Extending our gaze beyond the mainstream: studies of alternative journalism, 2003-2016

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SUMMARY

The thesis comprises a series of nine studies that were all published in peer-reviewed journals or books between 2003 and 2016, accompanied and contextualised by a commentary setting out the coherence and significance of the research when viewed as a whole. This work is concerned with exploration of alternative media in general, and alternative journalism in particular. The submitted publications comprise separate studies that are linked thematically and point to the following conclusions: alternative journalism is not necessarily a failed project just because audiences tend to be small and the lifetime of any particular project tends to be short; there can be said to be a continuum of journalistic practice involving both mainstream and alternative media; and the reporting practices and ethical commitment found within alternative journalism can be seen as an expression of active citizenship. Taken together, the studies gathered in the submission make an original contribution to scholarship in the fields of alternative media and alternative journalism; in the process, they have much to say about journalism as a whole. As an original contribution to scholarship over a sustained period of enquiry, the thesis represents a substantial addition to our knowledge.

CONTENTS

1. Acknowledgements

The publications included in this submission concern a form of journalism that is predicated on the validity of allowing many voices to speak, so there is something a little uncomfortable about the way the accompanying commentary has of necessity been concerned with emphasising *my* contribution to this field of study. Individual agency is important, of course, and individuals can certainly make a contribution and, indeed, a difference – for good or ill. But individual contributions cannot exist in isolation, and the publications brought together in this submission would not exist in their specific forms (if at all) were it not for the context created by other journalists, other scholars, and others with feet in both camps.

The egalitarian and non-hierarchical ethos inherent in (much) alternative media might be at odds with the notion that researchers stand on the shoulders of giants, but those of us researching the field today ought to acknowledge that we are at the very least peering over the shoulders of our predecessors (and contemporaries). My own work owes a debt to the contributions made over the years by scholars and authors such as Chris Atton, Susan Forde, Stuart Hall, Clemencia Rodriguez, Sheila Rowbotham, EP Thompson, Brian Whitaker, and many others, as well as to the work of countless journalists, including some who might not even call what they do journalism. Any nuggets of information or insight that may be found within this submission should be seen and considered in that light.

Particular thanks and acknowledgements are due to the editors and publishers of the journals in which most of the selected publications first appeared. Thanks too to those journals' peer reviewers, who remain anonymous but whose contribution is not forgotten. Beyond the world of journals, thanks and acknowledgements are due to the publishers and editors of the books from which material is also included here. Finally, thanks to Professor Jackie Harrison for her unfailing encouragement and guidance during the preparation of this thesis. Any errors are, of course, entirely my own responsibility.

2. Introduction

The submission comprises a series of nine studies published in peer-reviewed journals and/or books, accompanied by this commentary that sets out the coherence and significance of the collected publications. This research is concerned with study of alternative media in general, and alternative journalism in particular; the nine submitted publications comprise separate studies that are linked thematically and which, taken together, make an original contribution to scholarship and a substantial addition to knowledge.

The field of study

As has been pointed out by a number of scholars, not least among them Raymond Williams ([1961] 1965: 209-210), conventional accounts of media history tend to focus on what Lord Ellenborough once characterised as "the respectable press" at the expense of the alternatives on offer, which the nineteenth century Tory peer infamously attacked as a mischief-making "pauper press". Even today, according to journalism professor Richard Keeble (2015: 337), mainstream accounts "tend to marginalise or ignore altogether the non-corporate media", which might be seen as contemporary equivalents of the irksome (to the powers-that-be) pauper press. Yet this marginalisation of alternative media belies the role played by such non-commercial projects and practices "in the formation of a counter or oppositional public sphere" (Keeble, 2015: 337).

However, since the turn of the twenty-first century the trickle of scholarly literature concerned with a range of what might be termed non-corporate, non-commercial or alternative media has become, if not exactly a torrent, certainly a steady stream (see Atton, 2002, 2015; Atton and Couldry, 2003; Bailey et al, 2008; Downing, 2001, 2003, 2011; Coyer et al, 2007; Fenton, 2016; Fuchs, 2010; Hamilton and Atton, 2001; Howley, 2010; Kearney, 2006; Lievrouw, 2011; Milioni, 2009; Oumlil, 2016; Rauch, 2007, 2015, 2016; Rodriguez, 2001; Rodriguez et al, 2010; and Waltz, 2005; among others). The author of a recent (non-exhaustive) *Oxford Bibliography* on

alternative journalism documented more than 150 different works of relevant scholarship, commenting:

> Alternative journalism began to receive sustained scholarly attention only recently. Most of the literature remains devoted to case studies or to histories of particular media organisations, with little emphasis on broader processes and trends. However, a growing body of work seeks to develop a theoretical framework in which to understand alternative journalism. (Bekken, 2015.)

Bekken (2015) added that, "while no academic journals are focused specifically on alternative journalism, many are open to articles". That explains why much of the expanding literature concerned with alternative media and alternative journalism – be it empirical, theoretical or a combination of the two - has to date largely been located in a range of peer-reviewed journals covering fields such as media studies, journalism studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, communication, new technology, politics and history.

However, 2016 saw the appearance of two new academic journals devoted specifically to alternative media, incorporating alternative forms of journalism, and this development suggests a maturation of alternative media as a field of study. One new arrival is *Kaleidoscope: the Journal of Alternative Media and Social Movements*, the founding editors of which are Bora Ataman and Baris Coban, who envisage the publication focusing on "alternative media practices that are structured around democratic participation, rights-based journalism, amateur-professional solidarity in content production, anti-capitalist structuring, and egalitarian and autonomous experiences" (*Kaleidoscope*, 2016). The other is the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*, the founding editors of which are Chris Atton and Susan Forde, who describe the project as being, in part, one of helping to define the field itself:

> The journal aims to highlight and promote the study of alternative and community media and communication, which includes citizens' media, participatory media, activist and radical media and the broader forms of communication that these groups might undertake. The journal locates this scholarship within the media and cultural research disciplines... The *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* will define the field, present exciting, new research and

> advance the study of alternative and community media around the world. (Atton and Forde, 2015.)

This commitment to scholarship that will help define the field has been an important element of relevant research to date, perhaps not surprisingly for such an emergent and historically marginal area of work.

Alternative media has been described as "a difficult term to define" (Skinner, 2015: 199), and it is true that definitions of alternative media are neither fixed nor universally accepted. However, some common themes can be identified by considering the literature cited above as well as the record of such media production itself. My own attempt at providing a definition of alternative media includes the following:

> … Alternative media may be defined as media output produced by its (potential) audience and can be seen as serving and as helping to form what might be described as an alternative public sphere in which groups and individuals on the margins of mainstream culture and media can form communities of interest within which they can communicate and debate issues of mutual interest. (Harcup, 2014a: 12.)

Such media projects are often created by people without formal journalistic training and, indeed, often without being paid. Some of these people might be activists who also produce media output in support of the particular political, environmental, economic, and social causes that they espouse; some might be people who see the production of alternative media as *itself* constituting a form of political activism; and doubtless some do not see themselves as activists at all – merely individuals with something to say or a desire to facilitate others in having a say. Yet, however such alternative media production is labelled or self-identified, it typically implies a rejection of – or at least a questioning of – many of the conventions and structures that are dominant within mainstream media.

Although alternative and radical *journalism* can be found within many examples of alternative media, the latter label may also be applied more widely to non-journalistic forms of cultural expression that may include "graffiti, flyposting, badge-making, pamphleteering, experimental film-making, creative writing, music distribution, and fanzine production"

(Harcup, 2014a: 11-12); also, it might be added, podcasting, blogging, vlogging, and arguably even YouTubing, Facebooking and tweeting, where alternative messages may be circulated despite the commercial nature and "vast data collection" practices of the businesses that operate the communications infrastructure of social media (Hintz, 2015: 240-241).

Such diversity of alternative media notwithstanding, within the body of research in the field there is now a growing literature dealing in more focused fashion with alternative *journalism* specifically (see Ashuri, 2012; Aslam, 2016; Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Atton and Wickenden, 2005; Bolton, 2006; Forde, 2011; Forde and Anderson, 2015; Jenkins and Wolfgang, 2016; Meyers, 2008; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Poell and Borra, 2012; Reul et al, 2016; among others). As Bekken observes of such scholarly work on alternative journalism:

> In the literature the term encompasses a wide range of practices, from a simple description of the marginal…to a focus on the type of information presented or the practice of a politically engaged or oppositional journalism. Alternative journalism can refer to an oppositional stance, to a more participatory mode of journalistic practice, to the subject matter being covered, or to the position of the producers outside of dominant media channels. (Bekken, 2015.)

The work under consideration in this thesis is concerned with such alternative journalism, which I have defined as:

> … [A]lternative media practices that involve reporting and/or commenting on factual and/or topical events. Alternative journalism typically takes place in relatively open and participatory, non-professionalised and non-commercial media organisations, often utilising collective and non-hierarchical working methods. Implicit in alternative journalism is a rejection and critique of many of the established practices of mainstream journalism, with the consequence that alternative journalists may see themselves as working to different news values, covering different stories, giving access to a different cast of news actors and sources, operating to an alternative set of ethics, and in effect operating as a form of watchdog on mainstream journalistic organisations that like to portray themselves as watchdogs… (Harcup, 2014a: 11.)

Fluid though the label "alternative journalism" may be - sometimes being applied primarily to content, sometimes primarily to participatory processes, often to a mixture of the two - it is increasingly being recognised as an

important area of study. My own research, including the publications included in this thesis, has been intended to contribute to this growing literature as part of the process of "extend[ing] our gaze beyond the mainstream" (Harcup, 2014a: 11).

Why these studies?

The purpose of extending our gaze beyond the mainstream is not simply to inform the academic literature but to join a wider conversation (Forde, 2011: viii; Rodriguez, 2010: 133). The studies collected in this submission were conducted with the intention that, not only might such research be "a way of deepening our understanding of journalism itself", but also in the hope that those people actually producing journalism "might find some of the reporting techniques practised within alternative media to be of value in their own practice" (Harcup, 2013: 165). These studies are therefore intended to be *useful*; useful for scholars of journalism, certainly, but useful also for journalists, putative journalists, and indeed anyone with an interest in how society works and how people and issues are represented within the media. In this sense my research ethos echoes the ethos of much alternative journalism itself, which is to provide information that citizens may find useful in informing their practices whether at an interpersonal level or at more formal levels within civil society. That is why, wherever possible, the findings of these studies have been disseminated beyond (as well as within) the traditional sites of academe.

Such an approach reflects the fact that my academic research into alternative journalism over the past two decades built on my earlier journalistic research into the same, which was itself informed by my own practice as a journalist within alternative and mainstream media from 1978 onwards. Given such personal experience and access within the field, this might be seen as a form of ethnography, even as "native researching" (Harcup, 2013: 5-16), after Atton's (2002: 112) "native reporting". Ethnographic enquiry can be particularly helpful in understanding alternative media and "social movement networks as complex processes of negotiation and interaction rather than structures," argues Veronica Barassi (2013: 49).

Within months of the 1994 closure of the alternative *Leeds Other Paper/Northern Star* (the first newspaper for which I worked) I had interviewed many of those most directly involved and had written an account of the paper's history, speedily published in pamphlet form in an echo of a very early alternative media platform (Harcup, 1994). That pamphlet (along with two subsequent book chapters and an encyclopaedia entry: Harcup, 1998; 2006; and 2011a) was written to place on record an account of a 20-year-long journalistic project. Doing that seemed worthwhile, partly because it told an important and interesting story of what Barassi (2013: 50) terms "lived experience" – of social, political, cultural, and ideological resistance and independence at the local level during a historical period identified with major socio-political shifts - and partly because providing such an account might prove useful "if some community activists decide to take up where *LOP* and its counterparts left off" (Harcup, 1994: 30). A similar motivation – that is, a desire to record the possibilities of alternative approaches that might inspire action as well as inform understanding - can be traced through all my subsequent academic research into alternative journalism.

This approach was informed by the "history from below" orientation of Sheila Rowbotham (2001: 141) and others who, not content with uncovering and telling the stories of so-called ordinary people, dignified such people as *active* citizens by highlighting "the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts, to the making of history" (Thompson, [1963] 1968: 13). Such an approach "looked at relationships and processes, rather than simply focusing on institutions", and "restored individuals making choices in their workplaces and communities, becoming aware of themselves in new ways through ideas and action," as Rowbotham (2001: 74-75) explains. Among such choices have been the conscious decisions by groups of working people to produce "for themselves" alternative forms of communication such as "radical newspapers, political pamphlets and publicity, trade union banners and designs," argues Raymond Williams ([1958] 1963: 296). Groups in such circumstances will often adopt or adapt new communication technologies but of more central importance

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than any specific technology is the "human agency" involved in deciding to make use of it for particular purposes, according to Clemencia Rodriguez (2016: 36).

In these ways my own exploration of the journalism sometimes to be found in such media has been informed by thinking of it as *journalism from below*; journalism produced by, for, and about its own (potential) audience. However, given that communication entails "reception and response" as well as "transmission" (Williams, [1958] 1963: 301), audience may well be too passive a word in this context.

My research has developed to cover diverse aspects of such media, including studies of their historical development and the content they have produced, in particular their depictions of minority groups, economically disenfranchised communities, and people often deemed to be on the margins of "respectable" society. Studies included in this submission have also explored the social significance of such media and their reverberations and ripples, which can continue long after any particular media outlet has disappeared. Throughout, there has been a focus on the small and the local; a setting in which the relationship between media production and media reception can often be at its most intense precisely because, as Meryl Aldridge (2007: 7 and 161) points out, for most people most of the time, "life is local", somewhere that "institutional structures and processes become daily reality".

Methodologies

The development of this research has entailed the use of a mixed range of methods to scrutinise different aspects of the journalism under study. Underpinned by first-hand experience as a native researcher, my methods have included case studies, content analyses, textual analyses, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, which between them have allowed exploration of practitioners' motivations and choices, the practices, the processes, the outputs and, latterly, the audience reception of (and responses to) alternative media. At the more conceptual level, the submitted

publications draw on insights from scholarly work into citizenship, democracy and feminism (notably Couldry, 2006; Lister, 2003; Mouffe, 1992; Rodriguez, 2001); such a theoretical approach is then combined with use of concepts drawn from the fields of media studies, cultural studies, and particularly journalism studies (Franklin et al, 2005; McQuail, 2000; Schlesinger, 1990; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009; Zelizer, 2004). Such concepts, which provide the more standard reference points for research into journalism, include fourth estate (Franklin and Murphy, 1991; McChesney, 2000), hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Hall et al, 1978), news access (Cottle, 2000; Manning, 2001), news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), and the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1989). Their utilisation alongside feminist and other critical thinking around concepts such as citizenship has allowed for an exploration of alternative journalism both as a form of media output and as a form of social action, rather than just one or the other.

The publications included in the Appendix were based on research utilising the above mixed range of approaches, each of which was chosen to explore a particular feature of the alternative journalism landscape. The specific research methods used in each of the studies will be discussed as appropriate in Section 3.

Contribution to the field

An important element running throughout the submitted publications is the consideration of the journalism of alternative media as "a rich vein of journalism which is simply invisible in journalism studies", as John Hartley (2009: 314) puts it. On the margins, perhaps, rather than totally invisible. Alternative media has tended to be on the margins of journalism studies as an academic discipline, almost as much as it is on the margins of the mainstream mass media as an industry. Some might argue that is precisely where it belongs as it represents what is essentially a marginal form of journalism. But it can be a short step from regarding something as marginal to not regarding it at all, especially something as fleeting, ephemeral, and barely visible as many alternative media projects have been over the years.

The research discussed in this thesis seeks to shift such journalism from the margins to the centre, where it can be the focus of the serious attention it merits *as journalism*. Indeed, that may well prove to be the most significant contribution to the field made by this collection of research when viewed as a whole.

The forms of journalism studied here are significant because they illustrate some of the ways journalism might be produced when it is disentangled from some of the structures and constraints (and resources) that are found within the mainstream media industries. It can be illuminating to see how people who have mostly been neither formally trained on journalism courses nor schooled in mainstream newsrooms approach the task of reporting events, issues, and their fellow citizens; to explore the differences and similarities with traditional journalistic practice. And the forms of journalism studied here are significant also because they contribute to the recording of voices from below that may otherwise go unheard and unlistened to (Harcup, 2015).

Alternative journalism may be significant precisely because of its alternativeness, but it is not treated here as something entirely separate from a different, exclusive, uniform entity called journalism. Rather, those forms of journalism that might be labelled as alternative can be regarded as part of a *continuum* of journalistic practice. In this sense, the most mainstream of the mainstream are located at one end with the most alternative of the alternative at the opposite end; and between these two poles is the large, shifting (and occasionally seething) mass that makes up the bulk of journalism. People, practices, projects, perspectives, and even norms may sometimes move along this continuum in one direction or another just as they may at other times seem to be in explicit conflict with one another. For example, some journalistic styles (such as long-form immersive writing, first-person accounts, and fanzine style ground-level reportage) or choices of subject matter (such as the environment, feminism, and sexuality) that were once largely the preserve of alternative media are now found within some mainstream media. Even when it rejects or seeks to subvert much of

how the mainstream media industry goes about its business, *alternative journalism is journalism* and will be discussed as such herein.

Such scholarly consideration of the journalism produced within alternative media can usefully inform our critical understanding of journalism itself, and of the roles played (actually and potentially) by journalism within society. In this sense, as I have written elsewhere:

> Journalists do not necessarily have to share visions of an "alternative society", nor to declare ideological warfare on the ruling class, to realise that journalism can only be strengthened by reporting from both sides of the street, from the workers' side of the picket line, by asking the challenging or quirky questions, by gathering evidence from a multiplicity of sources, by contextualising events, by raising the issue of who benefits from any particular policy or decision, and by seeking out alternative voices. (Harcup, 2013: 165-166.)

It is by recording and exploring examples of such journalistic practice, and by shifting it from the periphery to the centre of our consideration, that the studies collected in this submission add to our knowledge and, simultaneously, might also broaden and deepen our understanding of what journalism could be.

3. The studies

A number of thematic threads connect the studies in this submission. One thread is that alternative forms of journalism are worth studying because they themselves can be seen as expressions of civic engagement, democratic participation, active citizenship, and, indeed, civil protest and class struggle. In this context, studying "the blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers", as Thompson ([1963] 1968: 13) puts it, might tell us as much as studying the relative success stories.

A second theme is that any account of journalism that ignores or marginalises the existence of journalistic practices beyond the mainstream is missing out on the additional illumination that can be provided by opening a window onto a wider (media) world. That is because alternative journalism does not just critique the society on which it reports; it in effect (and sometimes in intention) acts as a critique of dominant journalistic practices.

A third recurrent theme is that, notwithstanding such differences between mainstream and alternative journalism, they do not have to be treated as inhabiting entirely separate worlds. There is interplay and cross-fertilisation in addition to critique and, at times, rejection or outright hostility. Furthermore, just as there can be some similarities *between* alternative and mainstream media, there can also be differences *within* each "sector". Not all of what might be called alternative media or alternative journalism includes original reporting, for example; instead, some might feature personal reflection and/or political commentary, which may nonetheless still be seen as a form of journalism as broadly defined. But it is *reporting* that is the focus of many of these studies. The reporting found in alternative journalism is not simply a matter of using a certain skill or technique to state or record an alternative point of view. Key to such reporting is the approach taken and the willingness of journalists – individually and/or collectively – to go beyond the most familiar angles, sources, and questions.

The fourth theme that is central to these studies - sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit - is that ethics are at the heart of them all. By ethics I am referring to something that goes far beyond reductive notions of producing

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work in compliance with regulatory rules and industry codes of practice. Rather than feeling constrained by ethical requirements imposed on an industry from without (by regulatory bodies, for example), the ethical approach taken by many of the alternative journalists featured in these studies often seems to be inseparable from their understanding of *why* they do journalism in the first place; their understanding of journalism and ethics tends to be informed by the approach they take to the wider society of which they are (active) citizens. Many alternative media projects blur the distinction between citizen and journalist just as they blur the roles of producer, source, and audience. This may of course also apply to journalists who work within mainstream media but, even when it might do so for individuals, such an approach may be seen as less integral (even on occasions as inimical) to the commercial *organisations* for which most mainstream journalists work.

We might view the very existence of alternative ways of doing journalism as a critique of more mainstream journalistic practices. But it is a critique conducted *as practice*, albeit sometimes informed by theory – see the comments by members of the *Mule* collective about Herman and Chomsky, for example, in the submission "News with a kick" - rather than a critique conducted *in theory alone*. If that is the case, then subjecting alternative journalism to the type of scrutiny found in this submission must also shed some light on what we mean by journalism itself. This can in turn inform ongoing discussions about the "porous boundaries" around who is or is not to be considered a journalist (Russell, 2016: 111).

The four underlying themes outlined above can be identified in the nine selected publications, all of which are introduced briefly below; their specific findings and significance will be discussed in more detail in later sections. Many of these studies have also been re-published in edited form, along with other related and contextualising work, in the collection *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Harcup, 2013); however, that book itself has not been included here, to avoid unnecessary duplication and to allow the research to be presented in its original form.

Synopses

'"The unspoken – said": The journalism of alternative media', peer-reviewed journal article, *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 4(3), published 2003, pp 356-376.

The above journal article was based on a comparative study that explored the way the same major event (inner-city rioting in 1981) was reported in one alternative and one mainstream publication by means of a content analysis that examined the discourse, framing, and sourcing practices of two news organisations. The methodology openly acknowledged a debt to the way Stuart Hall et al (in *Policing the Crisis*) had previously explored the ways in which mainstream news media were said to have influenced public discourse around race and crime in the 1970s (Hall, et al, 1978). In a similar vein, I conducted a study of the content, sourcing, language, and ideological discourses found in the way an outbreak of rioting on the streets of Leeds was covered in two different local newspapers (the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and *Leeds Other Paper*). However, Hall's methodology was a starting point for me rather than a template to follow; whereas *Policing the Crisis* was concerned only with mainstream discourse, I adapted the method to compare the journalistic practices of mainstream *and* what could be considered as counter-hegemonic media. I also extended the breadth of the study beyond the textual-focused approach of Hall et al to seek out and *ask* practitioners about their motivations and practices, a method of enquiry informed by my own journalistic background. Such interviews offered an additional level of contextualisation to the research, allowing exploration of motivations and perceptions. The different sourcing strategies adopted by journalists working for different types of media formed a major part of what was my first scholarly study of alternative journalism (and was also to be a key element of the research that resulted in three subsequent publications: "Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike", "News with a kick" and "Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship?"). The study published as "The unspoken - said" identified the valuable role played by alternative journalism in countering hegemonic discourse and contesting

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ideological space; it also provided evidence to challenge the arguments of an earlier group of scholars (Landry et al, 1985) who dismissed alternative media as little more than repeated exercises in amateurish failure.

'"I'm doing this to change the world": Journalism in alternative and mainstream media', peer-reviewed journal article, *Journalism Studies* 6(3), published 2005, pp 361-374.

The above journal article presented the results of the first survey of its kind to be conducted into the motivations and experiences of what might be termed "crossover" practitioners; that is, journalists with personal experience of working in both alternative and mainstream media. The main research method was the questionnaire, which of course is an extremely familiar tool within the social sciences and beyond. However, less familiar was the decision to use questionnaires to question an under-researched (and previously un-acknowledged) grouping of journalists who had experience of working in both alternative and mainstream media. A questionnaire completed by 22 such journalists provided the data that was presented and discussed in this exploratory study. The findings pointed towards the possibility of the existence of a (non-binary) continuum of journalistic practice involving both mainstream and alternative media.

The Ethical Journalist (book published by Sage, 2007).

The above full-length book was an investigation of journalistic ethics that considered alternative journalism as integral to discussion of ethical journalism rather than something to be considered, if at all, as a marginal, foreign, and possibly faintly exotic phenomenon. Both alternative journalism and ethical journalism were incorporated into the book's exploration of journalism itself. Research methods included interviews with journalists and sources as well as reflections on my own experiences and practices at various point along the journalistic continuum. This research was further informed by engagement with case studies, scholarly literature, and the codes of ethical practice used by organisations ranging from the BBC to Indymedia. The aim of such an approach was to help open up space

within which multiple conversations about journalistic ethics could take place. The book's findings included identifying the value of doing journalism "from the bottom up", whether or not it appeared in an alternative "sector" of the media, and discovering examples of journalists individually or collectively asserting agency in the way they carried out their work (occasionally in defiance of the expectations or instructions of employers).

'Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike: An early form of citizen journalism', peer-reviewed journal article, *Journal of Media Practice* 12(1), published 2011, pp 27-39.

The above journal article reported a case study of the way a major industrial dispute (the 1984-1985 UK miners' strike) was contemporaneously reported within alternative media, based on detailed analysis of published content and, in particular, examination of the sources used - and not used - by alternative journalists. This methodology built on that employed for the earlier "The unspoken - said" (above) but applied it to a full year of relevant published output. The findings revealed the priority given by alternative journalists to locating, recording, and amplifying the voices of non-elite sources. The study also provided empirical evidence that some (although not all) examples of alternative media privileged reporting over commentary, despite the more labour-intensive nature of the former.

'Alternative journalism as active citizenship', peer-reviewed journal article, *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 12(1), published 2011, pp 15-31.

The above journal article dug deeper into data gathered from the survey of practitioners that was originally reported in the article published in *Journalism Studies* in 2005 (above), in this case exploring participation in the production of alternative media as a form of active citizenship. The study drew on theoretical work on democracy, agency, and citizenship by feminist scholars, among others, to thematise alternative journalists' own accounts of their practice. The article concluded that alternative forms of journalism should "not continue to be seen as of marginal importance

whenever the relationship between journalism and democracy is discussed and analysed".

'"News with a kick": A model of oppositional reporting', peer-reviewed journal article, *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7(4), published 2014, pp 559-577.

The above journal article was based on a case study of the journalistic techniques used by a contemporary example of online alternative media. Research methods used were content-based examination of sourcing and reporting practices augmented by interviews with practitioners. The study's findings reinforced earlier work on the use of non-elite sources and the privileging of reporting skills over commentary within some forms of alternative media, but also pointed to the existence of a more explicitly ideologically-driven yet evidence-based method of producing alternative journalism. The article concluded by positing a model of such, labelled "oppositional reporting".

'Listening to the voiceless: The practices and ethics of alternative journalism', book chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, edited by Chris Atton (2015), Routledge, pp 313-323.

