. I don't mind that, but whenever it starts to affect my editorial objectivity then I think it becomes a problem. I was a very commercial editor but the company and the people I dealt with, they knew the boundaries. You have to understand there's a line which you won't cross," he says.

"Editors do need to be more commercially savvy," says Kent Messenger editorial director Ian Carter in *The Commercial Editor* (Alan Geere Online, 2020b). He recalled a meeting he had with a group of editors from Iliffe Publishing, the company he works for:

I was saying to them that they have to be aware that now more so than ever that increasing your web audience has a direct impact on the bottom line. I was saying to them if you increase your digital audience three-fold, which is quite easy from where they are now, that means £400,000 to the bottom line, just through increased revenue. They have to understand that and they can't operate in isolation. (Alan Geere Online, 2020b).

Editors have always been commercial, maintains Sunderland Echo editor Joy Yates (Alan Geere Online, 2020b), and says they understand private sector businesses and the need to make the bottom line. However, to attract the commercial revenues "more and more we're finding that it's the editorial route into some of these big players that really works, so it's all about collaboration". And that 'collaboration' can take different forms, as she explains:

It's not every customer that is suited to a 15 x 4 [a quarter page display advertisement] but they might be suited to an online piece of content which a reader is not thinking is an advert. It's just more interesting ...so its constantly going back to content being key and that's one of the drivers that we find. So, it's working closer with our commercial friends but understanding our place in it. (Alan Geere Online, 2020b)

That 'cross-disciplinary collaboration' is the base of nearly all changes in structure of media businesses, agrees Kueng (2020). Quoting a research respondent in her report, she writes: "That's what news organisations are struggling most profoundly with ... you have to collaborate, it's no longer possible to do journalism here and sell advertising over here and they never really need to talk to each other."

Highlighting this move from 'the hierarchical to the collaborative' Kueng's research (2020) reflects a culture shift in attitudes and basic modus operandi as business, editorial, and tech worlds mesh:

The culture before was ... 'There are these sort of rather distasteful commercial people who do their thing over here' and 'We're editorial and we're the most important people in the business' ... when you have new leadership, a crisis, and out of that a willingness to experiment it becomes 'So, let's put people together, let's think about possible solutions in a completely different way ... We know we need to do something, we don't know what it is, so let's experiment, test and learn. (Kueng, 2020, 10).

Quoted in The Commercial Editor (Alan Geere Online, 2020b), JPI Media editorial director Jeremy Clifford acknowledges there is pressure to create content that's going to attract advertising but maintains it can be done in a positive way, explaining:

If you write a story which attracts a page view for you then that's got a commercial pressure with it, because then you're going to be directed to say 'right I want more of that content over there' because I'm going to get more page views which generate more revenue as a result of that. So that's one of the financial pressures which is a good pressure because you listen to your audience and you monetise it that way. (Alan Geere Online, 2020b),

Despite the normative rigidity of editorial independence, in practice the forces of commercialism have always compromised journalistic autonomy, says Carlson (2016) – inescapably so in primarily for-profit systems like the United States and western Europe.

Marc Reeves, West Midlands Editor-in-Chief for Reach Midlands Media Ltd (Alan Geere Online, 2020b) says that the ultimate direct lever pulled to influence the commercial success of the business is the scale of the audience generated. Instant, contemporaneous metrics are available showing audience engagement online and Reeves admits: “I’m held to account on those numbers every single day, so that’s a new thing.” He further reflects:

You could say ‘well, that just replaces the old focus on circulation’. It does, it’s really the same thing in a different guise with different economics beneath it and I think on the journey to those editor/publisher roles, I think a more sophisticated understanding of the commercial levers that everyone pulls is probably more necessary. (Alan Geere Online, 2020b)

Those arguments holding editorial and advertising to be necessarily separate domains has given rise to studies (Carlson, 2016; Gieryn, 1999) seeking to define journalism from non-journalism, a polite definition of advertising. The journalism trade press didn’t hold back, with Rieder (2013) warning in the *American Journalism Review*: “The problem is sponsored content appeals to advertisers because it feels more like news and less like advertising. That can be a very slippery slope. It’s crucial to keep the boundary sharply delineated.”

The rise of native advertising

In a study ominously entitled ‘Are UK newspapers really dying?’ Edge (2019) reaches the inescapable conclusion that newspapers as a medium will endure, but individual newspapers will likely find different ways to adapt. One of the adaptations has been the growth of ‘native advertising’ which Li (2019) defines as “a form of paid digital content designed to mimic non-advertising content published on the same platform” and Ferrer-Conill (2016) as “a form of paid content marketing, where the commercial content is delivered adopting the form and function of editorial content with the attempt to recreate the user experience of reading news instead of advertising content”. Some say the adoption of native advertising indeed signals “the end of the separation of church and state and the appearance of a new model of openly commercial journalistic ventures” (Ferrer-Conill 2016).

Clifford (Alan Geere Online, 2020a) agrees there is commercial pressure in terms of sponsored content and invokes the ‘church and state’ concept too:

I think we’ve got to be really careful and aware of those pressures and we need to still be cognisant of the church and state so that we write content which is there because of journalistic reasons. That said, I do think there is relationship with commercial organisations that you have as long as you clearly label it, I think that’s also okay as well. (Alan Geere Online, 2020a)

Native advertising is not a new phenomenon, asserts Sassi (2020) who reflects: “We always did advertising features, so have to be a bit careful about saying how outrageous it is. But certainly, when you talk about blurring of the lines and the placing of such stories without the correct recognition of what they are in big parts of the website or in parts of news stories it makes it very, very dubious.”

There is an acknowledgment from Carter (Alan Geere Online, 2020a), that they are quite far into the world of native advertising which brings all kind of commercial awareness and sensitivities:

They [editors] need to wear two hats, they need to be able to wear a commercial hat but also know when to put those Chinese walls up and say, just because my website is carrying a piece of promoted content about your double-glazing company, we’re still going to be covering you when a house that you’re working on burns down. (Alan Geere Online, 2020a)

But he denies the accusation ‘why are you doing disguised adverts editorially?’. “We’re not. We have run editorials about local chip shop week since the dawn of time and it’s just a new twist on that really.”

Duffy (2021) agrees, noting that native advertising is just the latest in a line of ‘quasi-journalistic offerings that blur the lines between news and commerce’ while Carlson (2016) argues that news organisations facing environmental uncertainty adopt a more marketing-oriented strategy. Tension has always existed between the editor’s will to represent the interests of the audience and that of the organisation (Duffy 2021). Studies have shown that during this struggle (Altschull, 1996) journalistic principles are likelier to be abandoned than commercial activities.

Native advertising is not a new phenomenon, but as Bachmann et al (2019) point out only recently has it reached news media outlets that stand for high-quality journalism, as interviewees for this study would no doubt claim they represent. Their experimental study found that news media outlets that stand for high-quality journalism damage their quality as perceived by recipients when publishing properly declared native advertising.

In this study, a random sample of 384 persons from the language-assimilated resident population of German-speaking Switzerland completed an online questionnaire after exposure to stimulus material. Structural equation modelling (SEM) revealed that news media outlets that stand for high-quality journalism damage their quality as perceived by recipients when publishing properly declared native advertising.

Li (2019) examines the role of the editor in the promotion of native advertising and promotes the idea that editors who were sceptical and critical of native advertising either left the organizations or turned their attitudes around. Despite initial hesitance, news organisations gradually embraced native advertising to seek financial stability. Referring to the editors of legacy newspapers, like our study group, Li says they “quickly turned their tones from scepticism to optimism”. This attitude shift did not necessarily mean that the editorial side was convinced but could simply be overpowered by the business interest, argues Li (2019).

Norton (2020), a seasoned editor and part of the senior management team, has a realistic view that attempts to strikes a balance:

At the end of the day we are producing products and those products are judged by the people that digest them. I think commercial content which is nakedly commercial but dressed up as editorial I think people can spot it a mile off. It damages the product and it damages the brand so I think they’ve got to find a happy medium. (Norton, 2020)

However, perhaps the revenue opportunity lies elsewhere, with a nascent sector of the media industry that has taken advantage of both the technology on offer and legacy media’s slow reactions? Benson (2020) feels the Government should intervene with a tax on the tech giants [Google, Facebook etc]. “Google and Facebook pitch in with what for them is buttons which is a sort of token attempt to say they are doing their part,” says Benson. But in the absence of any big intervention like that Benson thinks native advertising will continue to prosper:

It doesn't sit well with most editors; it doesn't sit well with me. But I think the old clear delineation [between editorial and advertising] is not really sustainable any more. Where it becomes excessive is with online influencers who make a living out of saying nice things about products for money and that's their *raison d'être*. I think there has got to be some line drawn by the editor but I think it's a more difficult question to address now than it used to be. (Benson, 2020)

Exploring that delineation, Machray (2020) says "the waters have become muddied to the point of brackishness" despite efforts to provide clear written guidelines where both editorial and commercial understand what can be provided before it becomes 'badged editorial' or 'in association with'.

Norton (2020) reflects on the creation of 'commercial editorial units' which took responsibility for creating content around subjects like awards and property. "Most media companies are involved in five, six, seven awards a year and around those awards you have to write stories about companies that are entering, simply to encourage more entries. Sometimes that fell to the reporters to write those sort of stories and it just didn't feel right."

Maybe as a way forward it is necessary to study native advertising in context, both within the newsrooms where it is assembled and in the response from audiences who consume online news (Carlson 2016). He suggests it is also imperative to monitor and critique the work of norm entrepreneurs who are developing not just new practices for news, but, more importantly, new normative underpinnings justifying these practices to the point of redefining what constitutes the field of journalism. In a further confirmation of this study Carlson (2016) contends that journalism scholars need to also become 'norm entrepreneurs to develop a normative position of what is allowable and desirable'. He writes: "Because moments of upheaval and innovation tend to coalesce into sturdy structures, the need for critique and intervention is now."

Clickbait and advertiser pressure

Clickbait, which Zhang and Clough (2019) define as "the intentional use of exaggerated and misleading content to entice people to click on a link to a particular web page" has brought some publications, and by definition editorial leaders, into disrepute. But Benson (2020) feels the impact may have been exaggerated:

I think that many people who observe the industry sort of knee jerk about clickbaits, when actually it's just stories that they don't like as commentators because it's not serious journalism in their view. For me it's the decision for an editor is to draw the line between clickbait which misleads people into reading the story and popular journalism that's of value to the reader if not to the editorial commentator. (Benson, 2020, no page number).

One traditional area of tension between editorial and commercial is publishing articles that present an influential advertiser in a bad light, leading to advertising being "pulled" [removed from the publication/website] by the advertiser in reprisal with a resultant loss in revenue.

As Machray recalls (2020): "When I first became an editor in 1995, we couldn't count the money, we had to weigh it, and if your biggest advertiser got into a scrape you barely thought twice before you reported it."

But although times change with big-spending advertisers harder to come by Machray insists that they still do their job and report without fear or favour.

What I've tended to try to do is when the story is presented to me, I would say you had better make sure every bit of this is spot on to the last dot and comma because £100,000 accounts are very rare these days and they will withdraw their advertising at this point. We don't want that to happen but we must do our job, we must report without fear or favour but get it right. You have to be very, very tough not to cave into that [pressure from commercial department] and you have to be absolutely certain once you haven't caved in that the story is good enough for the prominence it gets. You've got to be brave enough to say sometimes yes, we're running the story, but it's only a page 19 story. I know he's a big advertiser but we don't have to put it on page 1 just because of that. (Machray, 2020, no page number).

To illustrate his point Machray recalled an incident involving an advertiser who spent £1 million per year advertising with the paper. "They sacked the finance director about 3 o'clock one afternoon because of a hole in the accounts and the editor at the time splashed on it for the late-night final. You know, it was worth a business page lead. But, no, they're our biggest advertiser so it is our duty to screw them over regally [sic] because that shows to the rest of the world of advertisers that we carry no fear or favour. That was right then, but now you have to be more pragmatic and judicious."

As if treading this editorial/commercial tightrope wasn't hard enough, Machray also had a quite outlandish issue to deal with:

Whenever we struck a huge advertising partnership a couple of journalists then made it their moral and professional duty to dig up some dirt on the new advertiser. Stories that you would never have been presented about them before they became your biggest advertiser were being shoved across your desk. (Machray, 2020, no page number)

If the editorial leader is expected to be a commercial being in every sense of the word, what of the rest of the newsroom? Should they still be chasing down the stories that matter and make a difference or should they, too, also have an eye on the bottom-line performance?

O'Neill (2020) is sceptical:

Yes, it's important they [the journalists] understand where the money comes from and how it works but to expect them to be "commercially aware" at all times is just pie in the sky and in reality, that's not going to happen. They're there for one thing and one thing only and that's to do the job and if you start talking about "commercially aware" they'll nod at you and glaze over. It's not going to happen. (O'Neill 2020, no page number)

There is a concern that exposure to unpalatable economic facts about the company could lead to problems with recruitment and retention (see chapter, 'Editor as Personnel Manager'). Sassi (2020) recounts how some "clever staff" who has access to the company accounts decided "things are only going one way, no matter what a company says, and there ain't long left". Those people left the business leaving Sassi to reflect: "Is it important that everyone understands the economic realities because you shouldn't leave people in the dark shovelling s*** [sic], however I don't necessarily think it's a helpful thing at the moment."

Reeves (Alan Geere Online, 2020a), thinks it's important that journalists understand how the economics work. "For too long we had that church and state where editorial just wrote the stories and was quite antipathetic to the commercial side of things, which sort of worked when we were a monopoly and the money was being delivered in lorries every day," he says. One contentious solution – especially to those 'editors as public intellectuals' referenced earlier – is for the editorial department to be developed as the profit centre for the business.

“Newsrooms have got to be able to turn a profit in their own right given the way that traditional advertising is going,” contends Benson (2020). “Anything that sales departments can bring in is almost going to be the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself.”

Into the future

Scholars have employed a variety of theoretical constructs to analyse news organisations, concentrating on institutional theory, field theory, and organizational theory (Artemas et al, 2018) which all have resonance for the ongoing debate about the separation – variously referred to as a ‘wall’, ‘curtain’ or ‘line’ – between editorial and commercial activities. Coddington (2015, 67) contends that despite “journalists’ considerable rhetoric” surrounding the wall between the news and business sides of journalism organizations, scholars have managed much less analysis than for “other, less fundamental boundaries”. He concludes that “the discursive work that journalists put into maintaining [the wall] before the public has been relatively untouched.” As Gans (1979, 24) suggested “when news firms face higher profit demands, [there] is a breakdown of the long-standing walls between ‘church’ (the editorial side of the enterprise) and ‘state’ (the commercial side).”

In a study is based on 18 in-depth interviews with news and advertising professionals at middle-market American newspapers Artemas et al, (2018) explored, in the subsequent analysis of their rhetoric, the relationship between the news and business sides of their organizations. They identified phrases that referred to the tenor of the concept of a division between the advertising and editorial staffs. This is described as “church and state,” “doors opening up,” a line that may be “blurred,” or a wall with various characteristics: a tall wall, a hard or soft wall, a wall with holes in it, and a bad wall if it serves to stop conversations within the organization. Echoing Gans (1979), an advertising director noted, “while revenues are good, the wall stays up”.

Other frequent building or spatial metaphors referred to silos, boundaries, and lines, reported Artemas et al. “Silos, of course, completely enclose and cut off anyone who would place themselves inside. Since silos are not made for human habitation, it should come as no surprise that the metaphor expressed an antisocial meaning.”

Senior news editors and advertising executives often used ecological metaphors to express the willingness or need to change traditional ideas about the relationship or separation between editorial and business functions of a newspaper. The metaphors expressing what we

call the ecological perspective include these categories: the changing landscape, the needs of business, adaptation, and evolution. The study concluded that editors and advertising executives used building metaphors, such as walls and silos, to represent the past, and ecological metaphors, such as evolution, to represent current practices: “In this new world of journalism, the tenor of the primary metaphor, the separation of advertising and editorial functions becomes a different type of vehicle: a shorter wall, a wall with holes, a line, a blurred line, and so on.”

Helen, Dalby, Senior Editor and Head of Digital for Reach North East quoted in The Commercial Editor (Alan Geere Online, 2020b), thinks the commercial collaboration undertaken by newsroom leaders will develop further in future. She says that it will become increasingly important strategically that the focus as editors is on growing and developing audiences in the ways that they can control. Expanding in her theme, she said:

We need to use loyalty services such as apps and email newsletters and via a total commitment to a good user experience online and to driving up engagement. The rigours of search engine optimisation have meant that we’ve had to become very disciplined at managing detailed seasonal publishing and republishing. Our increasing commercial collaboration also means it’s important that we as a newsroom are well planned, as good planning and communication gives our colleagues in advertising departments the time they need to monetise the audience opportunities we’re delivering. (Alan Geere Online, 2020b).

Reeves (Alan Geere Online 2020b) reflects on the changes of the scale of the newspaper business, where numbers have shrunk from 500 people in an organisation. “We are now down to a newsroom out there with 50 people in it and that includes some commercial people so you can’t have that demarcation anymore. Therefore, the better informed and equipped people are to them make those decisions around the whole of the business the better decisions those will be.”

There is also a concern about the proliferation of primarily internet-based competition. Yates (Alan Geere Online 2020b) describes the advent of the ‘bedroom journalist’:

Everybody can create content; everybody can pick up a smartphone and take video and post it on any channels they want to or and anybody is a bedroom journalist. We can all post every day on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat. By doing that

you're creating content so competition is really, really everywhere. (Alan Geere Online 2020b).

The multiple channels of the delivery, as outlined by Yates above, also make it important that editorial leaders have a working knowledge of how these applications operate and the advantages they bring to their business as well as the beneficial impact for rival competitors.

Conclusion

Editorial leaders tend, almost by definition, to be a confident breed. The individuals in this study are no exception and by the very nature of their survival in tough times have shown themselves to be astute and commercially aware, although one said he is grateful for what he calls 'the great stock in editorial freedom' placed by his company. "I suspect that may not be the case at some other companies where we have seen very good, probably difficult, truculent editors leaving and possibly, and I'm making big assumptions here, slightly more malleable people are in key positions in some companies," he said.

There is no suggestion that editorial leaders today need to be 'malleable' but they do need to be probably more commercially aware than their predecessors. As Bunce (2017) pointed out, new technologies frequently disrupt news practices, and economic pressures can prompt news outlets to experiment with their news offerings. Maybe even to the extent that Bærug and Harro-Loit (2012) found where "the media intentionally avoids informing consumers about the strong influence of advertising on journalism". The emergence of the hybrid ad-driven journalism has an important impact and serious consequences for the public sphere, they concluded.

A bigger concern may be how editorial leaders adapt to this changing environment and find the time, energy and confidence to tackle a topic that is not in their natural milieu. This worry exercises Benson (2020) who contends that increased commercial responsibility spreads the editor ever more thinly.

I think that's probably the thing that's changed. The job actually got much bigger and much harder. It's got more facets to it, the whole idea of producing a newspaper and a website as well every day and everything that goes with it and all the social media and the commercial part of it as well, it's a big juggling act. (Benson, 2020)

However, as Nielsen (2019, 330) points out the need to make money has been a central consideration for journalists and news media from the very beginning of modern journalism: “This is not some nefarious plot. People need to make a living. Organizations need to cover their costs. Investors expect a return on their investment. So, someone has to pay.” Nielsen concludes there is strong evidence to suggest that financial sustainability is a necessary (even if not sufficient) precondition for editorial autonomy.

It is a reasonable assumption from the evidence gathered here that editorial leaders in the UK regional press have also arrived at this conclusion.

6. EDITOR AS 'PERSONNEL MANAGER'

Introduction

Jeremy Tunstall, writing in his seminal 1971 work *Journalists at Work* (1971), chose to feature the 'personnel management decisions' in his dissection of the constituent roles of the editor. Calling these decisions 'considerable' he highlights the "hiring and promoting of wide range of journalists" and the financial responsibility of "controlling salaries and expenses of over £1 million a year", which equates to around £13.8 million a year in 2019 when taking inflation into account, according to the Bank of England (2019).

While Tunstall was basing his comments around national newspaper editors there is still a considerable financial burden for regional newspaper editorial leaders to bear. For instance, a mid-sized newspaper with 50 journalists earning an average of £30,000 per annum would leave the editor looking after a wages budget of £1,500,000. Jeremy Clifford, editor-in-chief of JPI Media, has overall control of 800 journalists, so using the same formula he is 'controlling salaries' totalling £24,000,000.

Recruitment is also taking up a good proportion of the working life of the editorial leader. At the time of interview (Alan Geere Online, 2020a) Marc Reeves, West Midlands Editor-in-Chief for Reach, said he had invested in the past five weeks "a good 50 or 60 per cent of my time to recruitment".

Under the heading of 'Career uncertainty' Tunstall (1971, 55) looked at issues such as 'Lack of career structure' and 'Recruitment and training dilemmas'. As this chapter will demonstrate these themes still have resonance despite the intervening 50 years. Benson (2020) feels an editor's job is getting bigger and the line has got to be drawn somewhere. "Particularly on the HR side it's kind of dangerous water because clearly there are legalities to be aware of and often we see occasions when not intentionally but through lack of knowledge editors get themselves into trouble in that way so I think it can be a bridge too far."

This chapter examines the role and responsibility of the editorial leader 'as personnel manager' exploring the hypothesis that taking on wider responsibilities across disparate areas of the business editorial can be a dangerous distraction, seeking answers to the research question: Where is the line to be drawn on diverse responsibilities for editorial leaders?

Wider HR and financial responsibility

Referring to Tunstall's assertion that 'the personnel management decisions are considerable', Reeves reflects in his interview with Alan Geere Online (2020a) that things may not have changed that much: "You know your staff costs budget and your freelance budget, there's nothing new there. Both have been under more pressure and you know constant pressure, in the past 15 years, so there's nothing new there."

Maybe so, but Benson (2020) suggests that editors are expected to take on responsibilities that a generation ago would have been seen as a specialist job by someone in another department. For Benson, the implications are clear: "I think that's a difficulty. I've certainly spoken to editors who've felt uncomfortable having to deal with certain situations and issues that they felt they hadn't been trained in."

Other editorial leaders feel it incumbent upon them to assume the responsibilities of the wider HR function as part of their role. "I never did want to pass anything over to HR ever because I came from a background where we did our own HR, admittedly with HR advice and support," says O'Neill (2020).

I ran my own redundancy programmes; I wrote my own announcements and did my own communications. I much preferred it and I learnt a lot about HR over the years, a lot. I was not the sort of person who sacked people on a whim. It took a lot for me to sack someone, so if it was down to that sort of dismissal scenario, they would pretty much bang to rights. I wasn't like some of the old-style editors who just arrived and fired someone on day one to get everyone's attention. Also, a lot of it is common sense and judgement and fairness. If you try to be fair and not cut corners then you've got the framework right. (O'Neill, 2020, no page number).

Norton (2020) thinks that anyone running a newsroom should be involved in those big HR processes, from recruitment to redundancies. However, his view of the level of support offered by the HR professionals is somewhat jaundiced:

HR is essentially run by 12-year-olds who have never actually been in a difficult HR situation themselves. I think they are there to advise, or actually I think they're there to help you achieve the things you want to achieve, they are not the decision makers. I think the editorial leader should be the decision maker when it comes to HR with

advice from people who understand the HR process. On the other hand, I think there are sometimes issues where you do get bogged down in those HR procedures and ironically when you need HR staff to step up and actually maybe take some of that responsibility, that's when they tend not to want to. (Norton, 2020, no page number)

Not all editorial leaders, however, feel the demands of the wider HR element of the role have increased. Machray (2020) recalls that the editor used to be the HR manager and received support from the HR director as required. "But legislation got stricter, people got cuter about their rights and you had to be careful what was said to people in the newsroom," he said.

That, maintains Machray, has led to the editorial leader actually doing *less* of the extraneous HR issues than previously. "The editor became encouraged to utilise HR advice all the time and you became frightened to make a decision because you knew the companies that you worked for dreaded the thought of tribunals and the potential cost in a world that was increasingly litigious. So, is the modern editor more of an HR director than used to be? No, far less. They have loads and loads of support, the trouble is they are less able to make a decision."

Joy Yates, Editorial Director of Johnston Press North East, interviewed in Alan Geere Online (2020a) has learned to understand circles of influence and control as part of her editorial leadership role. "What is out of control just don't worry yourself about, just concentrate on the things that you can make a difference with and influence. Do you want to be involved in everything, you do want to change the world and do this and do that, but you just have to be sensible?" she says.

She acknowledges that she is open to challenge and thinks it is really important for people to know that. "Just because I have the title of divisional director doesn't mean I'm not infallible," she says. "We've got people who can recognise people's strengths, so whereas I can direct and advise and guide do the HR element of sport, I don't know what those guys know. A combination of our talents and what we do gets us there."

Perhaps on this issue there is more of a sense of potentially losing control rather than concern over dealing with the finer points of HR practice. Essentially, though, if the editorial leader does not have oversight of 'hiring and firing' the job becomes even more difficult.

Kueng, in her paper *Hearts and Minds: Harnessing Leadership, Culture, and Talent to Really go Digital* (2020) argues that HR-based issues— talent, recruitment, retention, letting go, role design, organisation design – should theoretically be planned and driven by the people function. Kueng contends there is a “vicious circle” of mistrust between HR and editorial people at work here. “If the people function is structurally underpowered, it’s work will necessarily be limited to the administrative, reinforcing prejudices that HR is about irritating bureaucracy. HR won’t have the resources to bring about the deeper structural shifts in culture, leadership, and inclusion that should be part of its mandate, so will never be seen as strategic,” she writes.

Kueng identifies new hybrid areas where tech, journalism, and business combine. Individuals with these responsibilities hold roles that are entirely new for newsrooms – data journalists, interactive graphics artists, product managers, and so on. Their work is contingent on high levels of collaboration, and many newsrooms have failed to really incorporate these individuals into core editorial processes, says Kueng.

Recruitment - “I don’t think I ever really got interviewing right.”

Like many of the facets of the editorial leader’s job, recruitment is a skill that has to be acquired, either through training or practice, but is an expertise that publishers expect to be in place, even if the individual in charge has relatively little experience. Everyone appears to have their own style and approach, especially as there is no necessity to follow a ‘fixed formula’ of questioning as required of public institutions like the police, health service or universities who could find themselves on the wrong end of a Freedom of Information request by a disgruntled unsuccessful candidate.

Some editorial leaders are unequivocal about where their ‘personnel manager’ responsibilities lie: “The most important thing that an editor will do, and I think it probably applies to any leader of any business, is to appoint well and build teams of people with complementary skills,” said Benson (2020). Sassi (2020) is equally forthright: “In my career, 32 years, without a shadow of a doubt the most important thing I did in every role was to take people on, because if you don’t surround yourself with the right people you are finished.”

Norton (2020) is also in agreement. “Yes, of course it [recruitment] is really, really important. I think you really want to understand every person who works in that newsroom. The thing is you can’t do everything all the time so you have to ensure that the people working in your

newsroom understand what it is you want and how you want things to be done and I think you can only do that by making sure they're the right people.”

Machray (2020) has a practical, matter-of-fact assessment:

Never has recruitment been more important, because you need to have people in there to do stuff that you can't and you need to have ones that aren't going to shaft you and let you down and go sick and all that sort of stuff. (Machray, 2020, no page number)

But the interview panel was not a comfortable milieu for all editorial leaders. O'Neill (2020) confessed he used to delegate a lot of recruitment to people who knew what he wanted. “To be honest, I always found interviewing very difficult. It was very, very difficult. We tried all sorts of things, but in the end the most successful was a mixture of face-to-face interview/conversation with good old-fashioned tests. I don't think I ever really got interviewing right. People can be one thing at an interview and be something totally different when they arrive in the newsroom. I found that out many, many times.”

Other editorial leaders were perspicacious enough to acknowledge that adopting an all-important, all-knowing stance may not be the way forward. “It's so tight now in newsrooms you cannot afford to make a mistake with recruitment and often you are recruiting into various social media that as editors you don't know that much about,” says Machray (2020).

When you're convinced they [the applicants] have got the skills, it's about would I want to spend time with this person because his colleagues will need to and also the public will need to. That always stood me in good stead and I'm proud of my record of recruiting, even in fields where I'm not brilliantly skilled. (Machray, 2020, no page number).

Recruitment - Team Building

Perhaps as important as the actual recruitment process is the element of team building. Without creating a coherent 'whole' the editorial leader's job can become even more onerous with a disparate group of individuals, no matter how individually talented, pulling in different directions. As Sassi (2020) says: “Building a team that will always punch above its weight that will always be double the sum of its parts was so incredibly important to what I did, so I can't speak more highly of how important that is.” Machray (2020) asks this of potential

recruits: “Will this person fit in with the team? Will this person get what the Liverpool Echo is as a brand? Will this person be liked by the often hard to impress people of Liverpool?”

In Sassi’s (2020) experience the process has become immeasurably more difficult equating it now with “panning for gold”. “The difficulty was of course how do you attract people to do a job which is so not what it used to be? It was always easier at the start to get people who previously would have gone on and become lawyers and surgeons and whatever and then they chose to be journalists because they were very bright, they were quite streetwise as well. In later years most of the people I employed came via telephone calls and word of mouth. You were always talking to people to get tips, your contacts became so incredibly important not just for stories but for employing people you know.” This throws up an interesting parallel with Tunstall’s assertion (Tunstall, 1971, p 57) that “many recruits were still entering a journalism only after failing to enter other white-collar occupations”.

There is also the opportunity that the cycle of downsizing in newsrooms, which has shown no sign of abating since 2005, offers the imaginative editorial leader, as Machray (2020) explains:

So, somebody leaves and you think ‘great, replace him’ and actually what you really think is actually I’ll just bag that vacancy for the next round of redundancies because if I need to lose seven it’ll be down to six because I’ve got one down already. It’s got to be a job replacement that’s utterly justified before you can recruit into it and it can’t be in a period where you’re looking to downsize. If you do get a chance to recruit you can’t afford to get it wrong, you really can’t. (Machray, 2020, no page number).

Quoted by Geere (2018a), the editor of the Regional Daily Newspaper of the Year, Richard Neville from the Aberdeen Press & Journal, said the constant drive for excellence demands quality people. “We look for the traditional journalism skills taught on most courses, but what we really want to see is enthusiasm and a hunger to get stories. That perhaps sounds glib but these days we are as likely to consider a driven enthusiast over a fully trained journalist. The pressure on finances has increased a lot as revenues have become more challenged. Recruitment and training has also become a greater burden and more time consuming with fewer good applicants coming forward for editorial roles.”

Recruitment – view from the front line

The researcher has a long history of dealing with recruitment and, over a 40-year career in media management and editorial leadership, has recruited hundreds of people to roles from trainee reporter up to editor. Writing in February 2020, Geere was intrigued by the recruitment ad from political strategist Dominic Cummings calling for ‘weirdos and misfits with odd skills’ to apply for jobs at No 10 Downing Street. Transposing this theory into an editorial environment Geere (2020) wrote a piece entitled ‘Why journalism needs weirdos and misfits too’ which recalled some editorial staff he had recruited who fulfilled the ‘weirdos and misfits’ remit “without even trying”. Geere questioned the perceived wisdom on recruitment:

When recruiting there is a temptation to stick with what has appeared to work best over the last 20 years or so. Recognised course? Shorthand? Law? Tick all those off and you won’t go far wrong was the perceived wisdom. But I do sense a mood out there to dare to be different and take a plunge with some other sorts of people. Not necessarily ‘weirdos and misfits’, but just people who will bring that diversity of attitude, approach and interests to journalism that Cummings is so keen to get into Government. (Geere, 2020).

Writing on Behind Local News, Geere (2019) said journalism needs to be more diverse, with a very small d. “Encourage people of all ages, backgrounds and ambitions to be part of journalism.”

The researcher often chose novel approaches to the recruitment process, choosing to pitch applicants into a newsroom scenario rather than a formal interview procedure. In Psst! Wanna be a journalist? The Apprentice meets X Factor (Alan Geere Online, 2010a) the researcher outlines his innovative and unpredictable approach to recruitment.

It’s a simple enough assignment. Find a story for a specially devised publication and write it up. In that hour I can see if the ‘driven, ambitious and motivated’ applicant on the CV can actually talk to people, find an angle, write an intro that makes sense, construct a sentence and make a deadline. And you’d be surprised how many can’t... (Alan Geere Online, 2010a).

The results were encouraging, with a number of job offers made directly after the session.

Perhaps editorial leaders looking to strike that balance between ‘editor as personnel manager’ and newsroom supremo should look to combine both. There is no necessity, as outlined earlier, to follow an uninspiring format interview. In fact, inspiring people to come and work for you by your attitude and approach could be seen as a far more effective recruitment tool than any amount of analytics or assessment.

The researcher devised another innovative recruitment strategy by inviting applicants to approach him via the then nascent technology platform of Twitter. The intention was to narrow the field of suitable candidates with the right combination of imagination and impudence to succeed as a reporter. As the researcher wrote in a blog post (Alan Geere Online, 2011c): “I keep getting told there is an over-supply of qualified people wanting to do journalism. Well, maybe there is but there’s definitely not an over-supply of people who are any good.”

Did this editorial leader stretching the boundaries of ‘editor as personnel manager’ find it a worthwhile exercise? It was undoubtedly a PR coup, although that exposure brought out the detractors too, and made the prospect of recruiting to the far-flung corners of Margate or Crawley that little bit easier. But the reality was that it became a time-consuming process to look at all 500 responses, reply where appropriate, and make arrangements for people to visit for a trial.

No hires were made. What the exercise did reinforce was that the time-honoured tradition of recruiting young people directly from National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) courses and other university programmes was not as flawed as suspected. These student journalists had already indicated their desire to follow a media career and were well versed in the requirements of a local newspaper publisher. The broader church of Twitter enthusiasts were a much looser group and ultimately unsuitable for the rigours of ‘always on’ journalism.

Interestingly, this angle of recruitment does not always find favour with editorial leaders, even if alternatives are not obviously apparent. As if cementing stereotypes, there seems little love lost between employers and the further education colleges and higher education universities sending out people with journalism qualifications.

Derek Tucker, editor of Aberdeen’s Press and Journal newspaper, was quoted (Alan Geere Online 2010a), in a forthright manner:

It frustrates me – and I know many other editors feel the same – that a lot of the young people leaving so-called university journalism degree courses are totally not suited for coming into newspapers. Very few possess the street cunning and inquisitiveness that is the hallmark of good journalists and it often appears that English is a second language. (Alan Geere Online 2010a)

While acknowledging that young people are getting better equipped as the educators belatedly recognise the role as it is now, Reach Midlands editor-in-chief Marc Reeves, quoted in *From hiring and firing to balancing the books* at Alan Geere Online (2020a), said: “Sometimes the colleges were giving us young dinosaurs because they were training them for an industry that stopped existing 10 years previously. Colleges have now largely caught up or are catching up so those online story-telling digital basics are now being much better baked in.”

What the recruiters say they want

For the Association for Journalism Education (AJE) summer conference paper *‘Entry-level journalism and the Regional Press: The Love Affair goes on’* the researcher (Geere 2017a) talked to new recruits into journalism and also canvassed senior editors about what they were looking for in new starters:

In a word – smart. Smart intellectually. It's a tough job and there's a lot more to the job than simply writing a story. We will fire story suggestions at them, copy improvements and style tweaks. Smart in terms of how they present themselves. Trainees probably get out more than editors and are ambassadors for our titles and websites. They need to come across as thoroughly professional. – Barry Peters, Group Editor, Iliffe Media Ltd. (Geere 2017a)

I'd say that I want someone who likes and is interested in people, because without that they won't ever have anything to write about. But persistence, ambition, hunger, curiosity and a good sense of humour would come a close second – Gary Lawrence, Regional Editor, Newsquest Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. (Geere 2017a)

Gumption. We can work round lack of experience, give them shorthand lessons, improve the knowledge of English but if they've got no gumption - to spot a story, ask

the right question, think to wonder why their electric is off, whatever - it makes it much harder. – Jeremy Condliffe, Editor, Congleton Chronicle Series. (Geere 2017a)

These replies offer an interesting perception on the evolution of the editorial leader's role and offer an insight into that 'Editor as personnel manager' perspective. The headline responses – 'smart', 'interested' and 'gumption' – are concepts rather than qualities and present both parties with difficulties in how to evaluate these notional attributes without considerable time and effort, which may be in short supply.

Perhaps it's time to look again at the researcher's Association for Journalism Education conference paper (Geere 2017a). "In the absence of anything different or better NCTJ qualifications still matter to industry - like it or not! They demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm to a potential employer. Shorthand still counts, it is a 'key differential'," says the paper. There was also an exhortation to work harder at the softer skills like team-working, confidence-building and talking to people reflecting some of the points the editors had made.

Conclusion

As noted at the start of this chapter Tunstall (1971, 55) explored some enduring themes such as 'Lack of career structure' and 'Recruitment and training dilemmas'. Fifty years on, the contemporary editorial leader will still find resonance engaging with these themes.

"The personnel management decisions...are considerable", wrote Tunstall, and as explored in this chapter the rigours of recruitment, team building and discipline are an intrinsic part of the editorial leader's job description – whether they like it or not. The extent of their involvement consists of an element of personal choice, the degree of control and input from the employer and the climate created by both of these parties. The editorial leaders evidenced here acknowledged the importance of the 'personnel' role, especially with regard to recruitment, but took different approaches to the level of personal involvement. Not all would be comfortable with the researcher's live newsroom scenario (Alan Geere Online, 2010b). Indeed, some editorial leaders may feel attracting entry-level journalists to the organisation was not a job for the person at the top.

Attempts here to seek a definitive answer to the research question: Where is the line to be drawn for editorial leaders? divide between the practical considerations of the recruitment and human resources process (interviewing, disciplinary hearings etc) and the more nebulous

‘personnel manager’ environment which some editorial leaders embrace and others prefer to distance themselves from. Both the tightening of employment law and the potentially litigious atmosphere surrounding recruitment have led to editorial leaders demurring to the HR professionals and finding they actually have to do less as ‘personnel manager’ than perhaps their contemporaries in Tunstall’s day.

Editorial leaders use their indeterminate job description to concentrate on facets of the role that they are either good at or enjoy the most. For some, recruitment and team building fall into this category. For others, they do not.

7. CONCLUSION

This research has set out to test the theory that while the newspaper industry may appear to be in turmoil, both from the point of view of practitioners looking out and commentators looking in, the role of editorial leader continues to be of key significance, especially in a period of perceived ‘change’.

The study has identified that editorial leaders have had to assume a greater appreciation and responsibility for the commercial performance of the business than their predecessors. The indeterminate job specification allows them to concentrate on facets of the role that they are either good at or enjoy the most. For some, business relationships, recruitment and team building fall into this category. For others, they do not. While baulking at the charge that they need to be ‘malleable’ they agree that they do need to be more commercially aware than previous editorial leaders. This is evidenced by a tighter control of staff and editorial costs at one end and an enhanced contribution to revenue generation via commercial platforms at the other.

The advent of what might be called ‘naked’ native advertising (Ferrer-Conill, 2016) – blatantly promoting goods and services within an editorial space – as opposed to the more traditional ‘commercial feature’ and ‘sponsored content’ has redefined the rules of engagement between editorial and commercial departments. What was once a red line, is now a very blurry line. The research concludes that placing of stories without the correct recognition of the source or intention is “very, very dubious,” (Sassi, 2020) and “the waters have become muddied to the point of brackishness” (Machray, 2020). Other editors talk of “putting up those Chinese walls” (Carter in Alan Geere Online, 2020b) and “being cognisant of the church and state” (Clifford in Alan Geere Online, 2020b).

Nevertheless, evidence points to “opening doors for commercial people” (Norton 2020) and “it’s all about collaboration” (Yates in Alan Geere Online 2020b) so editorial leaders are cognisant of the requirement to collaborate with commercial departments. Some may even go further: “If the editor can play a role to help generate extra cash for the business, I think that’s a good thing.” (Benson 2020).

In terms of the journalism for which they assume responsibility, editorial leaders may not themselves always engage in cutting-edge, award-winning journalism, but the pull to remain grounded in the craft remains strong. Some editors continue to perform a journalistic function

as a means to show subordinate staff they are still capable operators. Others do it simply because they enjoy it, or because it provides a legitimate distraction from the escalating demands of the role in totality. However, this wider business role of the editorial leader is leading to a more nuanced environment which makes ‘doing journalism’ very much a niche, and maybe redundant, role. They have, after all, recruited capable journalists to make sure the products are timely and relevant. These people are also likely to be more talented at their particular job than the editorial leader, who cannot reasonably be expected to be supremely proficient at every aspect of the process – even if they may claim to be.

In their paper on *Leadership in the Newsroom*, Goyanes and Gentile (2017) contend that the qualities and merit of leaders are “graphically reflected in the texts they have published for years in the newspaper”. This study, however, finds that some leaders do little journalism – or indeed none at all – that would qualify for this description.

Evidence here points to editorial leaders having a solid background in journalism – “The best editors were also, are also, good journalists” (Sassi, 2020) – but also an acknowledgment that day-to-day journalism is not part of the role. Indeed, some may say there is lip-service being paid with Norton (2020) contending there is ‘an element of vanity publishing’ and Benson (2020) arguing that doing some journalism simply ‘shows you’re prepared to muck in as well and not sit in your office’.

Others realise that this may not be where their talents lie with Reeves (Alan Geere Online, 2020c) going as far as to say: “You just can’t do that [production journalism] anymore and neither should you be because there are people way better at doing those functional things than you are.” Indeed, as Benson (2020) concludes: “You’re not paid to be to be an overpaid sub-editor you’re there to edit the paper.”

The reticence of the academy to engage with the editor as a figure of importance is misplaced. Editors are a marker of quality control who legitimise news journalism especially in the face of so-called ‘Interloper Media’ (Eldridge, 2014, 2018), which delivers information direct from outside sources bypassing the mediating effect of the newsroom and the editor.

The evidence from this study suggests that editorial leaders are having to adjust to content landing from a variety of sources, not just their ‘own’ journalists. “Now the decisions are made by an algorithm or at least by data and it almost bypasses the editor, bypasses the person in charge.” (Sassi, 2020). Also raised is the issue of online influencers “who make a

living out of saying nice things about products for money” and bring the traditional role of objective journalists into even sharper focus (Benson, 2020).

Ironically, as editors discover there is a willing band of ‘interlopers’ – often former journalists from their own ranks – who can provide well produced, timely and free content they are the very ones mitigating against their own legitimacy. With fewer ‘content drivers’ (aka journalists) in the newsroom providing original journalism it is very tempting to accept ‘oven-ready’ content from businesses, pressure groups, governmental organisations like the NHS, political parties and even the emergency services, as evidenced by Alan Woods (2021) who went from being ‘Editor - Essex, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire’ to ‘Press Office Manager at Essex Police’, a classic poacher to gamekeeper move. “I’m excited to develop a new set of skills, and help shape the way the force works with journalists,” he said.

The multi-faceted role of editorial leader continues to provide an absorbing context to both industry and academe, but it remains clear that, as Robinson (2007) put it in the title of her paper for *Journalism Practice*: “SOMEONE’S GOTTA BE IN CONTROL HERE”. This may be a crude headline in tabloid journalese, but its meaning, in more detail, is evidenced in this research.

Strengths and limitations

The main strength is that as an academic study using empirical evidence this research goes into much more detail than is usual for studies that mention editorial leadership in a cursory way. This is evinced by access to experienced editorial leaders, who are notoriously reticent in providing candid views, usually because they wish to maintain cordial diplomatic relations with current or future employers. The open and honest assessments given here offer an unusual insight into a world that is rarely documented, either from an individual, industry or academic perspective. Coupled with the researcher’s own experiences it offers an attempt at understanding the inner workings of a little known – and indeed, little appreciated – role. Although the study has successfully demonstrated that the role of the editorial leader is still valid, it has certain limitations in terms of the timing of the research. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic came *after* the fieldwork was conducted, leading to different newsroom practices and attendant adjustments to leadership and managerial performance and expectations, but the generic issues that are interrogated in the research remain valid.

The inquiry has also concentrated on the UK regional press, which is the researcher's main field of experience, and interviewees were sourced reflecting that category of the publishing industry. References have been made to both large national and international media concerns as well as smaller community ventures but the emphasis is directly firmly at the UK regional press.

Future research

This research points to a continued role for an 'editorial leader' regardless of the institutional framework they operate in or the economic uncertainties that continue to envelop the media industry. Although Harte and Williams (2016) suggest scholars should consider the likely effects of the de-institutionalisation and de-professionalisation which much hyperlocal news represents the legacy media sector continues to operate along largely traditional lines.