As with *The Ethical Journalist* (above), dialogue was integral to the above original book chapter, the one submission with no empirical element to the research. Its approach and methodology were concerned less with discovering something *new*, and more with considering *new ways of thinking* about what we believe we may already know. To this end it went beyond the familiar rhetoric of journalism giving *voice* to the voiceless and applied scholarly and feminist thinking to the ethics of *listening*. It discussed the concept of what has been called "political listening" (Bickford, 1996: 2) and examined the role of alternative (and some mainstream) journalism in recording the voices of people as active agents rather than (necessarily) passive victims. The chapter concluded that a commitment to ethics in this sense was neither separate from journalistic

practice nor need it be imposed from without; rather, it was integral to the motivations for producing such (dialogical) journalism in the first instance.

'Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship? A case study of a local news blog', peer-reviewed journal article, *Digital Journalism* 4(5), published 2016, pp 639-657.

The above journal article was a case study of a small-scale alternative journalism project; a project that was informed by knowledge of earlier forms of alternative media yet which used new technology, online data sources, and social media to produce a contemporary version of alternative media. Utilising interviews combined with systematic qualitative analysis of published content, the study highlighted ways in which even forms of alternative journalism that might be less ideologically-driven than "oppositional reporting" could still help citizens to equip themselves with the information required to question the actions of the powerful. This form of journalism was examined as an example of what has been labelled within some scholarly literature as "monitorial citizenship" (Moss and Coleman, 2014).

'Asking the readers: Audience research into alternative journalism', peer-reviewed journal article, *Journalism Practice* 10(6), published 2016, pp 680-696.

In closing this submission, this journal article offers not so much an ending but more of a new departure, by exploring that much written *about* but little heard *from* element of alternative media: the audience. It was an account of a parallel research project conducted alongside the "monitorial citizenship" study (above), but viewed from the vantage point of the readers. Focus groups and questionnaires were used to explore the motivations and perspectives of members of this alternative media audience, examining the extent to which people's relationships with alternative journalism reflected dissatisfaction with mainstream journalism and reinforced audience members' democratic engagement as active citizens. The article concluded

that "audiences are polysemic rather than uniform in nature" and, perhaps unsurprisingly, that "further audience research is undoubtedly needed".

Findings

The studies considered here may have mostly been relatively small in scale and exploratory in nature but they are large in ambition. Each has been designed to shed light on under-researched aspects of the media and to contribute towards our understanding of alternative journalism and alternative journalists' critiques of the practices, products and ethics of much mainstream journalism. Viewed in this way, the key findings of each study as summarised below can be seen as amounting to a series of interrelated and significant insights.

"The unspoken - said" compared the way that a major event of political and social controversy was covered in mainstream and alternative media and found that the reporting, sourcing, and framing techniques used by the latter resulted in "a form of journalism that went well beyond the boundaries of the dominant ideological field and which refused the 'rhetorical closure' of the mainstream media's 'law and order' approach" (Harcup, 2003: 366). The study also found that "the existence of a counter-hegemonic journalism in alternative media demonstrates in practice that there are alternative ways of seeing the world"; and, further, that this contesting of "ideological space, the space in which ideas circulate" (Harcup, 2003: 372), could be of value to society even if limited by low audience reach. This last finding was in contradiction to the arguments of Landry et al (1985) and Comedia (1984) that alternative media should be seen as exemplifying failure if they could or would not reach beyond an alternative "ghetto" (Harcup, 2003: 372).

If that first study (above) explored the differences between alternative and mainstream journalism, the next also identified some similarities. Among the issues explored in "I'm doing this to change the world" were respondents' motivations for becoming involved with alternative media and what they themselves saw as the relationship between journalistic practice within alternative and mainstream media when it came to skills, sources, news values, and ethics. In addition to recording some of "the critical

practitioner perspectives" of the participants, the key finding of this research pointed towards the possibility of the existence of a continuum of journalistic practice involving *both* mainstream and alternative media, "with people, ideas and practices moving along this continuum, in both directions" (Harcup, 2005a: 370-371).

As a book-length discussion of ethical considerations inherent in journalism, *The Ethical Journalist* drew on alternative media's critiques of dominant practices within mainstream journalism to examine the ethical choices (whether or not they are recognised as such) that necessarily comprise the everyday practices of *all* journalists. By recording the perspectives of journalists (and other interested parties) the book facilitated a multiple-voiced dialogue about how and why journalism is done as it is, and whether it might be (better) done in other ways. Of particular resonance within the field of alternative journalism were Chapters 3 (*Knowledge is Power*), 5 (*Danger: News Values at Work*) and 7 (*Round up the Usual Suspects*). The last of those was almost a form of alternative journalism in itself as it explored the media coverage of crime by giving voice to little-heard critical perspectives such as those of a bereaved relative ("There was a feeling of horror that our personal misery was other people's entertainment", quoted in Harcup, 2007: 97) and of a criminal-turned-journalist ("There's a very unhealthy relationship between the police and most journalists", quoted in Harcup, 2007: 101). The central findings of *The Ethical Journalist* were the identification of the possibility – even the necessity - of journalists recognising the agency they have and the ethical choices that may be open to them, and the value of acting individually or collectively to report "from below as well as well as from on high… Far from being a luxury, ethics are integral to being a good journalist. An ethical journalist is one who cares: cares about accuracy, cares about people, cares about journalism, cares enough to speak out, and cares enough to challenge preconceptions and prejudices" (Harcup, 2007: 144).

This finding of the possibility and value of reporting from the ground up by recording the voices and experiences of "ordinary people" was echoed in the article, "Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike".

This study found evidence within alternative media of "a rich record of reporting and of direct and sustained journalistic contact and engagement with a wide range of sources, most notably the so-called ordinary men and women involved in the strike at ground level" (Harcup, 2011b: 35). In recording the existence of what might be described as a pre-digital form of "citizen journalism" conducted in sustained fashion during an entire year of intensified industrial, community and class conflict, the study posited that evidence of such reporting practices might be used "as benchmarks against which to measure the performance of alternative and so-called citizen journalism today" (Harcup, 2011b: 36). The study's key finding was that, despite extraordinary advances in online and social media technologies since 1984-1985, "some voices may remain unheard unless reporters venture where mainstream journalists tend not to tread" (Harcup, 2011b: 36); that is, to venture physically and ideologically as well as digitally.

In contrast, "Alternative journalism as active citizenship" was concerned not so much with the report*ed* as with the report*ers*. To this end, the perspectives of journalists with experience of both alternative and mainstream media were explored through the prism of theoretical work on citizenship and democracy, most notably the contributions of feminist scholars such as Ruth Lister and Chantal Mouffe. For Lister (2003: 37), citizenship is "an expression of human agency in the political arena", and for Mouffe (1992: 4) an active citizen is someone "who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking". With this in mind, "Alternative journalism as active citizenship" recorded practitioners' own definitions of alternative media and found that, "although a precise and universal definition of alternative media remains elusive, there appears to be a considerable degree of agreement among practitioners and scholars of alternative journalism alike that such media can play a role in reflecting, nurturing and demonstrating what can be identified as active citizenship" (Harcup, 2011c: 15). Findings centred on the way the journalists themselves tended to regard the production of alternative journalism *itself* as a form of active citizenship that "must be understood in terms of fostering democratic inclusion and participation and countering social exclusion and political

disengagement" (Harcup, 2011c: 23). That is, the alternative journalists in the study were not necessarily content merely to report the active engagement of fellow citizens; the act of reporting in this way was itself an expression of their *own* political engagement.

"News with a kick" examined an online alternative media project where journalistic reporting techniques were utilised not just to foster such broad ideas of democratic participation and civic engagement but also in the service of a more explicitly ideological struggle as "a tool for social change" (Harcup, 2014b: 561). The study supported the findings of earlier research into the role of alternative journalism in privileging non-elite sources (Harcup, 2003; Harcup, 2011b) but went further in identifying the existence (in *some* alternative media) of a more ideologically-driven yet evidence-based method of producing alternative journalism. The study concluded by setting out an original seven-point model of "oppositional reporting", being the application of journalistic skills to produce a form of counter-hegemonic reporting that "speaks up for the powerless against the powerful and, at times, it allows the powerless to speak directly for themselves as active agents, not merely as people on the receiving end of others' actions. It does this in the hope of recording, supporting, and encouraging action for social change" (Harcup, 2014b: 575).

In contrast, "Listening to the voiceless" was concerned less with speaking out and more with the ethics of careful, active, and empathetic *listening*, often to the barely audible voices of oppressed individuals, groups, or communities. The study, which built on ideas initially addressed in *The Ethical Journalist* (Harcup, 2007), concluded that "the ethical approach of (much) alternative journalism within alternative media is more about an attitude and approach towards the people who may be a story's subject, source, narrator or audience, sometimes all at the same time. As a result, the 'ordinary people' are afforded dignity not because of legalistic or commercial considerations but because that is the very reason for such media to exist" (Harcup, 2015: 321), to give participants in events a chance to tell their own stories. As the chapter acknowledged, examples of a similar "attitude and approach" could also be found on some occasions in some

mainstream journalism, reinforcing the earlier finding (above) of the existence of a continuum of journalistic practice.

The final pair of articles in the submission, "Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship?" and "Asking the readers", are linked inasmuch as the same example of contemporary online alternative journalism (the *Leeds Citizen* blog) was at the heart of both studies. But the approach of each study was distinct, with the former examining the motivations and practices of the site's creator and the latter more concerned with how (and why) the site was used by its readers. "Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship?" demonstrated that laments about the absence of alternative journalism at a local level in the 21st century might be premature. The study found that it was possible for even one (unpaid if not unskilled) individual to practise a form of "monitorial citizenship" (after Moss and Coleman, 2014), which entailed "an active, quasi-journalistic form of monitoring power and making information available to fellow citizens" (Harcup, 2016a: 642). This form of careful, measured journalism contributed towards "monitoring the local power structures, asking some of the questions that tend to be ignored by mainstream media and circulating alternative ideas" (Harcup, 2016a: 653). Fellow citizens' reception of such information and ideas was studied in the parallel audience research that was published in the article, "Asking the readers". This found that members of the alternative media audience were prompted to seek out alternative forms of journalism because it helped them "make sense of the world" and provided them with useful information, "simultaneously prompting, reinforcing and reflecting readers' active democratic engagement as citizens" (Harcup, 2016b: 693). The study also found that "this audience's critique of mainstream journalism may also be seen as furthering our understanding of journalism itself" (Harcup, 2016b: 694) – one of the motivations for *all* the research presented and discussed in this submission.

Originality

Each of the publications included in this submission has its own specific context, its own findings, and its own value as an individual piece of

research. The fact that they have all been published either in peer-reviewed scholarly journals or in books that have also been subjected to a review process is in itself some indication that each makes a contribution to scholarship. The standing of my work within the field may also be indicated by the fact that I have been invited to make original contributions to two major collections of relevant work: *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media* (Downing, 2011) and *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media* (Atton, 2015); and by the fact that I have been invited to join the founding editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*. Several of my publications have also been deemed worthy of inclusion in the selective *Oxford Bibliography* on alternative journalism (Bekken, 2015).

Two of the articles in this submission for PhD by Publication began life as papers presented to academic conferences, meaning they were subjected to two separate peer-review processes. The research that resulted in "Alternative journalism as active citizenship" was originally presented at the *International Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference* held at the University of the West Indies in 2008, while the research published as "Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike" was originally presented to the *Journalism Studies Future of Journalism Conference* held at the University of Cardiff in 2009. The research that resulted in several of the publications was also presented and discussed over the years as work in progress at research seminars and symposia at a number of universities including Central Lancashire, Leeds Beckett, Edinburgh Napier, Sheffield, Strathclyde, and Westminster.

A further indication of a contribution to scholarship is that many of the publications have already amassed numbers of citations that are significant given the somewhat niche area of study they address: "The unspoken - said" has been cited 104 times according to Google Scholar (as of 22 September 2016), with 40 citations showing on Scopus; "I'm doing this to change the world" has been cited 71 times according to Google Scholar, with 15 citations also showing on CrossRef; *The Ethical Journalist* has been cited 61 times according to Google Scholar; and "Alternative journalism as active

citizenship" has been cited 47 times according to Google Scholar, plus six citations found on Web of Science and 12 on Scopus. The other publications, including those published in 2016, have been cited between one and five times each. Additionally, some of the above research will be included in the 21 citations to date for the recent edited collection *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices*.

However, seeing the publications as individual pieces of work only tells part of the story. The journalist, scholar, and editor Professor Richard Keeble has described my research into the fields of alternative journalism and ethical journalism as "a series of crucial texts" that highlight the collective as well as individual responsibilities of journalists (Keeble, 2009: 25).

Viewed together, the submitted publications represent a substantial examination of forms of journalism that are often overlooked. For example, as Forde and Anderson (2015: 6) note, relatively little research has been carried out into the sourcing practices found within alternative media, with my work being "one exception". Similarly, Jennifer Rauch (2007), Trish Bolton (2006), and Syed Irfan Ashraf (2013) have all commented on what Rauch (2007: 1009n) calls the "contrarian" evidence found in my research that "there is more crossover of both practice and personnel between alternative and mainstream media than has been acknowledged". Atton and Hamilton (2008: 148) describe "The unspoken - said" as offering "a valuable discussion of differing approaches to news sources, values and access", and add that: "taken together [with Harcup 1994, 1998, 2006], his work provides an interlocking series of case studies". The same authors describe *The Ethical Journalist* as a "compelling discussion of ethics in journalism" that "brings together mainstream and alternative journalism practices" (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 153).

Three examples of my research were selected for inclusion in the *Oxford Bibliography* on alternative journalism, with Bekken (2015) drawing particular attention to the work on sourcing practices, oppositional reporting, and active citizenship. "Surprisingly few studies systematically analyse alternative journalism's coverage of the news," writes Bekken

(2015), who includes just five examples of such studies, two of which are mine: "The unspoken - said" and "Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike". He notes that these studies demonstrate how, "despite modest resources", alternative media can give voice to those often marginalised by mainstream media and thereby help foster an "alternative public sphere" (Bekken, 2015).

Further recognition of the contribution made by my research may be seen in various scholars' positive although by no means always uncritical reviews of the book *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Harcup, 2013), which collects many of the publications found in this submission (Ashraf, 2013; Baker, 2014; Knight, 2014; Pattinson, 2015; Williams, 2013; van der Zee, 2013). The research is described variously as "a valuable contribution" (Williams, 2013: 84) and "a must read for any budding (or professional) journalist, and any journalism or media scholar who wants to make a difference to the current media landscape" (Baker, 2014: 192). In the view of Megan Knight (2014: 121), the contribution made to the field by this research "is undoubted".

However, it is in an earlier review of *The Ethical Journalist* published in the journal *Media, Culture and Society* that the internationally renowned alternative media scholar Professor Chris Atton identifies and expands upon the argument that analysis of the products, practices, and ethics of journalism itself can be deepened by an awareness of the products, practices, and ethics of alternative journalism. This can have practical as well as conceptual implications, he writes:

> Harcup's argument is not a purely theoretical one…: he locates his thesis in a presentation that is informed by history, that takes account of contemporary political-economic views of journalism and that recognises diversity and difficulty in ethical practices. Diversity is explored through a range of examples from history to the present day, encompassing mainstream and alternative journalism practices. Harcup profitably draws on his experience as an alternative journalist as well as an active trades union member to show that there are many dimensions to ethical practice, from the individual to the collective, from sourcing practices to writing practices. He makes liberal use of interviews with local and national journalists, from the unknown and the forgotten to the recent and

> controversial… It is easy for those in the academy to find fault with journalistic practice (however well-founded such critiques might be); by contrast, Harcup's interviews with local journalists reveal the complexity of acting ethically through insightful discussions of professional rivalry, the demands of editors and the consequences for local communities… Harcup wears his theory lightly, but this is not a superficial text. (Atton, 2008: 917-918)

Thus, part of the significance of the research in this submission is that it is neither purely empirical nor purely theoretical. And another part of its significance lies in the fact that, quite apart from any specific findings outlined above, it has been conceived from the outset as an exploration of *journalism* rather than research into some esoteric activity.

The themes identified in Section 3 (above) are the unifying threads connecting these different studies. Namely, that:

* Research into alternative forms of journalism can be seen as a way of exploring expressions of civic engagement, democratic participation, and active citizenship;

* Research into alternative journalism does not just inform us about a discrete set of practices but can also contribute to a critical understanding of journalism itself, including its role (and potential role) in society;

* Research into alternative journalism ought not be concerned with the discovery of an exotic "other" but can explore the movement of ideas, practices, and people along a journalistic continuum;

* Research into alternative journalism is also, in effect, research into ethics, including the roles of - and relationships between - producers, sources, and audiences.

These publications may approach journalism from some unconventional angles and explore some little-trod paths, but they are always connected in one way or another to the above themes. The original contribution to the scholarship of alternative journalism resulting from such research includes many findings, arguments, details, and nuances, but can perhaps be expressed succinctly in just three over-arching findings:

* Alternative journalism is not necessarily a failed project just because audiences tend to be small and the lifetime of any particular project tends to be short;

* There can be said to be a continuum of journalistic practice involving both mainstream and alternative media;

* The reporting practices and ethical commitment found within alternative journalism can be seen as an expression of active citizenship.

There is also a methodological thread running through the various research studies: whatever the specific mix of research methods used, there is an emphasis on allowing the voices of people directly involved to be heard. In this the scholarly research *into* alternative journalism connects with much of the practising *of* alternative journalism that is being studied, as Chris Atton has noted in a contribution worth quoting at some length for the light it might shine on the significance of the work under consideration and the themes highlighted above:

> "Alternative" can suggest choice, either between two positions or across a range of possibilities… Rather than look for homogeneity of intent or uniformity of method, the often-experimental nature of alternative journalism can present multiple possibilities for doing journalism… The epistemological imperative for which Harcup argues carries with it the inevitability of critique… There is a significant ethical dimension at work here that is concerned with questions of representation, authority and expertise… Harcup is suggesting that the underlying values of journalism should be common to all varieties of reporting: a tenet of *primum non nocere* of reporting, if you will. In a media world where "anyone can know"…, conflicts occur between differing ways of making sense of and representing the world at large. Harcup's contributions go some way to identifying common ground from which to build complementary news-gathering and writing practices. Taking journalism seriously as a social responsibility requires ethics to be at its centre, however journalism might be construed… The accounts presented throughout…can be situated as microstudies of practice that draw attention to a breach in need of repair... Harcup writes of a "continuum of practice" and emphasises the importance of history in understanding the present. In doing so he avoids lionising "progress", preferring to identify resonances between long-established and newer forms of media… Harcup's point is surely that the "alternate histories" of alternative journalism are able to inform the present, whereby we are able to see the "new" as part of

history, and the historical as providing methods for repairing the media cultures of the present…

As befits his subject matter, Harcup lets his subjects speak; he shows how they themselves let others speak... For those to whom experimentation is but a step away from the avant-garde, Harcup is reassuring: the critical practices he presents here never lose sight of the communities they are designed to support. Alternative journalism for Harcup is not an excuse to *épater la bourgeoisie* — the kinds of local reporting he shows us are significant to the degree that they are unostentatious; they aggrandise neither the journalists nor their practices. It is for this reason that, however unusual many of these practices might appear by comparison with many types of mainstream journalism, their concern for and their location in the lives of ordinary people renders them accessible, even ordinary themselves… In a sense, then, the book might be read as a manual for practice. It focuses not simply on what is possible, but what has been and continues to be achieved. It examines how questions of representation, of giving voice and of critiquing the media world are explored and answers provided, however temporary. By examining the local, Harcup explores practices of journalism in the contexts of community, commitment and criticism. That he does so in as direct and urgent a manner as his subjects practise their own writing makes this book compelling... Without ever falling prey to idealism, Harcup shows us what alternative journalism can achieve. (Atton, 2013: xii-xv.)

If, as Atton suggests above, some of the collected research may be seen not simply as scholarly work but also as a "manual for practice", then that will be in accordance with the ideas that have inspired the creation of alternative media projects over the years. As Brian Whitaker put it in the context of the *Liverpool Free Press*, on which he worked, that newspaper's internal test for whether something was worth publishing tended to be to ask the question: "In what ways is this story useful?" (Whitaker, 1981: 105). For Clemencia Rodriguez, if academic research is to be useful, it "should be at the service of praxis; in other words, that the knowledge we produce within academia is most valuable if and only if it becomes useful for those in the field trying to make our societies better places to live" (Rodriguez, 2010: 133). Or, as EP Thompson (1994: 363) put it, for scholarly work to be radical requires "some relations between the academy and active experience".

It was this connection with active experience that was the motivation for undertaking the research collected in this submission and other related work from the 1994 pamphlet *A Northern Star* onwards. As Bob Franklin noted while reviewing that publication, it concerned a form of journalism produced by what one worker referred to as a "grotty little thing", a newspaper that although small was not insignificant:

> For those interested in the local press, issues concerning the editorial objectives of a local newspaper, or the debate concerning a more democratic ownership of Britain's media, there is much of value in Harcup's account of "this grotty little thing". (Franklin, 1994).

Such was also the motivation for the placing into the public domain of previously unavailable material, including internal discussion documents about the nature of news and reports from alternative newspapers' conference workshops on sexism, covering the arts and industrial reporting, all published for the first time as appendices of the book, *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices* (Harcup, 2013: 171-180). That motivation also explains why the findings of my research have been disseminated in forums far removed from academia, including public meetings held in Leeds, London, and Manchester; in publications aimed at wider readerships (Harcup, 2009a; 2009b; 2014c; 2016c); in interviews with mainstream and alternative media (Broady, 2011; Dawson, 2013a; Dawson, 2013b; Gibbons, 2009; Kill, 2005); and at *With Banners Held High 2015*, a national gathering of more than 800 people in Wakefield to mark the 30th anniversary of the end of the 1984-1985 miners' strike. Less publicly, relevant research findings have also been communicated directly for the internal use of those who produce alternative journalism for the *Leeds Citizen* and *Manchester Mule*. Last but certainly not least, the publications submitted here have also proved useful in providing materials that can be utilised in the teaching of journalism (and other) students, potentially prompting some to think differently about journalism itself (Harcup, 2016d).

4. Conclusion

In the period since the initial study of this submission was published in 2003 the amount of scholarly attention paid to alternative forms of media has increased significantly. Within this wide field of media research some of the focus, although by no means all of it, has been on journalism. And among studies of alternative journalism some – although "surprisingly few", according to Bekken (2015) – have involved detailed considerations of news reporting and sourcing practices. That is the context within which this submission must be viewed and considered as a coherent and original contribution to knowledge and understanding.

However, the coherence of the research collected here does not imply uniformity, and together the nine publications also provide evidence of progression, difference, and nuance. This research may have begun by exploring alternative and mainstream journalism almost as opposites, but it developed to become concerned with continuities and similarities as well as differences *between* alternative and mainstream, along with differences identified *within* both alternative and mainstream media. A focus on the practitioners and products of alternative journalism had developed, by the time of the most recent publication included here, into an exploration of the relationship between alternative journalism and its audience – another area that Bekken (2015) notes has been "much less studied" than others.

Throughout, the research included in this submission has all to a greater or lesser extent been informed by the ethos and methods – the ethics and practices - that are often to be found within alternative journalism itself. That is, a commitment to allowing others to speak; especially those from whom we tend to hear less often, less clearly, or less loudly. Atton (2013: xi and xv) has described the studies collected here as being "rich with voices that speak of experiences" and of "allow[ing] voices otherwise unacknowledged to speak to audiences unaware of their presence". That has indeed been the aim.

But, informed by journalism though it is, the research included in this submission is also the product of engagement with scholarly methods and

rigour, beginning by drawing on Hall et al's (1978) exploration of the ideologies embedded in certain texts and culminating with a research project examining what Downing (2003) calls "the virtually unknown" audience for alternative media.

Despite recognising the originality of this work, it is important to guard against what Rodriguez and her colleagues have described as the tendency of researchers to think they have discovered a virgin area of study and to write "as if they were the first ones" to explore it:

> Losing track of the richness of the field, and conducting research on media, social movements, and social change as if the field of CfSC [communication for social change] did not exist, puts at risk significant opportunities to build upon already existing knowledge gleaned from a multitude of locations, contexts, and conversations. (Rodriguez et al, 2014: 162.)

With that in mind, even though the research gathered here stands up, it does not stand alone. Whatever contribution it makes must be considered alongside, and in conversation with, the contributions of others in the past, present, and future, in different contexts, countries, and continents.

There are, as ever, some limitations to the research collected here that have to be acknowledged. While my own involvement in practising alternative journalism might have been beneficial in helping with understanding and context in addition to access to publications, organisations, and people (that is, native researching), there might also be an element of what Downing (2003: 630) has referred to as us researching ourselves donning "a constantly circulating" variety of different hats. Potential limitations of such circularity have been dealt with as far as possible by studying projects with which I have had no personal involvement in addition to those that I had, and by anchoring my explorations and analyses of alternative journalism within the context of independent work by numerous other scholars.

Some might perceive another limitation of this submission to be that most of the research collected here has been concerned primarily with the small and the local. "Harcup is good on what he knows," writes Elizabeth Pattinson (2015: 48) in a review that is critical of the relatively narrow range of my

research into alternative journalism. Arguably, however, this allows for a more intense focus and greater depth, in which case it might even be seen as a strength – of sorts – rather than a weakness. If this concentration on the small and the local can be considered a weakness by some, it might just as easily be seen as "a rich vein" (Hartley, 2009: 314) for researchers to tap into. In any event, the publications gathered here demonstrate a range of different approaches to exploring the small and the local; together, they amount to a coherent and sustained body of scholarship that also demonstrates a degree of progression and an increasingly sophisticated treatment of the issues and the journalism under consideration.

Each individual publication must speak for itself, in its original chronological order, but this commentary provides the context within which the voices included in each will be heard. As was stated in the collection of work published in the book *Alternative Journalism, Alternative Voices*:

> Journalism studies is a youthful and multidisciplinary field, and the research brought together in this book is perhaps at the more eclectic end even of that range: a bit of history, a look at the political economy of the media, content analyses, case studies, interviews, surveys, some cultural studies, all against a backdrop of participant observation (native researching, if you like) and informed by thinking that draws on more than a hint of Marxism, feminism, anarchism, and liberal "free press" ideas about the roles and responsibilities of journalists within society/democracy and of the civic participation of citizens. To many within academe, such eclecticism will undoubtedly be seen as a fatal flaw, a methodological weakness. But eclecticism can only really be characterised as a weakness if we expect *one* method and/or *one* theory to be able to explain *everything*. Life does tend to be more complicated than that, and it is with that understanding that this research is offered: not as the first word, certainly not as the last word, but as a collection of – hopefully – stimulating words that can help illuminate further exploration of these issues, not just at the theoretical level but in practical ways too. (Harcup, 2013: 16.)

The above words apply equally to this submission, albeit with the caveat that the point about "many within academe" spotting a methodological weakness might perhaps be corrected to "some"; a mixed methods approach to research appears to be gaining ground as "a way to break down disciplinary barriers and facilitate broader conversations" (Hay, 2016: xv).