This research was written up against the backdrop of the COVID-19 epidemic of 2020-21 and the restrictions, and opportunities afforded by the upheaval in working practices. Post-COVID the media industry is now at a reset moment. The development of some working practices, such as working from home (WFH) and video conferences, were accelerated, while other more fundamental changes were introduced with far-reaching implications for editorial leadership and the position of the editor in the landscape of the media business. These are beyond the scope of this study, which has a specific time frame and precise definitions to pursue.

Another possible future investigation would be an ethnographic study of the everyday performance of editorial leaders. The researcher can be insinuated into the backdrop of newsroom activities, meetings and community outreach and view first-hand how the now peripatetic life of the editorial leader impacts on the elements under consideration in this thesis. As Willig (2013) points out, one of the traditional problems of researching journalism cultures concerns the 'invisibility' of certain structures such as the political economy of everyday news work which guides journalist practice. Such a study would add 'real-life' context to the academic discourse surrounding journalistic practice giving insight that may yield further lines of inquiry.

Research into post-COVID journalism could prove to be very rich area of inquiry. Addressing the implications for editorial leadership, using this study as the basis for further exploration, has potential appeal to both the academic community and industry.

Now 50 years after Tunstall's seminal work '*Journalists at Work*' (1971) his contemporaries would doubtless struggle to identify with the modern editorial leader, who now assumes responsibility for profitability and cost control on top of editorial responsibilities. Whether that is to the detriment of the media business or is actually an advantage is debateable, but one thing is certain: the climate and landscape of editorial leadership has irrevocably changed.

Significance of the findings

Reflecting on editorial leadership through the lenses of 'commercial' and 'personnel' as well as the more straightforward 'journalism' prompts the concern of how editorial leaders adapt to this changing environment and find the time, energy and confidence to tackle topics that are not in their natural milieu.

The editor status affords an implicit acknowledgement that they are the 'best journalist'. That is why they may be in the role. However, that is not necessarily the case. Some editorial leaders find themselves in position either by chance or commercial convenience. They could be faithful servants who are an easy option to promote or may be seen as compliant employees who will do the bidding of senior management.

Bærug and Harro-Loit (2012) found "the media intentionally avoids informing consumers about the strong influence of advertising on journalism" and conclude the emergence of the hybrid ad-driven journalism has an important impact and serious consequences for the public sphere. Evidence in this study reveals an unease at this development with Norton (2020) concerned about longer-term damage. "Commercial content which is nakedly commercial but dressed up as editorial I think people can spot a mile off. It damages the product and it damages the brand so I think they've got to find a happy medium."

Benson (2020) goes even further, suggesting the previous clear delineation between editorial and advertising is no longer sustainable: "I think there has got to be some line drawn by the editor but I think it's a more difficult question to address now than it used to be."

Regardless of this latest attempt of advertising masquerading as journalism the industry clings to specific values of accuracy, objectivity, impartiality and fairness as norms, which give credibility to their product, says Duffy (2021) and which, ultimately, give it both social and economic worth. The concern is that “nothing is more threatening than the lookalike who dissolves your identity” (Benson and Neveu, 2005) so the lines between what is and what is not journalism become more contested the finer the distinction is (Eldridge, 2018).

Attempts here to evaluate the role of editorial leadership within the scope of what Tunstall (1971) called ‘Editor as personnel manager’ divide between the practical considerations of the recruitment and human resources process (interviewing, disciplinary hearings) and the more nebulous ‘personnel’ environment which some editorial leaders embrace and others prefer to distance themselves from. Both the tightening of employment law and the potentially litigious atmosphere surrounding recruitment have led to editorial leaders defaulting to the HR professionals and finding they actually have to do less as ‘personnel manager’ than perhaps their contemporaries in Tunstall’s day. “So, is the modern editor more of an HR director than used to be?” asks Machray (2020). “No, far less. They have loads and loads of support, the trouble is they are less able to make a decision.”

Critical insights

Following Tunstall’s framework and allowing this study to be viewed through the prisms of ‘Journalist’, ‘Commercial’ and ‘Personnel’ has afforded the opportunity to dissect the editorial leader’s role without digressing too far from the practicalities of the position and launching into a philosophical treatise on modern media mores.

To summarise:

Yes, editorial leaders do want to continue to perform as a **journalist**, but there is a danger of using craft skills as a distraction from the demands of leadership.

The editorial leader needs – as they probably always did – to have well-attuned **commercial** nous. However, the landscape for economic well-being is considerably different from even just 10 years ago as the advertising/copy sale model for newspapers and media companies is overtaken by a sponsorship/subscription framework.

The predominant element of the **personnel** function continues to be recruitment. Without the right people in the right place doing the right thing an editorial leader's grand vision becomes blurred very quickly.

The overarching theme that needs to be embraced is a skilful, open-minded and contemporary approach to using all the technology available to perform these functions. Without it, all the 'leading from the front' attitude that has served newsrooms well for decades, maybe even centuries, will become consigned to the history books.

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9. APPENDIX Ai - PRACTICE PORTFOLIO, REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

The researcher's first leadership role was as the editor of *The Diss Express*, a small independently-owned weekly newspaper in Norfolk, aged 29. Famously 'learning on the job', as there was no mentor available, he took lessons learned and applied them in a series of roles in both UK regional and national newspapers plus in the UK, Canada and the Caribbean. (See CV, appendix Ai, page 112)

Published material written by the researcher give a public perception of his work undertaken as both an editor and consultant plus the challenges faced and potential resolutions. While initially published in small circulation trade publications the articles are available to the wider public via the publishers' websites and the author's blog ensuring a sense of responsibility and fairness prevails in both the content and tone of what is published. These articles directly address the issue of 'editorial leadership' and include observations, comments and quotes about those roles and make a valuable documentary addition to the blend of material in the portfolio.

Development of editorial leadership

Leadership, or even management, training and coaching has traditionally been in short supply in the UK regional newspaper industry. The researcher was Editorial Development Consultant for Thomson Newspapers offering just that service under the aegis of enlightened North American ownership and has written widely on the topic of editorial leadership including *What makes a great editor?*, *Energise the newsroom* and *View from the hot seat* (Geere, 2018, 2014, 2009). His leadership style was dissected by a Pew Institute researcher (Prochnau, 1998) in the *American Journalism Review*.

This experience, coupled with the evidence from this research revealing the almost accidental nature of acquiring leadership skills leads to the conclusion that there is both a gap and an appetite for more knowledge about editorial leadership – and people to impart that expertise.

The researcher has a long history of dealing with recruitment and, over a 40-year career in media management and editorial leadership, has recruited hundreds of people to roles from trainee reporter up to editor. Writing in February 2020, Geere was intrigued by the recruitment ad from political strategist Dominic Cummings calling for 'weirdos and misfits with odd skills' to apply for jobs at No 10 Downing Street. Transposing this theory into an

editorial environment Geere (2020) wrote a piece entitled ‘Why journalism needs weirdos and misfits too’ which recalled some editorial staff he had recruited who fulfilled the ‘weirdos and misfits’ remit “without even trying”.

Further reflections are provided from published material examining events, views and perceptions of the researcher from other editorial leaders, media commentators and reviewers. Dyson (2010) ably demonstrates this in the column *Attention to detail wins the day* which examines newspapers the researcher edited and comments on leadership style.

A total of 68 data references were initially identified, and after judicious selection 16 have been chosen to feature in this study as a coherent and compelling contribution to the overall thesis.

10. APPENDIX Aii - ALAN GEERE DATA REFERENCES

Alan Geere Online (2020a) *From hiring and firing to balancing the books: Editing 2020* [blog] 15 December. Available from: <https://alangeere.blogspot.com/2020/12/from-hiring-and-firing-to-balancing.html> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

- Interviews with industry figures which inform the chapter ‘Editor as Personnel Manager’.

Alan Geere Online (2020b) *Editor update: Time for a commercial break* [blog] 11 November. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2020/11/the-commercial-editor.html> (Accessed: 25 November 2020)

- Interviews with industry figures which inform the chapter ‘The Commercial Editor’

Alan Geere Online (2020c) *The ‘hands-on’ role of the editor* [blog] 29 October. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2020/10/the-hands-on-role-of-editor.html> (Accessed: 29 October 2020)

- Interviews with industry figures which inform the chapter ‘Editor as Journalist’

Alan Geere Online (2016) *The Regional Press: Reasons to be cheerful Part 4** [blog] 2 August. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2016/08/the-regional-press-reasons-to-be.html> (Accessed 3 February 2022)

- Researcher visits regional press newsrooms to gather practice-based material

Alan Geere Online (2011) *Your new job is here, tweet me now* [blog] 11 November. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2011/09/your-new-job-is-here-tweet-me-now.html> (Accessed: 25 August 2020)

- Researcher’s own experience of recruitment, informing the chapter ‘Editor as Personnel Manager’.

Alan Geere Online (2010a) *Psst! Wanna be a journalist? The Apprentice meets X Factor* [blog] 21 November. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2010/11/psst-wanna-be-journalist.html> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Further examination of the researcher's own experience of recruitment, informing the chapter 'Editor as Personnel Manager'.

Alan Geere Online (2010b) *Latest News: Editor Is Journalist Shock*. [blog] 10 December. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2010/12/editor-is-journalist-shock.html> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Researcher outlines his own experience as an editorial leader, helping to shape the direction of inquiry.

Alan Geere Online (2008) *Humdrum? Come to Waterford, Monty*. [blog] 28 March. Available at: <http://alangeere.blogspot.com/2008/03/humdrum-come-to-waterford-monty.html> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Case history by the researcher performing as an editorial leader

Dyson, S. (2010) *Attention to detail wins the day*. Available at: <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2010/news/dyson-at-large-attention-to-detail-wins-the-day/> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Review of the researcher's editorship and his newspaper by an industry authority

Geere, A. (2020) Why journalism needs 'weirdos and misfits' too. *PJ News*, February, 14-15. [Reprinted below, p 102]

- Expert view from the researcher on journalism recruitment processes.

Geere, A. (2019) What makes a great editor? Discuss... *PJ News*, January, 17-18. [Reprinted below, p 104]

- Researcher writes in industry publication about different styles of editorial leadership

Geere, A. (2018) *Welcome to the world of newspapers, 2018-style*. Available at <https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2018/news/alan-geere-welcome-to-the-world-of-newspapers-2018-style/> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Serialised chapter from a book, entitled ‘Anti-Social Media’, where the researcher spends time in a modern newsroom, observing editorial leaders at work

Geere, A. (2017) ‘Entry-level journalism and the Regional Press: The Love Affair goes on’ at *Association for Journalism Education summer conference* London College of Communication, June 2017
[Reprinted below, p 106]

- Presentation at academic conference where the researcher explores the relationship between industry recruitment requirements and the academic journalism provision

Geere, A. (2014) ‘Energise the newsroom’, *InPublishing*, January/February, 43-44. Available at: <https://www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/energise-the-newsroom-1011> Accessed 3 February 2022)

- Published industry opinion from the researcher exploring editorial leadership practice

Geere, A. (2009) ‘View from the hot seat’. *InPublishing*, Available at: <https://www.inpublishing.co.uk/articles/view-from-the-hot-seat-1710> (Accessed: 25 August 2020).

- Industry commentary by the researcher, profiling four active editorial leaders

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[Reprinted below, p 108]

- A major series on American newspapers, profiling the researcher’s role as editor and attitude towards editorial leadership

February 2020

INSIGHT 13

Why journalism needs 'weirdos and misfits' too

I NEVER thought I'd commit this in writing, but I do have a certain sympathy for political strategist Dominic Cummings.

You may recall that Cummings, widely acknowledged as the power behind the throne at No 10, put out the most unusual recruitment ad of the year (so far) calling for 'Weirdos and misfits with odd skills' to apply for a job at the seat of Government.

"We want to hire an unusual set of people with different skills and backgrounds to work in Downing Street ... we're hiring data scientists, project managers, policy experts, assorted weirdos," the Prime Minister's chief adviser wrote in a beguilingly readable 3,000-word blog post.

By way of explanation, subsection 'G' of the off-the-wall job ad is entitled 'Super-talented weirdos' and goes on to explain: "People in SW1 talk a lot about 'diversity' but they rarely mean 'true cognitive diversity'. They are usually babbling about 'gender identity diversity blah blah'. What SW1 needs is not more drivel about 'identity' and 'diversity' from Oxbridge humanities graduates but more genuine cognitive diversity."

The point he was making is that it takes all sorts to make a Government – and the same is true for journalism. Sadly, like many professions, journalism is still viewed as a rich young person's game – but the fightback is on.

Credibility

When I started as a junior reporter on a weekly newspaper group in the mid-70s I was one of six – yes SIX – trainees all fresh from school ranging in age from 16 to 18. We were chaperoned by the redoubtable David Scott who was the training editor. On the trainee intake just in front of me was Mike Parker, who went on to be the *Daily Express* man in Los Angeles, and behind me was Lisa Hampele who forged a long and successful career at the BBC.

We had all grown up in the area and been to school there. While we



may not have had much credibility in the street as naïve teenagers, we certainly had some street cred, knowing our way around the towns and villages we covered. One accidental diversity box checked was the one that could have been labelled 'youth'.

I'm not saying it was right or wrong, or better or worse than today, it was just different.

Now there is a concerted move to regain some of that ground and attract recruits into journalism who have more to offer than simply the ability to pay.

Apprenticeship schemes, like at major newspaper groups Iliffe and JPIMedia, are gaining traction and the NCTJ's Journalism Diversity Fund continues to plug a diversity-sized gap with a small 'd'.

The fund was set up in 2005 with a donation of £100,000 from the Newspaper Licensing Agency (now NLA media access), with the aim of encouraging more diverse people to train as journalists and making newsrooms better reflect the communities they serve.

"Journalism is a typically white, middle class profession, which needs to change. If you feel you could bring something different to a newsroom – such as your social background, life experiences or ethnicity – then we want to hear from you," says the promotional blurb for potential applicants.

Eight bursaries were awarded in the final round of 2019, taking the total number of people helped into a new career to 347. These aspiring journalists were awarded funding to begin their journalism training at NCTJ-accredited courses and

bursaries that can help fund their course fees and living expenses.

One of those recipients was Claire French who completed her journalism training at City College Brighton and Hove and went on to be the business editor at *The News* in Portsmouth.

"I was awarded the bursary for arguing that my background – being brought up in an unemployed, single-parent household – was not a particularly well-represented demographic in the industry," she said. "As well as being made up of white men, the news media industry as a whole continues to be rather middle class. I have always believed in speaking out, and about, the people who have the least power in society."

Privilege

Now media relations manager at Royal Bank of Scotland, French reflects: "It was such a great privilege that has unlocked a lot of opportunities for my career."

Over at the BBC they take their Diversity – with a big D – very seriously and have just appointed presenter June Sarpong as the BBC's first 'director of creative diversity'. Sarpong sees her role to increase black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) representation rapidly at senior levels and also boost disability representation on and off screen in the next year.

"Diversity is not a 'nice to have', but is an essential part of the BBC's agenda and positive action is already under way with urgency," she says.

"In the pursuit of diversity we are



Prime Minister Boris Johnson's special adviser Dominic Cummings stated in his blog of 2 January (inset) that "an unusual set of people with different skills and backgrounds" including "weirdos and misfits with odd skills" are needed for a new team of advisers and officials at No 10. This dream team would include "wildcards and artists", he said

I was awarded the bursary for arguing that my background – being brought up in an unemployed, single-parent household – was not a particularly well represented demographic in the industry

– Former NCTJ journalism college student Claire French, now media relations manager at Royal Bank of Scotland



Presenter June Sarpong, the BBC's first director of creative diversity. "In the pursuit of diversity we are not looking to exclude those who have already succeeded, but to allow room for new voices to be included," she says

February 2020

INSIGHT 15



PressPad co-founders Olivia Crellin (centre) and Laura Garcia (left) collecting The Women in Journalism Georgina Henry Award for Digital Innovation at the National Press Awards for 2018, organised by the Society of Editors

PressPad: An affordable room with media mentoring thrown in

FINE words are one thing, actually doing something to encourage diversity in journalism is something else.

PressPad helps young journalists find affordable accommodation with experienced media mentor-hosts. They get a place to stay that doesn't break the bank plus guidance and advice from the people they are staying with.

"We started PressPad to make internships and work experience more affordable to those living outside of London and from lower socio-economic backgrounds," says co-founder Olivia Crellin, who works for BBC World News.

Economic diversity

"When newsrooms do not reflect the demographic and economic diversity of their communities the distance between the journalist and the reader grows, and can diminish trust.

"Breaking into journalism, the media and broader creative industries can be overwhelming and having an industry insider can help a young person trying to get to grips with the challenges they will face in the workplace," says Crellin.

The innovative scheme has already raised £30,000 through crowdfunding, an experience that took Crellin and her team outside their comfort zone.

"I am not a social entrepreneur, diversity expert or businesswoman (well not except by accident). Neither is my co-founder Laura Garcia or any of the other committed individuals who have come onto our team or helped us along the way with our work," says Crellin.

"We are just journalists. I came up with this slightly crazy idea a year-and-a-half ago and have been riding this train ever since, fully expecting to get off at the next stop every time we hit a small bump in the road."

The pilot phase started in April 2018 and already PressPad has helped 45 interns, and has 150 hosts signed up to our service. Their new 'marketplace website' launches early this year which they hope will allow them an even bigger presence.

"Anyone who works or has worked in the media, and has a spare room, is welcome to sign up to be a mentor-host who must provide proof that they are professional journalists, filmmakers or authors and must also pass a DBS (disclosure and barring service) check that PressPad will pay for.

It costs £150 per week to stay with a mentor-host and although the scheme currently operates only in London there are plans to expand to other major media centres such as Manchester and Glasgow.

"Diversity is crucial in enabling journalism to act effectively as the fourth estate and hold power to account amid these challenging conditions. PressPad recognises that to bring about authentic change that benefits the media, society and democracy, we need everyone to take responsibility and contribute to a solution – something our host-mentorship model ensures," says Crellin.

PressPad
Opening the door to diversity

'If you feel you can bring something different to a newsroom, we want to hear from you ...'

— page 13

not looking to exclude those who have already succeeded, but to allow room for new voices to be included. Ultimately, I believe the BBC's window into the UK will be all the richer as a result, and hopefully one that more people see themselves reflected in too," says Sarpong.

Cummings' approach cared wailing and gnashing from predictable corners – political

opposition, unions, civil service types – but also some support from unlikely quarters, including broadcaster and former newspaper editor Janet Street-Porter.

"I would never have passed an interview for a post at the BBC – or in Whitehall for that matter," she wrote. "I didn't have a degree when I was appointed directly by the director general and was probably the only senior executive without one for almost a decade.

"I was stropky, and over-confident

that the BBC was lucky to have me, rather than the other way around.

"As an editor I made radical changes to *The Independent on Sunday*. New people were chosen for their ability to argue and challenge my way of thinking, to have confidence in their own intelligence. Of course, this method attracts annoying people, people who might not look right or have social graces, but if they are loyal and signed up to your project you could not wish for better workers."

For more:

presspad.co.uk/

www.journalismdiversityfund.com/

Dominic Cummings blog
<https://dominicummings.com/>

PJ verdict

Diversity of attitude, approach and interests, please

OVER the years I have had the pleasure to inherit and take on hundreds of journalists, some good, some bad and hopefully not that many who were indifferent. I've always striven to encompass diversity sometimes with the best results, sometimes not.

I hired a writer for a newspaper in the US who thought he was the second coming of Hunter S. Thompson, the dissolute godfather of 'Gonzo journalism' who ended up shooting himself dead. 'Gonzo' is practised by ignoring objectivity and placing the writer inside the story, quite a feat if you can actually pull it off, which this guy could.

So, much to the chagrin of the other 'beat reporters', he could set his own agenda and write about anything as long as the copy made it to the desk in time. Some of the pieces were priceless, others a little esoteric, but everything was entertaining and daring to be different.

All was going well until, living up to his alter-ego's liking for drink and drugs, he abused some bigwig friends of the publisher at an event, and

that was that. No amount of pleading the 'weirdos and misfits' case could save the day and off he went.

Another reporter I worked with looked rather stambolic and kept his own hours, but always came



Alan Geere's search for diversity has taken him around the world as a newspaper editor. He is currently on sabbatical in Guangzhou, southern China, teaching international journalism.
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up with stories that others had overlooked or ignored. His claim to fame – not, I think, purported by him – was that whatever the assignment he would come back with a front-page story. He had his own quirky take on everything and when sent, under duress, to cover a strike at a factory that made batteries he filed the immortal one-word intro: 'Charge!' Still one of the finest first lines I've ever seen.

I loved these guys, who fulfilled the 'weirdos and misfits' remit without even really trying. When recruiting there is a temptation to stick with what has appeared to work best over the past 20 years or so. Recognised course? Short-hand? Law? Tick all those off and you won't go far wrong was the perceived wisdom.

But I do sense a mood out there to dare to be different and take a plunge with some other sorts of people. Not necessarily 'weirdos and misfits', but just people who will bring that diversity of attitude, approach and interests to journalism that Cummings is so keen to get into Government.

January 2019

INSIGHT 17

Two giants of the journalism jungle recently squared off in a public squabblefest about who did what better.

The war of words generated plenty of heat, but did it shed any light on journalism's current debates?

ALAN GEERE adjudicates on the fray

PAUL Dacre was never given to public pronouncements during his 26 years as editor of the *Daily Mail*, so his 4,500 words delivered to the Society of Editors conference were eagerly dissected.

He rounded on the BBC, the Leveson inquiry, journalism academics and his bete noir, Alan Rusbridger, editor of *The Guardian* for 20 years.

Referring to Rusbridger's book *Breaking News*, Dacre said: "Its real message – and how insidiously it drips through the pages – is that virtually every national newspaper in Britain is scurrilous, corrupt and amoral with one iridescent exception. Yes, you've guessed it ... *The Guardian*."

"Unedifyingly, it manages to combine rather cloying self-glorification and moral superiority with an almost visceral contempt of and disdain for the rest of the press."

Ooof!

Rusbridger countered with a self-peened riposte in the *New Statesman* and responded to the direct criticism by writing: "Most of it seemed terribly myopic and insular and – for a man with such success, riches, power and acclamation behind him – incoherently angry."