Alternative forms of media, including journalism, have repeatedly emerged, changed, vanished, and re-appeared over the centuries and across continents, allowing the marginalised to be represented (or to represent themselves) while challenging dominant narratives, however fleetingly. How, why, and where that happens remains worthy of study, and the more we find out, the more we realise we don't know. There remain "so many questions", as Bertolt Brecht (1935) put it in the poem, *Questions From a Worker Who Reads* (cited in Harcup, 2016d). Those questions include, but are far from limited to: To what extent can alternative forms of journalism move into spaces vacated by retreating commercial media?; Does the concept of a continuum of journalistic practice contribute to our understanding of journalism as a whole?; Can the organisational and journalistic models developed in earlier forms of alternative media be adapted for use in the age of cacophonous and commercialised social media?; And, beyond the localised case studies presented here, what other alternative ways of doing journalism are being developed elsewhere and in other circumstances?

Such research remains worthwhile because it demonstrates the existence of "multiple possibilities for doing journalism" (Atton, 2013: xii), and such knowledge in itself can make our understanding of journalism deeper and richer than would be possible if we restricted our gaze to the mainstream alone. Alternative journalism has been described as "an ever-changing effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism" (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 9). Yet it is more than a mere *response*, as Susan Forde points out:

> [T]he practices and raison d'etre for alternative journalism have been around much longer than the commercial mainstream practices which have dominated for the past 100 years…This is why alternative and community media forms have not just 'sprung up' all over the world in recent years, but why they have always been around and indeed, *were* the mainstream prior to the period around the 1850s… partisan and often radical newspapers were the popular publications with the highest readerships, which often took a stance on political issues, similar to the 'alternative media'', in all its forms, that we know today. Essentially, the practices of alternative journalism are older than the practices of professional commercial

> journalism, even though media and journalism scholarship has, overwhelmingly, focused on those mainstream practices and ideologies since the development of the media studies field. (Forde, 2011: x-xi, emphasis in original.)

Informed by the idea that alternative journalism should be considered as journalism in its own right as well as a critique of dominant practices, my research has gone beyond the defining of alternative journalism (see Section 2 above and Harcup, 2014a: 11) to examine the sourcing, selection, reporting, and ethical practices of such journalism in relation to concepts such as the public sphere, democracy, monitorial citizenship, oppositional reporting, and active citizenship.

Looking forward, there is a sense in which we might consider whether alternative journalism ought to be seen just as journalism. A journalism less tainted by the commercial imperatives that tend to dominate at the other end of a journalistic continuum, perhaps; but journalism nonetheless. Doing so will remind us that journalism is not a monolithic entity any more than all media are the same as each other; and that the practising of journalism is too important to society to be left only to those employed as journalists within mainstream media. After all, as Raymond Williams reminds us:

> It is easy to write the history of the press in terms of [the "respectable press"] alone, but the history of the independent radical press is fundamentally important… Without this dissenting press, the history not only of journalism but of politics and opinion would be very different. (Williams, [1961] 1965: 210.)

As for history, so for today – and (some of) the evidence can be found in this submission. The research discussed in these pages forms part of what, in another context, Sheila Rowbotham (1977: x) has called "a continuing enquiry… a bundle of pamphlets, bursting out of their binding with unfinished problems." The work of the journalists and others recorded in this submission is a story that needs telling even as it is unfolding. The published work presented in the Appendix that follows this commentary is my contribution – to date – to continuing that enquiry and telling that ongoing story.

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Appendix

The following section includes the text of the submitted publications, presented in chronological order of publication. These pre-publication versions are included here with permission from the following publishers: Sage, Routledge, and John Wiley and Sons. Anyone wishing to reference, cite, or quote any of these texts is asked to refer to the final published versions of record, details of which are given along with each submission in this appendix.

'"The unspoken - said." The journalism of alternative media'

Abstract: There is a long and continuing tradition of alternative media being produced to challenge the discourse/s of mainstream media. This paper will explore the ways in which the journalism of alternative media differs from mainstream journalism; whether or not alternative and mainstream media use different sources; and how relationships between producers and sources in alternative media differ from those in mainstream media. These questions will be addressed by examining alternative media in the UK: first, by briefly tracing the history of that country's alternative press; second, by comparing how a major news story was covered by a mainstream local newspaper and an alternative local newspaper in the same city; third, by interviews with members of a collective producing a radical website that draws on the traditions of the alternative press. The analysis will be informed by the concepts of the 'public sphere' and the 'alternative public sphere', and will take issue with the categorisation of alternative media as an exemplar of 'failure'. The paper will conclude with some comments on the ability of alternative media to play a counter-hegemonic role in relation to mainstream media.

Alternative media have been dismissed as inhabiting an 'alternative ghetto' and as exemplifying 'radical failure' – failure to attract advertisers, failure to operate in a businesslike manner, and failure to reach significant audiences. (Comedia 1984: 100; Landry et al 1985; also see Hamilton and Atton 2001.) However, the very 'amateurishness' of many alternative projects, such as the alternative newspapers that sprang up across the UK in the 1970s, could also be seen as a strength rather than a weakness; a success story 'in terms of their sociocultural import, their opportunities for reflexivity and their prefigurative politics of organising'. (Hamilton and Atton 2001: 127.) But what of their journalism? This paper will address the questions: How does the journalism of alternative media differ from

mainstream journalism? Do alternative and mainstream media have different sources? And is there a different relationship between producers and sources in alternative media as opposed to mainstream media? The issues identified above will be explored by examining two forms of alternative local media in the UK: a newspaper and a website. But such alternative media projects will first be placed in context.

Radical tradition

When the UK Royal Commission on the Press turned its attention to alternative papers in the 1970s, it noted that there had been 'a persistent tradition of small radical publications' since the early nineteenth century. (Royal Commission 1977: 40). In fact, alternative publications go back even further, tending to emerge during periods of heightened social tension. A printing press used for radical purposes was suppressed in the town of Kingston in the sixteenth century, and the seventeenth century saw printers run considerable risks to publish works inspired by the seditious idea 'that the world might be permanently turned upside down'. (Hill 1975: 111 and 17.) The period from 1688 has been characterised as 'the rise and triumph of lay and secular public opinion, the fourth estate, the information society, involving the birth, infancy and troubled adolescence of the modern intelligentsia'. (Porter 2000: 23.) Then, from 1789 the French revolution inspired a 'stream of newspapers and news-sheets, handbills and embryonic newspapers that was to grow into a torrent over the next half-century'. (Harrison 1974: 28; also see Thompson 1968: 781-794.)

Whatever world these publications inhabited, it was certainly not an 'alternative ghetto'; they achieved considerable circulation for the time. The weekly sale of the *Northern Star* in the 1830s, for example, averaged 32,692, and 'as the vast majority of copies were taken in by beerhouses or other places where they were read by the customers, its effective circulation must have been enormous'. (Cole and Postgate 1961: 283.) Alongside the coffee shops and other locale of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, then, there was the 'continued but submerged existence' of a 'plebian public

sphere'. (Habermas[1] 1989: xviii.) Indeed, in his later reflections on the public sphere, Habermas talks of '*competing* public spheres' and notes that 'from the beginning a dominant bourgeois public collides with a plebian one'. (Habermas 1992: 425, my emphasis; and 430.) Influenced by the work of EP Thompson and Mikhail Bakhtin, Habermas talks of this plebian public sphere as part of 'a counterproject to the hierarchical world of domination'; countering, that is, the bourgeois 'hegemonic public sphere'. (Habermas 1992: 425-427.)

The demise of the alternative and radical press in the second half of the nineteenth century has been blamed on the rise of a more commercial popular press. (Hamilton and Atton 2001: 126; also see Conboy 2002.) But a later brief flowering of a radical 'plebian' press occurred during the General Strike of 1926, when more than 100 factory newspapers were produced by shopfloor militants around the UK. (Harrison 1974: 198-199.)

In the 1960s an alternative press once again began to emerge, this time informed not so much by a 'plebian' consciousness as by a range of 'social movements':

> From diverse backgrounds, a hundred small Davids emerged to challenge – or simply to mock – the press Goliath. Technically, this dissident press ranged from professionally produced and printed journals to roneoed sheets, and in its contents mirrored a wide range of protest movements large and small. Its unifying cause was the rejection of the media themselves. (Harrison 1974: 240.)

Observing these new arrivals, the Royal Commission offered the following explanation of the role of alternative papers:

> The existence of an alternative press is important for two reasons. First, the right of minorities to publish their views without undue difficulty is at the heart of the freedom of the press. Second, one of the functions of a press in a democratic society is to reflect and impart the opinions of the widest range of articulate interests. A multiplicity of alternative publications suggests dissatisfaction with an insufficiently diverse established press, and an unwillingness or inability on the part of major publications to provide space for the opinions of small minorities. On this view, the alternative press

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[1] Initial reference cited by Manning (2001: 8).

> provides at least some of the diversity lacking among stable and respectable publications. (Royal Commission 1977: 40.)

This benign - and faintly patronising - 'establishment' view of the alternative press was not shared by the forces of law and order. In a confidential report to then Home Secretary Reginald Maudling, Detective Chief Inspector George Fenwick[2] of Scotland Yard wrote on 13 August 1971:

> In this country at the minute there are somewhere in the region of 80 publications which advocate what in the current idiom is called the alternative society. Of these about 25 can be termed 'underground' press and a number of them contain articles which can be described as indecent. However, by far the worst of these are *Oz*, *Frendz* and *IT*, in that order… (Travis 1999.)

But such publications, along with later examples of alternative media projects, were not revolutionary enough for journalist Eamonn McCann, who criticised alternative media for not being linked to organisations[3] openly waging war on capitalism: 'An "alternative" media project, which is not in some way, even informally, linked into a wider effort to overthrow capitalism isn't really alternative at all.' (McCann 1999.) Rather than the ideological clarity demanded by McCann, many alternative projects preferred to work on the basis of 'a vaguely defined notion of communal well-being'. (Bareiss 2001: 220.)

If publications such as *Oz* - which celebrated drug culture and famously depicted Rupert Bear's sexual exploits - served communities of interest, others had geographical communities in their sights. Thus, alternative local papers sprang up to challenge the hegemony of the traditional local press. Papers such as *Lancaster Free Press* in Lancashire, which declared in its first issue in 1972:

> Many people in this area are dissatisfied with the local established press, and are sometimes frustrated to find that news they considered important has either been misrepresented or completely ignored. Morecambe and Lancaster are not among the liveliest of towns but

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[2] Fenwick, who as head of the Metropolitan police's vice squad initiated the prosecution of three *Oz* editors, was himself later jailed for ten years on corruption charges. (Travis 1999.)
[3] Such as the Socialist Workers Party, presumably.

> more does happen besides middle class ladies' jumble sales and dinners at the Town Halls. If you happen to be the Lord Mayor or his best mate you probably have a good chance of getting your views expressed in the *Visitor* or *Lancaster and Morecambe Guardian* but if you are just another face in the crowd, your chances aren't quite so hot. That's why we decided to publish this paper - *Free Press* - it's your paper… (Quoted in Spiers 1974: 42-43.)

Or papers such as *RAP*, Rochdale's alternative paper, which launched in 1971 with a more specific investigative brief:

> Questions - asked. Bubbles - pricked. Information - open. Workers - heard. Issues - debated. Rights - explained. Bosses - challenged. The unspoken - said. Life - explored. That's *RAP*. *RAP* is being published, not because it will always be right, but because it will always be necessary for the tasks referred to on the front page to be done. (Quoted in Spiers 1974: 48.)

Spiers' bibliography, published in 1974, listed 83 'underground and alternative' papers published in the UK, including national publications such as *Private Eye* and *IT*, and 'counter culture' magazines such as *Gandalph's Garden*. (Spiers 1974: 16.) But it included the following 32 examples of what might be termed the alternative local paper: *Attila* (Brighton), *Big Flame*[4] (Liverpool), *Cardiff People's Paper*, *China-Cat Sunflower* (Birmingham), *Cleveland Wrecking Yard Info Sheet* (Potteries), *Cracker* (Edinburgh), *Filthy Lies* (Merton, London), *Glasgow News*, *Grass Eye* (Manchester), *Hackney Action*, *Horse Feathers* (Glasgow), *It Can't Be* (Muswell Hill, London), *Kite* (Kentish Town, London), *Lancaster Free Press*, *Liverpool Free Press*, *Manchester Free Press*, *Mantra* (Southampton), *The Mole* (Brighton), *Muther Grumble* (Tyneside, Wearside, Teesside), *Ops Veda* (Sheffield), *Pak-O-Lies* (Liverpool), *Paper Tiger* (Harrow), *Pavement* (Wandsworth, London), *RAP* (Rochdale), *Seeds* (Bristol), *Skelf* (Glasgow), *The Snail* (Devon), *Spam* (Bristol), *Street Press* (Birmingham), *Styng* (Barnsley), *Titus Groan* (Stoke-on-Trent), and *Tuebrook Bugle* (Liverpool). (Spiers 1974: 33-52.) The relatively new and simple technique of offset-litho printing offered 'freedom' to such papers,

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[4] *Big Flame* went on to become the national paper of the socialist organisation of the same name.

with the old IBM golfball typewriter portrayed romantically as 'the Kalashnikov of the guerrilla journalist'. (Fountain 1988: 24 and 98.)

Most of the above papers started in 1971 or 1972 and many were already defunct by the time Spiers' bibliography was published in 1974. One, the *China-Cat Sunflower*, existed for just one issue (in 1968). As Spiers noted:

> All across Britain in the past 10 years underground papers have been erupting, ending, and beginning... [Many] papers have been short-lived, amorphous, fluid, constantly ebbing and flowing, individually impermanent, part of a new press deeply embroiled in a search for self-definition… All over Britain this alternative press functions as a voice and as an organising base for tenants, students, the homeless and myriad other groups in social struggles… The alternative papers are two way switch-boards, concerned with people as individuals and as members of small self-organised groups. Typically, papers tell their readers and themselves: 'this paper is not produced by "them" but by YOU'. *The papers report the underlying causes of the news, not merely the 'news' itself.* (Spiers 1974: 19, 21 and 22; my emphasis.)

A further eight alternative local papers[5] were studied in the Royal Commission survey of the alternative press in 1977. They were: *Angell* (South London), *Bright Times* (Brighton), *The Bugle* (Liverpool), *Gateshead Street Press*, *Islington Gutter* Press, *Leigh People's Paper*, *Lowdown* (Brentwood), and *West Highland Free Press*[6]. (Royal Commission 1977: 44 and 51.) These papers were mostly monthly, had an average of 10 to 12 pages per issue with very little advertising, and sold anywhere between 100 and 8,500 copies on the streets and/or through local newsagents. They were staffed almost entirely by unpaid volunteers. In their responses to the Commission's questionnaire, such papers expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which mainstream papers covered local issues:

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[5] A further 22 community newspapers in rural areas of Leicestershire were also considered briefly by the Commission. These papers, spurred by a feeling that the established evening newspaper was 'remote from the needs of readers in small communities', were supported by a Leicestershire Community Newspaper Adviser funded by the Rural Community Council. (Royal Commission 1977: 51.)

[6] None of the lists cited in this paper should be taken as exhaustive. Some more local alternative newspapers are mentioned in Harcup (1998a: 107).

> In particular, the established press was criticised for not carrying out its 'watchdog' functions effectively when it came to such matters as investigating allegations of corruption among local committees. (Royal Commission 1977: 49.)

In turn, one alternative paper informed the Commission that its mainstream rival had reacted to its arrival on the scene by applying 'pressure to discourage them from publishing'. When that did not work, the commercial paper made an unsuccessful bid to buy out its radical rival. (Royal Commission 1977: 50.)

A different cast of voices

Those engaged in such distinct forms of publishing clearly brought different attitudes to their work. To what extent did this result in differences in journalism? Studies of the routines of news production in the mainstream media suggest that they tend to result in 'the systematic accessing of powerful, resource-rich institutions and their definitions of events – and to the marginalisation of resource-poor social groups and interests'. (Cottle 2000: 433). However, as suggested by Nina Eliasoph's study of a non-mainstream 'oppositional' news outlet, it may not be news routines themselves but the ethos of organisations and their managers that determine access, thus allowing for the alternative press actively to select alternative sources and 'a different cast of accessed "officials" and other voices'. (Cited in Cottle 2000: 434-435).

Because journalists in the mainstream media tend to rely upon official sources as the basis for their news stories, those in positions of social and political power have 'considerable ability to influence what is covered in the news'. (McChesney 2000: 49). Furthermore:

> …professional journalism tends to demand 'news hooks' – some sort of news event – to justify publication. This means that long-term public issues, like racism or suburban sprawl, tend to fall by the wayside, and there is little emphasis on providing the historical and ideological context necessary to bring public issues to life to readers. (McChesney 2000: 49-50.)

For McChesney, the result is a media system and journalistic output in which 'consumerism, the market, class inequality, and individualism tend to be taken as natural and often benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values, and antimarket activities tend to be marginalised or denounced'. (McChesney 2000: 110). This, then, is the mainstream to which the alternative press is, in Habermas' phrase, a 'counterproject'. Accordingly, Atton talks of developing forms of media to 'encourage and normalise' the access of such marginalised groups:

> …where working people, sexual minorities, trade unions, protest groups – people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals – could make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news relevant to their situation. (Atton 2002: 11.)

While alternative papers' attempts to offer such access to/for different voices have been rubbished by Comedia and Landry et al as the 'fetishization' of amateurism[7] (Comedia 1984: 98-100) they have also been credited with fulfilling an important role in the cultivation of an alternative public realm or sphere (after Habermas). Far from being inconsequential failures languishing in a rarely visited ghetto, for Atton the alternative press is inseparable from an alternative public sphere. (Atton 1999: 54 and 71; Atton 2002: 35 and 50). This has been described as a space in which 'experiences, critiques and alternatives could be freely developed' on a 'self-managed, democratic basis – itself a major alternative to the media hierarchies of the official public realm'. (Downing 1988: 168-169; also see

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[7] Comedia's central argument - that the alternative press was held back by a combination of amateurish organisation and content that preached only to the converted - was not borne out by the fate of *Red Pepper* magazine, as demonstrated by Gholam Khiabany. Launched in 1994 as a national radical monthly aimed at a wide and non-committed readership, the magazine attempted to put into practice the more businesslike approach advocated by Comedia only to find that all its 'professionalism' could not make it economically viable. As Khiabany notes: 'The irony is that, while the Comedia strategy of a broad-based, professionally produced publication failed miserably, concessions to the much more traditional strategy of publishing on a shoestring and addressing a relatively small audience of those interested in leftist ideas have at least managed to provide a way for *Red Pepper* to survive.' (Khiabany 2000: 461.) Similarly, *Leeds Other Paper/Northern Star* – which did not reject concepts such as market research, despite the caricature offered by Comedia and Landry et al - finally ceased publication only *after* it had attempted to abandon some of its more 'unpopular' news coverage in favour of supposedly more popular and advertiser-friendly entertainment coverage. (Harcup 1994: 21-24.)

Downing 2001.) It is to see how this might impact on journalistic practice that we now turn.

Leeds Other Paper

To explore further the role of alternative papers, in particular their news values and use of sources, I shall examine in detail *Leeds Other Paper*[8], an alternative local newspaper published in West Yorkshire from 1974 to 1994, latterly under the title *Northern Star*. (Harcup 1998a; Harcup 1994.) I shall do so by comparing the ways in which *Leeds Other Paper (LOP)* and its mainstream rival the *Yorkshire Evening Post (YEP)* covered a particular story.

The methodology has consciously been informed by a classic of media studies and cultural analysis, *Policing the Crisis* by Stuart Hall et al. This study of the 'moral panic' around mugging in 1970s English cities suggests that a key way in which the media engage in ideological discourse favourable to the dominant forces in society is by privileging the voices of politicians, employers, the police and so-called experts who become 'primary definers' of events, whose 'primary definition sets the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is'. (Hall et al 1978: 59.) According to Hall, the hierarchy of power in society is reproduced in the media as a structure of access 'systematically skewed in relation to certain social categories'. (Hall 1986: 9.) In particular, mainstream news coverage 'privileged the interpretations of the powerful' not because of any conspiracy but because 'the hierarchy of credibility perceived by journalists reflected the structures of power in society'. (Manning 2001: 138.) This concept of primary definition[9] has subsequently been criticised for downplaying some of the complexities of relationships between journalists and sources. (Curran 1990: 127; Schlesinger 1990: 66-67; Franklin 1997: 46; Harcup 1998b; Manning 2001: 15-17 and 137-139; Stevenson 2002: 36.) However, acknowledging the complexities involved in such relationships, and noting some of the exceptional instances in which

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[8] The author worked on *Leeds Other Paper* for a number of years.
[9] With the media as secondary definers.

alternative explanations have achieved prominence in the media, does not disprove the existence of a *tendency* for the powerful to enjoy 'routine advantages' in news access. (Manning 2001: 139.)

Hall et al analysed press coverage of a 1973 'mugging' court case in Birmingham, comparing the ways in which the story was framed, examining those elements chosen as the primary news angles as expressed in headlines, noting which 'primary definers' were chosen to place the case in context, exploring how the story was thematised around particular concerns, what explanatory paradigms were expressed in editorials, and how language and typifying labels were used in feature material. (Hall et al 1978: 83-112.) The authors found that, despite the very different styles adopted by the various titles, the press produced remarkably similar 'public images' which together acted to foreclose discussion before it could go beyond the boundaries of the dominant ideological field. (Hall et al 1978: 118.) The result of such coverage was 'a powerful and compelling form of rhetorical closure', involving the reproduction of 'public images' - clusters of impressions, themes and pseudo-explanations - in the place of an analysis of underlying structural forces in society. (Hall et al 1978: 118.)

Drawing on the Birmingham study and subsequent discussions, I have conducted what Hall et al termed an 'ideological analysis' of the treatment of the same major story by the mainstream *Yorkshire Evening Post* and the alternative *Leeds Other Paper*[10]. A major news 'event', of interest to both titles, has been chosen, because it has been suggested that one of the defining differences between the alternative and mainstream press is that they frequently have a different idea of what constitutes a story in the first place[11]. (Franklin 1997: 110; Franklin and Murphy 1991: 126; Aubrey et al

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[10] Of course, one is an evening newspaper and the other weekly, so to that extent I am not comparing like with like. But the editions of both papers being considered were their first opportunity to report on the events in question. In any event, its frequency of publication was not a defining feature of *LOP*, unlike its 'alternative' nature; indeed, it occasionally proclaimed: 'Onward to the daily!'

[11] This divergence in news values between the alternative and mainstream press is shown by a 1980s content analysis of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*'s coverage of the multi-cultural Chapeltown area of Leeds. A meeting of the area's Police Community Forum was given the results of the study in November 1985: in the ten week period under study, the *YEP* gave the impression that Chapeltown was a lawless area needing a lot of policing, where

1980: 16.) The study will examine how the July 1981 riots in the Chapeltown area of Leeds were covered by first *LOP* and then the *YEP*.

Coverage of the disturbances differed markedly between the two newspapers, as can be seen from *Tables 1, 2* and *3*.

In the *YEP*, the riots were reported fundamentally as a 'law and order' story, echoing the priorities of the national media which focused on destruction of property, looting, theft and the possibility of issuing police with more weaponry, in contrast to the rioters' explanation that police harassment was a major part of the story. (Tumber 1982: 37 and 44.) For Wykes, such mainstream media reporting of the riots in English cities during the 1980s reproduced the language of 'tribalism, warfare, crime and violence' as it merged myths, stereotypes, and the values of the state with journalistic practices:

> It may be that the media concentrated on the violence due to news values, or as a result of their white vantage point on the streets behind police lines, literally and metaphorically, but the net effect of the language used was to reinforce both cultural racism and legitimate interventionist policing. (Wykes 2001: 36 and 38.)

It should be pointed out that, alongside 'law and order' articles blaming the trouble on 'outside agitators', the *YEP* also published one background article that located the riots within a social rather than a law and order framework. This piece, HOW *YEP* PINPOINTED PROBLEMS by Peter Lazenby, referred back to a series of articles by the same journalist a year earlier that

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prostitution, drugs, rioting and potential rioting were commonplace; the more negative the angle, the bigger the headline; and the area was even described in a report of a court case as a 'shadowy, twilight world'. Reporting the findings of this study at the time, *LOP* drew attention to its own rather different news agenda:

> In the ten issues of *LOP* published during the same period there were five specific news articles about Chapeltown: one concerning a court case resulting from a police operation outside the Hayfield pub; a report of a meeting of Chapeltown Police Community Forum; news about a new recording studio in the area; the opening of a multi-cultural centre in the area; and a local woman's bid to raise money for her dance training. In addition, during the same period we carried a debate on our letters' pages about the proposed dance centre in Chapeltown, plus reviews of artistic events in the area including one held at the Mandela Centre. (*Leeds Other Paper*, 13 December 1985.)

In another sign of the difference in approach of the two newspapers, *LOP* could not resist putting the explanatory phrase 'talking shop' in brackets after references to the Police Community Forum in news stories.

had 'warned that anger and frustration over lack of jobs and decaying houses was again building up to frightening levels'[12]. Nonetheless, the paper's *dominant* message remained firmly a 'law and order' one.

As *Tables 1 and 2* show, the alternative *LOP* thematised the events in a very different way. While the *YEP* located the riots as a 'law and order' issue and encoded the bulk of its coverage within a discourse of 'lawless' youth, *LOP* contextualised the events within a framework of poverty, unemployment, low pay, alienation, and racist attacks. *LOP* reported reactions on the streets of two locations within the city, while the *YEP* said that 'Leeds' was counting the cost, and that the riots could cost 'us' £1 million. The *YEP* gave prominence to those identified by Hall as primary definers, while such official voices were almost entirely absent from *LOP*'s cast of sources. Instead, *LOP* broke with conventional rules of reporting by quoting at length from anonymous eyewitnesses on the streets; by reporting overheard conversations within the court room; and (in one instance) by foregrounding the reporter's first-person 'I', a deictic device that Fowler notes is absent from 'normal printed texts'. (Fowler 1991: 64.)

A reading of court reporting in the two newspapers emphasises this difference in approach (*Table 3*). While the *YEP* reported the court cases within the confines of routine court reporting - a formal balance beginning with the prosecution version of events, listing personal details of defendants and so on - *LOP* called into question the whole procedure, emphasising the extraordinary events that were being reported/witnessed:

> At the Prime Minister's whim, people arrested are being brought before special 'kangaroo courts' within 24 hours...The situation within the special courts was utter confusion...From the press box I clearly heard a number of youths tell the solicitors that they would plead guilty just to get it over with... (*Leeds Other Paper* 17 July 1981.)

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[12] The presence of some more critical material raises the possibility that Hall – and, indeed, many other media theorists - may have downplayed the significance of the conscious actions of individual journalists (agency), and the possibility of a hegemonic/counter-hegemonic struggle *within* organs of the mainstream media. And/or it may indicate the greater leeway given to the writer and the greater diversity of sources used in 'background feature' material than in 'hard news'.

Into this court report, which further broke with journalistic conventions by declining to name the defendants, was inserted contextualising information from the world beyond the courtroom:

> Almost all those arrested on both Saturday and Sunday nights are unemployed. At a Council Policy and Resources meeting on Tuesday it was announced that there are 10,000 unemployed youth in Leeds, with just 8 registered vacancies. (*Leeds Other Paper* 17 July 1981.)

This was a form of journalism that went well beyond the boundaries of the dominant ideological field and which refused the 'rhetorical closure' of the mainstream media's 'law and order' approach. The choice of words indicated in *Table Three* - rampage, carnage, anguish, confusion - suggests the 'relational syntagms' discussed by Hodge and Kress in their analysis of lexical choice in press coverage of conflict:

> All the major ideological struggles will necessarily be waged in words, through texts that circulate in various ways by virtue of various technologies, in forms of language that bear the traces of these struggles in innumerable ways. (Hodge and Kress 1993: 161)

Of course, this study presents only a historically and geographically specific snapshot, but the contrast between the published content of the alternative press and the mainstream press raises the possibility that alternative media may indeed be able to subvert the dominant discourse, albeit to a limited audience. This was suggested by Hartley, who studied the different approaches of the alternative newspaper *Rebecca* and the commercial *South Wales Echo in* 1979/80 and concluded that those producing the alternative title were seeking to build a 'counter-hegemonic consciousness'. (Hartley 1982: 135.) Reception studies are a notoriously contested ground, but for Hartley, the presence or absence of alternative media can affect the ways in which people read the dominant messages of the mainstream media[13].

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[13] The importance of alternative sources of information is highlighted in a different context by Greg Philo, who describes an empirical study of how people read television coverage of the 1984-1985 miners' strike; while most viewers subsequently believed that picketing had been mostly violent, this media discourse was rejected by those viewers who had direct contact with the dispute, on both sides of the line (miners, police and their friends/families). Philo concludes: '...where the television audience has no direct experience of events and uses no *alternative sources of information*, then the media and especially television news can have a very powerful affect on beliefs'. (Philo 1990: 62-64; my emphasis.)

(Hartley 1982: 46, 135 and 191-192.) Manning agrees that audiences are less able to engage critically with news texts if they have no access to 'alternative benchmarks' against which to evaluate such news coverage. (Manning 2001: 226.) If this is the case, then alternative media could be considered as one way of providing such benchmarks within what has been characterised as an alternative public sphere[14].

Alternative media are not merely purveyors of alternative content. They frequently display alternative or 'prefigurative' methods of organisation (Atton 2002: 18 and 154), with a 'synergistic' relationship between producers and consumers (Bareiss 2001: 228). Atton has referred to alternative media tending to have, in place of the 'vertical, top-down communication' of most mainstream media, more 'horizontal communication' between writers and readers, with some people being both. (Atton 1999: 73.). There may also be horizontal communication between writers and sources, as a visiting *Guardian* reporter noted during a visit to *LOP*'s offices: 'While we chatted…a group of squatters came in to complain about police activity and [were] made reporters on the spot.' (Wainwright 1988.) Such 'native reporting' is often at the heart of local alternative and community media, helping to make both product and process quite distinctive from mainstream media (Atton 2002: 115), and to further reinforce the views of the 'particular interpretative communities' (Manning 2001: 226) served by such media.

KDIS website

The alternative local press created and sustained by the '1968 generation' may have mostly disappeared from the UK by the early 1990s (Harcup 1998: 110), but alternative media have continued in other forms, most notably on the internet, utilising information and communication technologies that 'supplement and exponentially increase opportunities for sociality, community, mobilisation, knowledge construction and direct

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[14] It should also be pointed out that journalists in the mainstream media may gain access to alternative sources of information via the alternative media; and that journalists on the alternative media may go on to work in the mainstream media, potentially (at least) taking their radical ideas and alternative contacts books with them.

political action'. (Atton 2002: 133.) Publishing material on the internet removes the financial and physical burdens of printing and distributing alternative newspapers, although it still requires both capital and time. (Atton 2002: 139.) Although the usual suspects of giant corporations now control substantial chunks of the internet, it has been noted that 'new interactive sites, spaces for opinion and identity formation are growing within the belly of global capitalism'. (Stevenson 2002: 224.)

An example of a website that consciously draws on the traditions of alternative local newspapers such as *Leeds Other Paper* is based in Leeds' neighbouring city of Bradford. *KDIS*[15] was launched in 1997 (www.kdis.org.uk) but its pre-history dates back to the year of the riots discussed above. The following brief account of *KDIS* is based on interviews with two of its producers, Tony and Matt, who both asked to be identified only by their first names. Further information is taken from the website itself (KDIS 1997-2002) and from printed copies of the *KDIS* fanzine.

KDIS started life in 1981 as the occasional 'fanzine' of Bradford's 1-in-12 Club, formed the same year. Based on broadly anarchist principles, the club continues to be a music venue and the focus for activities ranging from a football team to communal allotments. The fanzine, produced in their spare time by a publications collective based at the club, declared its aim as 'to publish material, particularly of local working-class interest, which would not otherwise be published'. (KDIS 1999.) It began to feature lengthy investigative articles, addressing issues such as 'who runs Bradford?' and naming local freemasons, but the fanzine had no regular production cycle: 'The fanzine disappeared for a while, mainly because of the difficulties of producing it, the cost. Then the internet started to be used, and it was obviously a way to do it with minimal cost.' (Interview: Tony.)

The website developed with a news section, sometimes featuring lengthy investigations written by members of the collective, with all articles retained on an archive. Local authority documents were scanned-in and placed on the

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[15] It stands for 'knee deep in shit'.

website several years before the authority decided to make such documents directly available on its own website. An open discussion forum was launched as part of the *KDIS* site, with the only editing being the removal of threats of violence posted by members of far-right groups. Although the open forum developed into a lively space for the exchange of local gossip, the promotion of gripes both personal and collective, and the occasional exchange of abuse, Tony says he has been surprised that only a small minority of those who view the website contribute to the forum, most users apparently having a more passive relationship as 'readers'. There have been occasions, however, when major items of controversy have been set in train not by articles on the news pages but by 'readers'' unmediated contributions on the forum.

Those who produce *KDIS* see it as a direct alternative to the city's mainstream evening newspaper, the *Telegraph and Argus* (*T&A*):

> Whereas 99% of the time the *T&A*'s fine - it covers all your local stuff - there are some major things which really do need challenging. They also have an agenda of their own, and sometimes it's really blatant. The *T&A* campaigned for CCTV [closed circuit television] and promoted it, so that needed challenging. And the Bingley road scheme. They *campaigned* for these things, they didn't just *report* them. So they do have an agenda and they are players in the city. (Interview: Tony.)

Sometimes *KDIS* will make the *T&A* itself the story, as when the latter apparently swallowed a police line and reported a riot that, according to *KDIS*, never happened. *KDIS* printed an alternative eyewitness account which questioned the police version of events, included a link to the *T&A*'s own article MOB GO ON BONFIRE RAMPAGE, and featured a lengthy interview with the *T&A*'s editor about how the offending story came to be written. (KDIS website 1998.) Tony explained how he obtained the interview: 'I started ringing him up at home, bugging him at home, and in the end he said "Don't call me at home, call me at such and such a time and I'll talk to you".' (Interview).

Readership of the site is small, with about 1,000 'hits' each month, and among those who have signed-up for email alerts are local politicians and

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journalists. Although the collective has received emails from readers as far away as Los Angeles - comparing notes on anti-CCTV campaigns - the focus of *KDIS* remains determinedly local:

> I've always been interested in my own backyard, how Bradford works, how it functions, things you can actually touch and get involved in.
>
> It is intended to have an effect. We're not reporters who are just telling people what's going on, it is a political thing as well. We want to affect things, we write about things that we're bothered about, like CCTV or roads or whatever. (Interview: Tony.)

The relationship between those who write for *KDIS* and the wider milieu in that part of Bradford's 'alternative' scene focused on the 1-in-12 Club echoes Atton's suggestion that alternative media are inseparable from an alternative public sphere (or spheres):

> It's all about contesting of space. The club is about having a social space that's accessible to working class people. We also want a space, a journalistic space if you like, where we can state our ideas. I think it's about reclaiming what's ours to reclaim. We don't have the right to reclaim the Philippines, we do have the right to reclaim Bradford because it's ours. That's always been a really strong thing, that Bradford is ours - it's no more complicated than that really. From that, everything else flows - everything the club's done. The bottom line has always been it's our life, so do something. Encouraging people to participate and improve their own lives. (Interview: Matt.)

In this way, an alternative media space such as *KDIS* can be seen as 'not a simple expression of a social movement, but as the public discursive activity by which it comes into being'. (Hamilton and Atton 2001: 125.) It is an expression of what Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) refers to as 'citizens' media'. For Rodriguez, the production of 'alternative media messages' is about more than the simple challenge to the mainstream media:

> It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one's own story teller, regaining one's own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one's own community and one's own culture…

> …referring to 'citizens' media' implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible. (Rodriguez 2001.)

Ironically, the interviews with Tony and Matt took place just as the collective had decided to 'take a break' from their time-consuming investigative journalism[16]. Will the investigations return?

> Who knows? Maybe. Or maybe a different group might emerge from the club and make it a different site, a music site perhaps. Sometimes things do have a life and that comes to an end, like *LOP*, and it doesn't mean it's a failure. (Interview: Tony.)

Neither Matt nor Tony had ever heard of Comedia or Landry et al, but that has not prevented them from articulating one of the most eloquent ripostes to the latter's simplistic dismissal of alternative media as a failed project.

Conclusion: journalism from below

The narrative of alternative 'failure', as told by Comedia and Landry et al, is based on the undeniable fact that alternative media tend to reach significantly smaller audiences than are reached by mainstream media. Many alternative projects are indeed short-lived - a fate they share with many commercial media projects, incidentally - and under-capitalised. As Rodriguez (2001) notes, alternative or 'citizens' media' projects sometimes have 'such short life cycles that they appear and disappear leaving - what at first glance seems to be - no signature, no accomplishments, no successes'. However, if we go beyond an initial glance we may observe that alternative media are 'historical constants, albeit ever in flux'. (Downing 2001: 391.) Three long-term consequences of alternative or radical media suggest themselves to Downing. First, the energy 'poured into and drawn from' such projects may live on in other projects over decades. Second, such projects

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[16] At the time the interviews took place the site was still online with its archive and forum still active. Problems with their internet server mean that the site has sometimes been unavailable since then, and at the time of writing traffic is directed to the related 1 in 12 Collective site at:
www.1in12.go-legend.net/

may involve 'prefigurative politics' that foreshadow subsequent movements and demands. Third, there is the power of memory:

> …media activism that may fail in its most immediate objectives for many reasons, including internal ones, but that nonetheless lights a flame that, like some trick birthday cake candles, obstinately refuses to be doused. These radical media in practice often offer a vision, either from their contents or their making or their interaction with social movements, or all three, that bends like the willow in a gale but does not uproot. (Downing 2001: 391-392.)

And then, to return to the questions posed at the outset of this paper, there is the journalism. The evidence from *Leeds Other Paper* suggests that the journalism of alternative media does indeed differ from mainstream journalism. Whereas the mainstream has a tendency to privilege the powerful, alternative media set out to privilege the powerless and the marginal; to offer a perspective 'from below' and to say the 'unspoken'. Alternative and mainstream media not only use different casts of sources, they tend to have a different relationship *between* producers and sources, with alternative media sometimes blurring the lines between the two. This is the sense in which alternative media can be considered as inseparable from alternative public sphere/s, opening up the possibility of 'empowering narratives of resistance for those counter-publics that are written by those very counter-publics'. (Atton 2002: 153.) Within the 'interpretative communities' made up of a fluid population of citizens who may at various times be producers, sources and readers, alternative media may offer the possibility of subverting the dominant discourse by providing access to alternative voices, alternative arguments, alternative sets of 'facts', and alternative ways of seeing, all of which citizens may be able to use to engage critically with the output of mainstream media. In this way, alternative media can provide arenas for 'subcultural or class-specific public spheres' to compete with the dominant hegemonic public sphere. (Habermas 1992: 425-426.)

For Rodriguez, this ability of people to become their own story tellers is inherent in what she terms 'citizens' media'. At heart, it is a question of democracy :

> …what makes citizens' media fascinating is how they stir power in kaleidoscopic movements that fade soon after they emerge, like movements in a dance towards empowerment…
>
> … instead of thinking democracy as an ultimate goal, a final state-of-things to reach, we should look at how democratic and non-democratic forces are being renegotiated constantly, and how citizens' media can strengthen the former, thus contributing to the - although sometimes ephemeral - swelling of the democratic. (Rodriguez 2001.)

This democratic spirit is evident when a member of the 1-in-12 collective speaks of the role of alternative media in the 'contesting of space'. He is talking in a specifically local context, but the comment suggests a wider point; that alternative media are not just about contesting physical space ('who runs Bradford?') but also ideological space, the space in which ideas circulate. The technology and language may change, and projects will no doubt continue to come and go, but the existence of a counter-hegemonic journalism in alternative media demonstrates in practice that there are alternative ways of seeing the world and other stories to be told. That is why the attitude of radical websites in the twenty first century would be familiar to those who wielded golfball typewriters in the 1970s, and why both echo the attitudes of those who laboured to produce the likes of the *Northern Star* and the *Poor Man's Guardian* in the nineteenth century. To label such a tradition a 'failure' is to take a very short-sighted view indeed.

Acknowledgement

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INTERVIEW: Two members of the *KDIS* collective, Tony and Matt, were interviewed in Bradford on November 29 2001.

Tables for 'The unspoken – said' article

Paper	Front page leads	Inside stories	Editorials	Primary sources
Yorkshire Evening Post	VIOLENCE FLARES ON LEEDS STREETS: 'Leeds was today counting the cost of its second night of street violence, petrol bomb attacks and looting…' (*YEP* 13.7.81) STREET VIOLENCE: CITY SETS UP ACTION DESK (*YEP* 14.7.81) STREET VIOLENCE: IT COULD COST US £1M (*YEP* 16.7.81)	STAGE-MANAGED – role of people from outside Leeds in disturbances. How YEP pinpointed problems. RUMOURS – then the mobs took to the streets. 'Thanks' to youths who saved shop. CHAPELTOWN'S NIGHT OF VIOLENCE. How a city suburb erupted. (*YEP* 13.7.81) AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE – city court cases. Uneasy peace settles on the streets. TWO NIGHTS OF MAYHEM IN LEEDS. CB radio directed copycat attacks says Chief Constable. Whitelaw set to bring in water cannons. (*YEP* 14.7.81)	'…not race riots… outbreak of hooliganism on a mass scale… symptom of a sick and greedy society…' (*YEP* 13.7.81)	Chief Constable. Other senior police officers. MPs. Council leaders. Other senior councillors. Magistrates. Community Relations Council.

TABLE 1: Coverage of the 1981 Chapeltown riots in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*.

Paper	Front page leads	Inside stories	Editorials	Primary sources
Leeds Other Paper	NOW THE KANGAROO COURTS! 'Anger mounted in Chapeltown and Harehills this week over the harsh treatment of those detained by police during last week's disturbances. At the Prime Minister's whim, people arrested are being brought before special 'kangaroo courts' within 24 hours…' (*LOP* 17.7.81)	RIOTS IN LEEDS. RACIST ATTACKS ON THE INCREASE. YOUTHS FACE KANGAROO COURTS. (*LOP* 17.7.81) 'TENSE' COURT AS LEEDS RIOT TRIALS CONTINUE. (*LOP* 24.7.81)	'…riots caused by a combination of mass unemployment, dead-end jobs, poverty, bad housing, boredom, no social facilities, and a racist and oppressive police force…' (*LOP* 17.7.81)	Un-named eyewitnesses.

TABLE 2: Coverage of the 1981 Chapeltown riots in *Leeds Other Paper*.

Paper	Themes of court reporting
Yorkshire Evening Post	Law and order: ☐ Rampage ☐ Carnage ☐ Pillage ☐ Mayhem ☐ Looting ☐ Police officers injured Defendants' names, addresses, ages
Leeds Other Paper	Kangaroo courts: ☐ Anguish of defendants and relatives ☐ Confusion in special courtrooms ☐ Reports of defendants beaten up ☐ Stiff sentences for minor offences ☐ Racist attacks ☐ Unemployment ☐ Critical commentary from public gallery Defendants' names not used

TABLE 3: Coverage of the initial court hearings arising from the 1981 Chapeltown riots.

'"I'm doing this to change the world": journalism in alternative and mainstream media'

Abstract: Journalism practised within alternative media has typically been understood as being entirely different to, and separate from, journalism practised within mainstream media. However, in recent years, such 'binary opposition' has been rejected by a number of authors (Atton, Downing, Platon and Deuze, Rodriguez) who argue that there may be more crossover of media practice than has previously been acknowledged. By the means of an exploratory empirical study, utilising qualitative research methods, this article examines the extent of this potential crossover of both practice and personnel between journalism conducted in alternative and mainstream media. The study provides some empirical evidence to support the contention that there can be movement along what might be termed a continuum of journalistic practice. The article concludes by suggesting that consideration of the perspectives of 'hybrid' practitioners, who have a range of journalistic experiences across alternative and mainstream media, can inform our understanding of journalism itself.

Recent years have seen a small but growing literature concerned with a range of practices and products that might be termed 'alternative media' (Atton, 1999, 2002, 2003; Atton and Couldry, 2003; Bareiss, 2001; Beckerman, 2003; Caldwell, 2003; Davis, 2003; Downing, 2001, 2003; Forde et al, 2003; Gibbs, 2003; Haas, 2004; Hamilton and Atton, 2001; Harcup, 1998, 2003; Howley, 2003; Khiabany, 2000; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Rodriguez, 2001; Shaffer, 2003; Welch, 2003). Definitions of alternative media are not fixed or universally accepted, and the term has been attached to 'a heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups and organizations, in specific and different contexts, and employing a great variety of media' (Paiva, cited in Rodriguez, 2001).

Labels such as 'alternative press' have tended to be used as 'broad-brush collective terms for a disparate body of practices' (Campbell, 2004, p.178), but some common themes can be identified. Alternative media processes and products have been described as inhabiting - indeed, as being inseparable from - an alternative or plebian public sphere (Atton, 1999, p.54 and p.71; Atton 2002, p.35 and p.50; Habermas, 1989, p. xviii; Habermas, 1992, p.430). Within this context, the journalistic practices carried out within alternative media have been described, in a historical context, as 'insurgent journalism' (Curran and Seaton, 2003, p.16); and, in a more contemporary context, as 'counter-hegemonic journalism' (Harcup, 2003, p.372).

Until recently, there has been a tendency to look at forms of journalism practised within alternative media in isolation from - or in opposition to - forms of journalism practised in more mainstream or commercially dominant media. This is perhaps not surprising. Alternative media projects frequently define themselves as *existing in opposition* to mainstream media whether local, national or global - existing as 'propaganda of the deed, highlighting the faults of the established press' (Whitaker, 1981, p.101) - and they serve publics who in many cases are alienated from mainstream media (Harcup, 1998, p.114). Yet, as both a journalist and academic, I am aware of a significant number of journalists currently working within mainstream media who previously worked in some form of alternative media. Danny Schechter (2001, p.287) describes himself as 'a media professional with a unique vantage point, having worked in alternative and mainstream media, print, radio, and television'. Not quite unique, as we shall see. Yet, despite the publication of a handful of practitioner accounts (Fountain, 1988; Harcup, 1994; Schechter, 2001; Younge, 2004), this 'crossover' grouping has to date largely been absent from academic research[17].

There are some indications that a less 'either…or' approach is now emerging within the study of alternative media. Atton (2003b, p.26-27), for

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[17] With the exception of work on the influence of the underground press of the 1960s on the commercial music press of the 1970s (see Frith, 1983, pp.168-172; and Forde, 2001, p.24).

example, talks of the 'hybridity' of journalistic practices within 'the contemporary media landscape', and points to 'the complex, hybrid nature of alternative media in relation to its mainstream counterparts'. Similarly, Downing, writing in 2001, was self-critical about the 'binarism' of his earlier studies in which he 'seriously simplified both mainstream and alternative media'; the reality, he realised, was rather more complicated on both sides of the equation (Downing, 2001, p. ix). It was to explore these complexities in the relationship between journalism in alternative and mainstream media that I sought to identify a group of journalists with experience of both and to invite them to reflect on their experiences[18]. This article draws on the resulting qualitative research, which will be discussed in the context of relevant literature, to examine alternative media as one of a range of entry points into journalism, and to explore what those who have moved into mainstream journalism have to say about their motivations, experiences and observations.

Many of those involved in alternative media see their journalism as 'a political activity' (Whitaker, 1981, p.99; also see SchNEWS, 2004, p.301), a perspective that appears to be far from the norm among journalists in the wider industry. Roy Greenslade (2003, p.195), for example, recalls his experience as a trainee reporter on a local commercial weekly newspaper in the 1960s:

> I had not become a journalist to do good works, to right wrongs, to serve the public interest, and I would be astounded if any of the scores of young journalists I then knew, on rival papers or at college, had done so either… Words like ethics and conscience were not part of our vocabulary. Most of us were seeking personal fame and fortune, and the trouble we took to report on stories or to write well had more to do with building our reputations in order to advance ourselves than with an intense love of the craft itself.

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[18] We are not dealing with monolithic entities labelled alternative media and mainstream media. The forms of alternative media cited by the sample varied at least as much as did the forms of mainstream media, and included print, broadcast and online projects, both local and national, and spanned campaigning political (including party political) publications, underground cultural magazines, more investigative publications, and special interest outlets such as football or music fanzines. However, although not all the respondents were engaged in overtly political journalism, what these journalists have in common is that they were all once producing forms of media that were motivated by a desire, not to make profit, but to make change; and they have gone on to work in mainstream journalism.

Greenslade may or may not be right about the motivation of the majority of journalists (and I suspect the reality was rather more complicated), but his description does not fit those who became journalists in the alternative media precisely to do good works, to right wrongs, and to serve the public interest. Journalism within alternative media exists, as least in part, as a critique of mainstream journalism: a critique of practice, conducted in practice, 'showing other journalists how newspapers could be different and what was possible' (Whitaker, 1981, p.101). This study will explore how and why a number of such individuals became involved in journalism within alternative media; the relationship between their practice as journalists in the alternative media and their later practice as journalists in mainstream media; and what insights they may have to offer us, informed by this dual experience.

Asking the practitioners

To help explore this relationship between journalism in alternative and mainstream media, I sought information from a sample of journalists with experience in both fields. Notwithstanding the danger that qualitative research can become mere 'anecdotalism' (Silverman, 2000, p.11), a qualitative approach offered more possibility of exploring the motivations and self-perceptions of a target group than would quantitative research. With qualitative research, even a small sample has the potential to offer insight (Denscombe, 1998, p.25). Having considered potential qualitative research methodologies (Denscombe, 1998; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Silverman, 2000), I decided that a questionnaire would be an appropriate method of gathering facts and opinions from the sample; and that this would include both closed questions to elicit specific information and open questions to further explore the respondents' experiences and opinions (Denscombe, 1998, p.89-101). Questionnaires were sent to respondents by email or post, to be completed in their own time without the presence of a researcher, meaning that each person answered an identical set of questions without the potential influence of direct personal interaction with a third party (Denscombe, 1998, p.87-88). Although questionnaires rely on the

honesty (and memory) of participants, they can be useful in learning about the characteristics, attitudes and beliefs of a population sample (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p.129).

Informed by discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of this form of methodology (Denscombe, 1998, p.105-107), I devised a questionnaire that was piloted with a national newspaper journalist who I was aware had started his career on the alternative press[19]. To gain access to a larger sample group, I wrote[20] to the letters' page of the *Journalist[21]*, magazine of the National Union of Journalists (the major trade union that organises journalists in the UK and Ireland), seeking people who 'went on to work as journalists in what might be termed the mainstream media after being involved with some form of alternative media'. As the magazine circulates only amongst people who have been accepted into NUJ membership, the readership is by definition made up of working journalists. The letter was deliberately framed in an open way as I did not wish readers to be influenced by *my* definitions of mainstream and alternative media. Following publication of my letter, I was contacted by 25 journalists[22]. Copies of the questionnaire[23] were sent[24] to these journalists, and 21 completed questionnaires were subsequently returned. Together with the return from the piloted questionnaire, this gave me a specialised sample

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[19] I contacted him directly to ask if he would be willing to participate. His replies have been included as part of the sample.

[20] The letter read: 'I wonder if any readers could help with a research project. I am looking for people who went on to work as journalists in what might be termed the mainstream media after being involved with some form of alternative media. It doesn't matter how long ago, whether you were paid, or if you were/are staff or freelance. If this sounds like you, and you are willing to fill in a brief questionnaire, please get in touch…'

[21] The letter was also sent to *Free Press*, magazine of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, and was published on a sheet of supplementary information sent to subscribers.

[22] Of whom, 23 had read it in the *Journalist* and two had read it in the *Free Press* supplement.

[23] The questionnaire featured 18 questions that asked journalists how and why they had worked in both alternative and mainstream media, whether they had been able to use a similar approach in the latter to the former, if they felt alternative media had impacted upon mainstream media, and so on.

[24] Mostly by email.

group of 22 journalists[25]. Although the journalists concerned are all based in the UK, their perspectives may have a wider resonance[26].

The purpose of this exploratory research is to bring to journalism scholarship the perspectives on a range of journalistic practices from a sample of individuals who have not (necessarily) studied journalism, but who have *practised* journalism within alternative and mainstream media. How and why did they get involved in alternative media? Do they perceive their current journalistic practice to be informed by a different set of considerations from those who have not experienced journalism outside the mainstream? What influence, if any, do they feel that alternative media has on mainstream media? Such questions are central to this study. Of course, the information within the completed questionnaires is from a self-selecting sample and relies on self-perception about the respondents' own activities and attitudes. Such information does not exist in isolation, however, and will be considered within the context of insights, explanations and theoretical models that have emerged in recent years from the academy's engagement with journalism.

The sample

It was noted above that definitions of alternative media are not fixed[27]. Therefore, when seeking journalists for my sample, I deliberately left open the question of definition. Any potential respondents who asked how I defined alternative media, or whether I regarded their particular experience as fulfilling the criteria, received the reply that it would fulfil my criteria if *they* regarded themselves as having been engaged in alternative media. Some respondents spoke of alternative media providing a voice for otherwise disenfranchised groups in society and/or serving 'fringe' groups. Alternative media was also defined as a means to 'let off steam', while other respondents pointed to a blurring of roles between journalist and source and

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[25] Of whom, 16 were male and 6 female.