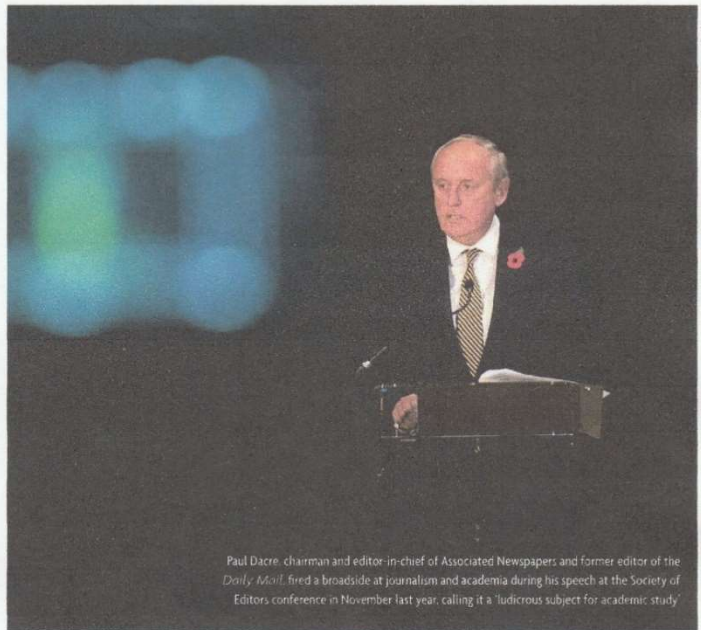
Ooof No 2!

While this stand-off might entertain the masses of journalists who don't earn a small fortune editing a national newspaper or armchair media watchers who are intrigued by this public cut-and-thrust, there were other comments hidden deep in Dacre's speech that have got the journalistic, and academic, community more exercised.

"The mainly left-wing professors of journalism – is there, by the way, a more ludicrous subject for academic study – will order box loads of this book [Alan Rusbridger's] to demonstrate to their students how appalling Fleet Street is. Meanwhile, they'll continue to churn out

graduates for non-existent jobs, which is why so many idealistic youngsters end up disillusioned and working in public relations, leaving us with a Britain where there are now more PRs than journalists – another depressing and insidious contribution to the democratic deficit. And today, my heart bleeds for those dedicated young journalists who were lucky enough to get jobs, yet are being denied, by our industry's belt tightening, the opportunities I enjoyed."

Ooof No 3!



Paul Dacre, chairman and editor-in-chief of Associated Newspapers and former editor of the *Daily Mail*, fired a broadside at journalism and academia during his speech at the Society of Editors conference in November last year, calling it a 'ludicrous subject for academic study'

Photo: Society of Editors

What makes a great journalist? Discuss...

Dr Margaret Hughes, chairman of the Association for Journalism Education – and, like a lot of the members she represents, a journalist for many years – reminds Dacre that journalism is a serious business. "The last few years have shown us this acutely, particularly when we look at how perceptions of the role of the news media is influencing political and public life," she told *PJ*.

"Good journalism, and good journalists, require the ability to think critically and analytically about the complex world in which we live.

"Journalists are required to interpret complicated issues and help audiences make sense of the world. As such, the development of critical thinking that lies at the heart of all journalism education is not just necessary for considered and thoughtful journalism, I would argue it is a pre-requisite.

"Journalism

requires the most talented, curious and thoughtful practitioners and there is no better place to develop this knowledge and skill set than within an academic environment, such as a university. So, yes, that does mean that journalism is a worthy subject for academic study and that it quite rightly has a place within the academy, indeed I would go so far as to say at the heart of the academy."

Snobbery

Steve Hill, a journalism lecturer at the University of Westminster and co-author of *Online Journalism: The Essential Guide* has another view. "It is simply snobbery, from a certain section of the elite who believe that young people should only study 'the classics' or STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] subjects – and preferably at Oxbridge rather than an old Poly. It's not even original. I recall Kelvin MacKenzie was prone to similar rants. Very depressing."

And what about Dacre's comments about professors who 'churn out

graduates for non-existent jobs? "One of the most challenging aspects of being a journalism educator these days is that we can no longer say that a good education will lead to a great job, but when could anyone ever really say that?" says Hughes.

"What journalism educators now understand is that while we may well be preparing young people for workplaces and environments that do not exist in the way that they did in the past, the knowledge and skills gained on journalism degree programmes are multi-disciplinary in nature.

"We prepare young people for a changing world of work, where the skills they learn can be used in a multitude of settings in which they will be valued for the skills and knowledge they bring and in which they will be able to carve out exciting and rewarding careers

'Highly educated' journalists hold relevant qualifications plus Alan Geere's verdict, page 18 ➔

Journalism requires the most talented, curious and thoughtful practitioners. There is no better place to develop this ... than within an academic environment

– Dr Margaret Hughes, Association for Journalism Education

→ page 17

founded on what they have been taught as part of the excellent journalism education that is offered at universities across the UK."

Claire Wolfe, head of journalism at Worcester University and a well-regarded journalist in the Midlands, says that although newspapers are contracting there are other openings. "Students from journalism courses have shown themselves to be highly employable. Journalism courses help to develop communications skills, confidence and introduce them to the requirements of work via the often mandatory work placement modules," she says

And to conclude on a philosophical note, David Baines, journalism lecturer at Newcastle University and a former sub-editor on the *Journal*, says Dacre seems to equate a degree in journalism with the traditional training course.

"A degree at undergraduate or postgraduate level in journalism is not simply preparing a student for a traineeship on a local newspaper, but for life and a career in an increasingly complex world.

"An education which develops in a student the critical-reflexive skillset, toolkit and outlook of a journalist, would benefit all in the global economy," he says.

As well as being highly educated, increasing proportions of journalists hold relevant journalism qualifications and these are more likely to be NCTJ

AN upbeat assessment of the current life and times of journalism comes in the latest *Journalists at Work* report published by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ).

Based on information from 885 journalists who submitted an 'online self-completion survey', it provides a snapshot of attitudes and expectations from inside the newsroom and is able to compare data from previous editions of the report from 2002 and 2012.

The 92-page report is a comprehensive overview of many aspects of journalism and dives straight in to estimate there are 73,000 journalists working in the UK, up from 65,000 in 2012.

"This overall level of numbers in journalism, and the increase over the last few years, may jar with the anecdotal perception that journalism is an occupation in decline," says the report, explaining that the evidence suggests that this increase in the number of journalists has been "facilitated by dispersion away from the mainstream publishing areas of newspaper and magazine publishing to other sectors".

It is estimated that less than a third (30 per cent) of journalists are engaged in newspaper and magazine publishing (compared with 45 per cent in 2012), with increases in the proportion in broadcasting (TV and radio), increases in

the self-employed (who work across a range of sectors) and increases in the proportion working in PR and communications.

Interestingly, the report's author Mark Spilsbury does reflect: "The extent to which all these individuals can be classed as 'journalists' is a matter of some debate."

Other key takeaways from the report:

Personal characteristics of journalists: Journalists tend to be older than the UK workforce as a whole – driven by the fact that the proportion of young people aged under 25 is lower (at five per cent) than for the UK workforce as a whole (12 per cent). This is linked to the need for high-level entry qualifications.

Working patterns of journalists: The majority (97 per cent) of journalists who responded to the survey were working, and tended to have lengthy, continuous periods of employment.

Entering the profession: The majority (87 per cent) of new entrants (those who have entered journalism in the last three years) did a period of work experience or worked an internship before gaining their first paid job. Of these the vast majority (95 per cent) were

unpaid; and the work experience or internship lasted an average of eight weeks, although the lengths can vary widely from short (lasting one to two weeks) to 52 weeks.

Journalism qualifications: As well as being highly educated, increasing proportions of journalists hold relevant journalism qualifications and these are more likely to be NCTJ.

Working conditions: Journalists react positively to statements that 'journalism is a job that they enjoy doing', that 'it has lived up to their aspirations as a job' and that 'they intend to stay working in journalism'.

Ian Hargreaves, professor of digital economy at Cardiff University and chairman of the research project, was pleased to see that journalists are happy to recommend their trade to the next generation.

"Journalists appear to be more confident in general, as indicated in answers to my all-time favourite question in these surveys which asks whether journalists would recommend their trade to a young person. This year, 62 per cent of journalists say yes to that, against 51 per cent in 2012," he said.

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PJ verdict

NATIONAL newspaper headlines such as 'Dacre v Rusbridger: two titans of 21st century journalism united in distaste' give the general reading public the idea that beleaguered journalism is in trouble from within let alone outside.

But these are, to slightly misquote the great journalist Charles Dickens: "The best of times, the worst of times." There has never been such a great opportunity to get involved in journalism across a multitude of platforms that hadn't even been invented when Paul Dacre was editing the Leeds University student newspaper and Alan Rusbridger was a trainee on the *Cambridge Evening News*.

But in order to tame these multi-headed beasts of 24/7 digital news, aggregated and curated content plus the fog of misinformation and fake news the world needs people are educated – sorry, not just trained – in how to make sense of it all for everyone's benefit.

Both Dacre and Rusbridger were brilliant editors. But they were of their time. Those times have moved on and editorial leadership is moving in different directions. Journalism, as never before, needs insightful, committed people and, as the NCTJ report concludes, those currently working in this noble game are more confident than ever.

We seem to be going in the right direction. Let's hope Messrs Dacre and Rusbridger can pull together too.

"I must declare an interest or two. I am one of a small, but growing, band of journalists-cum-academics who have chosen to share their knowledge and experience with both the next generation of journalists by teaching and also the wider academic community through research. I have also served on the board of the NCTJ.

Alan Geere says he is proud to have been both 'journalist' and 'academic' for 40 glorious years

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1

Entry-level journalism and the Regional Press: The Love Affair goes on

ALAN GEERE, EDITORIAL CONSULTANT/JOURNALISM EDUCATOR

2

Meet Young Journalists of the Year, 2017...



Society of Editors Young Journalist of the Year shortlist:
Eime Ashcroft (Wiltshire), **Hannah Somerville**, Keiran Southern, **Nicholas Carling**

3

The entry-level jobs landscape

- ▶ Industry website Holdthefrontpage has advertised **176** entry-level jobs since January 2016.
- ▶ These positions were available on May 15 2017:

Jobs by Category	
▶ Trainee & junior reporters	16
▶ Senior reporters	18
▶ Specialist reporters	9
▶ Online journalists	13

4

What employers say they are looking for:

- ▶ "You will not be considered if you have not undertaken NCTJ training or haven't got a journalism degree. A full clean driving licence is required too." - Trainee Reporter, Oxford Mail.
- ▶ Well, that told you didn't it! So that bar is pretty high, but at least you know where it is, in fact, most of the ads talk about NCTJ qualifications and the ability to drive. Who said reporters don't go out nowadays?
- ▶ **Hannah Somerville** has already convinced the Oxford Mail to take her on and says it is important to speak to people in the industry before deciding on your course. "Also, I cannot put enough emphasis on shorthand. Not only does it look like witchcraft, it is vitally important on so many occasions," she says.

5

Practical considerations...

- ▶ "The ideal candidate will have completed their NCTJs and have 100wpm shorthand. Must also have a driving licence and use of a car." - Multimedia Reporter, Newsquest Berkshire.
- ▶ **Nicholas Carling**, who did his training on the Eastern Daily Press in Norwich before joining specialist title Health Service Journal, is clear with his advice to would-be recruits. "I'd advise them to do an NCTJ course, or an accredited university course. Work experience is also important, and learn shorthand."

6

...for the digital age

- ▶ "The ideal candidates will be able to find their way around social media platforms to find and promote stories and record audio and video footage for our multimedia operation." - Trainee Reporter, KM Group.
- ▶ and
- ▶ "You will have an understanding of all the storytelling requirements of a digital newsroom. Use search analytics to identify digital audience and content trends." - Trainee Reporter, Bath Chronicle.

The softer side...

7

- ▶ "The successful applicant for this role needs to be an enthusiastic self-starter who can find stories, make contact and fit in with our hard-working team." - Multimedia Journalist (Trainee), Messenger Series.
- ▶ That "fit in with our hard-working team" can mean everything from making the tea to volunteering for evening jobs. If you are one quarter of a four-person team that flexibility factor needs to be high.
- ▶ "The successful candidates will be able to focus clearly on issues that hold the interest of our readers and be keen to build relationships with key local figures. They will bring in stories, be good with people and have a good telephone manner." - Trainee Reporter, Busy Free Press.
- ▶ Good telephone manner! That takes me back to my trainee days when we did mock phone interviews with a local worthy hiding in the next room with the editor standing over us. In this multimedia all digital age I think I may start doing that again.

Advice from them what know...

8

- ▶ Emma Ashcroft was crowned Young Journalist of the Year in May this year and has three pieces of advice to those wanting to enter the industry. "Work hard, never give up and don't expect to become a millionaire! It is important not to get disheartened by criticism from readers, trolls or colleagues - take their opinions on board, but don't let it sway any self-belief."
- ▶ And Hannah Somerville is clear where the regional press can take you: "Local and regional journalism is a fantastic way of finding your feet, regardless of where you think you may like to go in the future - it's here, at the grassroots, that you will get the grounding to excel as a reporter."

9

- ▶ Nicholas Carling champions the confidence to say yes to any job you are given to do. "Nowhere teaches you to research a story as well as at a print publication, so recommend starting out of a paper, even if it's only for a couple of years."
- ▶ "And don't be put off by negative stories about journalism and the rise in fake news, the truth is that if you want to be a good journalist and work hard enough you will still today get more enjoyment and variety than in other jobs because if the story is good enough, then people will read it and your CV and portfolio will look better and better."

What the editors say they want...

10

- ▶ In a word - smart.
- ▶ Smart intellectually, it's a tough job and there's a lot more to the job than simply writing a story. We will take suggestions of them, copy improvements and style tweaks.
- ▶ Smart in terms of how they present themselves. Trainees probably get out more than editors and are ambassadors for our files and websites. They need to come across as thoroughly professional.
- ▶ Barty Peiris, Group Editor, Life Media Ltd
- ▶ I'd say that I want someone who likes and is interested in people, because without that they won't ever have anything to write about. But persistence, ambition, hunger, curiosity and a good sense of humour would come a close second.
- ▶ Gary Lawrence, Regional Editor, Newsquest Oxfordshire and Wiltshire

11

- ▶ Gumpston. We can work round lack of experience, give them shorthand lessons, improve the knowledge of English but if they've got no gumpston - to spot a story, ask the right question, think to wonder why their electric is off, whatever - it makes it much harder.
- ▶ Jeremy Candler, Editor, Congleton Chronicle Series
- ▶ It's got to excite you - you've got to care. And show that you care. Yes, things are exceptionally tough in the media, but there are rewards that money can't buy. The things I've seen, the people I've met and the places I've travelled to because of my job are crazy when I stop and think about it.
- ▶ Weekly newspaper editor who wishes to remain anonymous

Lessons for journalism educators (us!)

12

- ▶ In the absence of anything different or better (NCT) qualifications still matter to industry - like it or not! They demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm to a potential employer. Shorthand still counts, it is a 'key differential'.
- ▶ Ensure students can demonstrate current skills (video, audio, social media etc) via their own publishing platform.
- ▶ Encourage practical journalism. The publishing community is largely very supportive of work experience, there will be uni and local titles to contribute to and self-publishing, via a blog or website, is just a few clicks away.
- ▶ Work harder at the softer skills like team-working, confidence-building and talking to people.



The State of
THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

In Lord Thomson's Realm

ALITTLE MORE THAN 100 MILES NORTHWEST OF THE WASHINGTON Beltway, in the fishhook of western Maryland, Breakneck Hill looks down somberly on Interstate 68 where the highway cuts through one of the first low passes into Appalachia. Neither the hill, a 1,872-foot sentinel for the mountains ahead, nor the crushed-granite slash of the humpback pass is likely to occasion a postcard home. But they constitute a powerful natural barrier. It is here that you pass out of the East and into the rest of the country. It is here that you also pass out of the orbit of Washington and all its inside-the-Beltway dither—out of the orbit, for that matter, of the Washington Post. On one side, the Post still sells a handful of copies. On the other, it effectively sells none.

At a pass-through like this you also leave behind the world of modern mega-journalism and all the attendant hullabaloo that has relegated the media to the level of used-car salesmen and congressmen in the eyes of the American public. The gentleman pumping his 50 cents into the newsrack in the town ahead is not concerned that his local paper is scandal-driven at the expense of "real news." Packs and paparazzi are not issues to him, made-up columns and borrowed quotes and unnamed sources hardly on his mind. You are leaving the orbit of reporters who "analyze" their own stories on nightly TV at fees that would cover the salaries of a couple of their colleagues—and entering one where Kris Baker rises before the sun to walk the cops beat in Logansport, Indiana, at \$9.36 an hour.

In small towns across America, the Canadian-born chain struggles with its penny-pinching legacy.

BY WILLIAM PROCHNAU

of the upheaval, Richard J. Harrington. He was an unusual patron. An accountant, he had never worked in a newsroom and described himself as "a marketer and salesperson who can count." But not all analysts were convinced that Thomson intended to stick with newspapers. In its 1996 annual report, Thomson boasted that "advertising represents only approximately 10 percent of our total revenues." Some viewed the retooling as a way of dressing up the newspapers' profits for a richer sale down the line.

Still, when Harrington moved up to replace Brown as head of the parent group in 1997, he immediately hired a man with 24 years of experience in newsrooms—albeit all on the other side of the Atlantic. Hints that Thomson saw light in the British way predated the arrival. As early as 1993, a Thomson newsletter that provided monthly performance prods to its newsroom chiefs heralded:

Bold, Brash Newspapers Sell: We Could Learn a Few Things From Our British Counterparts

The chance arrived with Stuart Garner, 54, the former managing director of two British newspaper chains and a man who has worked at virtually every job in a British newsroom.

Dispelling rumors that Thomson secretly intended to abandon the newspaper business came high on Garner's list: The upheavals of the '90s made the Thomson Corp. "unequivocally an information and publishing company," he insisted in an internal memo, and that should lay to rest "any lingering suspicions that Thomson is getting out of newspapers."

Garner is a cocky fellow with sprightly ideas. In the field, however, the reaction is mixed. One reporter, angry about the escalating trend at his paper against covering "boring" government stories, blames Garner. "He doesn't understand the First Amendment, the Second Amendment or any of the amendments," the reporter complains, although, in fairness, the trend had invaded newsrooms long before Garner came ashore. Bill Sternberg, the former Washington bureau chief, calls him a "very bright, sharp guy," but worries about his lack of background in gut issues for the American press. Garner, he says, "strikes me as someone who doesn't know what he doesn't know." But his editor in Manitowoc, Gerald Guy, agrees and points to Britain's invasion of American magazines and its inroads into New York publishing. "One if by land, two if by sea, three if by Thomson," he says.

Garner's best insights into Stuart Garner may be in far-off Phoenix, in the low, stucco-dreary suburbs of the flat valley of the Phoenix. There Thomson Newspapers is trying its most audacious and out-of-character experiment.

THE DRIVE TOWARD THOMSON'S NEW SUBURBAN ENTERPRISE, the Tribune, is string-straight into Mesa through an endless bazaar of sun-bleached and sand-blasted one-story buildings—two stories would be a skyscraper. Local entrepreneurs tout their wares in tried and true fashion: Lulu's Taco Shop...Metropolitan Mattress...PETsMART...Airtouch Paging...Payday Loans Checks Mortgage Senior Day.

The newspaper office is two right turns off Main Street, at 120 West First Avenue, a modern brick building that is unexpected testament to permanence and lined in front by newsracks. Harry Caray is dead and you discover it in 72 point: *So Long Everybody*, the trademark words of the grand old man who broadcast major league baseball for a half century and Chicago Cubs games for 16 years. Caray was a folk hero here, for Mesa is the spring training ground for everybody's favorite loser.

It is not quite 8 a.m., a thoroughly uncivilized hour for a morning publication, and the newsroom already is abuzz.

"To hell with e-mail!" comes sudden thunder from the corner. The accent is British neighbor boy, steam-pressed only slightly by several years of overseas living. This is Alan Geere's way of calling the first meeting of the day.

Phil Boaz, 39, the city editor, who had been lost in his story budget, finds Geere angled at him ominously over a video display terminal.

Boaz was here when Thomson Newspapers arrived two years ago. The irrepressible, unyielding Brit showed up shortly thereafter. "At first we thought we had one foot in the grave," Boaz will tell me later of the Thomson development. Of Geere: "A lot of us wondered, 'When is this son of a bitch going to leave?' We knew he was going some day. Now I think we will regret it. I am a convert."

Not so with everybody. "A lot of people show a lot of affection for Alan," says one of his reporters, who requests anonymity for reasons that seem fair. "But Alan's a company man. If he was a first sergeant in Vietnam, he wouldn't be a grunt sergeant. He's the guy who sends you out. He knows who is promoting him."

Thomson picked up the five East Valley papers—Mesa, Scottsdale, Chandler, Gilbert and Tempe (also served are Ahwatukee and Apache Junction)—from Cox in 1996. The package also included a floater in Yuma, Arizona, the hottest place in the country if not the hottest deal. Thomson merged the suburban papers and prepared for war with the Arizona Republic, the Phoenix metro whose reputation often suffers as much as Thomson's. So far, most of the shots have been over the bow. But the changes inside the building on West First have been dramatic nevertheless.

Gone is the old meandering suburban pace. The Tribune has a snap to it now, an unpredictability as well. It is far more metropolitan than other Thomson papers—it covers major league baseball. But readers also awoke one morning in July to, of all things, an all-good-news edition—right down to the logo, the Good News Tribune. The harsh realities of the news day were not allowed to spoil the event. A burning cruise liner off Miami demanded its place. The headline became: *All Aboard Survive Cruise Ship Fire*. The changes have been pure Geere, a man so full of contradictions and energy and ideas and push—"He has people running around like rats on amphetamines in a coffee can," says one—that he totally dominates the scene.

"I'm a hired gun, simple as that," Geere says. "You hire me, I'll go." One hire took him to Romania, where the European Community sent him to instill Western journalistic principles in newsmen and women emerging from the dark. Early on, he sent 10 reporters out to cover a fire at a chemical factory and they came back with 10 different stories. "I

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knew I was in trouble," he says. "They had all made their stories up. No official had ever talked to them in the old Romania, so this is what they had always done. I failed miserably."

Geere has not done that here, although sometimes the endless spew of ideas is the bane of his troops. He has sent reporters out into the street, with photographers, to interview women about the contents of their purses. To the reporters' looks of *you're kidding*, his return stare says: Don't you get it? If you can do that, you'll be able to knock on the door of a woman widowed only an hour.