[26] However, such perspectives may be more pertinent in societies that operate relatively 'free' media marketplaces.

[27] Some media projects (*Time Out*, for example) may be seen as shifting from alternative to mainstream.

between journalist and audience. Alternative media could therefore be defined, according to one newspaper journalist, as 'anything produced by its potential audience'.

The sample group identified 40 alternative media projects with which they had been involved (listed in Appendix One). Some people worked for more than one, and some projects were mentioned by more than one person. The list includes 'party' newspapers *Militant* and *Morning Star*, feminist publications *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*, underground magazines *Oz* and *Ink*, campaign mouthpieces such as *Anti-Nuclear Action* and *Troops Out*, and non-aligned publications such as *Leveller* and *Red Pepper*. However, such 'national' (UK) projects tell only one side of the alternative media story, as the list of 40 also includes a large number of specifically local projects, whether alternative local newspapers (*Batley Leader*, *Leeds Other Paper*) or fanzines based on a musical or sporting identity (*Big Noise*, *Leyton Orientear*). Print is the dominant medium, but there are also examples from community cable television, community radio and the internet. Work on these alternative media projects was mostly, but not always, unpaid.

Respondents identified 20 mainstream media employers that they had worked for (listed in Appendix Two); again, some people had worked for more than one employer, and some employers were mentioned by more than one person. The list includes local, regional and national newspapers, trade magazines, and broadcasting. In addition to citing specific employers, a number of respondents either work, or have worked, as freelance journalists in the national newspaper, magazine or broadcast sectors. It may be coincidence (and could be the subject of future research) that many of the respondents have ended up working as freelance rather than, or after being, staff journalists; arguably, being freelance gives them greater control over the journalistic tasks they take on.

More than half the journalists (13 out of 22) stated that they had no formal journalism training at any stage in their careers. The remaining nine journalists have had some form of formal training - mostly on courses accredited by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) -

either before or, more typically, after their involvement with alternative media. Asked if they would have become a journalist were it not for their involvement with alternative media, more than half (13) thought they would or probably would; five said they would not or probably would not. The remainder either did not know or did not say. Two respondents mentioned the possibility that working in alternative media might act as a *barrier* to moving into the mainstream rather than an entry route.

There is evidence of some parallel involvement with alternative and mainstream media at the same time. One journalist who has never had any training, for example, reported that his work for alternative media 'went alongside work for the straight media'. Another reported contributing to a range of alternative media projects before, during and after attending a journalism training scheme run by a major mainstream newspaper group. Two other respondents referred to their involvement in alternative media as their *re*-entry route into mainstream journalism after a period away from journalism.

How and why journalists became involved in alternative media

I was interested to explore how - and why - these 22 journalists had become involved in alternative media. The blurring of audience and journalist referred to above was demonstrated by several respondents who explained how they made the transition from the former to the latter. One journalist, who now works for a mainstream regional newspaper, recalled:

> I became involved through being sold an alternative weekly newspaper while in a pub. I went along to see if I could be of any use as I wanted to help…to expose dishonesty, unfairness, hypocrisy, wheeling and dealing and general skullduggery going on in the establishment and to lend a hand to 'save the planet'.

Similarly, a freelance journalist reported:

> I was a reader of the magazine; responded to an invite to readers to a Christmas party, and asked to help afterwards - started coming to the office on a voluntary basis [as] writer, editor, subbing, layout and design, typesetting (we were a collective) until the magazine's demise.

This response to an appeal for volunteers (by the *Leveller)* was echoed by a journalist who later went on to work in mainstream broadcasting:

> They were looking for people to volunteer and help out…and I liked the people and the politics. Everybody did everything… We wanted to produce an alternative source of independent news and information covering arts and politics both in this country and overseas, which was non-aligned to any of the traditional parties of the left. Personally I felt part of a collective endeavour, I met some interesting people and I acquired some very useful skills.

The three people quoted above all joined existing alternative media projects of which they had been readers. Others launched their own media outlets, as in the case of this freelance journalist:

> I was trying to be a rock star… [We] were pissing in the wind… I went home in a rage and immediately put a four-page fanzine together, demanding that the powers-that-vaguely-be start taking the local music scene seriously. Issue one was shite. Utterly shite. But it did hit a nerve and start some kind of movement.

If rage was one motivating factor, the quest for personal exploration was another, as a newspaper journalist recalled:

> I wanted to write but found I was not disciplined enough to apply myself to it properly. A friend who was a comic artist and others of a creative bent had similar challenges so we decided that if we started a magazine with a deadline and launch parties we would have to produce work or face humiliation… We wanted the freedom to experiment in our different mediums without external pressures but with feedback.

Dissatisfaction with mainstream media is, not surprisingly, frequently cited as a reason for involvement with alternative media. A journalist who now writes for the national press explained:

> I suppose I viewed the media as a whole as fairly fatuous, with the exception of media animated by 'a cause' or 'a calling'.

Similarly, a freelance journalist recalled:

> There was an obvious need to put out alternative information about the situation in the North of Ireland to compensate for the shortcomings of mainstream/establishment sources.

Another freelance journalist was critical of the local mainstream newspaper yet at the same time made use of it whilst also producing an anti-nuclear magazine:

> My interest in using the media and developing alternatives began, I think, when I pretty well ran an anti-nuclear power group - and I found how easy it was to get sympathetic stories into the local press… I was also very critical of the politics and staid character (at that time) of the local paper.

Many respondents stated that their involvement in alternative media had been, as one put it, 'part of my contribution' to political activity. In most cases, this was of the non-aligned left variety, and was often a mixture of cultural, informal and more formal political activity. A freelance recalled:

> The central theme of everything I did for the alternative and radical media was to produce work or papers which would appeal outside the narrow spectrum of the underground and the far left. There was also the little question of the replacement of capitalism with a socialist democracy.

Another explained:

> I had a real 'save the world' sensibility and it was important to be working for causes (rather than, for example, making any money)... I found myself in groups who had a need of people who felt they could write concisely, absorb and regurgitate, precis, edit - and I volunteered.

Such pre-occupations were echoed by a journalist who described his motivation behind becoming involved in the ostensibly less 'political' arena of a football fanzine:

> We probably had a slightly evangelical desire to shake people up, get other people writing etc, and also just to let off steam and give others a vehicle to do so.

Alongside such social considerations as being dissatisfied with mainstream media, or wishing to contribute to a cause, there were also more personal motivations such as the desire to gain skills and experience. Social and personal motivations often acted simultaneously, as recalled by a journalist who now works as a staff reporter on a national newspaper:

> I arrived in the office one morning, offered to help around the office and make coffee, but was sent out on a reporting job instead… I originally became involved in alternative journalism because, in essence, I was both very interested in learning about the craft of journalism and getting hands-on experience, but equally interested in reporting and investigating subjects of less interest to local mainstream media - racism and discrimination, local council corruption, fascist political activity, black-listing, gay rights and so on.

Such motivations were not universal, however. One broadcast journalist said he joined a community broadcasting project simply because 'I wanted to play records on the radio'. The desire to 'have a good time' was cited by several respondents as a reason for involvement in alternative media, but that did not preclude other motivations. 'Fun and being part of a cause,' as one freelance put it.

Individual journalistic practice

The journalists were asked about their own journalistic practice; specifically, whether or not they took into mainstream journalism any of the practices they had developed within alternative journalism. Although not everyone perceived any significant difference from journalists who had not been involved with alternative media, and a few prefaced their comments with the qualification that they did not wish to imply that other journalists did not share a similar approach, a number of perceived differences did emerge. The responses had four themes:

- Greater multiskilling and/or resourcefulness (*skills*).

- A different range of contacts (*sources*).

- A different relationship with contacts/sources (*ethics*).

- Different ideas of what makes a good story (*news values*).

The phrase 'multiskilling' occurred in many responses, as did 'resourcefulness', indicating the perceived benefits of working in an alternative media environment in which, to a greater or lesser extent, 'everyone did everything'. So reporters may also have taken photographs

and designed pages as well as physically distributing a publication. There is a clear perception that this experience has given those journalists a more rounded perspective on the media as well as improved 'people skills'. As one journalist explained:

> In trying to design pages, take photos, write good headlines and develop a flow and balance through a 40-page publication, I learned the nuts'n'bolts of production in a way I'd never have done if production alone had been my full-time job. I'm still in a position to understand everyone else's part of the job a lot better than most do… I've also ended up one of the fastest production operatives on the planet! That's come out of having to know when time's up because if you don't finish the fanzine you'll miss that mate who can photocopy 200 tonight only.

The concept of multiskilling - and a 'can do' attitude - could be taken even further, as another journalist recalled:

> I may have been an editor, but there were times when I did typesetting, designed and laid out pages, took pictures, negged the pages and made the plates, even unblocked the toilets. And in doing that, you gain all sorts of new skills and experiences that you don't get in the mainstream media, where you tend to stay inside your professional silo… All I found in the mainstream media was cynicism and low self-esteem. In the alternative media the attitude is 'I'm doing this to change the world'. In the mainstream media it is 'I'm doing this to pay the mortgage'.

Several journalists in the sample pointed out that their experience in alternative media had given them access to a different range of contacts, many of whom they continued to use while working in mainstream media, often providing them with a different range of story ideas. One journalist said that he 'used contacts to construct stories and issues mainstream media had no contact with and often no idea of'. Another explained:

> I had loads of obscure, and occasionally well-placed, contacts that very few other journalists had. I also believe working in the alternative media gives journalists an outlook on things that is unusual. The things that capture the imagination are different from other journalists - you see stories where others don't and vice versa; there is a quirkiness of viewpoint…

A perceived different attitude to, and relationship with, these contacts/sources also emerged from the journalists' replies to the

questionnaire. A freelance journalist explained how this concern with the ethics of journalism affected his daily practice:

> I think I tend to care quite a lot that my work is 'honest' journalism - that's using the word honest in a fundamental sense, to mean among other things not simplifying issues in a lazy way, or exploiting the people I'm interviewing or reporting. Unusually for many journalists I will often check quotes back or explain to people how I intend to use their contributions (not business or PR professionals who know the score, but ordinary people who can be mesmerised by a media enquiry and not realise the importance of choosing their words carefully).

Similarly, a national newspaper journalist said she retained the values she had while working in alternative media:

> I am still anti-racist, anti-imperialist, socialist, feminist. I could never ever work for the red top tabloids. I would never consciously rip anyone off, misquote them, am concerned with how things they tell me in the course of an interview might have an impact on their lives etc…

A freelance journalist explained how her experience of alternative media had informed her later journalism within mainstream media:

> None of the following is meant to imply that other journalists don't feel the same! A commitment to helping give a voice to people who aren't usually otherwise heard. As a reporter that would mean talking to the homeless person before the housing officer, for example. Presenting campaigning, trade unions, squatting, feminism, lesbian and gay rights etc as a normal part of everyday life. Obviously keeping to the NUJ Code of Conduct as best I can… In personal terms, not…making decisions on the basis of whether I was furthering my career.

In addition to skills, sources and ethics, several of the journalists noted that they had taken a different conception of news values into their jobs within mainstream media. As a magazine journalist reported:

> I tend to dissent from many of the views of the mainstream media. I often tend to think, there's no story there, or that's not the story.

A freelance journalist gave some specific examples:

> I have written lots of stories that look at perspectives - Islamic banking is an obvious example, also environmental concerns and

ethnic minority businesses - that perhaps the mainstream media is less likely to have pursued.

Of the 22 journalists surveyed, 14 said they continued to use alternative media as sources of ideas, stories or contacts, while another four did so sometimes.

It remains an open question whether the skills, sources, ethics and news values discussed above have a tendency to distinguish journalists who have worked in alternative media from those who have not. One journalist reported that his alternative experiences had equipped him with 'a certain iconoclasm' and 'a belief that one way or another you can wing it' before adding: 'but then that should be an attribute of any journalist'. Another warned against regarding journalistic virtue as residing solely in alternative media: 'I've met some splendidly off-message journalists who've never been near alternative media.'

Relationship between alternative and mainstream media

The respondents were asked whether, on the basis of their experience or observations, they felt that alternative media had made an impact on mainstream media. Most reported some kind of influence, albeit often limited. Suggested influences ranged from providing recruits for the wider journalism industry to making parts of the mainstream media alter some editorial practices. A newspaper journalist observed:

> Mainstream media are always stealing the styles, content and contributors of alternative media. It's a bit like an underground music scene, things filter through.

Another newspaper journalist argued that mainstream media tended to be 'less sensationalist and/or dogmatic when it knows it could itself become the news', ie in alternative media. And a freelance journalist recalled:

> We made the local newspapers in the town sit up and take notice of us. They also became more inclusive in their own editorial content.

More specific examples of influence included the growth of 'what's on' listings; the 'new journalism' writing style in features and lifestyle copy; the

use of design and graphics for campaigns; the inclusion of fanzine style supporters' perspectives in sports journalism; and the highlighting of certain issues or perspectives, helping to make them visible. One journalist expanded on this last point:

> There's always a need for alternative viewpoints and diversity if any change is to be made to current conditions. One example might be: in the 1970s feminist journals raised issues which were taken up by trade unions in the 1980s and became copy for (a part of) the mainstream in the 1990s - issues like domestic violence or sexual harassment at work, which were 'unsayable' till said by the alternative media… The extent to which feminist ideas have permeated the mainstream, even if 'feminism' itself (or the usual caricature of it) is dismissed as old fashioned or irrelevant. Taking a longer view, there are numerous other issues (over the centuries) which were first aired in contemporary 'alternative media' before becoming part of the mainstream, like the struggle for universal adult suffrage.[28]

However, not everyone agreed with such a perspective. One journalist argued that 'in a way the lack of influence is what makes the alternative media alternative'. And another complained: 'Mainstream journalists take material put out by alternative sources and put it out under their own names!'

The above responses suggest there have been a range of ways in which the practices of alternative media have influenced the practices of mainstream media, according to those with experience of working in both. But the relationship between the two is not fixed. A magazine journalist summed up the fluidity of this relationship in the following way:

> The battle to sustain [alternative media] is never-ending. There is more alternative info than ever, through the internet, yet the dominance of commercial media seems to get stronger - a constant mystery.

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[28] Of course, social forces (the impact of feminism, for example) will have impacted on *both* mainstream and alternative media, so it would be unwise to assume that because alternative media said something and then mainstream media said it, that this was a causal effect. Wider social processes will be at work at the same time, and alternative and mainstream media may be both senders and receivers of messages.

Despite - rather, because of - this perceived continued dominance of mainstream commercial media, and notwithstanding developments *within* the mainstream, there is felt to be a continued need for alternative voices to be heard, however faintly. A freelance journalist argued:

> People with strong common interests need vehicles to communicate with each other… Mainstream journalism is probably a bit more diverse than in years gone by, but it could still do with more diversity. The quality of some journalism - content in the red top tabloids and the standard of writing and news selections in many local papers - makes you want to cry or just screw up the papers.

Yet a national newspaper journalist argued that distinctions between journalism within alternative and mainstream media were not as stark, with many alternative projects abandoning investigative reporting in favour of comment, and sections of the mainstream taking up issues (such as the environment) previously seen as the preserve of alternative media:

> The longer I spend working in mainstream media the more I find that the crossover between the two 'brands' of reporting is far greater than outsiders suspect, although chiefly with centre and centre-left papers such as the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*…

This notion of 'crossover' is one of the matters discussed below.

Not entirely separate worlds

The above findings echo a trend that can be detected in some recent writing about alternative media: that such media cannot be understood in isolation from the mainstream. This can be seen in the rejection of 'binarism' (Downing, 2001, p. ix) and the emergence of the concept of 'hybridity' (Atton, 2003b, p.26-27). In his study of alternative media, Atton (2002, p.151-152) refers to 'hybridized' practices to suggest the ways in which those involved in such production break down barriers between form, content and distribution and make 'subversive use' of skills and techniques drawn from mainstream media. For Atton (2003b, p.26):

> Conspicuous features of alternative media practices have not simply broken with mainstream practices, they have often sought to radically redefine them… Hybridity can also been [sic] found in the

> form and content of alternative media reporting. It can be argued that, far from alternative media establishing ways of doing journalism that are radical to the extent that they mark dramatic ruptures from existing practices of journalism, their work may draw from existing forms (such as tabloid journalism) and methods (such as investigative journalism).

The findings outlined above suggest that this is not a one-way process. Some practices make their way from alternative to mainstream forms of journalism; and, as this study indicates, there is some movement of people too.

In the absence of quantitative data we cannot attempt to estimate the numbers involved, but this exploratory study suggests that working in alternative media has acted as an entry point, a re-entry point, and/or a training ground for a number of journalists who went on to work within mainstream media. It is also evident from the findings that some, at least, of these journalists regard themselves as having a set of skills and practices that differ to an extent from those of journalists who have entered journalism through more traditional (or more widely recognised) routes. However, whilst referring to attributes such as multiskilling, resourcefulness, scepticism, ethics, and trustworthiness, several made the point that these should be the attributes of 'any journalist', and that they did not see themselves as superior beings. Whilst many acknowledged certain differences of approach between themselves and journalists with more conventional career paths, several pondered on whether this was as a result of their involvement in alternative media or, rather, whether this was why they had been attracted to alternative media in the first place. (Or neither? Or both?)

The fact that the journalists in the sample group had gone on to make their livings within mainstream media - and that some at least saw themselves as continuing their alternative-style practice within the mainstream - lends some credence to the contention that mainstream media ought not to be regarded as a unitary and monolithic entity. As Conboy (2004, p.107-108) argues, the type of radical journalism associated with nineteenth century oppositional publications such as *Northern Star* 'continues to make brief, if

marginal, appearances' within the mainstream; but such appearances are 'always on terms dominated by a capitalized and incorporated industry'. For Conboy, journalists such as Paul Foot and John Pilger continued this radical 'rhetoric and tradition' in recent decades, despite occupying 'commodified spaces within a journalism environment which is institutionally and procedurally balanced towards more conservative positions'. The reappearance of Pilger in the pages of the *Daily Mirror* during the 2003 Iraq war - and the fact that he has continued to make occasional challenging programmes for the UK's major commercial television channel (ITV1) - should warn us not to regard mainstream media as being entirely uniform.

Nor can the experiences of journalists - including within alternative media - be understood as uniform experiences. Whilst the above findings suggest that the journalistic gene pool may have been deepened by the entry of some people via alternative media, the research also suggests that not everyone works in only one field (alternative or mainstream) at the same time; that the movement between alternative and mainstream is not all one way; and that it would be a simplification to state that journalists in the mainstream receive formal training whilst their alternative counterparts learn their trade in the university of the streets. It is more complicated than that. Similarly, Platon and Deuze (2003, p.340-352) found the practices of those involved with Indymedia websites to be not so very different from mainstream media practices in a number of ways, including content selection, a concern with immediacy, and the use of brand identity to establish an authoritative voice. Drawing on the work of Laclau (1977, p.7-8) and others, they argued that Indymedia journalists could be seen as 'articulated' to mainstream journalism (Platon and Deuze, 2003, p.340); articulation being 'a process of creating connections' (Slack, 1996, p.114) and 'a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time' (Hall, 1986, p.141).

The evidence of this exploratory study would appear to support the contention of Atton and Couldry (2003, p.584) that the practices and processes of alternative media should not be considered as 'entirely

separate' from those of more dominant media. Many of those surveyed for this article entered alternative media through informal means such as dropping in and offering to help, and they began their journalistic activity with the specific intention of helping (hoping) to 'change the world' in some way. Such decisions were, for many, informed by a critique of mainstream or commercial media. Despite this, all 22 then found ways of working within parts of the mainstream - sometimes in parallel with alternative media - whilst in many cases reportedly taking their alternative contacts books and alternative attitudes with them. When asked to reflect on the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, the respondents identified a number of possible ways in which the former have influenced the latter. One journalist commented: 'The longer I spend working in mainstream media the more I find that the crossover between the two "brands" of reporting is far greater than outsiders suspect.' This lends credence to the contention of Campbell (2004, p.182) that alternatives to 'conventional practices' operate 'on occasion at least, *within* conventional media organisations apparently dealing with mainstream audiences and mainstream concerns' (emphasis in original).

The sample group for this study could be said to embody the notion of crossover - of both people and practices - between alternative and mainstream forms of journalism. Certainly, the existence of a number of journalists who have worked in both alternative and mainstream media, many of whom report that their work within the mainstream has been informed by perspectives they held whilst working within alternative media, suggests that the picture is indeed more complex than the most binarist explanations would have us believe. Despite the limitations of qualitative research in relying on relatively small numbers and on self-perception, it is the contention of this article that journalism scholarship can benefit from considering the insights offered by the journalists in this exploratory study - not as paragons of virtue or as heroes of the working class, but as journalists who have critiqued the media from the inside.

A critique of practice, conducted in practice

Academics have too often resorted to a simplistic 'David versus Goliath' framework to analyse the relationship between alternative and mainstream media, according to Rodriguez (2001). This results, she says, in 'rigid categories of power and binary conceptions of domination and subordination'. Although it would be foolish to dismiss the power of the market in marginalising and/or incorporating oppositional forms of journalism, this study has suggested that[29] there may be some crossover of ideas, content, style, and, not least, people between what may be termed the alternative and what may be termed the mainstream; that some of the alternative media's 'hybridized voices' (Atton, 2002, p.151) may on occasions resonate within the mainstream. At the very least, the findings lend credence to the suggestion that we need 'more finely graded positions' to help us understand that the practices and processes of alternative media are not 'entirely separate' from the practices and processes of more dominant media (Atton and Couldry, 2003, p.584). It also needs to be recognised that there is considerable variety *within* both alternative and mainstream media (Downing, 2001, p. ix).

The experiences of the journalists reported in this study suggest the existence of what might be termed a continuum, with people, ideas and practices moving along this continuum, in both directions. To argue that the journalism/s practised within alternative and mainstream media are part of a continuum is not the same as saying they are all the same or that they occupy positions of equal power. Nor does it imply that alternative media are merely a stepping stone for would-be journalists or some kind of proving ground for mainstream media, although it might sometimes appear as if mainstream media simply take what they want from alternative journalism to reinvigorate themselves and ultimately to strengthen their dominance (much as the commercial music industry takes ideas and talent developed at the margins and squeezes all the life out of them by the processes of commodification). Certainly, the pioneering, radical and

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[29] In the UK, at least.

dangerous[30] journalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be seen as paving the way for the commercialised journalism practised in the mainstream media today (Curran and Seaton, 2003, pp.3-103).

Whilst incorporation of alternative media practices and personnel may be part of the story, it is not the whole story. Gary Younge[31] writes that, by providing 'an alternative prism through which to examine the world', alternative media continue to help create and sustain a community of activists. He argues:

> We need alternative media to keep debate thriving in print at a time
> when it is being extinguished in Parliament and elsewhere in the
> press; we need them to raise the bar of what is regarded as
> acceptable or desirable, and to challenge the skewed version of
> 'normality' pumped out by the regular press. (Younge, 2004.)

The views of those journalists surveyed who have seen both alternative media and mainstream media from the inside seem to support this view. As one of the respondents noted, certain things appear to be 'unsayable' until they are said by alternative media. If we accept that this can sometimes be the case, then it would support Younge's implicit argument that alternative media are essential for the healthy functioning of a public sphere. As Campbell (2004, p.202) argues:

> In their efforts at attempting to address topics otherwise
> marginalised by mainstream media, to try to give access to otherwise
> marginalised groups, or simply through challenging the
> presumptions of conventional styles of journalism, these alternative
> journalisms are potentially significant in their impact on a deeper
> understanding of what journalism means.

Ultimately, then, discussion of crossover, hybridity, articulation and a continuum is not about labels. It is a discussion about journalism, and it is not the preserve of the academy. If there is some movement of individuals between alternative and mainstream media, then it means that there are critical practitioner perspectives available to us from people who have contributed to alternative and mainstream media either at different times or

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[30] For those practising it.

[31] A journalist on the mainstream (albeit liberal) *Guardian* who also writes for alternative magazine *Red Pepper*.

simultaneously, and who have critiqued journalistic practice, in practice. In the fields of journalism and journalism scholarship alike, there is, as Platon and Deuze (2003, p.352) point out, plenty of scope for 'exchange and learning' from different perspectives and practices. This study is offered as a modest contribution to that process.

Appendix One: alternative media cited by respondents

Anti-Nuclear Action, campaign magazine; *Batley Leader*, local newspaper; *Big Flame*, newspaper of a left-wing organisation; *Big Noise*, music fanzine; *City Limits*, listings magazine; Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament local newsletter; Community cable TV; *Counter Press*, magazine; *Fleece*, student magazine; *Forge FM*, community radio station; *Green Gathering Collective*, magazine; *Half Baked*, magazine; *Hammer*, underground paper; *Heroes & Villains*, football fanzine; *Idiot International*, underground magazine; Information on Ireland publications; *Ink*, underground magazine; Journalists' Charter newsletters; *Knee Deep In Shit*, investigative magazine; *Leeds Other Paper*, local newspaper; *Leveller*, non-aligned left magazine; *Leyton Orientear*, football fanzine; *MatchON.com*, sports website; *Militant*, newspaper of a left-wing organisation; *Morning Star*, newspaper of a left-wing organisation; *News on Sunday*, a national left-wing newspaper; *Noisewave*, music fanzine; *Outwrite*, women's newspaper; *Oz*, underground magazine; *Peace News*, campaigning magazine; *Red Pepper*, non-aligned left magazine; *Sanity*, campaign magazine; *Searchlight*, campaigning magazine; *SiYu*, magazine for the Chinese community; *Socialist*, non-aligned left newspaper; *Spare Rib*, feminist magazine; *Stop Press*, alternative student newspaper; *Street Life*, newspaper; *Tribune*, left Labour newspaper; *Troops Out*, campaign magazine.

Appendix Two: mainstream media cited by respondents[32]
BBC, state-funded broadcasting organisation; *Beo*, Irish language internet magazine published by Oideas Gael; *Birmingham Evening Mail*, daily newspaper in the West Midlands published by Trinity Mirror; *Daily Record*, Scottish national daily newspaper published by Trinity Mirror; *Dewsbury*

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[32] Some respondents requested that current employers not be named.