"At first, I thought we were going to be an English tabloid," says Boaz. "But that wasn't it. He was teaching us."

Whether the eclectic thoughts of Alan Geere are an advance for the cause of good journalism is your choice as well as mine. The Tribune is still more meringue than pie.

The 8 a.m. meeting is a dawn patrol, with Boaz deploying his first troops—"launched" is his term. By 10 the day's work is serious and the outlines of tomorrow's paper take form. Geere and his editors have moved to the conference room, where no news meeting is conducted without the phone hookup to the Scottsdale bureau. Scottsdale is the plum in the group—chic, upscale, so rich with advertising dollars that its zoned edition is done artfully enough that most locals think it is a separate paper. Since Orlando, the meeting doesn't go on without the circulation director. Mike Romero is smart enough to hang back from the table just a bit.

The meeting takes on an Alan Geere buzz. There's pie today. News.

A follow-up on a messy freeway fatal has a good Arizona twist. "The kid's father is in the witness protection program," Hal DeKeyser, the Scottsdale editor, rasps over the speaker phone. "Don't know what we are going to do about that..."

Bob Satnan, the news editor, is antsy. Washington is threatening to go to war with Saddam Hussein again. Let's get past this Mickey Mouse stuff...

Boaz: "We've got a 79-year-old man, he went out to pick a grapefruit in his yard before bed. They found his truck burned out this morning. He had been forced to use his ATM. They're dragging the canal..."

Satnan: Iraq...

Boaz has an Arizona bright: A good Samaritan found a thousand dollars in a purse and walked it back to its owner. Who stiffed him.

Satnan: War...

DeKeyser by phone: A holdup man has stolen 57 Rolex watches from a Scottsdale jeweler.

Jim Ripley, the managing editor: "What does a black-market Rolex go for? Ten percent?"

DeKeyser: "I dunno. We're checkin'."

Geere has been listening silently. Now he interrupts, backtracking: "Do we have a clue from the police about the missing man? You know, 79-year-old man goes out to pick grapefruit, never seen again?"

The words clatter across the table like direct orders from Pat-

ton. By the end of the day two reporters and Boaz himself will knock on the widow's door—training pays off. Geere will drive to the scene himself, purely out of curiosity. "God, it's a green house," he says. "No one will pick a grapefruit from that tree again. Was it pink or white?" By morning the story will become the page-one centerpiece with two color photos, two maps and words from the widow. Iraq will be below the fold.

As the news hands leave the room, Geere motions to Romero to stay behind—a holdover from Orlando. He's going a mile a minute now, wants to set up a promotion with Arizona's new major league baseball team, the Diamondbacks. And then Iraq. He goes so fast he sometimes seems to lap himself. "We need to get ready for this war. Who are we going to sell to? Where are we going to make some money?" He hits the brakes like a truck in a red-light intersection. Romero doesn't get the pregnancy of it. Make money off the war. Geere has run right over his foot. And he knows that I know that he knows. Suddenly, I think that he may be the only person in two months who realizes what I have been doing. Listening. Reporting. Writing things down. The chores they all do. Joan Didion's classic line about reporters runs through my mind: "People tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests." He clearly has a similar thought—and I feel bad, *good grief*. This effervescent man has caught me up in his whirling orbit, too. Then I watch his face change, fatalistically. *Sauce for the goose*.... And he moves quickly on, a man full of an adrenaline mix of ideas, good and bad, soon to be yesterday's news, no cheers or jeers. He also is the only one in two months who invites me home for dinner.

GEERE LIVES OUT A DESERT ROAD, UP A DESERT CUL-DE-SAC TO A solid American house with a patio that's just about a hacker's drive down a dry desert fairway. It is a Sunday afternoon and, incurable, he shouts not-always-welcome coaching to the golfers as they skitter by, some with shots that ricochet dangerously near. The address—on Western Skies Drive—seems chosen for the friends back home in Essex, where he started this work at age 18 taking names at funerals.

Geere cooks dinner and talks about the craft. He can be philosophical in every direction of the compass. Conventional wisdom is not his forte. But these days when editors tend to be the most conventional people in town, he is, if nothing else, refreshing.

"A lot of people don't understand what is going on because the world is moving so fast," he begins. "We are hooked on instant deadlines, filing stories on the Internet Web site because we can't get it off the press till tomorrow morning. Papers are all going a.m. for various reasons, yet working women don't have time to read a paper in the morning. Working women are absolutely time-starved. So they read it when they come home from work. So we are filing stories on the Internet to get an even break with the electronics and, in reality, nobody has time to read it till 24 hours later anyway."



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to a critical examination of the American newspaper industry. The series is being produced by the Project on the State of the American Newspaper, an initiative of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and affiliated with the University of Maryland College of Journalism. The series' editor in chief is Gene Roberts. The editors are Thomas Kunkel and Carolyn White. The series' designer is Jann Alexander, and its researcher is David Allan. The project is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Coming in November: Peter Arnett on foreign coverage

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

Or: "British newspapers are so different. Fewer staff. Produce more. Work on six-month contracts. Journalism is not viewed as a calling. You're only as good as your last story."

And then he enthuses: "Newspapers have been so good to me. I've lived the most exotic life, like a sports star. I go places, I do things other people can only dream of. No one owes me anything. This business has given me everything."

He knows he can be gone at any minute. "I'm only here for as long as I'm good." Then he'd hire on somewhere else or go back to writing, freelancing, spinning for a living. He made a good living at that, too. He describes the freelance piece that earned him the most money of all:

"It was a story about a man who cracked walnuts with his bottom."

Back at the office the next morning, circulator Mike Romero tries to look into the future. Suburban journalism in this kind of area is hard work. The place is booming, transient, a winter sun-lover's economy, with a powerful metro that is spending millions trying to protect the growth area around its core. Romero has to deal with a "churn" of 130 percent a year—that means 130 percent of his subscribers turn over each year. You get, you give, you get back. It's all very costly. The cost of one churn is \$17.50. With an average yearly circulation of 96,000—it soars to a high of 118,000 in the winter—the churn rate alone can cost the Tribune several million dollars.

Romero thinks Thomson is giving the Republic a run for its money. And, indeed, the Republic has been diverting troops as well as dollars to the suburbs. The metro is holding its own in and around the Phoenix city line, including a still-strong grasp of prosperous Scottsdale, but its position weakens as the sprawl moves east into the desert—Tribune country.

"We've got 45 percent penetration in Apache Junction," he says, then grins. "But that's halfway to New Mexico."

Romero, like any good circulation man, knows how to grub for readers. He works the trailer parks, works the trailer park owners to work the "snowbirds," the retirees who flock here with the sun. Almost 40 percent of the Tribune's readers are snowbirds. He has to go for them anew every year.

"By tax day they are gone," Romero says wistfully, "and this becomes a very dead place heading into a hot summer."

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES TO THE NORTHEAST, WHICH PLACES you pretty much in the heart of the country, Thomson has no walls to tear down. When the receptionist at Logansport's Pharos-Tribune says, "Just a minute, I'll see if she's here," that is exactly what she means. She can cast her eyes right over advertising and circulation to the newsroom rows. The office of the Pharos-Tribune is one medium-sized room.

Arriving in Logansport, Indiana, which requires you to cross the Wabash River where it intersects with the Eel, is about as close as you can come to stepping into yesterday. That's the way the Pharos-Tribune, circulation 12,000, looks at it, too. Proudly serving the farm counties of Carroll, Cass, Fulton, Miami, Pulaski and White, this Thomson paper has the look of a weekly that comes out daily and Sunday, printing every gram of news to do it.

"People complain there is no good news in the paper," says Margo Marocco, 56, who has reported here for 33 years. "I have never understood that. The fact that babies are being born, people are getting married, the school board is meeting—that's all good news and it's all in our paper."

So it is—along with column after column of calendar

events, hospital notes (even admissions are news), funeral notices, area briefs and columns that pitch the past: "Where Are They Now?" and "Time Traveler."

Marocco is a copy editor who also handles the wire. After all these years, she has opinions—and one is that she just can't understand the newspaper's new policy on obits. Charging people—\$53, at that—in their moment of grief. "That didn't go over well at all, I'll tell you. We've had some pretty strange results, too. I mean, people have been survived by their dogs."

What would happen if the mayor died?

"Now, I hadn't thought of that one." Marocco's face turns from a frown to an impish smile, no offense to His Honor. "Fifty-three dollars, I guess."

This place marches to a far different drummer than the one pacing the Alan Geeres. Thomson bought the Pharos-Tribune three years ago during the Strategic Marketing Group shuffling. Most of the reporters think the paper has been playing more softball since then. The executive editor and publisher, Dollie Cromwell, a whiz-kid arrival at 33, is immensely popular but an unabashed booster. "The city council and the school boards have internal conflict," Cromwell says. "Everybody knows it. I don't want to feed the fires."

But, if you are willing to get up very early in the morning, the way farm folk do, you find that all is not lost. That's when Kris Baker, 21 years old, moving double-time in her jeans and running shoes, starts the cop-shop run—6 a.m. in the summer, 6:30 in the winter.

Baker ran out of money and was forced to drop out of communications school at DePauw University after a year and a half. Now she uses her Thomson salary—she got a second-year raise to \$9.73, an increase of 37 cents an hour—to repay her school loans and continue with night classes at nearby Indiana University at Kokomo. Her aspirations point toward the big city, but she is staying for the time being. Her father, who is into soybeans and corn and is now "doing cows and pigs," has been ill. It's not a good time to move on.

She flutters through the reports, pencil in hand—not a big news day, even by Logansport standards. Car hit by egg, reads one complaint; carpenter's level stolen off the roof of the Hard Times Custom Cycle, reads another. The egg caper will not make the paper. The stolen carpenter's level will, as will the damage that Frederick T. Weese did to his wheel and bearings hitting a pothole near the train tracks.

"Anything else?" Baker asks crisply after getting to the bottom of the basket.

"Nope."

Baker wears a shield of farm-girl shyness. But there is no straw in her hair and the disguise is as good as the one worn by her unknown soul mate in West Virginia, Theresa Haynes. "Sometimes they just withhold them," she says as she moves down the hall. So she lays booby traps behind her, almost invisible pencil marks in the corner of each report. Every few days she goes back through the old reports, thumbing the corners till a corner comes up unmarked. Gets her best stories that way. ●



WILLIAM PROCHNAU is a former Washington correspondent for the Seattle Times and national reporter for the Washington Post, and is now a contributing editor of Vanity Fair. His most recent book is the acclaimed "Once Upon a Distant War," a narrative account of the first American journalists in Vietnam.

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THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER



ALAN GEERE

Journalist, Editor, Academic, International Consultant
(British citizen)

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

Associate Professor, International Journalism. Guangdong University, *China*. Devise and deliver two years of undergraduate study to Chinese students in English, preparing them for a year with partner institution in the UK. 2019-date. [UK based during COVID restrictions]

Special Contributors Director. *NLA Media Access*. Non-executive director overseeing the interests of freelance contributors for syndication organisation formerly known as the Newspaper Licensing Agency. 2018-date

Media Columnist. Regular contributor to publishing industry titles *InPublishing and PJ News*. Occasional guest writer for *Press Gazette* and *Holdthefrontpage*. 2010-date.

Doctoral researcher. PhD for thesis on editorial leadership – ‘*Has Anyone Seen the Editor*’ – expected 2022 at University of Lincoln.

External examiner. BA (Hons) Multimedia Journalism course within the Wolverhampton School of Art at the University of Wolverhampton. 2020-date. MA Journalism at Oxford Brookes University. 2021-date

ACADEMIC CAREER

Southampton Solent University. *Head of News Journalism, principal lecturer*. 2013-2016

Victoria University, Kampala, Uganda. *Senior tutor Media, Communications and Journalism*. Sep 2012-Jan 2013

University of Worcester, UK. *Principal lecturer, course leader BA (Hons) Journalism*. Sep 2007-December 2008

University of Westminster, London. *Senior lecturer in journalism practice and leader of Journalism Program, BA Media Studies*. April 2003-Aug 2006

City University, London. *Senior lecturer, MA International Journalism*. Aug 2000-July 2002.

Arizona State University, Phoenix, United States. *Hearst Visiting Fellow*, 1999.

University of Lincoln *BA Journalism external examiner*, 2015-2018

MEDIA CAREER

Consultant Editor, *Nottingham Post* Mar-June 2013

Editorial Director, *Northcliffe Newspapers (South-East)*. Jan 2009-Aug 2012

Editor, *Essex Chronicle Series*. Jan 2009-Aug 2012

Editor-in-chief, *Trinidad Daily Express* Sep 2006-Sep 2007

Editor, *The Tribune, Phoenix, Arizona, USA* 1997-1999

Managing editor, *The Daily Courier, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada* 1996-1997

Executive editor, *Western Mail & Echo, Cardiff, Wales* 1993-1994

Executive editor, *The Journal, Newcastle upon Tyne*. 1992

Managing editor (production), *Today, London* 1989-1990

Associate editor, *South China Morning Post, Hong Kong* 1988-1989

Production editor *Today, London*. 1985-1988

Night editor, *Eastern Daily Press, Norwich* 1984-1985

Editor, *Express Series, Diss, Norfolk* 1983-1984

MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Kabul, Afghanistan. Institute for War and Peace Reporting project Aug 2002-Mar 2003

Beijing, China. Consultant editor for launch of 21st Century Schools Edition. April-May 2001

Bucharest, Romania. Editorial trainer on European Union mission. April-May 1995

Readership development consultant, *Thomson Newspapers, United States*. 1999-2000

Independent trainer. Delivered more than 200 workshops to newspaper, magazine and online journalists in United Kingdom, Canada and United States. Worked with World Association of Newspapers, Commonwealth Press Union, American Press Institute, European Journalism Centre and the Press Association. 1985-date.

Journalism Training Centre. Owner and Director of Studies of centre delivering accredited courses to post-graduate students and working journalists. 2000-2006

Editorial consultant, *Thomson Regional Newspapers, United Kingdom* 1994-1995

EDUCATION

MA Mass Communications. *University of Leicester*, awarded July 2005.

PhD. *University of Lincoln*, expected 2022

OTHER

Judge at the British Journalism Awards, Regional Press Awards, The Press Awards, NCTJ Awards for Excellence, Newsawards, Scottish Press Awards, Scottish Student Journalism Awards – ongoing.

Director of National Council for Training of Journalists (NCTJ) – 2009-2012.

APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Neil Benson (interviewed September 16 2020):

Formerly group editorial director at Reach plc and interim editorial director at Express Newspapers. Editor of Newcastle Chronicle and Coventry Evening Telegraph. Chair of the UK Editors' Code of Practice Committee, which sets the professional standards for journalists. Visiting Professor at the University of Huddersfield.

AG: The background to the research is I was interested in where editorial leadership was going. After I stopped being an editor about four years ago things seemed to change and the original title of the thesis was “Has anyone seen the editor.” Now I did a quick count up yesterday we’ve got audience and content director, marketplace publisher, head of print and curation; does it matter that we don’t have an editor anymore?

NB: It depends I think, I think there has to be somebody who takes editorial responsibility for every title that’s not to say that every title needs to have an individual taking full responsibility, you know, I think what’s happening in the industry as it’s consolidated and shrunk is that obviously the span of control that editors have has to be bigger, that’s not necessarily ideal but I think it’s just a recognition of the condition of the industry at the moment. I guess my thoughts have changed a bit over time, I would have said that of course there has got to be somebody called an editor, I think these days it’s less important and I think some of the new titles sort of tend to reflect the way the industry’s gone so umm I think you mentioned *Lost the sound*

They are also publishers so they are taking on full responsibility for the commercial side as well as the editorial side. I think externally it’s probably a bit of an issue because if I’m a businessman working in Birmingham I ring up and I want to talk to the editor if I’ve got a problem or if I’ve got a story or whatever, so I think the industry’s changing the titles are changing but the outside world still expects there to be an editor in the title. I think the changes aren’t the end of the world but it probably does give a few sort of operational glitches.

How important do you think it is internally, does there need to be somebody steering the ship within the newsroom?

Yes, absolutely for me there's got to be somebody, well they may not be in every newsroom but somebody who's within regular easy, daily contact I think so that if a big decision needs to be made it can be made by the person at the right level who then, the buck stops with them. I think that the danger is that if things go down to too low a level there'll then be recriminations and it's not the fault of the individual its possibly lack of experience and a wise head.

Yes absolutely. I mean one of the things that's come into sharp relief in the past few months is the actual physical location of this person. I was doing interviews a year ago and I would say do you sit on the newsdesk, do you have an office, now I'm saying are you at home, do you think that matters?

I think the pandemic has, I mean obviously it's been pretty bad news commercially and obviously we're seeing some of the fallout from that as jobs are lost, not just in editorial but right across all departments, but I really felt that the way the whole industry managed to go from office based working to completely remote working in about 3 or four days was an absolute enormous achievement I thought it was brilliant and to me it sort of showed what the industry is capable of when its backed against the wall, journalists are flexible people generally, is it ideal, could we all be home based for ever now? Yes, is that the ideal scenario? Not for me, I think having some sort of opportunity to get together face to face has got to help the creative process I mean we were both sat in newsrooms where you know you're struggling with a headline or you're trying to think of dream up a splash for the next edition and it's that sort of interaction being able to bounce off people and sometimes randomly and not planned it's just that odd conversation or something that triggers a thought and it's a creative process and I think that's the thing that maybe will get lost along the way if we were completely remote.

One of things I've detected is that that there are a lot of publications both in print and online have become largely reactive, responding to things that are happening within the community and doing that very well, but I see less actual sort of driving forward with new initiatives and new ideas. Do you think there's a danger of those sort of things getting lost along the way?

Possibly, I mean I can't honestly say I have noticed that but it may be just that I have just not noticed that. I think so because they are the sort of initiatives, campaigns things like that, they're the sort of things that emerge from those kind of random conversations and little sort of five minutes at the water cooler or whatever or five minutes in the canteen so yes I think

that's, that kind of thing will happen more readily if you've got sort of people under the same roof and able to just interact in that kind of fairly loose creative way that newsrooms do.

Yes okay. I'm going to get onto a subject dear to both our hearts, do you think it's important the editorial leader gets their hands dirty and does some journalism?

I've always felt that that was important for the editor to show that you're a very good journalist because it buys lots of credibility with your team. I know there was a view some years ago that we'll both recall that the editor didn't have to be the best journalist in the room

Although we were weren't we?

Clearly yes laugh but in my view if you are the best journalist in the room or one of them it definitely helps so I think getting your hands dirty from time to time is a) good fun and b) wins points with your team and shows you're prepared to muck in as well and not sit in your office. Having said that the obvious flip side of that is if you're constantly wanting to sit down and write the splash headline and sort of craft the page four and five spread, that's not what you're paid for, you know, you're not paid to be to be an overpaid sub-editor you're there to edit the paper so yes, I think it's a matter of striking a balance.

Yes absolutely. Also on the sort of craft side of things, the editor has oversight of some very complicated and sophisticated equipment in terms of the technology that's available. How important is it for the editor to be across that?

As somebody who grapples with QuarkXPress when I was an editor in Newcastle, I spent a week learning how to sub on QuarkXPress and I think it was useful to the extent that it meant that I could understand the system better, but again I guess it sort of beats the previous point, the editor doesn't need to be a super user, it's about in all these things, I guess it's about knowing enough that you can spot the bullshit when you hear it.

Yes absolutely a very good answer thank you. I've got two sort of subject areas I've been looking at, 1) the umbrella title of the commercial editor there is an expectation that the editorial leader has a significant part to play in the commercial wellbeing of the business how is that impacted on the editors role?

Well I think it's [that the editorial leader has a significant part to play in the commercial wellbeing of the business] probably something that's developed over, I don't know maybe 30 years or so. Casting my mind back where the division of church and state was always very

clear and there was that sort of healthy wrestling match that would happen between editorial and commercial. Probably in the 90s, it sort of became more, a bigger part of the editors job, so rather than just sort of saying yes or no to the latest excess that the commercial directed wanted to come up, the editor would then turn out with a commercial person to pitch to a big client and I think that's become the norm now. I know at national newspaper level that editors will lead on pitches to big clients where there is significant money involved because the clients listen to the editors more than they listen to the same familiar commercial voices, so I think that's important. I think it's right because the money is not coming in the way it did to say the least, so if the editor can play a role to help generate extra cash for the business I think that's a good thing. Obviously it spreads the editor ever more thinly and I think that's probably the thing that's changed since I was sitting in the editor's chair is that the jobs actually got much bigger and much harder, it's got more facets to it, the whole idea of producing a newspaper and a web site as well every day and everything that goes with it and all the social media and the commercial part of it as well, it's a big juggling act.

It's [*native advertising*] tricky isn't it, its I mean the industry is in a fight for survival. It was before coronavirus hit and it's even more so now, so that's only helped us accelerate towards the cliff edge basically and I think a better way out of it would be if the government intervened with some sort of tax on the tech giants which has been mooted in various reports over two or three years but there doesn't seem to be a great deal of action there.

Google and Facebook pitch in what for them is buttons which is a sort of token attempt to say they are doing their part, so in the absence of any big intervention like that I think native advertising is going to be around, it doesn't sit well with most editors I don't think, it doesn't sit well with me but I think there is the old clear delineation just, it's not really sustainable anymore. Having said that I guess the what you do see, where it becomes excessive is let's say online influencers who make a living out of saying nice things about products for money and that's their *raison d'être* and I think there has got to be some line drawn by the editor but I think it's a more difficult question to address now than it used to be.

I think it is important [*that everybody in the newsroom has some understanding of media economics*]. I think having an understanding of what makes the business function is important, particularly for journalists, it's important to understand that what they write actually drives revenue directly, that's the big change in our working lifetime I think in terms of every journalist's role. So what you write drives revenue and my personal view is that

newsrooms have got to be able to turn a profit in their own right given the way that traditional advertising is going, anything that sales departments can bring in is almost going to be the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself. So that then begs the question about click baits and where you draw the line on that. Difficult, has click bait made an appearance in newspaper websites all over the world you betcha, I think in the more enlightened publishing houses these days, I think that's actually reduced in volume and there's a realisation that Facebook will penalise you for it, it's actually not a solution to anything umm maybe this is just a sort of personal hobby horse really, I think that many people who observe the industry sort of knee jerk about click baits, when actually it's just stories that they don't like as commentators because it's not serious journalism in their view. For me it's the decision for an editor is to draw the line between click bait which misleads people into reading the story and popular journalism that's of value to the reader if not to the editorial commentator.

The other big area that I've been looking at is under the heading of the editor as personnel manager the first heading, sub-heading here is recruitment. How important a role is recruitment to the editorial leader?

I said when I was an editor and I've believed it ever since that the most important thing that an editor will do and I think it probably applies to any leader of any business is to appoint well and build teams of people with complementary skills as well. You'll remember a certain T Quinn who sent me on a recruitment selection course at Aston University many, many years ago. It was a week long and it was one of two best pieces of personal development that I got in my career because you learnt how to properly run interviews, how to get people at their ease, how to winkle information out of them that they possibly didn't want to give and I think that set me and everybody else who did it in really good stead so to me it is top of the list.

And then also there is sort of wider HR responsibilities personal development, discipline all those kind of things which I guess the poor old leader has subsumed more of that, not so much in a big organisation but in the smaller ones, and it hints about what you were saying earlier about this being a multi headed role now, is that something that editors are equipped for?

I can only speak from my experience and I'd say that often and sometimes even in the bigger organisations that editors are expected to take on things that a generation ago would have been seen as a specialist job by someone in another department and I think that's a difficulty.

I've certainly spoken to editors who've felt uncomfortable having to deal with certain situations and issues that they felt they hadn't been trained in, naming no names, so I think this is maybe where having said that an editor's job is bigger you've got to draw the line somewhere and I think some of this sort of particularly on the HR side it's kind of dangerous water because clearly there are legalities to be aware of and often you know we see occasions when not intentionally but through lack of knowledge editors get themselves into trouble in that way so I think it can be a bridge too far.

Yes absolutely. I'll throw into the pot there as well – financial responsibility, having an oversight of the numbers, personally I don't think it's good enough to say oh I don't understand the numbers I think you've got to be all over the budgets nowadays

Yes I completely agree with that and I think, I'd certainly subscribe to the idea that you should delegate this responsibility as well so in my time in the 90s in Newcastle I think that was the first time that I felt that I should delegate departmental responsibility to the news editor, sports editor, features editor, they had their own budget to be responsible for, mainly because if they had control of it and responsibility for it they will take more notice of it and I think you know the same probably applies even more so these days. I mean we see it with personal targets for reporters in terms of the number of page views and engagement that they get. I think for those reporters to understand that their journalism has brought in x amount of money, I'm not advocating that you should target them on how much money they bring in, but to understand that that is a key relationship it can only be a good thing. There are fewer people around these days, a higher proportion of them are journalists even though the number has shrunk so it's got to be the journalists who drive the commercial success or otherwise of the business so they need to know.

Yes thank you. In your dotage in 10 years' time having this conversation again what do you think the landscape for editorial leadership will look like then?

Very hard to say I mean 10 years is a very, very long time, not for us but in terms of journalism and where it's going. I've got some concerns about it because I think one of the other things that's happened in the last 15 years is editors have got younger like policemen, they are less experienced generally, they tend to, they are flatter management structures and I think that means that sometimes they've not had the personal development that you or I would have had when we were coming through the ranks you know, you get there a lot sooner but there's a lot more and you're doing a bigger job but there is a lot more scope for

something to go wrong, particularly if you haven't got an old wise head in the newsroom, which is where I guess consultants come in you know that's experience that can be plugged in at any time and I think and I'm not saying this because I make a small amount of money out of it, but I think that there are a lot of very experienced people around who have got some knowledge about publishing and probably more importantly have got a lot of knowledge about leadership, about how to do it, how not to do it, who could be very useful so I think, it's a bit like the way the Japanese car manufacturers work where the chief executive will be sitting there, if their asked the big question there'll be a wizened guy behind him whose the former retired chief executive whose experience he'll draw on and I think some kind of a mentoring network for editors like that would be a very good thing.

Thanks very much end of formal proceedings.....

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Alastair Machray (interviewed September 24 2020):

Editor, Liverpool Echo. Editor-in-Chief, Trinity Mirror Merseyside at Trinity Mirror Group PLC. Head of Editorial for Trinity Mirror's North West Region. responsible for editorial content and strategy across 22 daily and weekly titles and a range of companion websites. Editor of both the English and Welsh Daily Posts during their amalgamation and through to their splitting into separate titles in 2003.

AG: I thought I'd just start by telling you a little bit about what I've done and the title was originally has anyone seen the editor, because I was concerned about the consolidation of editors and now we've got I've made a note here Marketplace publisher, contents and audience director, and a few others, does it matter that we don't have an editor anymore?

AM: Umm there's practical reasons why you need one in that you've got to have someone that the public know they can complain to and shout at because that takes up a lot of somebody's time and I think you extrapolate that into the legal field and I think there's probably still articles of engagement suggesting the editor is ultimately responsible for everything that's published and certainly whenever we've cocked up spectacularly under my stewardship, which is often the judge at the sitting trial that we've just caused to collapse has demanded the editor turn up immediately and I'm not quite sure how we're going to say we don't have an editor but there's an audience and content director we might be able to get hold of but I think they're in Bristol today. So yes I think there is a day to day role for an editor in

a sense of being in trouble, but you know there's been editors for hundreds of years and is one of those magical words that you don't want to go the way of the dodo really it's just sort of lovely and I always used to tease mates of mine who were managing directors by digging out stats showing there were 712,000 managing directors in the uk and only 100 daily editors, so whenever anybody has offered me a flash new title like editor in chief which I've got now, I've always insisted on yeah but I'm still editor of the Liverpool Echo and whenever I've gone into a bar and somebody says well what do you do, I've never said I'm editor in chief of Reach plc North West, North Wales I say I'm editor of the local Echo. It gives me enormous pride, I'd hate to see that go. But there are practical reasons why you need someone in the firing line.

Absolutely. How important do you think it is for the wider community to have someone like editor?

Yeah totally in as much as you provide leadership and you become sometimes as a newspaper and the editor of that newspaper, the symbol around which a community gathers, you go, you know, people go to you for support, for comments etc and that has traditionally been the editor whose agreed the support and provided the comments about that support. I'm not saying that couldn't be done by an audience controller or a marketplace publisher, I just think you'd have a huge communications deficit to make up and you know it could be to the detriment of brands couldn't it, because if you're a producer at Sky News and somebody says, right we've got this story about press freedom, try and get hold of a regional editor, try the Liverpool Echo editor. Actually we can't seem to find the editor, we can get you the marketplace publishing director, no, no, no, no ring the Bristol Post see if they've got an editor. I think we're many years away, you still have headmasters don't you, what does that mean in the modern era, it's an old word but people know what it does, it does what it says on the tin, so I'm on my way and I go with enormous affection for Reach. Its xxx before that they've treated me brilliantly; I wish them nothing but success but I think you know one of the things that I have been able to influence a little bit is getting across the point that okay you can have these roles but you still need a brand editor. Somebody still needs to call themselves brand editor and we've got to that point, if that were to go I'd worry. In a community sense yes.

Okay absolutely. The other side of the coin really is within the news room and I'm looking specifically at editorial leadership here. The editor has traditionally been the captain of the ship there, how important is it that there is still somebody within the newsroom environment who is pulling the strings.

Totally but I'm not sure that's been the editor always forever, there's been different types of editors hasn't there. There's been the great writing editor who would opine from his office and maybe do a lead that sort of stuff, then you'd have the chief sub and the editor pulling the strings as you put it and latterly you've had, well before you'd also have the great statesmen editor like Graeme Stanton who was never pulling any strings in the news room but everybody in town knew him and everybody that potentially had an advertising pound to spend you know, Graeme would know them and know their boss and ambassadorial editor was important but you'd have your Mel Waggots and Paul Nunns and people like that pulling the strings in the news room. But you then got the sort of hands on design editors and you got who were the editors with a design background, subbing background so there were many manifestations about what an editor is and in the modern era I think there's been all those things and latterly there's been a sort of digital editor if you like who understood digital publishing when people like me were having to learn it we had to sort of import digital natives to pull the strings in the news room and we could make decisions on brands and we could make decisions on taste and we could hire and fire, but the actual rhythms of day to day publishing were controlled by the digital editor. I think you need someone in the news room pulling the strings, it doesn't have to be the editor but they have to march to the editor's beat if you like in terms of policy, in terms of strategy.

To follow up on something you've just alluded to, how important is it for editors to actually get their hands dirty and do something.

It depends what sort of an editor you are. I mean you can be doing things without sort of being hands on. I mean I always tried in my latter years as editor to rota myself in for like duty editor I think you'd call it, you know someone who was pulling the strings in the news room on a Friday night. That kept my hand in and kept me close to digital publishing even though towards the end they didn't let me touch a lot in case I broke something and it enabled me to have an influence and to draw the front page and the stuff I loved and that's what I came into journalism to do, to write stories, meet famous people and ultimately to draw page ones and things like that and it also in an era when every editor whether they will be honest

with you and say so or not are looking over their shoulder and thinking when is somebody going to come and do me because I'm expensive and so I always thought well if I'm on the rota once a week it's a bit harder for them to do me laughter so yeah that's a silly anecdotal answer to your question.

How important is it to keep your hands dirty?

You need to know enough so that people can't pull the wool over your eyes, they can't say I can't do that it'll take me three hours. You need to be able to say I know how long that takes and in print I knew it all, in digital I found it increasingly difficult, increasingly putting my faith and trust into digital natives and taking their word for it, I found that very very difficult. I think it would be impossible to be an editor in the next generation as I leave without knowing how long it takes to digital tasks, to create a social media strategy around the election something like that. I think you're going to have to need to know all that now and I respected Reach for deciding that there are people better placed to lead that now than you.

Yes absolutely. You're making my job very easy here leading from question to question. The editorial leader has oversight of some sophisticated and complicated technology umm where do you stand on that?

Yeah it's you know it's impossible for an editor to understand it all at least you understand a little bit about everything and I think that's journalism in a nutshell Alan, journalists, good journalists know a little bit about a lot of things. You know not a great deal about everything but a little bit and I think that, enough not to have the wool pulled over your eyes, because you can spend a lot of time mastering a content management system that's then redundant and replaced, so I don't think it's vital that you're all over everything, just enough. But never has recruitment been more important because you need to have people in there to do stuff that you can't and you need to have ones that aren't going to shaft you and let you down and go sick and all that sort of stuff because you need, there's so many skills you don't have that they need to have and also its very, very rare you get a chance to recruit these days and also once you recruit a turkey..... we're getting a bit of track Alan but you know you're stuck with that fucking turkey for ever and they're in a key operational role. Once upon a time you'd make them special projects editor or some shit like that wouldn't you just to get them out the way. Nobody ever got made redundant or sacked you'd just shove them into the corner and said here's your title don't touch anything. But you can't it's so tight now in news rooms you

cannot afford to make a mistake with recruitment and often you are recruiting into various social media editors you don't know that much about.

What strikes me is one of my headings is the editor as personnel manager, recruitment is probably number one on that list. Interesting to hear you say that it's not something that you are able to do very much now.

Well you're not because in the last 15 years we've been in a permanent cycle of downsizing in news rooms, so somebody leaves and you think great replace him and actually what you really think, when you think hard about it is actually I'll just bag that vacancy for the next round of redundancies because if I need to lose seven it'll be down to six because I've got one down already. So you don't recruit as much as you used to, I mean we used to take on three on the Echo graduate trainees every year, and if it was super xxx there were no vacancies, it didn't matter take him anyway, there will be vacancies eventually. We don't do that anymore. So we're recruiting, it's got to be a job replacement that's utterly justified before you can recruit into it and it can't be in a period where you're looking to downsize and in the last fifteen years that's most periods really. So you can't afford, if you do get a chance to recruit you can't afford to get it wrong, you really can't.

On those occasions when you were able to be recruiting, did you feel you had the skills to make the right appointment?

Yes you know that's a really, really, really good question. If I was recruiting a digital editor I was required to have the group digital editor alongside me and I was fine with that. I always got the last say so it was fine and then hopefully he said yes this person can work all the kit, really understands how to publish digitally and so does this person which one do you want and then you're into areas where you're comfortable. Will this person fit in with the team? Will this person get what the Liverpool Echo is as a brand? Will this person be liked by the often hard to win press people of Liverpool? That's fine isn't it and I remember John Griffith who you'll remember saying to me many years ago when we were recruiting graduates and all these kids had been to camp America, they'd all worked with handicapped kids, they all had firsts from good universities and John said well what I always say to myself is would I want to go to the pub for the evening with them and I always found that.... Again getting off track Alan but I always found ultimately when you have great staff and you're convinced they've got the skills it's about would I want to spend time with this person because his colleagues will need to and also the public will need to and that always stood me in good

stead and I'm proud of my record of recruiting, even in fields where I'm not brilliantly skilled.

The other sort of HR disciplines like discipline, like dealing with awkward people is that something you felt comfortable doing?

Yes I've been doing it a long, long, long time I mean you try not to recruit the dickheads in the first place because they never leave and they cause you problems for ever and they become HR problems and that takes up a lot of time, but I think when I started as editor, the HR department of Liverpool Daily Post and Echo Ltd and its thousand employees was one. The HR manager one woman and it grew like topsy, it just grew and grew and grew and the editor used to be the HR manager and then got support from the HR director as required but legislation got stricter, people got cuter about their rights you know and you had to be careful what you said to people in the news room and you know the sexist jokes had to stop and the bullying had to stop, sad day when the fucking bullying had to stop Alan, all of us but generally it was banter, but banter became bullying taking the piss out of someone for a shit intro became, you should take him into an office quietly and see if they need any more training on intro writing rather than shout who the fuck wrote this across the news room, but that was like one of the joys of journalism. The public humiliation you got from your first news editor and so yeah, HR became a thing and it never was a thing, so the editor became sort of you were encouraged to utilise HR advice all the time and you became frightened to make a decision because you knew the companies that you worked for dreaded the thought of tribunals and the potential cost in a world that was increasingly litigious so is the modern editor more of an HR director than used to be, no far less they have loads and loads of support, the trouble is they are less able to make a decision.

My other main area is the expectation that the editorial leader take a much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title in business how does that play out for the editor?

Well so I'm going to answer this [*the expectation that the editorial leader take a much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title*] very honestly and very carefully. When I first became an editor in 1995 we couldn't count the money, we had to weigh it and if your biggest advertiser got into a scrape you barely thought twice before you reported it. You might mention to the ad director, oh Fred the motor dealer who spends 200 grand a year is up for drink driving next week, ha ha, sorry and they'd go oh shit fair dos. Now advertisers

are hard to come by and big spenders very hard to come by, you must do your job and report without fear or favour, so what I've tended to try to do and I'm sure others the same is when the story is presented to me I would say you had better make sure every bit of this is spot on. To the last dot and comma because £100,000 accounts are very rare these days and they will withdraw their advertising at this point, we don't want that to happen but we must do our job, we must report without fear or favour but get it right. There is a beautiful thing about journalism that infuriating as an editor but sort of beautiful looking at it from the side-lines, but whenever in Liverpool we struck a huge advertising partnership it was a couple of journalists who then made it their moral and professional duty to dig up some shit on the new advertiser. Stories that you would never have been presented about them before they became your biggest advertiser were being shoved across your desk. Ha let's see what he does with this and then you have to sort of say is the game worth the candle is the story, would we have run it if they hadn't been a big advertiser, it got very complicated for editors, the area became grey, you were encouraged to support your commercial colleagues and that's good to support your commercial colleagues at all time, nobody ever said don't run stories about advertisers nobody ever would. But you were encouraged to get to know the advertiser, to offer editorial support of the right nature at the right time you know, he's opening a new showroom or something, wouldn't it be lovely if we could do a picture blah, blah blah. I suppose that's always gone on but it's you know you are increasingly under pressure to support your commercial colleagues and therefore you are under increasingly amounts of pressure, subtle pressure, not to behave in the way you should. It's almost subliminal you know the sort of long spaniel eyes when you say we've got a story about Oh shit sort of God money is hard to come by and you have to be very, very tough not to cave into that and you have to be absolutely certain once you haven't caved in that the game is worth the candle, the story is good enough for the prominence it gets. You've got to be brave enough to say sometimes yes we're running the story, but for fucks sake it's only a page 19 story. I know he's a big advertiser but we don't have to put it on page 1 just because of that. Once upon a time TJ Hughes and his department stores the biggest advertisers in Liverpool, we had literally Alan a million pounds a year in revenue from them and they sacked the finance director about 3 o'clock one afternoon because of a hole in the accounts and the editor at the time Mark Dickenson splashed on it for the late night final and you know it was worth a business page lead, but no they're our biggest advertiser it is our duty to fuck them over, regally because that shows to the rest of the world of advertisers we carry no fear or favour and that was right then. Now you have to be more pragmatic and judicious; does any of that help?

Yes I'm also thinking that the water's become a bit muddy with things like native advertising which.....

Yes call it what you like [native ad], and clear written guidelines what is badged what, is absolutely essential and we've striven very hard for those at Reach in the last few years, you know commercial understand what they can ask and editorial understand what they can provide before it becomes a badged editorial or in association with in partnership with, yes the waters become muddied to the point of brackishness yes.

How important do you think it is that the journalist on your team understand the media economics and how it all works?

Mmmm it's important [*media economics*] that they understand the consequences of their actions, it's important that they understand we are there to run stories, not to suppress stories, but yes they need to understand as I said, if we're going to write this piece, turning over this huge advertiser it needs to be worth the prominence that we're giving it and it needs to be 100% right. We don't want someone coming back and saying you shouldn't have run this story because of x or y is wrong in it. We want them coming back and saying how can you do this to me and then we can say that's our job, it's not personal; we hope you stay with us as an advertiser but we are only doing our job fairly. We are not singling them out, which can happen, nor are we backing off them which can happen. Of all the things that's difficult in the modern era that is the most difficult of all.

Just thinking of the role itself as editorial leader and it's become more personal over the last few months. How important is it where they are, do they have to be in the newsroom do they have to be in the building?

At the moment they are not in the newsroom they're on the end of screens aren't they like this, do they have to be in the office? Yes in a normal environment you want to be seen and you want to be approachable I would say it's all a matter of personal style really. I think there's a danger to not being seen because you never find out about the fuck ups and the cock ups until you're answering the lawyers letter. If you're in the newsroom you get to know what's going on and you can often head off a problem before it happens. You know you walk someone's screen and they're writing 'top motor dealer shouts Goat' or something like that I think hang on a minute may I have a look at that story before we put that headline on it and if you're remote you can't and its tough in this era of 24/7 publishing to be over everything, something's going to catch because you can't read everything but if you're in the

newsroom you're getting the vibe, you know what the big stories are, you know the angle people are trying to take you can almost sense it, hear it and feel it and that's vitally important. You need to be in communities I think to provide leadership for a community you need to be part of that community as far as possible. I mean we always used to joke that the champion of the Liverpool poor, the editor who banged the table on behalf of these sink estates of Liverpool you know would go there to work and as soon as his shift was over he'd get in his leather upholstered, power driven limousine and fuck off back to the leafy suburbs as quick as possible, but I think you need to live in Merseyside to edit the Liverpool Echo and you need to go to these places and see them and talk, and Alan you were always very big about this is talk to readers. You don't know what they want or what matters to them until you're actually speaking to them and there's a huge danger as an editor that you know once you're the editor, you never talk to a reader because that's what reporters do, photographers do, only photographers see them if you've got any photographers left, reporters don't see them they probably speak to them on the phone and as editor you're in your ivory tower and so I think it's vital you're in communities, speaking to them. I used to do quite a lot of speaking engagements in terms, round tables and stuff like that if they asked me, because it was good to meet people and good for them to see what you were and drop in things like, oh yeah I'm driving straight home after this because I only live down there sort of thing, I think that's vital and I know, I'm telling you this privately Alan, I know that the new editor of the Stoke Sentinel lives on the Wirral Peninsula in Liverpool. But we live in a Zoom world and whoever's made the appointment has decided its fine, it'll be fine and I'm not sure it'll be fine.

What about conferences do you go to conferences still, is there still a conference?

Yeah again every where's different even though standardisation I think will become more prevalent in the next couple of years from a Reach perspective and we have a conference, a digital conference in the morning to set the day up and a print conference early evening to set the night up print and I went to conference probably four times a week if there's a xx meeting then I couldn't. I tried to get to both conferences every day but I wouldn't lead either of them. The digital editor would lead the digital conference and the print editor would lead the print conference but I would always try to go and I would always intervene, overrule the print editor or the digital editor if I wanted to. Yeah you know be it print or digital if it was a matter of taste or a matter of policy or a matter of Liverpool and I didn't like the approach

you know I would always take control at that point. But I didn't lead the conferences; I let those be the string pullers as you call them.

Absolutely. The interviewer's wrap-up question we are having this conversation in ten years time do we still have people as editorial leaders, do you see it changing dramatically within the ten year period?

Yeah there will be fewer I think, there will be more consolidation of brands under one editorial leader, one editor responsible for four, five, six titles I think unless there's a dramatic change in digital revenue. You will always have someone whose fault it is, you will always need someone to blame, so you will always need that named person, be it an editor or an audience and content director or a marketplace publisher, I think it will be an editor is my view and as long as newspapers and websites are sensitive things that turn over stones and upset people you will need newsroom leaders of a visible, identifiable, responsible nature.

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Mike Norton (interviewed September 16 2020):

Editor of the Bristol Post and Bristol Live and the Editor-in-Chief of the West region of Reach PLC (the UK's biggest media group). Also, Deputy Managing Director of Trinity South West and responsible for the commercial success of Trinity titles from Gloucestershire, Bristol, Somerset, Dorset, Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall. Previously editor of Derby Evening Telegraph.

AG: Does it matter that some titles now longer have their own editor?

MN: I would say of course it matters [that there is an editor] and I think the companies that are moving away from having an editor are going to realise that it matters.

I think what you'll get is very reactive news sites where they're very good at an event happens, they report on it, you know it's a journalistic, it's almost a knee jerk reaction but when it comes to okay what should that xx think on certain issues that affect the city, you know, how should that site, what stance should it take.

Now take Bristol, Bristol has got two really big mayoral elections coming up you know, whose going to challenge the people vying for that position, you know whose going to set the stall out for the publication, whose going to challenge those people in power and I think what we are going to see more of is moving away from that proactive okay what should the

community where this paper exists or this website exists, what should that community stand for and we're going to get more of this happened yesterday, you know or this is happening now and I think to be honest, I think if you want good quality journalism is as much about analysis as it is about reporting what's happening and so I think that's what you need an editor for, you need an editor to set the agenda for the news room and I think what we are going to have going forward is going, we're going to dilute away from that.