Reporter Group, weekly newspapers in West Yorkshire published by Johnston Press; Freelance broadcast journalist; Freelance for magazines; Freelance for *Financial Times;* Freelance for national newspapers; *Guardian*, national daily newspaper published by the Scott Trust; *Halifax Evening Courier*, daily newspaper in West Yorkshire published by Johnston Press; *Independent on Sunday*, national Sunday newspaper published by Independent News & Media; *Irish Post*, weekly newspaper published by Smurfit Media UK; *Kentish Times*, group of weekly newspapers in Kent now published by Archant; News agencies; *People Management*, magazine published by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; *Pharmaceutical Executive*, magazine published by Advanstar Communications; *Portsmouth Evening News*, daily newspaper published in Hampshire by Johnston Press; PR adviser; *Scotsman*, Scottish national daily newspaper published by Scotsman Publications; *South Wales Argus*, daily newspaper in Newport published by Newsquest; *Time Out*, listings magazine published by Time Out Group; *Waltham Forest Guardian*, weekly newspaper published in London by Newsquest; *What Mortgage?*, magazine published in London; *Yorkshire Television*, commercial broadcasting company owned by Granada.

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'The Ethical Journalist'

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Chapter One: Introduction to ethical journalism

It was a small story in a local newspaper. It began:

> Mrs Hattie Carroll, 51, Negro waitress at the Emerson Hotel, died last week as a result of the brutal beating by a wealthy socialite during the exclusive Spinsters' Ball at that hotel… (Wood, 1963.)

That article, published in the *Baltimore Sun* in February 1963, went on to explain that Hattie Carroll had been hit with a cane by farm owner William Zantzinger. Mrs Carroll was a black woman with 10 children. She died in hospital from internal haemorrhaging. Zantzinger, who was white, was arrested and released on bail. In August of that year he received a six months' jail sentence for manslaughter, and the story was picked up by other parts of the United States media. According to a report of the court case in *Time* magazine (1963): "The judges considerately deferred the start of the jail sentence until Sept 15, to give Zantzinger time to harvest his tobacco crop."

Fleetingly, the case was brought to national attention. Or, at least, to the attention of those paying attention, one of whom was a 22-year-old folk singer going by the name of Bob Dylan. Within days he had written *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*. "This is a true story," Dylan would tell audiences when introducing the song. "This was taken out of the newspapers. Nothing but the words have been changed" (quoted in

Corcoran, 2003: 153). In what has been described as a "journalistic narrative" (Hajdu, 2001: 189), *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* introduces us to the characters, gives us the facts, fills in the background to the story, and builds layer upon layer of understanding. It has been described as "perhaps Dylan's most journalistic song" (Frazier, 2004), telling the story "with the economy of a news reporter and the imagery of a poet" (Sounes, 2002: 176). Dylan's words continue to speak to audiences down the years. Thanks to his song, countless thousands of people around the world have now heard the story of Hattie Carroll and William Zantzinger: a human interest story of two individuals that tells us something about society.

As with many journalists, Dylan has on occasions been accused of distorting the facts of a case to fit his own agenda (Heylin, 2001: 124-125). But Dylan is an artist, not a reporter. When a singer says that a song is true, their words are taken as meaning that the song is *based* on a true story, that the facts are *broadly* as indicated in the lyrics, and/or that the song is true to the emotion or spirit of real events. A reporter makes a very different promise; a promise that is implicit in all journalism. When a journalist says, "This is a true story," that is precisely what she or he means. That's why the very first clause of the international journalists' code declares: "Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist" (www.ifj.org). The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) brings together journalists' organisations from more than 100 countries and, although few of their half-a-million members could recite the code in detail, most journalists understand the principle: that our job is indeed to get at the truth.

Which is not to say that journalists always report the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth can be an elusive beast to hunt down, even without the help of those philosophers who tell us that it does not exist. And the truth can hurt. Consider the following three examples of truthful reporting.

After the *Derbyshire Times* reported that Brampton Rovers trounced Waltheof by 29 goals to nil in an under-nines football match, the Sheffield and District Junior Sunday League ordered clubs not to tell local newspapers the results of matches in which any team lost by more than 14 goals. This was apparently motivated by a desire to prevent the defeated children feeling humiliated (Scott, 2004). A minor example, perhaps, but it demonstrates that, for journalists, ethical considerations can arise when you least expect them, even when reporting the football scores.

In common with most local newspapers in the UK, the *Kenilworth Weekly News* routinely reports on sports days and other events at schools in its circulation area. But it was forced to stop publishing children's surnames after a bogus kidnapper caused intense distress by telephoning parents and claiming he had snatched their children. Police said the hoaxer had targeted parents whose children had been identified in newspaper coverage of primary school functions (Lagan, 2005). It is another example of a simple, everyday story having potential ethical implications.

Reporters covering the siege at Middle School Number One in the small Russian town of Beslan presumably acted in good faith when they reported the fact that relatives outside the school were receiving mobile phone calls from some of the hostages inside. But when the hijackers heard this on television they forced hostages to hand over their mobiles and shot a man for making a call (Walsh, 2004). It is a life-and-death example of the weighty responsibility borne by journalists, even when reporting accurately. But journalists do not always report accurately.

Not according to Eymen, at least. He is a Kurdish refugee who fled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Talking to a group of journalists in the UK, he told us about taking a call on his mobile one day: it was a friend, asking if he could help a new asylum seeker who had just arrived in town with nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, and no money. The call came just as Eymen was passing a newspaper kiosk that displayed banner headlines about asylum seekers being housed in luxurious mansions. The irony was not lost on him. So obsessed are parts of the UK media with asylum seekers

that, when they are absent from the front pages, he asks the shopkeeper: "What's the matter, have asylum seekers done nothing wrong today?" (quoted in Harcup, 2003).

Such coverage is beyond a joke for Sandra Nyaira, former political editor of the *Daily News* in Zimbabwe and now a member of the Exiled Journalists Network in the UK, who explains:

> In the last year alone I have read articles, mostly in the tabloids, that blamed refugees, nay, asylum seekers…for the rapid spread of infectious diseases like TB, the dreaded HIV/Aids virus, Sars, as well as housing shortages and even terrorism… As soon as they land at Gatwick or Heathrow, they blight Britain's services. It is all sheer hyprocrisy… The public trust most of the things they read in newspapers so journalists must be responsible in the way they present issues that directly affect the lives of others, especially those who are in no position to answer back. (2004.)

Asylum seekers are people with histories and, therefore, with stories. But sections of the UK press too often seem intent on demonising them as a group - a label - rather than treating them as individuals with their own tales to tell. That is not just unethical journalism; it's bad journalism.

There is certainly too much stereotyping going under the banner of journalism, just as there is too much clichéd coverage, empty-headed celebrity-chasing, peering into people's bedrooms, hysterical yapping and yelping…and far, far too many columnists taking up resources that could be devoted to reporting. As the redoubtable journalist Paul Foot put it, when discussing "freedom of the press":

> Nothing wastes newspaper space more than columnists "letting off steam", especially if they are billed as "frank" or "fearless". There is nothing specially free about a courageous or fearless opinion which involves no courage or fear whatsoever. (2000: 79.)

Even our popular newspapers look positively highbrow in comparison to those "lads' mags" in which the height of journalistic ambition seems to be to persuade a model to pose in what one editor describes fondly as "subservient poses with her arse in the air" (quoted in Turner, 2005).

However, there is also journalism that can inform, surprise, challenge, shock, even inspire, as well as entertain. When I wake up in the morning I can turn on BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, for example, and discover something that I didn't already know. I can even learn the "unknown unknowns" that (to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld) I didn't know that I didn't know. It's far from perfect, and I often shout at the radio in exasperation, but listening to the *Today* programme invariably leaves me better informed, having been exposed to a mixture of reportage and discussion, interesting questions, and even the occasional straight answer. It is essential listening.

Similarly, I can never pick up a quality national newspaper without finding something to interest me. It might be the front page splash or the hard news in the early pages, but it is just as likely to be an analytical backgrounder, a quirkily-written warts-and-all obituary, or a photograph that captures some moment of sporting ballet in all its glory. The UK "popular" papers may leave me cold with their tales about the antics of celebs, but such papers also have the ability to highlight social issues in as dramatic and powerful a manner as does any journalism anywhere on the globe. They can also make me laugh out loud. And there is something deeply pleasing about falling asleep at night listening to journalists describe a football match on the radio, then waking up and finding a newspaper on the doormat containing an account of the same game, complete with pictures; if you don't want to wait for the morning, you can go online and get similar coverage almost instantly. It feels like magic, but in reality it's just people getting on with their jobs, often in difficult circumstances. Even the freebie *Metro* newspaper, despite its lack of investment in editorial staff, can provide enough clearly written bite-sized news items to brighten up a brief bus journey. It also has the potential to surprise, as with its description of a motorist who was fined for splashing pedestrians as a "puddle toll martyr"[33] (*Metro*, 3 November 2005).

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[33] Anyone who doesn't understand the reference should look up the Tolpuddle Martyrs on the internet and delight in the fact that a sub on a throwaway freesheet was prepared to stretch his or her readers.

The BBC and our national newspapers may be regarded as the regular "agenda setters" of journalism, but thousands of journalists work elsewhere in the media. There are magazines that cover virtually every subject imaginable, often with flair and imagination as well as specialist expertise. There is a minority ethnic press serving sections of the population that feel misrepresented or simply rendered invisible by much of the rest of the media. There are local and regional newspapers that – despite relentless staffing cuts - can still tell people more about what is going on where they live than they hear from their neighbours, and that can run lively campaigns on behalf of their readers. And there is *Private Eye*, which is in a must-read class of its own for most journalists. On television there are investigative current affairs slots that – sometimes, at least - tell us things we don't already know. There are 24 hour news channels that can broadcast live coverage of press conferences, parliamentary debates, and events such as a whale swimming into central London. There are broadcast journalists who do everything from distilling local events into brief bulletins on commercial radio to analysing world events at length every evening on the excellent *Channel Four News*. There are journalists whose work goes straight onto the web, combining traditional elements of print, TV and radio reporting to make something new. And there are freelance reporters and news agencies who try to ensure that nobody can cough or spit on their patch without them hearing and, if possible, making a story about it. Beyond all that there are international media, mostly now available online. There also exist alternative media that make use of journalistic techniques to challenge and critique what we get from mainstream media (Harcup, 2005b; 2006). Then there are the countless bloggers, whose online web logs include the good, bad and the ugly of the internet age, and who can inform, educate and entertain while "stretching the boundaries" of journalism (Allan, 2004: 180). And there is the potential for citizens increasingly to get in on the act, believes broadcast journalist Jon Snow. He points to the way in which coverage of the "barbarity of American troops in Fallujah" was made possible because, although journalists were kept out of the Iraqi city, footage was taken by local people. "It has only been exposed because people have been able to take video and use the web to get it to us," says

Snow. "The opportunities are fantastic. I just can't see the secret society surviving" (quoted in Kiss, 2006).

There is, then, much to celebrate about journalism. But we cannot take good journalism for granted. The ethos of this book is that to be good journalists we need to be thinking journalists, or reflective practitioners. By this I mean that journalists should be encouraged to reflect critically on our job – both individually and collectively - *while* we are doing it. To date, much discussion of the ethical dimensions of journalism has been bogged down in worthy-but-abstract philosophising or sidetracked into treating ethics as a set of obstacles blocking journalists' paths. That is why this is not another book about ethics. It is a book about journalism.

Its starting point is that, as we have seen, *everything* journalists do - from reporting on a school sports day to covering international conflict – has potential ethical implications. Whether we recognise it or not, ethics are involved in every story we follow up or ignore; every interview we request; every conversation with a confidential source; every quote we use, leave out or tidy up; every bit of context we squeeze in, simplify or exclude; every decision to create (sorry, report) a "row"; every photograph we select or "improve"; every soundbite we choose to use; every approach from an advertiser trying to influence editorial copy; every headline we write; every question we ask or don't ask. For the ethical journalist, it is not enough to have a bulging contacts book or a good nose for news; being an ethical journalist also means asking questions about our own practice.

If everything that journalists do has ethical implications, it follows that no one book could possibly deal with all the ethical issues that may arise during a journalist's career. That is as true of the big issues – such as racism and sexism – as of specifics ranging from the embedding of war reporters to the selection of stick-thin models by women's magazines. So, this book will not cover every single issue ever faced by journalists, nor every type of society within which journalists operate. Although written primarily from a UK perspective, it seeks to highlight the key principles involved and to aid understanding of why and how journalism is practised. It will not attempt to

lay down a series of do's and don'ts or provide a list of problems to be ticked off; still less will it attempt to provide a list of easy answers. Instead, it will explore a range of ethical considerations at a practical level, and discuss such considerations within the context of historical and contemporary ideas about what journalism is for. By discussing a range of ideas, arguments and examples – and by adopting a questioning, challenging approach – I hope it will support journalists and journalism students in thinking about the implications of what they are doing, in whatever medium and country they are doing it. The aim is to encourage critical analysis within the classroom and a more reflective practice within the newsroom, based on the idea that theory can inform practice and vice versa.

Not that we will all think alike, of course. Journalists should "become more self-reflective and less careless with their power", argues John Lloyd (2004: 141), a *Financial Times* journalist who is now a director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University. I agree with Lloyd on that, but the results of my reflections - on the Hutton Inquiry, for example (Harcup, 2005a) – are quite different from those in his influential lament about the state of UK journalism, *What the Media are Doing to our Politics*. When dealing with as messy a business as journalism, such a difference of opinion is inevitable; in fact, it is probably desirable. As John Stuart Mill put it in his famous *Essay on Liberty*:

> Truth…has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners… Only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair play to all sides of truth… [T]here is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices… (1859: 26.)

This book will draw on the reflections of a range of journalists, on my own experience as both journalist and academic, on a wide range of published sources, and on original research. Issues and principles will be approached via specific examples and case studies, drawn from a range of media. Chapter Two will look at why journalism matters to society and consider the implications of challenges to journalism ranging from the Hutton Report in the UK to the *New York Times* fakery case in the United States. Discussion

of why journalism matters leads inevitably to the concept of journalists as a fourth estate, acting as a form of watchdog on government, and this will be addressed in Chapter Three. Fulfilling this watchdog role has led to some journalists using subterfuge, justifying their actions as being in the public interest. This public interest defence will form the basis of Chapter Four, which will explore investigative and undercover reporting. Chapters Five and Six will consider the implications of the choices made by journalists in selecting news stories and in their relationships with sources. All these issues will be discussed within the context of one particular genre of journalism - crime reporting - in Chapter Seven. Chapters Eight and Nine will look at a range of what might be termed ethical interventions, first in the form of self-regulation and statutory regulation, then by tracing a hidden history of journalists standing up for ethical journalism. Finally, Chapter Ten will draw together the key themes of the book: that ethical journalism is good journalism and that good journalism is ethical journalism.

This book will discuss many of the pressures that, arguably, make it harder to practise good, ethical journalism; trends that, for some, came to a head at the British Press Awards in 2005, when the Scoop of the Year went to the *News of the World*'s "sensational…hugely entertaining" account of a footballer having sex with somebody who wasn't his wife (British Press Awards, 2005: 46). When the *News of the World* - aka *News of the Screws* - was also named National Newspaper of the Year, the decision dismayed those who believe that, in the words of media pundit Roy Greenslade (2005), "journalism is not about the size of a chequebook, dubious invasions of privacy and the weekly purveying of sleaze". Although the Newspaper of the Year prize was given to the redesigned *Guardian* the following year, Scoop of the Year once again went to a celebrity story, this time a tale about a model taking drugs (*Press Gazette*, 2006b). Whatever next? Final proof that bears defecate in the woods?

The idea that journalists should be content to entertain audiences with titillating tittle-tattle is an insidious one, argues Francis Williams, a

thoughtful commentator on media affairs who was editor of the *Daily Herald*:

> The real danger facing a good deal of journalism today…is that it will be pressed into a pattern that denies it all purpose other than the purely commercial one of attracting the largest number of paying customers by whatever means comes most readily to hand… The defence of journalism as more than a trade and greater than an entertainment technique – although a trade it is and entertaining it must be – is properly the journalists' and no one else's. (1959: 225.)

Those words were written almost half a century ago, but – as with Bob Dylan's account of the death of Hattie Carroll – they speak to us still.

Chapter Two: Why journalism matters

It was quite a big story for a young reporter to be sent on: to go to the home town of a US soldier who was missing in action during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, to meet the family and describe their pain, with a bit of local colour thrown in. So the reporter flew from New York to San Antonio, hired a car that he would end up sleeping in, and headed south in the blazing heat. He drove down US 77 in the direction of Los Fresnos, a typical Texan town near the border with Mexico. He missed his exit, met a helpful man at a petrol station, and eventually arrived in the small, dusty town. He crossed some railroad tracks and found his way to the family home of the missing soldier. There he was shown a shrine to the missing Marine, and the family opened up to him, giving him plenty of quotes about their grief. He wrote it up, filed the copy to his newspaper, and headed back to New York with a hefty expenses claim, having fulfilled his brief.

The only trouble was, the young reporter had not spoken to the family and had never set foot in Los Fresnos. He had remained in his Brooklyn apartment all the time that he was supposed to be in Texas on behalf of the *New York Times* (Blair, 2004: 1-5; 294-295). As had become his habit, he had constructed the story by lifting quotes from news agencies and local newspapers, embellished with details drawn from a photographic archive. As the reporter in question, Jayson Blair, later explained:

> I lied and I lied – and then I lied some more. I lied about where I had been, I lied about where I had found information, I lied about how I wrote the story… It was a simple system of deception – my tools were my laptop, my cell phone, online archives and the photo database, which could be accessed from my kitchen table. (2004: 1 and 11.)

He had been getting away with it for years but was eventually found out when a reporter on the *San Antonio Express-News* took the trouble to put in a call to the *New York Times*, pointing out similarities between her story on the missing Marine and Blair's subsequent one (Blair, 2004: 9; Mnookin, 2005: 104). After an internal investigation and some more lying, Blair resigned and on 11 May 2003 the *New York Times* published the embarrassing story on its front page. Its 13,000-word correction-from-hell began:

> A staff reporter for the *New York Times* committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events in recent months… The widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper… Every newspaper, like every bank and every police department, trusts its employees to uphold central principles, and the inquiry found that Mr Blair repeatedly violated the cardinal tenet of journalism, which is simply truth… (Quoted in Mnookin, 2005: 173-174).

Blair (2004: ix) conceded in his memoirs – for which he received a reported advance of $150,000 (Hanson, 2004: 399) – that his deceptions "have not only let down the employees of *The Times*, but also my family, my friends, my college professor and myself". And, he might have added, his readers and his fellow citizens. Although Blair "had issues" – he was a black reporter in a mainly white organisation, and he also suffered from addiction and manic-depression – his is fundamentally a story about trust. Or, to be more precise, betrayal of trust.

If the Blair case is informative because it illustrates that trust is at the heart of good journalism, it is also instructive in indicating what can go wrong when fellow journalists feel their doubts are likely to be ignored. The warning signs had been apparent to some of his colleagues for some time, yet Blair was popular with those in charge of the newspaper, whose

apparently dismissive attitude discouraged section editors from speaking up. As Seth Mnookin (2005: 157) observes, "a newsroom where editors are scared to voice their concerns is a disaster waiting to happen". Jayson Blair was that disaster.

Not that he was the first journalist to resort to invention. Perhaps most famously, Janet Cooke had to hand back the Pulitzer Prize she won for her heart-rending reports in the *Washington Post* about an eight-year-old heroin addict called Jimmy, when it was discovered that Jimmy existed only in her imagination (Sanders, 2003: 109). Again, as David Randall (2000: 138) notes, some of Cooke's colleagues had doubts but they "either thought it best to keep quiet, or thought the story 'too good to check'". Nor is fakery confined to the US. Granada Television in the UK, for example, was fined £2 million for a documentary, *The Connection*, in which supposed drug runners were in fact actors (Keeble, 2001a: 65). And then - on a lighter note, as they say – there was the reporter in Liverpool who was sent to seek out human interest stories from passengers about to embark on ocean-going liners. Having drawn a blank, he resorted to inventing a romantic story about a pair of long-lost lovers who had been reunited and married and were now sailing to their new home in Canada. His newsdesk was so impressed that they instructed their Canadian reporter to meet the couple when the ship docked in Montreal. The Liverpool reporter – certain that he was about to be exposed as a faker - was astonished to see a full interview duly appear when the happy couple arrived. "The Montreal man, too, had to hold down his job," he realised. "I wiped the sweat off my brow" (quoted in Marr, 2005: 89). Making up quotes from a happy couple who don't exist might seem a relatively harmless occupation. And so it is, if you are writing fiction. Journalism, however, is about getting at the truth. We may not always achieve it, but the truth is our aim. "Our mission is to tell the truth," declared the *Daily Mirror* in its front page apology for printing "in good faith" what turned out to be fake photographs of British soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners; editor Piers Morgan lost his job after continuing to defend their publication (Allan, 2005: 1-2).

The Jayson Blair case – in which a journalist deliberately "fabricated history" (Mnookin, 2005: 162) – is especially shocking for anyone who cares about journalism. But it would be wrong to blame him for all of journalism's ills, argues commentator Paul McMasters (2004: 407), who says Blair is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise in which marketing the news has become more important than reporting the news. McMasters writes that the systematic shortcomings of a journalism that is "too sensational, too superficial, too immersed in celebrity, too invasive, too riddled with mistakes" are more damaging in the long run than the activities of "a gaggle of miscreants playing fast and loose with the truth".

The failures of journalists matter because journalism matters. And journalism matters, as Barbie Zelizer (2004: 204) puts it, "not in one prescribed way but in many ways and across many circumstances". Zelizer is a journalist-turned-professor in the US. A UK counterpart, Ian Hargreaves (2003: 25), similarly has no doubts about the importance of our craft:

> I operate from the assumption that journalism matters not just to journalists, but to everyone: good journalism provides the information and opinion upon which successful democratic societies depend.

This is hardly a new point. When the great English radical Tom Paine had some of his articles spiked by the *Pennsylvania Packet* in 1786, he told the editor that even privately owned newspapers had public duties, adding:

> If the freedom of the press is to be determined by the judgement of the printer of a newspaper in preference to that of the people, who when they read will judge for themselves, the[n] freedom is on a very sandy foundation. (Quoted in Keane, 1996: 261-262.)

In the 1950s, Francis Williams reiterated the argument that journalism has a social obligation above and beyond the commercial considerations of the market place:

> The freedom of the press does not exist in order that newspaper owners should grow rich. It is not a possession of newspapers or their proprietors or editors but of the community, won by many who were not journalists, as well as many who were, during that long struggle for freedom of religion, opinion and association and for the

> independence of parliament, judiciary and press on which our democratic society rests. (1959: 215.)

Democracy means more than people having the right to elect representatives every few years, and journalists can play a role in facilitating more participatory and deliberative forms of democracy (Stromback, 2005). Participatory models of democracy, allowing citizens to speak for themselves, are intimately linked to the concept of social justice, writes the theorist Iris Young (2000: 17-23). She argues for a widening of "democratic inclusion…as a means of promoting more just outcomes". While the absence of a commitment to such democratic inclusion by much contemporary mainstream journalism has been noted by observers of the relationship between journalists and their sources (see Chapter Six), the idea of democratic inclusion appears to inform much of the work of alternative media such as Indymedia, for example.

Laments about the state of journalism go back a long way. At least as far back as 1648, when journalists were described as a "moth-eating crew of news-mongers" by *Mercurius Anti-Mercurius*, an early newsbook that bemoaned the state of affairs whereby "every Jack-sprat that hath but a pen in his ink-horn is ready to gather up the excrements of the kingdom" (quoted in Clarke, 2004: 24). Journalists have been accused of gathering up the excrements of the kingdom ever since, and journalism was described recently as "the single most depressing, misanthropic and indefensible vocation anyone can undertake" (SOTCAA, 2000). Ouch.

If the critics are to be believed, journalism has always just got worse; if it were a horse, it would be shot. "Journalism is in crisis," asserts political communication lecturer Roman Gerodimos (2004). Journalism is facing "the biggest crisis of its existence", agrees journalist Seth Mnookin (2005: 263). *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger (2005) has spoken of "a widespread feeling that newspapers are failing in their duty of truly representing the complexity of some of the most important issues in society", resulting in "really dreadful levels of trust". Trust, and the lack thereof, is crucial to an

understanding of the role of journalism, argued philosopher Onora O'Neill in her influential series of Reith lectures:

> A free press is not an unconditional good. It is good because and insofar as it helps the public to explore and test opinions and to judge for themselves whom and what to believe. If powerful institutions are allowed to publish, circulate and promote material without indicating what is known and what is rumour; what is derived from a reputable source and what is invented, what is standard analysis and what is speculation; which sources may be knowledgeable and which are probably not, they damage our public culture and all our lives.   (2002.)

It was to the accompaniment of this crisis chorus that John Lloyd's book *What the Media are Doing to our Politics* (2004) struck a chord with some of those who are sometimes dismissed as the chattering classes in the UK. Although Lloyd's assertion that cynical journalists are undermining democracy seems a bit rich, given the influence of political spin doctors these days (Franklin, 2004: 6), his book contributed to a wider debate that has encouraged journalists to reflect on what we do and why. For Lloyd (2004: 1 and 143), as for most critical observers, journalism is too important to be left solely to market forces. That's because, although the market is good at providing entertainment, it is not so good at supporting citizenship. Yet it was the publicly-funded BBC that drew much of Lloyd's wrath for broadcasting the now infamous "two-way" interview between presenter John Humphrys and reporter Andrew Gilligan on the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme.

Here is the full text of the exchange – complete with repetitions and "erms", courtesy of the official transcript - that was broadcast at 6.07am on 29 May 2003:

> *JH:* The government is facing more questions this morning over its claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Our defence correspondent is Andrew Gilligan. This in particular, Andy, is Tony Blair saying, they'd be ready to go within 45 minutes.
>
> *AG:* That's right. That was the central claim in his dossier which he published in September, the main (erm) case, if you like, against (er) against Iraq and the main statement of the British government's belief of what it thought Iraq was up to. And what we've been told

by one of the senior officials in charge of drawing up that dossier was that, actually, the government probably (erm) knew that that 45 minute figure was wrong, even before it decided to put it in. What this person says, is that a week before the publication date of the dossier, it was actually rather (erm) a bland production. It didn't - the, the draft prepared for Mr Blair by the Intelligence Agencies - actually didn't say very much more than was public knowledge already and (erm) Downing Street, our source says, ordered a week before publication, ordered it to be sexed up, to be made more exciting and ordered more facts to be (er) to be discovered.

JH: When you say 'more facts to be discovered', does that suggest that they may not have been facts?

AG: Well (erm) our source says that the dossier, as it was finally published, made the Intelligence Services unhappy (erm) because, to quote (erm) the source, he said there was basically, that there was, there was, there was unhappiness because it didn't reflect the considered view they were putting forward. That's a quote from our source and essentially (erm) the 45 minute point (er) was, was probably the most important thing that was added. (Erm) and the reason it hadn't been in the original draft was that it was, it was only (erm), it only came from one source and most of the other claims were from two, and the intelligence agencies say they don't really believe it was necessarily true because they thought the person making the claim had actually made a mistake, it got, had got mixed up.