Yes so we've now got in a position where the lady that's nominally taken over from you is looking over a whole raft of different geographies to start with let alone publishing vehicles. Is that a nonstarter is that going to work?

I mean again I think it doesn't resonate with the idea that publications like the Bristol Post should be rooted in their communities and I think you need leaders within those organisations who understand those communities because they are very, Bristol is very different to say or even to Bath you know, it's a very different place and I think if you fail to understand that, again you get this very superficial journalism which sits on top of a place and doesn't necessarily interrogate it and understand it in the way it would if you had somebody who was more connected. I always think about, I'm not going to criticise anybody who's doing my job now because I like them all, they're all great people, I like Jackie a lot but I think the moment they have an issue with say the mayor of Bristol, the elected mayor of Bristol and he says well I want to speak to the person in charge and he says to her where are you and she says Plymouth and that, end of conversation to be honest Alan.

Yes. I've got two strands that I've been investigating within this questions one is within the news room itself, how important do you think it is to actually have a figure head leader within the newsroom?

I think it's very important simply because I think you need somebody who can lead by example and I think it's much easier rather than try to explain to somebody how to write something is write it with them, sit down, show them how it should be written, maybe even you know write it yourself and you essentially set the tone and I think you're also, I'm a great believer in editorial quality in quality of writing and making sure you really get the best out of people in terms of the quality of their writing and the quality of their reporting and I think you only do that by sitting with people, talking to people, being part of their daily working life, I mean that was how I did my job as an editor and I think again you, I'm not saying that won't happen but it won't happen at the same level and I don't think people will be pushed

and challenged journalistically perhaps as much as they should be. So I think having somebody really visible, having somebody who you know is empathetic but also critical when necessary is a really important part of just essentially making everyone in that newsroom feel better.

Yes. How important do you think it is for the editorial leader to actually get their hands dirty to do stuff?

Yeah I mean the way my career, everyone's career went really as an editor was, I mean I've worked for editors as you have who you know, I used to work for a guy called Mike Woods as somebody said he's always on a lot of courses you know, golf courses. I mean he would come in, he was in an hour we'd do morning conference and then he'd go and play golf for the rest of the day you know. These days it's not like that in newsrooms you know, I remember we had a situation just before I left when we got this opportunity of a big interview with a guy who runs a company called YTL big Malaysian company making a big investment in the city, building an arena for the city and they suddenly said the guys in Bristol do you want to, can somebody do an interview and our political editor Kate who would normally have done it was on holiday and I looked round and I just thought I'm going to have to do it, I'm going to have to do that interview and that's fine and I think that's how it should be and I think on the other hand I think what you don't want to do is be a news editor because you've got one of those, you know what I mean and I think the danger is that you undermine the person doing that job, so I think there's a fine balance between getting your hands dirty when necessary without making people feel that you're taking their authority away. It's really difficult actually when you want to be as involved as we do. And I think sometimes you have to let other people do that interview because, I think the danger is some editors, I mean thank God we're not like that but there's an element of vanity publishing there, that they think whatever they write, whatever do is going to be good and it's not always and I think sometimes you have to understand that as editor. And actually I think you've also got to understand that there are journalists in the room who can do it better than you can. The analogy that I always use is the Wayne Rooney can play football much better than Alex Ferguson but that didn't mean to say that Alex Ferguson couldn't tell him how to do his job you know but I think the important is let Wayne Rooney play football you know what I mean. Anyway that's my two pennoth.

Absolutely I think one of the things you've hit upon there is what we might loosely call experience where we know where that line is between helping, cajoling, being a nuisance and being ready to walk away, one of my other concerns is that we are losing all the people who have the experience, does that matter or can we just run with the young bucks.

I mean I think there are some great young bucks and one of the things, well you wrote a piece actually, you went into a modern news room and I remember you wrote a piece and it was really good because what it did was acknowledge that the danger is that those of us who are leading the industry kind of we sort of lose prospective on what it was like when we were there and it was fantastic and it will never be the same. There's a guy in my cycling club and he's got a tee-shirt and it says the older I get the faster I was and I think there a lot of former editors who only remember the good times and forget all the mistakes they made and I think there are some really talented young journalists who deserve to do very well within the profession but I just don't think you can only have a roomful of people like that, I just think you need, you need people with, it's not just experience I think its corporate memory. It's like well when was the last time this happened and if nobody knows or nobody cares I think what you do is you send a signal to the city or whoever you're covering that you're not local, you know, you're not as invested because you don't know the history. So I think you need it for both reasons really.

Yes absolutely. Just half a step sideways you have oversight of some very sophisticated and complicated technology is it important to be on top of that?

Yeah and I think that's where some editors fall down. You know analytic, I love data and analytics, it's there to inform, it's not there, it's there to guide and inform it's not there to command. I think if you use it cleverly and learn from it then why wouldn't you I think it's a really important part of a modern journalists tool kit and of course there are editors who fight it and that's mainly because they don't understand it but I think if you understand it and you use it it can be very powerful and helpful.

Absolutely. You've sort of answered this question already but I'm going to ask it again. How important is it for the editorial leader to be visible in the community?

Well again, I mean I think it's paramount I mean I think people should know who you are, what you do, what you stand for, you should be able to go into a room in the city with the great and the good in it and everybody to know who you are and what type of approach your newspaper and website and what you stand for. That was easy for me in Bristol because I'm

a Bristolian and I always felt, in a way I always felt that you know I was judging the incomers you know what I mean there are a lot of incomers in Bristol and I was on the right side of that and so that was, I found it a bit easier and I was very settled in the city and I knew all the people, it's very, as you know in most places, even big cities it's actually quite easy to meet the fifty people who actually make a difference. As an editor I think you should be able to pick the phone up to any one of those people at any time, because I think if you don't your newsroom will suffer as a consequence.

Absolutely. A question which has actually changed a little bit in the last few months, what about the physical location of the editorial leader. I'm talking here to be in the newsroom, does it actually need to be on the desk with people or can it just be in a remote location. Where should the editorial leader be?

Do you know what I think to some extent it's going to take a bit of time for us to really understand that because I think the world is in love with home working at the moment, well some parts of it anyway, but I think it's age related to some extent so I think there are certain people at life stages, perhaps like you and I we've got rooms we can go to in our houses but you know there are young people who are not in that position. I was doing zoom, hangouts with my teams twice, three times a day during the lockdown and you know I'd have a young journalist, a young content editor who is essentially running the site that day and she's running it sat on her bed in a shared house, you know and I don't think that's sustainable. And I think the other thing about remote working although there are lots of good things about it, I also think that from a mental health issue I think it can be quite challenging particularly for young people because work is very much a part of their social life and I think if you take that away you take the office away, one of their reasons for working away as well, I mean I think as time goes on I think hopefully it will start to balance and there'll be a balance between the two but at the moment a lot of companies are seeing an easy way to save money and they're wrapping it up as just keeping you safe, but you know they're seeing millions of pounds drop to the bottom line if they close offices. But I think in the long run, once we get a proper understanding of how it affects people, I do think it's going to be we're going to be together. I think one of the other sorry I think it's going to be a mixture. One of the other things I think about remote working is that it makes decision making much harder, so again if you're on your own, in your house and a big thing happens, if you're in the newsroom you can talk you can turn to people you can discuss you get this sort of discovery, serendipity of discussion and I found that a couple of times, there was one instance in particular during it

was as we were coming out of lockdown but in Bristol we had a statue torn down by protestors a stature of a former slaver kind of, its more subtle than that and it was really shocking Alan, I mean the news editor rang me and she sent me the video and I was, I had slight palpitations, I was really shocked by it and then she said what are we going to do and I said look just give me two minutes and I put the phone down but I was in this bubble, I was in this vacuum of just me, and in the end we wrote a comment we said Bristol had brought it upon itself and we did some really great coverage I thought, but that process and I think it's the same for young people, young people managing the site you know during the day big things happen and I mean yes they can go on a zoom call or they can IM but it's not the same, the decision making process is more isolated obviously when you're on your own and more difficult as a consequence.

Thank you very much. I've got to other areas to consider in some detail. One is under the headline of commercial editor so we're talking here about commercial collaboration undertaken by newsroom leaders. What direction do you think that is heading?

Well I think in an ideal, what do media companies want. Media companies want I think very little barrier between editorial and commercial responsibility. In other words they want editors who see no issues with ultimate commerciality. And do you know what I have some sympathy with that I do, but I just think and I think what we forget as businesses or what they forget, I'm not in it anymore but at the end of the day we are producing products and those products are judged by the people that digest them and I think commercial content which is nakedly commercial but dressed up as editorial I think people can spot it a mile off and I think it damages the product it damages the brand and I think they've got to find a happy medium. Now actually in fairness the company I used to work for Reach, we created these commercial editorial units because I think what was happening in a lot of news rooms was if you take awards for example. Most media companies are involved in, well you know five, six, seven awards a year and around those awards you have to write stories about companies that are entering, simply to encourage more entries. Now sometimes that fell to the reporters you know those sort of stories. And it just didn't feel right, well having created this commercial unit that is obviously there to write commercial content and some of it is actually quite good and useful content maybe around property or whatever, I think that is quite good medium. In terms of senior people, I think, I mean I was a very commercial editor but the company and the people I dealt with they knew the boundaries. I think as long as you understand there's a line which you won't cross. I don't mind opening doors for commercial

people, I don't even mind having commercial conversations with commercial people present or even on my own I don't mind that but whenever it starts to affect my ability, my editorial objectivity then I think it becomes a problem and I think from my perspective, I really did, I mean I think the company understood where I was on that, I think the people I dealt with understood where I was on that. As long as that remains I think its fine.

So from what you've said you're not a great fan of native advertising whatever you want to call it they were called ad features in the old day, one paper that I edited I follow the editor on twitter and his output now is mainly full of look what a great job we did for these Mercedes dealers and it makes me a bit sad but also makes me a bit concerned, what do you think of that sort of thing?

Yeah I mean I just think it's the line, I think that [*native advertising*] crosses the line you know, I mean there's no point in an editor tweeting about commercial success as long as the bulk of what he concerns himself with or herself with is editorial excellence. I think it's about balance isn't it.

Do you think that the staff, the people within the newsroom should have a better understanding of media economics?

Yeah I do I think one of my issues with journalists is that they are quite economically naive and the good ones never are actually. Good journalists tend to have a better understanding of economics, the economics of the business that they are working with. So yeah I think it helps every journalist really to have an understanding of the economic context that they sit within.

Absolutely. The other big area is what is loosely called the editor as personnel manager, so within this first off let's talk about recruitment and how important is recruitment to the editorial leader?

Yes of course absolutely essential I mean I would use the football analogy I used to scout people you know, I would spot people, I would somehow get in touch with them, I would try and get them into the news room.

Even once there was a lad who played tennis in the same tennis club as me and I watched him come up as a junior really just the kind of lad that you knew that would be good and then amazingly he went to journalism college and I took him out for coffee and I said right when you're ready to be a trainee come to me and he's done, I like doing that I like spotting people and I like giving people opportunity, particularly local people.

Yeah of course it's really really important. I think you really want to understand every person who works in that newsroom. The thing is you can't do everything all the time so you have to ensure that the people working in your newsroom understand what it is you want and how you want things to be done and I think you can only do that by making sure they're the right people.

Yeah what about the wider HR responsibilities, discipline for instance that kind of thing?

Yeah I mean I think modern media companies are run by accountants and HR and I think, I see HR, I mean I see them there to advise, I mean and this is going to sound very patronising and misogynistic and I don't mean it to be but HR is essentially run by 12 year olds who have never actually been in a difficult HR situation themselves. And I think they are there to advise or actually I think they're there to help you achieve the thing you want to achieve, they are not the decision makers, I think the editorial leader should be the decision maker when it comes to HR with advise from people who understand the HR process, but I think that's flipping, I think HR is starting to decide. For example you look at the latest reach redundancies, everyone was put into consultation, I never would have let that happen you know, I would have preselected before I made any announcement. Now I know that every time I try to preselect I was told by HR that I couldn't do it, but we always did and I think, I just think the editorial leader has got that experience of if they have of going through that process, unfortunately lots of times and they should be the ones calling the shots.

On the other hand, I think there are sometimes issues where you do get bogged down in those HR procedures and ironically when you need HR staff to step up and actually maybe take some of that responsibility, that's when they tend not to want to, so I don't know if that answers your question Alan I think it's complex but I think that ultimately running a news room does mean that you should be involved in those big HR processes.

What was it like being on the other end of the process?

Yeah I mean that's an interesting question. It was actually quite easy because I knew what to say. You know, yeah it was easy and yeah I knew how to play hardball.

Did you get treated fairly?

I had to fight to, what I considered to be treated fairly umm but in fairness you know, there was a negotiation process, but you know there are times aren't there when you know you are in a good position because you are in a strong bargaining position, because you know what outcome they want and you can exploit that.

Yes absolutely. The other big area is finance. So were you did you have a big budget that you were actually in control of or did somebody tell you what you could spend?

I would say throughout my career that's changed, when I first became an editor it was 20 years ago, you really did have a big budget that you essentially controlled but accountants slowly wrestled back control I would say, that actually to some extent though that's not true in that I still kept control of the budget but I would say it was more difficulty, you had to be more resolute in order to you know make some of the budgetary changes you might want to but if you were you could still make them, however look at where I am now. So maybe that's not quite true umm I think I go back to a lot of journalists are economically naive and I think I didn't want to be, I worked hard to understand the spread sheets and understand budgets. I remember the first management meeting I went to as an editor I took a calculator and the xxx said God that's the first time I've seen an editor walk in with a calculator, that was in Bristol. I think you need to keep finance people on their toes; you need to show that you understand you know the processes and the situations they are trying to explain to you

Did you keep across the figures; did you know what was going on?

Obsessively yeah. Probably more than I should have done.

Well it's a great world isn't it? I mean I was astonished to find out there were literally up to the minute numbers available, how much revenue have we got, now press the button away we go, fantastic.

Interestingly towards the end of my time in Reach was that editors in chief were given P&L responsibility for the region, so actually I was all over it.

Wow. A couple of questions to finish up with. How difficult or otherwise did you find moving from a primarily operational role to a more strategic one.

Really difficult. And I think, I don't know if it's as much as a challenge now Alan but certainly in our hay day, you know, and I think it's about there are different types of busy but I do think that journalist judge people by how busy they are. It is one of the faults I think in

our industry and if you're the news editor and you're seen to be there constantly working away, you expect everyone to be working in the same way, but I think as a leader it's a different type of busy, it's a different type of responsibility and you have to learn that it's not bad if you haven't kind of had a pee for 3 hours you know what I mean, which is our news editors and chief subs and the other thing about news rooms is, everyone's watching everybody else so, when I first became assistant editor, you get an office, you sit in that office you are suddenly less busy than all the other people and you're being watched and you have to learn to get used to the fact that you're going to be busy in a different way and everybody else has to realise that as well. So yeah it's a huge challenge and I always liked sort of like coaching people who have made that transition because I think if someone explains and helps you understand what's happening to you, mentally it helps with the process, but it takes a bit of time you know to get used to it.

Yes absolutely I mean one of the full back positions I've found is that people struggling with that will go back to their comfort zones and go and write a few headlines.

Absolutely right, and they only feel they've actually done a days work when they do that. You know what I mean but what that often does of course is they are avoiding the other stuff that they don't want to do and yeah you're absolutely right so true and news edit, you know you find editors sat alongside the news editor and of course ultimately that does make everyone uncomfortable.

Okay drum roll final question so if we were having this conversation in 10 years' time what do you think the role of what we might loosely call the editor will look like?

I go back to I think it's going to become more generic, more regional, I don't think companies necessarily understand the value, they can't put a price on the value of an editor so I think what's happening at the moment is going to continue to happen with the role being diluted, but I think it will ultimately affect the relevance of the site or the print product or whatever it is that sits in that community and I think if you lose relevance go back to it's a product, let's not forget that, if that product loses relevance then it's going to decline more quickly.

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Simon O'Neill (interviewed October 22 2020):

Editor of the Oxford Mail, The Oxford Times, three paid-for weekly titles, two monthly magazines, a range of niche publications and free newspapers, websites and social media channels. Responsibility for a team of up to 85 people and an annual budget of £3m. Editor of the Swindon Advertiser, a two-edition evening title, two paid-for weeklies, three free newspapers and associated websites. Editor, South London Press.

AG: My research is into editorial leadership and originally it was called "Has anyone seen the editor?" I look round now and I see in my notes; audience and content director, chief audience officer, market place publisher, content and audience editor; what's happened to the editor? Does it matter that we don't have an editor anymore?

SO: Well I mean I will preface this by saying two things, 1) I am obviously relatively old fashioned and 2) I left the industry five years ago in December this year actually and things have changed since then so you know the people inside are probably there are still a lot who know what they're doing, but in an ideal world an editor particularly in big publishing portfolios to drive them who has all the modern skills who is able to set goals, targets, tone of the publications be they digital or print I think it's still important and will make a comeback in due course in some form or other.

I'm thinking both internally and externally, let's start with externally. You've been there how important is it that there is some kind of figurehead within the media organisation that people outside know who to talk to?

Well you know an editor is recognised by the people outside, if they want anything, usually it's a complaint let's be honest, but if they want to have a moan about something and go to the top it's the editor. I'm not sure they'd know whether to start with the content director and audience director because they wouldn't know who is in charge of who there, and I think that titles are important. Those titles are internal but they mean nothing externally and that is an issue. I think the editor is important, don't let editors tell you they will overstate their importance, we always do but it is a good, they are good people for people to go and take a complaint, for people to go; I used to get people come to me with stories that didn't work, they wanted to sort of run them past me first before they thought about handing them over. Some people brought me stories direct because they wanted it; they thought they were that important that only I should deal with it. A lot of people in the community who had sensitive issues, I'm thinking of a child grooming scandal in Oxford, came to me and set up meetings to discuss the what was inevitably be an absolute storm of coverage, negative coverage. Yes

the editor as a role and externally and people value that I think, even if it's someone to shout and scream at when they are not happy.

Absolutely. Internally I'm wondering how important is it that the editor gets their hands dirty, actually does some journalism?

There's a balance to be struck in my opinion I mean everyone's got a different style. I mean you've got totally hands off editors and there are totally hands on and I think both – I think if you're an editor who's sitting reading proofs all day then you are not an editor you're a sub and you should leave that to people to do that. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be keeping an eye on the publication day to day and intervening if need be. There's a very fine balance. I mean someone I respect many years ago said to me that what's not factored into a job description is an editor's thinking time and what that means is that an editor needs to mentally step back and see the bigger picture in order to direct things. The ship analogy you wouldn't have the skipper going into the engine room shovelling coal nor should you have an editor subbing pages on a routine basis unless it's an emergency, so I think it's important that there is a balance struck between the two.

And feeding into that is of course the plethora of technology that's now available, at everyone's fingertips, how important is it that the editor is all over that?

Well put it this way, it helps if they are, but if they are not and they've got a value and they know what they are doing and they have a value to that publication, then they have to make sure they build a team around them that has all those skills. They can either do it for them or they can learn from. That's a very important point actually is that you learn as much from the people who report to you as they learn from you if it's working properly. I think that feeds into something else about editing it isn't a lonely, solitary task. It can feel that way when you've got to make tough decisions but you know building a team around you is one of the most important parts of the editor's job. Even in these straightened times if; in fact more so now if I was in the newsroom with one man, a couple of, a few people I'd want the right people around me. Fewer people that we had before and it becomes even more important.

One of the things has struck me over the last six months is the actual physical location of the editorial leader. A year ago I would have asked you the question is it important that the editor is within the newsroom, now I'm just asking is it important that they are even within the building.

Well they're often not. The fact is they're often not and again I had the benefit of different times, even five years ago when things were tough then I had everyone around me in my newsroom and I was there. Now I think there are people sitting in offices who are straight out of journalism college or relatively new and who is guiding them, who is helping them, who is advising them, who is even talking to them making sure they're okay, seeing how morale is, whatever. That is a worrying development but most editors with strange unintelligible titles, in miles away from not just their readers but their own staff and I think that's going to have to be fixed in some way you know, going forward. I mean the industry is fire fighting at the moment, that's what's happening and when they're fire fighting the finer points are not considered, but when you step away from it you can see that, you know obviously things have to change but if it's going to have a long term future you're going to need to think about skills and structures and who's where and who does what and things like that and it's not really being thought about across the board. It's being thought about in some places but not all.

I've got two sort of areas to explore one of them is an expectation that the editorial leader will take a much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title and the business, how does that play out for an editor?

Oh it's [*a much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title*] very important I mean I learnt that over time, I wasn't interested at first when I became an editor. I was 28 or 27 when I became an editor first and I couldn't give a stuff about it I just wanted to be left alone to do what I wanted to do and although I've always been a public service person rather than a bottom line person, I learned very, very the hard way really that I must take an interest in how we're doing commercially and I must help where I can without compromising any principles because it's in my best interests and best interests of the department and in latter years I was down at the our director weekly asking how the figures were going because I knew if they were going bad over a period of time that was going to come down into our area soon enough. So I think it's very important and I think if you cut yourself off from that you're a fool.

Do you think it's important that the rest of the team, the journalists on the team understand the economics of publishing?

I think the economics [*of publishing*] yes, it's important they understand where the money comes from and how it works but to expect them to be "commercially aware" at all times is just, its pie in the sky and in reality that's not going to happen. They're there for one thing and one thing only and that's to do the job and if you start talking about commercially aware they'll nod at you and glaze over, it's not going to happen.

The other area is one my chapter heading is the editor as personnel manager and that's looking first of all at the issue of recruitment. How important is it that the editor is involved in recruitment?

Well it depends I mean I used to delegate a lot of recruitment to people but they were people I trusted, and they were people who knew what we wanted and to be honest with you I always found interviewing very difficult. It was very, very difficult we tried all sorts of things but in the end the most successful, particularly for a young you know bringing young journalists in was a mixture of face to face interview/conversation with good old fashioned tests. About current affairs, what's happening in the world things like that just to sort of see if they were switched on and also about the area that they were applying for a job in. In this case it was Oxford. I don't think I ever really got interviewing right to be honest with you but I found them quite difficult because you just couldn't gauge and people can be one thing at an interview and be something totally different when they park their bum in the news room and I found that out many, many times.

And there's also the sort of wider HR responsibilities and things like discipline and that kind of thing.

Yes absolutely it's our job. I never liked, I never did want to pass anything over to HR ever and because I came from a background in Northcliffe where we did our own HR with HR advice admittedly and support from John Looney I think it was in the day and I learnt a lot from working with HR people who had an editorial mind-set and I used that and I ran my own redundancy programmes and everything, within the auspiciousness of the company and deadlines and what they wanted but I did all my own stuff. I wrote my own announcements and did my own communications and I much preferred it to be honest with you and I learnt a lot about HR over the years, a lot.

Did you feel that you had the skills required to perform that role?

Yes I never got taken to a tribunal put it that way and you know I was not the sort of person who sacked people on a whim anyway it took a lot for me to sack someone, so if it was down to that sort of dismissal scenario, they would pretty much bang to rights as it was so, I wasn't like some of the old style editors who just arrived and fired someone on day one to get everyone's attention. Yeah I learnt a lot from working with, I mean admittedly HR people particularly in Norcliffe who are very very good, the people I dealt with. I learnt a lot from the editors I reported to who were good on that as well and if I wasn't sure I could ask, I could ask and you learn from that. Also a lot of it is common sense and judgement and fairness. If you try to be fair and not cut corners then you're pretty much on, you've got the framework right.

Absolutely. I'm interested to see that a lot of papers, a lot of people are spread across a couple of papers, the other day I saw Natalie who has taken over as editor of Nottingham from Mike Sassi, I've suddenly realised I'm editor at both Nottingham and Derby and they are playing each other tonight..... How do you think that's going to play out?

Well I mean I'm trying to imagine, it's now a reality, it's the same as being editor of Oxford and Swindon in football terms but you're not really the editor, I mean I left because of that because we were re-structuring again and one of the roles being created was for we had an editor in Wiltshire and an editor in Oxfordshire and they were going to one and I thought well I'm just going to be mostly on the road and I'm not going to be doing any editing, I'm going to be really a kind of a general manager of editorial and other people are going to do the day to day job. And that was it for me really so that probably tells you everything you need to know, I didn't want any part of that so I just said to them, I spoke to the other guy and said do you want to stay and he said I have to stay because of financial considerations, so I said fine, so when I went to the first consultation so I said if one of us volunteered to go and the other one to stay would you be happy with that and they said yes, I said well okay I'm volunteering to go and that tells you everything you need to know about that. You know Nottingham, Derby, Oxford, and Swindon, I just, I mean I might be old fashioned but it's not editing as you know it, it can't be. Unless you were prepared to work sort of seven days a week and never have any life outside, even then I don't think you'd really be able to do it as it's meant to be done.

I suppose the cynic in me is thinking it's easier for senior management to control fewer people in senior positions is that fair or am I being a cynical old

I think it's probably down to straight economics and I know this because I've spoken to people who made these decisions and it's really a case of looking down an excel spread sheet and looking where the biggest salaries are. And seeing how you can streamline and slim down the wage bill, that's what it's about in my opinion and someone once said to me if we can get rid of people and then pay their replacement five thousand less and we do that across the piece we're going to save millions. It's that simple. The balance of, the conversations I used to hear as we need to save money but we can't do that because it will damage the publication, that's been removed that sort of balance has been removed many years ago and now because the industry is in trouble, let's face it is in trouble, anything goes, you've got to keep that profit going and you've got to keep those costs down until such time as your revenue starts to go in the right direction to sustain the journalism that you maybe want to do but can't.

Interviewer's killer question here. If we're having this conversation in ten years' time do you still think there will be editors to talk about or they'll be the gone the way of the dodo.

If you take the line as going straight on from where we are now, no, but if you take the line straight on from where we are now there won't be many newspapers left at all. So all I can say is that I hope that something changes in society really you know, and people start to understand and realise the importance of local journalism and to value it and that there are slight rumours about now with all that's gone on but you know there's going to need to be a sea change, not just in the industry but in society as a whole for local news organisations to be sustainable in the long term, to do meaningful journalism, you know meaningful local journalism that matters to people and its still about holding people to account and challenging those who spend our money and that is the and also doing good, lifting people up, supporting them, all those things are going out the window umm because we just don't have the resources anymore to do it in many cases. I mean in some we do, the bigger centres still do it to a degree but those smaller centres I feel sorry for them. So something has to change or you know I just at the moment if it's going to carry on like this I can't see it lasting for another ten years the industry as a whole.

Can you see a financial model to support that kind of journalism you're talking about?

OOh dear well you're going to need to start making serious money on line and I've not seen any evidence of that in any, in terms compared to what we used to make in print and that's the thing you see, the cash cow of print has gone and not been replaced with anything and until they do then no I don't I see a different model and we'll still have smaller teams and maybe there'll be a more settled you know a lower return will be expected for example the cost base will be lower but the return demanded would be lower maybe it will be more locally owned, or regionally owned, maybe private ownership not with shareholders because that is a problem there's no doubt about that, then you know I've read and heard a lot about this and I've not seen much evidence of it happening at the moment. And remember I am now looking from outside, I'm looking in from out so I'm not privy to a lot of the conversations that are going on and what's been happening but all I can tell you is the state of the local papers around me is just poor. It is poor. I've stopped giving them stories because they can't do anything with them.

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Mike Sassi (interviewed October 9 2020):

Edited three big, regional daily newspapers – Nottingham Post, Stoke Sentinel, Lincolnshire Echo – and their websites. Ten years a member of the Editors' Code of Practice Committee, managing the code enforced by Press regulator IPSO.

AG: My thesis was originally called, "Has anyone seen the editor?" and was concerned now and I've made a note of these we've got audience and content director, chief audience officer, market place publisher does it matter that we don't have an editor anymore?

SO: I think it does, because newspapers, media organisations have just become like every other organisation they get trapped in the sands and the quagmire of you know everything from a university to a building society, decisions take so long and of course news as we know it doesn't have time to wait, so I think yes in my later years you were in reality you were only editor by name because the power that an editor once had has diminished and disappeared. The hierarchy was technically still there but you were just another individual and who was making the decisions well in my later, later years the decisions weren't made in the building or in the city or in the region but somewhere else in London, and the same with running a bank and so therefore you were left almost just as a traditional middle manager taking the decisions that were made above you and selling them to the people who were below you and taking the gripes of the individuals below you and trying to get something done about them to

the senior managers above you and of course that's not an editor's job it's just a conventional hierarchical organisation.

Yes absolutely. What about the world outside the newsroom, do you think it matters to them there's not the editor any more.

Well yes because people who speak to you, whether it be a reader or whether it be a football manager or whether it be a staff member, because the staff also think that an editor is omnipotent, omnipresent can do anything, can make decisions, can make big decisions and so therefore when they ask you and you and she agreed upon something they'd expect it to be done and if it wasn't done because someone above you have said, forget that, they thought ohh, one of two things either a) you were useless or b) you weren't bothered and of course neither was true, you were bothered and you weren't useless.

Yes absolutely. That's why I hit upon the catch all term of editorial leader; what does editorial leadership mean to you?

Well, it would mean being able to make the decisions that you thought were important for the telling of the story, for the bringing of the news to your readers and if you can't do that then there's no point in being there, I mean there's all the management leadership about taking your staff with you and making sure everybody is on side and knows what they are doing, and standards are kept and people work hard and showing leadership out in your community by taking a stand and expressing an opinion and taking the city or the region forward, but I think the most important thing is being able to make those decisions, being able to lead.

Right okay. I've got three distinct areas that I'm going to discuss with you and the first one is called the editor as journalist. Is it important for editors to actually do some journalism and get their hands dirty?

It is or else you won't have the respect of your staff and if they don't have the respect of your staff then you can't go forward. Yes I think it's very important, sorry, *all of the good editors I ever knew were good journalists too, they were able to right a story, they were able to put a decent page together, they were able to carry out an interview, they were able to work out what an intro was, you know all those things so I think yes, it is important. They also had to be a good manager but I guess we'll come to that, but yes the best editors were also, are also good journalists.*

Yes absolutely. Thinking now as opposed to most of our career, the editorial leader has oversight of sophisticated and complicated technology, do they need to be all over that.

I think it's impossible for them to be all over that [*sophisticated and complicated technology*], I think and in many ways there is no point, you could die trying. It's important for them to understand, it's important to be able to do what is required. I was never a sub-editor, I was for a short period of time but I was never a chief sub-editor but I was always a news editor, I was always a good news editor, I was always a good reporter, I was always a good writer you know it used to amuse my staff no end when we were in our pomp that I was still struggling to put a page together, not in terms of in my head and how it should turn out but certainly the technology so I think it was never thus, I don't think it as important that an editor has to be able to upload whatever to; is good at search engine optimisation or even at twitter you know, these things are helpful but in the final analysis you need to know what a story is and how to put it together and to give the audience a reader what he or she wants.

And something that's come really into sharp focus in the last few months, does it matter where the editor is? Do they need to be in the office, do they need to be in the newsroom, does it matter?

I may sound old fashioned here but I really do think so, I think there's no substitute for face to face contact, you know true leadership I almost hesitate to say this because you don't want to sound like a dinosaur standing on a fruit crate in the middle of the news room and say look we're going to do this and here's why. If anyone wants to ask, ask now. But as I say this but that may sound old fashioned but I think it is important to be visible at least and I would say face to face physical.

Okay. In an office or on a desk or walking around?

I think walking around, I was always a walker around, sitting on a desk well you might have been as well, but I think in the finer analysis you are there to lead. I mean you write the story you might do a page or you might take a conference or whatever but you are there to lead. You know you employ people to do the nitty gritty of things and you help them and you're supportive and you work hard but the idea of you sitting at a desk and doing it with them and I wouldn't do myself, but similarly you don't want to be invisible, you don't want to be sitting in an office, you don't want to be permanently out to lunch, you don't want to be oh god knows, absentee editors were always hilarious. So it's finding that balance and if you are in an office nail the door open so people can wander in and tell you what the great stories of

the day are you're not seen to be fabulously distracted and you're writing shitty emails at midnight, not telling stories.

Very good you're warming to your task. The second heading is called the commercial editor. There's an expectation that the editorial leader take much more significant stance in the commercial wellbeing of the title and the business. How does that play out?

Well again I would say a little bit twas ever thus, I had a good ten years of looking at accounts and being to a greater or lesser degree responsible for elements of the revenue and I get that I mean I think that has to be certainly in cost terms, but also revenue a big part of the editorial portfolio, part of the editor's duties. However I happen to know an editor who I spoke to just yesterday and she's excellent, she is not one of these jolly come latelys who you know anybody and everybody's an editor these days, she would have been an editor in our generation too she is that good. So that's great but she has the weight of the world on her shoulders she is now the editor of four daily titles and she also has a devil of a job filling vacancies, you know not only does she have vacancies because people jump ship on a consistent basis but she also as you'll remember has difficulty in persuading the people to whom she answers to to allow these vacancies to be filled so that she can write sufficient stories to generate whatever audience. However, on her weekly conversation over in its fashion, with the person to whom she answers specifically that person is only interested in one thing, effectively how many adverts she has sold, where the potential revenues are she may have spotted on her travels, it's just hilarious laughter, you know she is a good editor but she doesn't get to do editing as we would see it, she doesn't get involved, she doesn't get to do what she's really good at, getting involved with stories and writing those stories and publishing those stories. She doesn't even get involved in too much as an editor as something that you sent me as a HR manager which I think is quite important. Building the team, driving that team, taking them forward together, she doesn't even get chance to do that because she spends her time scooting round the region and dealing with fires everywhere and the person to whom she answers also isn't interested in those two facets of her job. He is only interested in just a minute spot the opportunities to turn a coin.

Where is all that leading us though Mike, do you think that's going to have an effect on quality, output?

It already has, most of the stuff well how do you say this politely I mean these are my friends, but you know there isn't too much word reading on local newspaper websites these days as well as local newspaper websites, they are very, very, regional bordering on national, they have part of a national network so therefore interest in serving the local communities as we once saw them in writing local news stories about people is gone. You never ever, I mean pre covid, I mean covid is almost a fantastic cover of darkness, but pre covid you didn't get a chance to go and meet anybody; you didn't get a chance to do face to face interviews. You didn't get a chance to ring people really because what is wanted is copy, paste whether it be a press release or somebody else's work because we've all different set of issues, band it with a box, get it gone, make sure the headline has the key words in it, make sure the sell, anyway the sell will be written in a certain way so that it is attractive to a Google search engine. And I get all of this I don't see anything necessary wrong with it but that was instead of what we used to do, not in an addition to. So I think it's already led there. You say where is it leading – oblivion but in the meantime its already half way down that road.

Yes that's right. Some people are getting themselves very exercised by some of the developed like native advertising for instance which they feel has blurred the distinction and muddied the waters too much what do you think to that?

Again its native advertising is not a new phenomenon you know we always did add features didn't we, so got to be a bit careful about saying how outrageous that is. But certainly you talk about blurring of the lines and the placing of such stories without the correct recognition of what they are in big parts of the website or in parts of news stories makes it very, very dubious.

Do you think it's important that the journalists and the staff understand how economics of a media business works?

Yes I think it is important [*journalists and the staff understand economics*] but their role is to provide good, detailed, readable, contemporaneous stories in knowledge or involvement with the commercial side can only be a good thing, but it can do one of two things it can either as it stands at the moment, it can either frighten the living daylights out of them and I know for a fact that staff in recent years said to me as they left look you know there's no future here I can see from because the clever ones would go and take advantage of the access they had to accounts and they're only going one way, no matter what a company says, there aint long left and the clever people disappeared elsewhere. Is it a important, yes there is because you

shouldn't leave people in the dark shovelling shit, however I don't necessarily think that's a helpful thing at the moment.

One area that I am concentrating on is called the editor as Personnel Manager and just hinted on earlier about recruitment. Recruitment to me has always been a really important part of the role, do you think that's been diminished now or is it still as important as ever?

In my career, 32 years, without a shadow of a doubt the most important thing I did in every role was to take people on because if you don't surround yourself with the right people you are finished.

Team building and building a team that will always punch above its weight that will always be double the sum of its parts was so incredibly important to what I did, so I can't speak more highly of how important that is,

to be fair to my previous employers, perhaps because I jumped up and down and banged on the table, they always gave me great latitude in who I could or I couldn't employ and I over the years, I made my position more reasonable, I always took one, sometimes two other people into every interview.

I did work out specific questions and took them ever so seriously, we set bench marks, we got people to do stuff before their interviews, we gave them feedback after the interviews. I think they appreciated that. We made it the more complex process quite deliberately so, and I think we put together really good teams of individuals who subsequently went on and had great careers.

Right up until the end I was given great latitude, the difficulty was of course how do you attract people to do a job which is so not what it used to be. So it was always easier at the start to get people who previously would have gone on and become lawyers and surgeons and whatever and then they chose to be journalists because they were very bright, they were quite street wise as well and all that kind of thing.

But in later years you were panning for gold you were really struggling and in later years most of the people I employed worked with telephone calls and word of mouth, you know you were always talking to people to get tips you know, your contacts became so incredibly important not just for stories but for employing people you know.

And the other big area which is not strictly editorial is finance keeping on top of the numbers. Were you good at keeping on top of the numbers Mike?

It was a matter of pride *laughter*. I think because I used to laugh about it so much I had a reputation for deliberately not keeping on top of the numbers. However, if you spoke to the people to whom I answered you would actually say that, you know what I wasn't quite far off most times, certainly I never had anybody coming down on me like a ton of bricks. I think it is quite probably important to be sensible, I'm hiding behind closed doors and responsible and to prove that you're intelligent, thoughtful, measured and not just some buffoon who thinks they can sort of shoot from the hip all the time, so the answer to your question is yes it is important to keep on top of the numbers how you do that is your own personal choice but I think with power comes responsibility you know. You're a great powerful indubant being but you know you've got to treat that with some, treat your authority with responsibility.

Absolutely. Just thinking back to the comments I made at the beginning about "has anyone seen the editor?" It strikes me as one of the things that might be happening here is that you've talked about, the lady now in charge of four papers, how much easier it is for the senior management of the company to control fewer people. Is that a cynical attitude of mine or do you think

No, no, no and I'll give you a concrete example which explains exactly how that has happened. My friend who looks after four newspapers, what is driving her round the bend at the moment is that she would frequently log onto one of her four daily newspaper sites and see stuff that not only did she not know about but that she fundamentally objects to. Perhaps it will be advertising features, native content as you called it on taking pride and place either on the site or social media but she was also seeing national, international stories written in a particular way such that they don't confirm to what she would believe is the essence of her site. Lots of things that are out of her control to put it bluntly really piss her off because not only will people think that she agrees with these things and thinks it's a good thing but it fundamentally undermines her.

Yes absolutely. I suppose I'm trying to explore the day of the big beast editor is over.

It is but I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. People talk about the democratisation of the industry of news and there is some truth in this whereas it was big ugly fellas of a certain age who invariably had strong northern accents and stood on crates in the middle of the news room and made decisions and its possibly no bad thing that that has changed. However,

perhaps you could suggest that it's gone too far the other way. The big beasts were there, they were making decisions with their gut and they lived and died by those decisions. The newspaper succeeded or failed. But now the decisions are made by an algorithm or at least by data and it almost bypasses the editor, bypasses the person in charge, it was look we write stories about this particular element. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. A fella called George Grant, this is when I realised how, a reserved team striker for Nottingham Forest. Notts County came along and they borrowed him for a season and he scored lots of goals for Notts County, lots of goals for Notts County he was very, very good. Now every time George scored we would write a story that said George scores again, Notts County striker George Grant has hit his 94th goal in god nows how many games, isn't he marvellous and it might generate 2000 or 3000 or even 4000 page views. However we found that if we wrote those stories in a certain way ie with the headline which said Nottingham Forest loanee striker George Grant has scored again without mentioning that he scored for Notts County or even mentioning Notts County at the end of the sentence and write it up you would get 10000 or 20000 or 30000 page views so that's what we started doing. We weren't being inaccurate, we weren't being dishonest, it didn't half piss off Notts County fans and the chairman who spent half his time ringing me about this sort of thing, but we did that because we were writing for the Google search engine which wanted Nottingham Forest striker scoring goals rather than Notts County scoring goals and it's that kind of thing where you're left going right okay.....

Well that's a great story Mike thank you.

I confess that the news rooms I've been in lately I've become a bit mesmerised by the metrics, watching everything ticking over in front of view. Is there a danger that we become a slave to the metrics or is that a good thing.

No obviously it's not a good thing and it touches upon that last answer. You know you see, I see the people to whom I answered previously, people right at the top of the organisation who the two people right at the top I have great respect for. They're both really, really nice fellas and both very good journalists and I got on really well with them, so it was a bit weird, but you know I would look at what they had to do, and I understand they had to do it, they needed to persuade the people to who they answered that they were able to create such a big audience it was all going to be worthwhile, which completely wasn't the case so they had us doing the strangest things, the strangest, strangest things and they were both appeared in the

peer press saying “we take journalism seriously, we think it’s very important councils are covered, people go to football matches” although they had to change that subsequently but all these traditional journalistic tasks are followed through on so that the community is served, but then they would also say, “look if you do not get 1.1 million page views per individual in our newsroom then you must, after 3 months you must have a conversation with that individual and if he or she is not able to get the 1.1 million page views they’ll be on their bike, they should be told that look this isn’t on they have to generate more or else perhaps they should be moved to something else” and of courses something else has disappeared, there weren’t any feature editors or subs of that nature and so traditionally people who weren’t particular good as reporters might have been shifted round the room or given another task or something else to do, but this was purely data driven 1.1 million page views per month, per individual. That means that people start taking chances don’t they. They start to think oh my god it’s my job, it’s my mortgage, oh my god I know I should go to this council meeting or go to this court case or whatever, but it’s much better for my figure to have copy and pasted this instagram of a Nottingham Forest striker playing football in his underpants to copy and paste that and put three paragraphs underneath and put on the website and my goodness there’s my audience, phew I’ve saved my job for another month. I’m really happy *laughter....* And so it’s difficult, data driven, purely data driven the company says isn’t on the ground it is because people are, they want to keep their jobs.

Very insightful. We’re both now on the outside rather than on the inside. We’re having this conversation in ten years’ time, what do you think the landscape for the editorial leader will look like then.

I don’t think there will be any local newspapers, ten years, I’m not certain there will be, but in terms of what I used to do there will presumably a very high performing in terms of an audience, network of in name only local/regional websites, the big ones in Manchester, Liverpool and Castle perhaps will survive but everywhere else will be a passing story in Derby get a few stories from Derby a few stories about Forest, there probably won’t be any in County for example, written by half a dozen people maybe on the ground in the region remember the local radio the way that went. When I was taken on as a reporter 32 years ago, the trainee reporter from Derby with three others the local independent radio station also took on four local reporters, very soon after that they stopped taking on trainees, they stopped taking on reporters and then it became a national network which has I think one person in the Midlands doing the work. I think it will do a similar sort of demands for local newspapers. I

don't know how long the titles themselves will kick around. The newspaper for which I used to work is in commercial terms answers to a man in Birmingham in design terms it answers to a man in Swansea, in business terms its business stories are written by a man in Liverpool, in football terms again they all answer to a fella in Birmingham, what's left. There's a news editor with half a dozen a dozen reporters.

Wow okay. My last question which is maybe something you've been asked, I know I have been. Young journalist, even mid-career journalists come to you and say Mike how do you get to where you are today what's the secret. What do you tell people who want to aspire to climb the greasy pole of editorial leadership?

Do you mean in local, regional news?

Yes in the world that we circulated in.

I think that has gone, there is nothing to aspire to I'm afraid. If you were looking to do something within your community, if you were looking to be successful you might try and do it yourself. I was always incredibly impressed by a fellow xxx who lives and works in Nottingham and who when I met him seven years ago had just been made redundant as a lorry driver logistics expert. He had a wife who had a very good job and therefore she said to him right okay for a year you can do what you fancy but at the end of the year if you haven't started making money you're going back to work. So he set up something called Westbridge for the Wire and it's been a raging success in terms of audience and I happen to know in terms of his finances. He is a fabulously intelligent fella who is the classic frustrated journalist and so he keeps that in the background, he does the occasional really thoughtful, intricate piece but probably for 16 hours of every day he is on it. He is brilliant at social media, he's a great blocker and he produces a very nice site which because he's so agile he's able to put together every bit of press release from the police, every bit of news from the council etc etc etc so I think that might be the future for someone who wants to who is of a mind to be an editorial leader. He doesn't have any staff, he could if he wished to but he is certainly a leader in his field and loves what he does.