JH: Does any of this matter now, all this, all these months later? The war's been fought and won.

AG: Well the 45 minutes isn't just a detail, it did go to the heart of the government's case that Saddam was an imminent threat and it was repeated four times in the dossier, including by the Prime Minister himself, in the foreword. So I think it probably does matter. Clearly, you know, if (erm), if it, if it was, if it was wrong - things do, things are got wrong in good faith - but if they knew it was wrong before they actually made the claim, that's perhaps a bit more serious.

JH : Andrew, many thanks; more about that later. (BBC, 2003b.)

There certainly was more about that later, and we will return to the story of Tony Blair's dossier in Chapter Six.

For Lloyd (2004: 8-13), the broadcast quoted above "broke most of the proclaimed rules of journalistic inquiry" because it, in effect, accused the Blair government of lying; it was an "accident waiting to happen", caused

by the cynical and politically damaging journalistic presumption that politicians are likely to be acting in bad faith (Lloyd, 2004: 10-13). The broadcast was subjected to detailed scrutiny during the Hutton inquiry and Lord Hutton came down hard on Gilligan, who resigned shortly after the official report was published.

Three years on, by which time he had re-emerged as a staff journalist on the London *Evening Standard*, I met Andrew Gilligan and asked, among other things, what he made of the Lloyd thesis. He was clearly unimpressed:

> Journalism is under attack by a number of forces. The principal complaint seems to be that journalism is untruthful and corrupting of the political process, and I simply don't think that's factually correct. I think the political process is corrupted by *politicians*. I cannot think of a single lie told by journalists. Journalists habitually exaggerate, but I lose count of the number of times I'm lied to as a journalist. We are far more sinned against than sinning.

He accepts that a lot of citizens feel disconnected from the political process, but he blames the politicians for this rather than the journalists who report on their activities.

What about the charge that cynical and over-aggressive reporting undermines trust between journalists and politicians?

> Look, journalists and politicians on the whole shouldn't trust each other, apart from on the most basic level. I think there should be a basic level of trust that you will not betray a confidence, that you won't misquote and that kind of thing. But they shouldn't be friends. I don't think they should be at daggers drawn and hate each other and constantly undermine each other, but they shouldn't trust each other. The audience – that's who we work for, we don't work for the politicians.

The real problem with journalism these days, he argues, is not untruthfulness. Rather, it is a lack of seriousness, "by which I mean asking really hard questions about really important things".

Although there was widespread journalistic dismay at the way in which Lord Hutton's report exonerated the Blair government at the expense of the BBC, journalists were divided on the extent to which Andrew Gilligan was

the author of his own misfortune. "Gilligan got more right than he got wrong," commented *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger (2004: viii). Yet many others felt that Gilligan had blown what could have turned out to be a hugely significant story, if he had been able to back it up. "I am not one of those who would argue that Andrew Gilligan was 'mainly right'," said Richard Sambrook (2004), then director of BBC News, adding: "In journalism 'mainly right' is like being half pregnant - it's an unsustainable condition." Gilligan agrees that, although journalism is necessarily a rough draft, being half right is not good enough:

> But 90 per cent right, maybe even 95 per cent right which is what it was, *is* good enough. Journalists should not be obliged to behave like lawyers, because that would stifle a lot of important journalism. I think Hutton had a view that it is like the law, where you talk to somebody and you draw up a memorandum of understanding, you then have it signed and put it in a filing cabinet. And journalism is not like that. I'm not saying that's any excuse for inaccuracy, but lawyers have power to demand information, or they work for clients who freely give them information. Journalists have nothing like such powers. We are trying to open a cupboard and shine a torch around – a feeble torch in a very large cupboard – and we don't know what's in the bits of the cupboard we can't see, and some of those bits are deliberately not shown to us.

In an odd twist, Sambrook's "half pregnant" argument was rejected by Rear Admiral Nick Wilkinson, a former secretary of the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee, a peculiarly British invention that allows media bosses and Whitehall mandarins to meet occasionally and discuss what they don't want the rest of us to know about. Wilkinson (2004) pointed out that, if journalists always had to wait until they were certain that they were more than mainly right, "little would be revealed to the public of what was going on behind the politico-official screen, and how relieved my ex-colleagues there would be". He continued: "In this case, we now know (and many were fairly certain then) that Andrew Gilligan was more 'mainly right' than the US/UK political leadership was." Gilligan himself told the Edinburgh television festival that "journalism got closer to the truth, more quickly, over the dossier than politics, than the law, than parliament or anything else". He added:

> The only stories I'm really ashamed of on *Today* in the run-up to war are the ones where I tamely accepted at face value what the likes of Colin Powell and Jack Straw were telling us. That kind of journalism doesn't get anyone into trouble, of course. But far more of it was inaccurate than any original story I was responsible for.   (2004.)

In the United States, meanwhile, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and *New Republic* all subsequently apologised to their readers for being too gullible or for underplaying scepticism when reporting White House claims that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (Younge, 2004). Those newspapers, it seems, felt they had damaged the trust between journalists and citizens not by being too sceptical of their government, but by being too trusting.

Journalism, then, is about "something larger than a commercial relationship between a publisher and a customer" (Hargreaves, 2003: 174). If journalism wasn't about more than a commercial transaction, if it didn't really matter, if trust between journalist and audience wasn't vital, then how could we explain the serious repercussions when trust breaks down? Trust is something that should concern all journalists, not just those reporting on war and peace. Consider the case of Willie Mack, editor of the *Southern Reporter* newspaper in Scotland, for example. Mack felt compelled to resign after he accidentally published a dummy picture caption describing a group of local people as "pious little bleeders [who] should get out more often" (*Independent*, 2004). It was just a newsroom joke that was never intended for publication, but his position on the newspaper became untenable because the people in the picture were also his readers, and the bond of trust had been broken.

All such talk of trust rings hollow for Janet Malcolm, who opened her book *The Journalist and the Murderer* with the following dramatic passage:

> Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself [sic] to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.   (2004: 3.)

"Can that really be?" asks Ian Jack in his introduction to the UK edition of Malcolm's book. He continues:

> Every journalist, all kinds of journalism? The foreign correspondent at the scene of the flood, the court-reporter, the fashion writer, the stock analyst? Their work may be flawed and inadequate. It may even, in the case of the share-tipper, be corrupt. But it is hard to see what they do, always and universally, as "morally indefensible". (2004: x.)

Yet Malcolm has only just started. Still on her first page, the words "treachery" and "deception" are used to describe the relationship between journalists and the people about whom they write. Her book describes a real life relationship between journalist Joe McGinniss and convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald; a relationship in which, to cut a long story short, MacDonald is under the impression that the journalist believes his protestations of innocence but is then "betrayed" upon publication of the story. It all ends in tears and court cases for the two central characters, but for Malcolm (2004: 4 and 20) it has a wider resonance; for her, the "deliberately induced delusion, followed by a moment of shattering revelation" inflicted upon MacDonald was actually "a grotesquely magnified version of the normal journalistic encounter".

Malcolm (2004: 32) is struck by the fact that people keep talking to journalists – placing "crazy" and "childish" trust in their good faith – despite the near certainty of being betrayed by them. But there is another way of looking at that. Perhaps people continue to talk to journalists because, most of the time, they are *not* betrayed or stitched up. Some might argue that Dr David Kelly was "crazy" to trust Andrew Gilligan, but Kelly had spoken to him and many other journalists before, without apparently suffering any moments of "shattering revelation". And what of the people who contacted journalist Paul Foot over many years and who asked him to investigate alleged miscarriages of justice; people who opened their hearts and often their homes to him in the hope that his journalism might be able to get at the truth? Were they betrayed? Not according to the many testimonies from sources and contacts sent in unsolicited following his death:

> Paul could be trusted with anything we told him….A brilliant journalist who never betrayed a source…He was a considerate caring person…He took the time to understand the extremely complex and arcane issues, read about them, check with other sources, supplement the facts and would double-check his facts and often his copy with us and he never left any of his sources exposed…
> *(Private Eye*, 2004.)

Not every journalist is a Paul Foot, of course; but nor is every journalist a faker, a plagiarist, or a confidence trickster preying on people's vanity.

I wonder if Andrew Gilligan has ever read *The Journalist and the Murderer*. Yes, he tells me:

> I think it's preposterous. Frankly, our sources use us as much as we use them. There is a case to answer in the case of somebody unsophisticated who is entrapped by a tabloid reporter into divulging details that are not in their interests to divulge, but I don't do that kind of journalism. People talk for a reason.

If people talk for a reason, why did he agree to my request for an interview for this book?

> Because I've got nothing to hide about what I did, I freely admitted I didn't get it all right, but I really do think that journalism and me were far more sinned against than sinning. And I do believe it's important to talk to people, because if you don't you can't blame them for not giving your side of the story.

It is because journalism is one of the key ways in which citizens are informed and misinformed that we should be prepared to wash our dirty linen in public and to engage in discussions about our work, even when to do so might be uncomfortable. The ethical codes discussed in this book have resulted from such discussions and, although no code represents the final word on any issue, reference to them can usefully inform our practice.

Journalist Gerry Brown (1995: 315) concluded his autobiographical account of tabloid investigations with the words: "Listen, pal, I don't tell you how to do your job…" It was a neat rhetorical payoff. However, as an argument it fails to convince, because journalism has an impact on society as a whole and therefore other people *do* have a stake in how we do our jobs as journalists. Imperfect though it is, journalism is one of the key ways in

which we can gain knowledge about the world in which we live. And, as will be discussed in the next chapter, knowledge is power.

Chapter Three: Knowledge is power

"Knowledge is power," as the philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon proclaimed 400 years ago (Wheen, 2004: 6). It was dangerous talk. The spreading of knowledge, or the questioning of what is commonly accepted as knowledge, has long been a risky business. As far back as the 1160s, alleged heretics were sentenced by a court in Oxford to be branded and flogged for publicly questioning church doctrine; they were comparatively lucky, because some who came after them were burned at the stake or had their tongues bored with hot irons for similar offences (Coleman, 1997: 1-5). With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the communication of such dangerous ideas was revolutionised; and the impulse of the authorities was to restrict the growth of this potentially democratising new information technology. King Henry VIII's right-hand man, Cardinal Wolsey, put it rather melodramatically: "We must destroy the press; or the press will destroy us" (quoted in Porter, 2000: 477).

Destroying the press was not possible, however, and even restricting it was to prove far easier said than done because, if Bacon's dictum could be seen as dangerous, it was also attractive. It was attractive to the Enlightenment thinkers who came after him, for whom knowledge and reason went hand in hand; and it was attractive to those who attended public lectures on matters of scientific inquiry and frequented the new coffee houses of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Keane, 1996: 43). The coffee house, notes Martin Conboy (2004: 50-51), was literally "the space of exchange which corresponds to Habermas' public sphere", a reference to the concept of a public sphere of rational discussion as identified by the cultural theorist Jurgen Habermas (1989). If the coffee house was a space within which news, views and gossip could be passed on and/or challenged, the printing press became "the great engine for the spread of enlightened views and values" (Porter, 2000: 91).

Two centuries after Bacon used the phrase, "knowledge is power" was adopted by the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge for the masthead of the political journal, *Watchman* (Porter, 2000: 132 and 462). It was also used by the creators of a later radical press that set out to inform a broader citizenry: "knowledge is power" was the motto of the *Poor Man's Guardian* newspaper, founded in 1830 and affiliated to the National Union of the Working Classes (Williams, 1998: 37). Such publications were more likely to be read in pubs than in bourgeois coffee houses, and the practice of reading aloud multiplied their audience way beyond their sales (Rose, 2002: 84), helping to create a "plebian public sphere" alongside the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989: xviii).

The idea that knowledge is power remains attractive, and dangerous, today. In 2006, for example, armed police officers raided the offices of media organisations in Kenya, closing a TV station, disabling a printing press, burning thousands of newspapers and arresting several journalists (Vasagar, 2006). Two years earlier, in the UK, web servers belonging to the alternative online news service Indymedia were seized by police (*Journalist*, 2004c). And a leaked memo even suggested that US President George Bush had considered bombing the headquarters of Arab television station Al-Jazeera (Maguire and Lines, 2005). Nothing came of that, but journalists working for Al-Jazeera have suffered raids, arrests, expulsions, beatings and even missile attacks (Miles, 2005). They are not the only ones. Every year dozens of journalists around the world pay with their lives for putting into practice the belief that knowledge is power. As the International Federation of Journalists reports:

> [J]ournalists and media employees in every corner of the globe have been targeted, brutalised and done to death by the enemies of press freedom. Some have been deliberately sought out by crooks and hired assassins. Others have been gunned down as a result of nervous, unruly and ill-disciplined soldiering. Many succumbed because they appeared to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But it wasn't the wrong place, of course. Journalists have a duty to be on the spot when news is in the making. (IFJ, 2005: 1.)

Although many journalists are killed in international war zones, most journalist casualties die in their own countries while reporting on domestic issues such as corruption, crime and politics (Tomlin and Pike, 2005). The vast majority of journalists killed at work are not hit by crossfire but are targeted for murder because of their journalistic work, and in most cases the killers go unpunished, according to studies by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2005a).

Parts of twenty-first century Africa have been described as a "serious danger zone" for journalists. Guy-Andre Kieffer, for example, was a 54-year-old freelance journalist in Ivory Coast who disappeared without trace while working on a series of investigative stories; in the weeks leading up to his disappearance in April 2004, he received death threats because of his reporting (IFJ, 2005: 4-5). In Latin America too, journalists have come under violent attack from both political and criminal organisations. "The reasons for the killings are always the same," says the IFJ (2005: 6), "to stifle independent voices and punish journalists who tell the truth." Journalists such as Francisco Arratia Saldierna, 55, who was kidnapped, tortured and killed in Mexico after writing about sensitive issues including drug-trafficking, corruption and organised crime (IFJ, 2005: 10).

In Asia, according to the International Press Institute (IPI, 2005: 114), murder is just "one of the many forms of censorship"; and China and Burma are "still holding high numbers of journalists in prison, mostly in inhumane conditions, because of their reports both in newspapers and magazines as well as on the internet". For seven years running, up to and including 2005, China was named by the Committee to Protect Journalists as the country that jails the most journalists (CPJ, 2005b). One of the 32 Chinese journalists being held in prison at the end of that year Shi Tao, who received the committee's International Press Freedom Award. Shi, who edits a business newspaper and works as a freelance online journalist, is serving a 10-year sentence for revealing state secrets. Shi was imprisoned in November 2004 for posting online details of the Chinese government's instructions on how the country's media were to cover the fifteenth

anniversary of the military crackdown in Tiananmen Square (CPJ, 2005b). In parts of the Middle East, in addition to the large numbers of journalists killed covering the conflict in Iraq, publications are being censored or shut down and "journalists are being threatened, dismissed and imprisoned" (IPI, 2005: 265). For their part, European governments also sometimes opt to close newspapers and send journalists to prison but more often use less crude means to influence media by "manipulating coverage, taxes, and legislation" (IPI, 2005: 188). And in the United States there have been more journalists facing prison sentences and fines for refusing to reveal confidential sources of information (IPI, 2005: 92). Clearly, then, there are people around the world who feel very threatened by the work of journalists. And so they should. Because journalism *is* a threat to those who profit from ignorance, whether that be a corrupt political elite, a faceless corporation, an organised criminal gang, a legal system that takes short-cuts, or a conman who preys on vulnerable victims.

The concept of access to knowledge being empowering informs serious journalism; that is, the sort of journalism guided by ethical codes of practice of the kind discussed in this book. Of course, that's not the only type of journalism on offer in the marketplace these days, and a glance at more entertainment-driven products such as the *Daily Sport*, *Nuts* or *Zoo* suggests a complementary aphorism: ignorance is powerlessness. If the downside of press freedom is that people are free to produce material that treats their audience as stupid - and encourages them to be so - the upside is that freedom of the press can facilitate the participation by citizens in rational discussion of public affairs of the day. As the seventeenth century poet John Milton (1644: 71 and 101) put it in his famous defence of the "unbridled" pen: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."

Milton's views did not come from nowhere but were rooted in the social ferment of his time, when England was in the midst of civil warfare and, in the words of historian Christopher Hill (1975: 14), there was a state of "glorious flux and intellectual excitement". Just a few years earlier, King

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Charles I had tightened further the already strict censorship of the printed word, but the system began to fall apart in the build up to the Civil War. When tight control of the press unravelled for a brief period from 1641, there was an extraordinary increase in the number of pamphlets and other literature printed and circulated (Williams, 2005: 8-9). According to Henry Wickham Steed, a press historian and former editor of the *Times*:

> Regular English journalism began with the Civil War and the political strife that led up to it. From the outset it was vivacious and, on the whole, truthful… It was not by accident that the first English newspapers took shape between 1640 and 1688…for at no time in English history had so many conflicting political ideas and passions filled the public mind, or had the essentials of political freedom been so fiercely debated. (1938: 110-112.)

Numerous newsbooks (prototype newspapers) appeared on both – or, rather, *all* – sides of this political and social conflict, combining the reporting of domestic news and political comment. Such journalism both reflected and fostered a period of intense democratic participation in public debate, with the radical Levellers among those petitioning against all restrictions on printing (Williams, 1998: 20). Indeed, Levellers within the New Model Army - which was defending parliament against the King's forces - demanded and won the right to have a printing press which they used to contribute to an extraordinary series of debates within the army itself (Foot, 1994: 64). "For a short time," notes Hill (1975: 361), "ordinary people were freer from the authority of church and social superiors than they had ever been before, or were for a long time to be again."

Having briefly felt this "breath of reason" in the air, Milton (1644: 69) was horrified when parliament re-imposed the previous system of pre-publication censorship, so he wrote *Areopagitica: a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing* and published it himself, as an unlicensed pamphlet in defiance of the new law. "He who destroys a good book, kills reason itself," argued Milton, utilising the imagery of a poet to bring his political message alive:

> Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible

> locks: methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam; purging and unsealing her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms. What should ye do then, should ye suppress all this flower crop of knowledge and new light sprung up and yet springing daily in this city? Should ye set an oligarchy of twenty engrossers over it, to bring a famine upon our minds again, when we shall know nothing but what is measured to us by their bushel? (1644: 69 and 100.)

Such writing knocks spots off many of today's opinion formers who like to think they have a way with words. You couldn't make it up, as tabloid columnist Richard Littlejohn might say.

Despite Milton's plea, the short-lived parliamentary regime and the restored monarchy both clung on to the power to license and censor the press for several more decades. *Areopagitica*, as Granville Williams (2005: 6) notes, received little attention when first published, but "the reputation of the work grew later in the seventeenth century, when it was abridged and cited by others in debates on censorship and the freedom of the press". This culminated in the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, effectively ending pre-publication censorship of printing in what was to become the UK. Milton's central argument, that "ideas should be tested and debated in the public domain rather than censored or suppressed" (Williams, 2005: 56), continues to resonate more than 300 years later. His words remind us that the relative freedoms enjoyed by journalists in some parts of the world today were not handed to us on a plate but were achieved as a result of what was "a saga of struggle against unjust laws, of assertion of the people's right to disobey them, of valour in the defence, and to a large degree, in the very creation of British democracy" (Harrison, 1974: 9). All the more galling, therefore, to see the casual way in which some journalists regard our rights and responsibilities today.

The ending of pre-publication censorship and the further development of printing technology cleared the ground for a local, regional and national press to spring up and for journalism to develop as a skilled occupation, if

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never quite a profession. As with its pre-history, the subsequent growth of the press was neither uniform nor uncontested. Journalists could still be prosecuted *after* publication for a range of offences including seditious or blasphemous libel. Government-imposed stamp duties made lawful newspapers too expensive for most people to afford, while anyone caught producing or selling the cheaper "unstamped" underground press was liable to be thrown into jail. Before, during and after such "taxes on knowledge" were abolished in the mid-nineteenth century, a commercial press devoted to profit developed alongside – and eventually helped to marginalize – a more radical press devoted to ideas.

This emergent commercial press did not share the insurgent stance of the radical press that had blossomed at times of intense political activity such as the English Civil War, the French Revolution, and the Chartist agitation. But, in its own more restrained and constrained way, it too began to train a watchful eye on what our rulers were getting up to in our name. The press came to be known as the "fourth estate" of the realm (alongside the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the clergy), playing the quasi-constitutional "watchdog" role of monitoring those in power on behalf of the people. This role was explained in a famous *Times* leader published on 6 February 1852, which declared:

> The first duty of the press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, make them the common property of the nation… For us, with whom publicity and truth are the air and light of existence, there can be no greater disgrace than to recoil from the frank and accurate disclosure of facts as they are. We are bound to tell the truth as we find it, without fear of consequences. (Quoted in Clarke, 2004: 231.)

It is rarely quite as simple as that. The history of journalism is a contradictory one that has included journalists in the pay of corrupt politicians working alongside journalists who have gone to jail for exposing corrupt politicians; intellectually-challenging publications competing with crime-ridden scandal sheets; and the power of the censor replaced by the power of the market. Yet, despite such apparent contradictions, the idea of the journalist as a watchdog remains a vibrant one; prompting recent *Times*

editor Simon Jenkins (2006) to describe newspapers as the "greatest democratising force in history".

Journalism should indeed serve as "an independent monitor of power", according to the statement of principles drawn up by the Committee of Concerned Journalists in the US. One of the most celebrated examples of journalists fulfilling this role is the Watergate case, during which *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (1974) exposed the political dirty tricks and subsequent cover up by US President Richard Nixon. Nixon, aka "Tricky Dicky", resigned before he could be impeached, and the two reporters became journalistic heroes played by Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford in the film-of-the-book-of-the-investigation, *All The President's Men*. Ben Bradlee, executive editor of the *Washington Post* during Watergate, later told a James Cameron memorial lecture in London:

> Governments prefer a press that makes their job easier, a press that allows them to proceed with minimum public accountability, a press that accepts their version of events with minimum questioning, a press that can be led to the greenest pastures by persuasion and manipulation. In moments of stress between government and the press…the government looks for ways to control the press, to eliminate or to minimise the press as an obstacle in the implementation of policy, or the solution of problems. In these moments, especially, the press must continue its mission of publishing information that it – and it alone – determines to be in the public interest, in a useful, timely and responsible manner, serving society, not government. (1987: 18.)

A challenge to this narrative of journalists as heroic seekers of truth comes from Julian Petley, an academic who chairs the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom in the UK. He believes we need to reconsider the extent to which the commercial press has ever operated as a fourth estate, monitoring and limiting the powers of the state:

> [T]he repeal of the stamp duty and of other "taxes on knowledge" in the nineteenth century was not motivated by governmental conversion to the cause of press freedom; it stemmed, rather, from the growing realisation among politicians and other members of the establishment that if entrepreneurs and industrialists could be tempted to enter the newspaper market then this could kill off the

> hated radical press far more effectively than taxes had ever done…
> [T]he powers-that-be intended the press to be used as an agent of
> social control and regulation rather than as a means of popular
> enlightenment. (2004: 68-75.)

A similar argument about journalism today is that it fails to live up to its
self-proclaimed watchdog role because of structural problems such as a
collusive relationship between media corporations and politicians, the
privileging of market values over social values, an over-reliance on elite
sources, and a limited ideological aperture through which events tend to be
viewed. Media commentators Stephen Baker and Greg McLaughlin, for
example, argue that the failure of most mainstream journalism "to ask the
appropriate questions of those in power has had a corrosive effect not just
upon the traditions of journalism, but upon the democratic process itself".
They continue:

> Received wisdom would indicate that [journalism's] role is to serve
> to inform the public, to encourage public debate, and to scrutinise
> the actions of the powerful and hold them to account, but it has
> palpably failed on critical occasions to fulfil any of these important
> functions. (2005: 5.)

Although few journalists can hope to bring down a President – let alone an
entire economic or social system - there are reporters out there every day
doing their best to monitor the powerful and to ask the awkward questions.
In the press galleries and corridors of our parliament buildings - as in many
of our courts and council chambers - there are journalists taking notes and
looking for stories. There are journalists using Freedom of Information
legislation as well as well-placed anonymous sources, probing everything
from decisions about war to the nutritional value of school dinners.
Journalists have exposed miscarriages of justice, security scandals and
corruption in high places, as well as informing us about developments in
education, health, business and numerous other issues large and small. At
the most local level, when a National Health Service trust refused to allow
people to have a second chemist's shop in their village in the English
midlands, the trust saw fit to take this momentous decision behind closed
doors with press and public excluded. Only after journalists on the local
weekly *Newark Advertiser* objected "in a very forthright manner" did the

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Newark and Sherwood Primary Care trust agree to hold future meetings in public (Ponsford, 2004b). Such vigilance by local media is as much a part of the fourth estate function of the press as is the monitoring of the big issues of war, peace, poverty and climate change. We are probably more likely to find out about a contentious planning application at the end of our street by seeing it mentioned in the local paper than we are by reading a notice on a lamppost; and how many of us have met our councillor or MP in person, rather than through the eyes and ears of the local media?

Of course, these are not the only things journalists do; journalists don't always do them well; some critics dismiss the fourth estate as a myth; and some journalists hardly bother at all with the fourth estate role. Too many rights won by earlier generations of journalists are wasted today. Given the lengths to which the MP John Wilkes and his *North Briton* newspaper went to establish the freedom of the press to publish accounts of parliamentary debates from 1771 - Wilkes was locked up in the Tower of London for his pains (Harrison, 1974: 19) – it is a pity that even serious newspapers in the UK now regard gallery reporting as an anachronism, worth devoting space to only on special occasions. Similarly, lobbying by the National Union of Journalists got it enshrined in law in 1908 that journalists should be admitted to all meetings of local authorities except in exceptional circumstances, and even then the press could be excluded only after a vote in public by councillors (Bundock, 1957: 22); yet more and more newsrooms seem to rely these days on press releases rather than on the more time-consuming business of sending reporters to cover meetings and develop their contacts. Eileen Brooks, former head of communications for a local authority in South Yorkshire, observes: "Ironically, the only media presence in the council chamber at Rotherham these days are students from the journalism degree course at Sheffield University. But will they be there when they're out in the real world?" (quoted in Humphries, 2005). If journalists are to be watchdogs rather than lapdogs, then we must hope so.

Despite editorial cost-cutting, and an apparent shift to less serious news (see Chapter Five), good journalists *do* continue to act as the eyes and ears of the

public, putting into practice the belief that knowledge is power. One such is Kevin Peachey, consumer affairs correspondent of the *Nottingham Evening Post*, who has won a series of awards for campaigning journalism on behalf of his readers. I asked him to talk me through one of his typical stories:

> There was a couple who had a guy knock on their door and he offered to do their guttering for them, then he went round the back and said 'I'll build a conservatory for you'. They agreed and paid him £5,000. He built a two-foot high brick wall and then disappeared. They didn't know who he was, he had a mobile phone number that was always off, he never returned any calls, they'd given him five grand and all they'd got literally was a two-foot high wall. It's an incredible story because everybody could appreciate what the situation was. It related to doorstep sellers - which was something that we then campaigned for, banning all cold-calling by property repairs salesmen – and the wider issues of the law. We took a dossier of stories down to MPs in London, making it an active campaign where we could go and lobby for something to happen. The great thing about that story was that we then got inundated with calls from legitimate builders who were also pretty miffed that their industry was being tarnished, and a company offered to come in and finish off the job. So the couple got their conservatory, and it was a nice bit of publicity for the legitimate company.

Such campaigning is a vital link between the public and journalists, particularly those on local and regional newspapers, believes Peachey. "You can get your news from so many different places now that you've got to campaign to survive as a local paper," he says. At any one time, a newspaper such as the *Nottingham Evening Post* is likely to have around a dozen campaigns on the go, ranging from fundraising for local charities to lobbying for a change in the law. Most are prompted by readers' concerns as expressed in letters or telephone calls. Does this mean he feels a sense of social responsibility?

> Yes, you're there to some degree to represent your readers, in a stronger way than they'd be able to do on their own. They see the power of the local paper as much greater than them individually. And it is, because if you ring up a company on behalf of 10 people, then they tend to take some action. Doing this job makes you feel as if you are doing your bit for the community really, and most of that is just education, raising awareness.

Warning readers about bogus builders and dodgy dealers is all well and good, but it hardly tackles the big issues that have a greater impact on

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society; structural issues such as economic inequality and exploitation. How does Peachey respond to the suggestion that he is merely taking on the small fry rather than the bigger fish:

> You've got a guy who is going door-to-door and ripping off old ladies by doing terrible driveway jobs or by not doing the job at all, just taking the money and disappearing. To me, somebody who does that isn't small fry, because they've taken someone's life savings and they're then going to do it to a load more other people. If they had stopped a lady coming out of the Post Office and taken her entire life savings off her, and then done it outside the same Post Office to scores of other pensioners, then that would always be a front-page story. They are taking huge amounts of money off people who are the most vulnerable in our society, and therefore by definition they are not small fry. If you've got the chance to expose them then it's a social responsibility to do so, or a newspaper's responsibility to do so, no doubt about it.

Victims of such scams are often deeply embarrassed by their own gullibility, yet they frequently overcome this to tell their stories to journalists as a warning to their fellow citizens. To demonstrate this point, Kevin Peachey tells me that his quickest outline in shorthand is, "We don't want this to happen to anybody else," because that's what so many of his interviewees say. As Bacon said, knowledge is power.

Chapter Four: In the public interest

Coffee was being served in Buckingham Palace and the Queen was making small talk with her guest of honour, the President of the United States. Servants were busying themselves catering to the needs of George W Bush who, at the time, was probably the most powerful man on earth. Palace servants are expected to pretend to be invisible, to avoid unnecessary eye contact with anyone above their own rank, even to walk along the edges of corridors so that their royal highnesses can enjoy the luxury of a carpet that has not been worn down by inferior feet. On the occasion of the President's visit, one footman was so good at making himself invisible that nobody spotted him standing behind a net curtain, from where he observed proceedings and sent text messages on his mobile phone.

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There was said to be a temporary telecommunications block in that part of London to prevent anyone setting off a bomb by phone, but the young footman had no difficulty using his mobile before resuming his duties, calmly helping to clear up the coffee cups. When his shift was over, he returned to the footmen's living quarters within the palace itself and gathered up his few possessions from the tiny room that had been his home for the previous eight weeks. He put them into a holdall and walked off into the night. Across town, meanwhile, tension had been mounting at the offices of the *Daily Mirror*, where his text messages had been received with growing excitement. The paper's print-run had been increased by around 100,000 copies in anticipation of record sales when the following morning's edition hit the streets. A nasty surprise was awaiting the royal family.

Those extra copies were not wasted, because the story caused a sensation. Labelled "world exclusive", the front page of the *Daily Mirror* on 19 November 2003 featured a photograph of Ryan Parry standing on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, and the headline: INTRUDER – AS BUSH ARRIVES, WE REVEAL MIRRORMAN HAS BEEN A PALACE FOOTMAN FOR TWO MONTHS IN THE BIGGEST ROYAL SECURITY SCANDAL EVER. The story continued on pages 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. It was indeed sensational stuff, revealing how Ryan Parry had applied for the job using his own name but a combination of real and bogus references. Nobody at the palace suspected that he already had a job: as a reporter. Had they typed his name into *Google* it would have taken them less than two seconds to discover not only that he was a reporter, but that just weeks earlier he had hit the headlines with a similar undercover investigation into security lapses at the Wimbledon tennis championships. Game, set and match to a reporter who had displayed the very qualities that Nicholas Tomalin (1969: 174) once described in the *Sunday Times* as the essentials for a successful journalist: "ratlike cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability".

Parry left *Mirror* readers in no doubt about the "right royal fiasco" he had found in the security operation surrounding not one, but two heads of state:

> For the past eight weeks, I have enjoyed unfettered access throughout Buckingham Palace as one of the royal family's key aides. Had I been a terrorist intent on assassinating the Queen or American President George Bush, I could have done so with absolute ease. Indeed, this morning I would have been serving breakfast to key members of his government, including National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice and US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Such is the shocking incompetence at the heart of the biggest security operation ever in Britain. Not once, from the moment I applied for my job as a footman to my walking out of the palace at midnight last night, did anyone ever perform anything close to a rigorous security check on my background. Not once during the entire three month operation did anyone ever search me or my bags as I came and went at Buckingham Palace. On my first day I was given a full all-areas security pass and the traditional uniform of the Queen's trusted aides that allowed me unquestioned access to every member of the royal family. And within days of starting my job, I was even shown the secret hiding places for skeleton keys that will open every door in the building. From my small bedroom on the palace's second floor, directly above the famous Picture Gallery and just yards from the Queen's bedroom, plotting a devastating terrorist attack would have been simple… (Parry, 2003.)

He went on to explain how easily he could have poisoned the Queen or planted a bomb in the President's bed. He demonstrated this with photographs he had taken of the royal breakfast table - complete with cereals in Tupperware containers - and the Belgian Suite in which the Bushes were to spend the night.

Within hours, Home Secretary David Blunkett was on his feet in the House of Commons announcing that a thorough review of procedures would be undertaken by the Security Commission, a previously little-known arm of the Cabinet Office. Parry, meanwhile, was on his way to winning an armful of Scoop of the Year awards. Much later, he told me how the story had come about:

> The idea came from Jane Kerr, our royal reporter. I did Wimbledon and she said, "You know what you should do next? You should go on the Buckingham Palace website because there are always jobs advertised there." So I did and I saw the footman job and that's what I applied for. I thought I'd give it a try. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd end up serving the head of state. I had suggested it at an ideas meeting but it wasn't until I got the interview that anyone took it seriously. One of my editors said, "Yeah, like you're going to

do that," at which point I pulled out a letter with the royal crest inviting me to interview.

And what was the point of the exercise?

> We set out to test security. It was about testing security at the palace at a time of terrorist threat. Post 9/11 there is always a terrorist threat and there is clearly a fear in the royal household. All we did was test out their recruitment system, which should be airtight and which should have checked my friends, my family and my finances.

In reality, the system failed on all three counts. If they had checked with his friends they would have been told that he worked as a journalist; if they had checked with his family they would have found out that his claim to have been employed by his father's painting company was untrue; and if they had checked his finances they would have seen that his salary was in fact being paid by Trinity Mirror. Instead, in addition to genuine academic references, the palace accepted a verbal reassurance from a bloke in a pub where Parry used to collect glasses – "Yeah, I know him," said the customer when a barmaid shouted out if anyone had heard of him – and a fax from a fictitious foreman at his father's firm:

> I was on a press trip on the Isle of Man when I got a call from the palace personnel office because they hadn't had a reference from my dad. I made something up about a family feud so they wouldn't ring my dad, and the personnel woman was really sympathetic. I came up with a plan to get someone on a pay-as-you-go mobile phone to pretend to be the foreman at my dad's firm. I was at my sister's and the palace faxed over a form for a reference, and I filled it in and faxed it back.

So he lied, even to somebody who was being sympathetic towards him. How can he justify that?

> At the end of the day it was a security issue. Any terrorist wanting to plant a bomb in the palace wouldn't think twice about lying to a personnel officer. It was a security issue, so it was hugely in the public interest.

If deception could be in the public interest, where would he draw the line?

"You don't do anything hugely illegal," Parry assures me.

The public interest is an interesting phrase. It has long been used by the *News of the World* to justify the actions of its controversial undercover specialist Mazher Mahmood, who has tricked countless people with his infamous "fake sheikh" disguise. He once described his methods as: "You befriend them, you spend a lot of time with them, you have dinner with them – and then you betray them" (quoted in Marr, 2005: 47). However, the public interest is not the preserve of journalists who are engaged in undercover work, and is often cited by reporters involved in other forms of exposure – or intrusion – as opposed to straightforward reportage. But what does it mean? That rather depends on who is talking. The Press Complaints Commission (www.pcc.org.uk) defines the public interest as including:

> (i) Detecting or exposing crime or a serious misdemeanour.
> (ii) Protecting public health and safety.
> (iii) Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation.

But what is a "serious misdemeanour", what is meant by "public health", and what sort of "misleading" statements or actions might by included? Does it include exposing the bedroom and bathroom behaviour of celebs? Yes, according to the popular newspapers that pay good money for such stories. No, counter those who argue that what interests the public is not necessarily in the public interest.

Few people have seriously argued that the *Mirror*'s exposure of security flaws at Buckingham Palace would fail the public interest test - not least because it is the public that pays for security there – but what about some of the material on the rest of that day's 15 pages, not to mention 12 more the following day? Was it really in the public interest to know what the Queen had for breakfast, to see pictures of her family's private rooms, or to read which royal called another footman a "fucking incompetent twat"? Yes, says Parry, because it demonstrates just how close he got; besides, the *Mirror* operates in a competitive market and makes no apology for trying to boost circulation:

> Once you've told the gist of the story about duping the personnel office to get the job, there is the juicy tittle-tattle about the Tupperware, and at the end of the day we're a tabloid newspaper. We had to justify it with all those references [to being close enough to poison the Queen] but the fact that I found out they put their cornflakes into Tupperware containers showed the intimacy of my job and the access I had. All that juicy information showed we had got amazingly close to the head of state. And the pictures were very interesting. People are interested in seeing the Queen's rooms, but I wouldn't have been able to take them if I hadn't got that access.

Could the paper not have told readers it had such pictures - and possibly handed a dossier of evidence to the authorities – rather than publish them? Not in the real world:

> We're a tabloid paper and a commercial entity so we're going to go big on it. You can be a cynic and say that it was sensationalism and all about getting headlines, but there was a serious motive behind it, to test security at Buckingham Palace. It could have gone monumentally wrong if I'd been arrested and the paper could have ended up with egg on its face.

In fact, for the newspaper, the whole exercise went far better than it had hoped. When Parry applied for the job, the visit of George Bush had not even been announced:

> That was a bonus. We initially thought I'd stay for maybe three or four weeks but when we found out the President was coming we decided I should stay for that. There was a £14 million security operation to protect the President and cordon off the area around Buckingham Palace, with concrete blocks and Special Branch search stations, and yet I was coming backwards and forwards carrying holdalls in and out and nobody searched me or asked me what I was doing. It's a lot harder to get into my office [at the *Mirror*] in the morning than it was to get into the palace. There was a naïve assumption that all terrorists have a criminal record. I could have been in Afghanistan for the previous four years, for all they knew. After the story they appointed a new director of security at the palace, which spoke volumes, and they got police to make the checks in future rather than the personnel office. We did the royal family a favour. If a terrorist had got in there and attacked the Queen, imagine the fallout from that. As a result of our story they've completely shaken up the security there, so it would be harder for a terrorist to get in there now than it would have been before our story. If it had just been a tabloid attempt at getting the headlines then all that action wouldn't have been taken. It couldn't have been a better operation, it was a sensational story and it got the desired result.

The success of the operation depended not just on Parry's now legendary coolness under pressure, but also on the ability of a small group of *Mirror* journalists to keep schtum:

> We had to be extremely secretive, and only about half a dozen people knew. It was like James Bond style meetings in the office. They set up a room on a different floor where all the copy was laid out and where the royal reporter went to check things like where the Queen had been visiting on particular days. The lawyers were all over it [the copy].

On the final evening of the operation, Parry was receiving panicky text messages from the *Mirror* telling him to leave the palace immediately, as they feared that at any moment he might be rumbled and arrested. But he stayed put until he had finished clearing up the coffee cups. "I was quite laid back," he recalls. "I thought if I just suddenly leave now they'd get suspicious, so I just finished my shift." Had his true identity been discovered at that time, lawyers for the palace would undoubtedly have woken up a judge to obtain a late-night injunction preventing publication. As it was, the injunction came two days later, after the *Mirror* had already published virtually all of its revelations and tittle-tattle alike.

One undercover reporter who did have his collar felt was Mark Daly, who was arrested after spending several months working as a trainee police officer to expose racism in the ranks. He was released on bail after a night in the cells and went on to be regarded by many as something of a hero after the transmission of his film *The Secret Policeman* (BBC1, 21 October 2003). His covertly filmed report revealed a minority of police recruits routinely using racist terms, including "nigger" and "paki", while socialising among themselves, despite being instructed that such language could lead to dismissal. One officer was filmed boasting of how he would give white people preferential treatment on the streets. He said that black teenager Stephen Lawrence, whose unsolved murder by racist thugs had led to changes in police policy, had "deserved" to die. In one bizarre episode, this officer was filmed putting on a Ku Klux Klan-style hood made out of a pillowcase and joking about wearing it to frighten a fellow recruit who was Asian.

Daly had set out to investigate whether the police's public commitment to countering racist attitudes was reflected among officers on the ground. As he explains:

> In 1999 the Macpherson Report branded London's Metropolitan Police institutionally racist. The report, which followed the Met's failure to successfully prosecute a gang of white youths for the murder of Stephen Lawrence, found ethnic minorities in Britain felt under-protected as victims and over-policed as suspects… We wanted to see what steps were being taken to eradicate this. But more importantly, we needed to see if they were working. The only way we could find out what was really happening was to become a police officer - asking questions openly as a journalist would not have uncovered the truth. (Daly, 2003.)

So he applied to become a police officer and, once accepted, used hi-tech surveillance equipment to record secretly the views of his fellow young recruits at a police training centre in Cheshire. As with Parry, this involved deception:

> I had become a friend to these men. They trusted me with their views. And they believed I was one of them. I operated under strict guidelines. I was not allowed to make racist comments or incite anyone to do or say anything which they wouldn't have otherwise said or done. But I had to laugh at their jokes and behave like a dumb apprentice. (Daly, 2003.)

Prime Minister Tony Blair said he was shocked and appalled at the racism revealed in the film, and Home Secretary David Blunkett agreed that the revelations were "horrendous" (Carter, 2003a). This was something of a turnaround, because before transmission the programme had been condemned by Blunkett – who was responsible for the police - as a stunt designed to *create* rather than report the news. The film contained such shocking evidence of deep-seated racial prejudice among police recruits that it forced the Home Secretary to admit: "It was a mistake on my part to call it a stunt. The revelations themselves justify, in this case, the way in which they came to light" (quoted in Travis, 2003). In other words, Daly's methods were deemed to be in the public interest. An official police investigation was prompted by the revelations and within days of the broadcast a number of police officers had either resigned or been suspended from duty. The Crown Prosecution Service quickly decided that Daly – who

was still on bail on suspicion of obtaining money by deception (his police salary) and of damaging police property (by inserting a pinhole camera into his bullet-proof vest) – would not be charged with any offence (Carter, 2003b). When Cheshire police announced that recruits were to be shown *The Secret Policeman* as part of their anti-racist training, the story had travelled full circle (Ward, 2004).

Daly and Parry are just two of the latest exponents of a tradition of undercover journalism that, in the UK, dates back to 1885. That was when William Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, exposed the scandal of child prostitution in Victorian England. Posing as a punter, he "bought" a 13-year-old virgin girl for £5, ostensibly for his own sexual gratification. His subsequent articles on this trade in human misery, which ran for several days under the heading THE MAIDEN TRIBUTE OF MODERN BABYLON, boosted the newspaper's sales from 8,360 to 12,250 (Snoddy, 1992: 46-49). But the reports were denounced by the rival *Standard* newspaper for containing "the most offensive, highly-coloured and disgusting details…which appeals to the lascivious curiosity of every casual passer-by, and excites the latent pruriency of a half-educated crowd" (quoted in Clarke, 2004: 261). Stead was arrested and served two months in prison for the offence of procuring the girl, but he achieved his aims of shocking parliament into raising the age of heterosexual consent from 13 to 16 years and of increasing the circulation of his newspaper (Clarke, 2004: 259). In the process, he established the template for many subsequent exposes, as Hugo de Burgh points out:

> Stead changed the style of reporting by conjoining high moral tone with sensational description, the favoured style of many newspapers in Britain today. Stead got attention not only by prurience, but also by revelation. That this kind of trade existed was almost certainly news to most of his readers. His undercover, investigative style was premonitory…Investigative journalism had been invented. (2000: 39-40.)

Journalists are rarely remembered by posterity – unless they branch out into more respectable pursuits such as fiction – so it was a pleasant surprise when, walking along the Thames Embankment in London one day, I came

across a bronze memorial plaque to Stead. It was erected in 1920 "by journalists of many lands in recognition of his brilliant gifts, fervent spirit, and untiring devotion to the service of his fellow-men". Homage of a different sort was also paid when the *Sun* exposed a "sex slave racket" involving women from eastern Europe in 2006; an undercover reporter "bought" a Romanian woman for £450 (Harvey, 2006).

William Stead is remembered not only for his undercover exploits but also for his belief in the power of journalism to change things. As he wrote in the *Contemporary Review* in 1886:

> I am but a comparatively young journalist, but I have seen Cabinets upset, Ministers driven into retirement, laws repealed, great social reforms initiated, Bills transformed, estimates remodelled, Acts passed, generals nominated, governors appointed, armies sent hither and thither, war proclaimed and war averted, by the agency of newspapers. (Quoted in Clarke, 2004: 266.)

Sadly, Stead went down with the Titanic while en route to New York in 1912; it is said that he helped women and children onto the few lifeboats, and even declined to take one of the scarce lifejackets himself (Snoddy, 1992: 49). As the *Daily Mirror* (1912) reported at the time: "The greatest tragedy of Mr W T Stead's life was that, being present at the most disastrous shipwreck in the world's history, he was unable to send off a full and vivid description of what really happened."

Across the Atlantic a wannabe reporter by the name of Nellie Bly had been committed to an asylum for the insane. She had not been driven mad by the intensity of her desire to be a journalist and she was, in fact, perfectly sane. She was pretending to be mentally ill so that she could expose the shocking conditions within the asylum. Her undercover stint in 1887 worked a treat: the story caused a sensation, the city of New York invested an extra $1 million in care for the mentally ill, and young Nellie got the job she was after as a staff reporter on the *New York World* (Randall, 2005: 99-103). Over the next few years she went undercover countless times:

> She also got inside a paper box factory to write about the conditions of virtual slavery in which its young women workers toiled; learnt to

> fence, swim and cycle; joined a chorus line, covered graduation at
> West Point, spent a night in an opium den; exposed a mesmerist, an
> unlicensed money lender, gimcrack washing machine sellers; and
> she made a laughing stock of seven of the most prominent doctors in
> New York by presenting all of them with the same symptoms and
> getting from them seven different diagnoses, ranging from malaria to
> "shattered nerves"… [S]he had an incurable curiosity and an
> unshakeable faith in the power of reporting. If only the true facts
> could be uncovered, she believed, then people and authorities could
> be roused to act and make improvements. (Randall, 2005: 103-113.)

A similar mixture of curiosity and ingenuity has been displayed throughout the unorthodox career of Gunter Wallraff, a German journalist who has assumed a range of identities to report – usually at length in book form - on life as it is lived at the bottom of the heap in modern Europe. After revealing the racism, brutality and unsafe working conditions suffered by many Turkish workers in Germany, for example, Wallraff (1985: 160) wrote: "Of course I wasn't really a Turk. But you have to disguise yourself in order to unmask your society, you have to deceive and playact to get at the truth." In other words, there are times when a journalist must deceive to avoid being deceived (Schuffels, 1979: 2). Similarly, in Italy, journalist Fabrizio Gatti went to great lengths to investigate the treatment meted out to immigrants lacking the necessary documentation: he jumped into the Mediterranean sea and floated to shore on a raft, before being picked up by a motorist and handed to the police. Gatti spent seven days in a detention centre, which allowed him to witness – and experience – physical and verbal abuse at first-hand (Hooper, 2005). As in the cases of Daly and Stead discussed above, such undercover operations can land journalists in trouble with the law. When accused of going too far, Wallraff has defended his methods as "only slightly illegal" in comparison with some of the scandals he has exposed (quoted in Schuffels, 1979: 8). In short, he argues that what he does is in the public interest.

The trouble is, they all say that, don't they? "Don't complain to me about invasion of privacy," writes veteran tabloid investigator Gerry Brown (1995: 315). "If it's in the public interest, I prefer to call it invasion of secrecy." That is all well and good when what is being revealed is corruption, racism, dodgy estate agents, corporate greed, airport security

bungles or how easy it is to buy lethal weapons; but where is the public interest in revealing politicians' bedroom behaviour, exposing couples who host parties for "swingers", photographing celebrities on holiday with their children, or prying into the lives of individuals who have the misfortune to become embroiled in a story not of their own making? It was hard to detect much public interest when the *Sun* sent a female reporter to pose as someone who had taken a fancy to a middle-aged male MP who was between relationships at the time. A day of deception resulted in a double page spread telling us…that the MP bought his young "admirer" a box of House of Commons mints (Iggulden, 2006). William Stead would be turning in his grave, if only he had one. Even those "newspapers" that print "upskirt" photographs of z-list celebs falling out of nightclubs might be able to think up something that resembles a public interest defence: exposing the hypocritical behaviour of people who should be role models for the young, blah blah blah. It would be a feeble defence, to be sure, but perhaps not much more flimsy than the excuses trotted out by some of the more prurient elements of the UK national press.

With the honesty of an ex-editor, Piers Morgan said of his time in charge of the *News of the World*:

> I was…lacking in any real humanity for the mayhem we were causing, which is probably the right way to be on the *News of the World*, because the humanity aspect just compromises you. There's no point in pretending what you're doing is good for the human spirit. Most of the time, the public interest defence was trumped-up nonsense. The reason we were doing it was to sell papers and amuse and titillate people. (Quoted in Hattenstone, 2005.)

Which, of course, is exactly what Stead had been accused of doing more than 100 years earlier.

Sometimes, for all of us except the editors and proprietors involved, there is a clear distinction between something that is in the public interest and something that will merely interest or titillate the public. But there are plenty of grey areas. Take, for example, the tapes of Princess Diana's intimate mobile telephone conversations, which were recorded - apparently by chance - by two members of the public. As the Princess of Wales was

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referred to in the conversations as "Squidgy", the story became known as "Squidgygate", in the time-honoured tradition of adding the word "gate" to every supposed scandal since Watergate in the early 1970s. Or consider the revelation of Prince Charles' equally intimate conversations with his then "secret" lover Camilla Parker-Bowles, inevitably known as "Camillagate". On one hand, publication of the tape transcripts was a clear invasion of privacy designed to titillate the public and boost newspaper sales. On the other hand, Charles and Diana were not you or me. At the time, the early 1990s, they were the UK's rulers-in-waiting, whose "fairytale" romance had been sold to the public – who picked up the bill - via the media. Therefore, argues Gerry Brown, the *Sun* was clearly acting in the public interest by publishing details of the Squidgygate conversations:

> [I]t wouldn't have been right for the sham royal marriage to continue and the rest of us to watch misty-eyed as they ascended the throne as King and Queen with only a handful of *Sun* executives, a retired bank manager and a secretary [who made the tapes] knowing Diana had been secretly rogered by a used car dealer and her Army riding instructor. It was a stunning victory for technology in the service of mankind and tabloid journalism. (1995: 313.)

Perhaps it was; on balance, I would rather err on the side of revelation than go along with the sort of cover-up that occurred in the 1930s, when undue deference prevented editors from telling the public about the impending abdication crisis. I couldn't help feeling, however, that there was something distasteful about reading the transcripts of such excruciatingly private conversations. Still, they were very funny.

Arguably, this tension between that which is in the public interest and that which people merely find interesting was demonstrated by the way journalists covered the Profumo affair in the early 1960s, when – for neither the first nor the last time - a male government minister slept with someone who was not his wife. Because the young woman concerned had also hung out with someone from the Russian Embassy, it was portrayed as a Cold War security scandal. But Roy Greenslade argues that the supposed security angle was blown up out of all proportion to justify the press revealing – and revelling in – the sex life of a supposedly upstanding politician:

> If papers had stuck to a rigid formulation of public interest in the Profumo affair, they would have dealt only with the security danger, which was quickly found to have been bogus. By concentrating on sex, they were appealing to baser appetites among their readers, and they knew it. The public interest was a figleaf for a sales-winning exercise. (2003: 191.)

John Profumo had the misfortune to live in a country that equated sex with scandal and, although he was in a position of political power, he was not allowed to get away with defying what were held up as the moral norms of society. Yet his political downfall came about not because of the affair itself, but because he lied to parliament about it. Therein lies the real public interest test, argue many journalists: if someone is prepared to lie about their private life, how can we trust their word on public matters? That is merely self-justifying rhetoric, counter the critics, who point out that he would have had no occasion to lie to parliament had the press not been sniffing around his sex life in the first place. A charge of hypocrisy is levelled at editors who have the power to decide whose peccadilloes will be exposed to the public glare and whose will be ignored (or kept on file for possible future use). And, heaven forfend, journalists themselves may even be guilty of the same offences of which they are accusing others. This was the point made by the singer Robbie Williams, when he said of some journalists who attacked model Kate Moss: "Some people in various media groups who I have personally taken cocaine with are now talking about her, saying she shouldn't do it" (quoted in Butt, 2005).

Implicit in Robbie Williams' allegation of hypocrisy, and in Greenslade's comments on Profumo, is the question: Who the hell are journalists to decide what is or is not in the public interest? It is a good question. Fortunately, as with all the ethical issues discussed in this book, individual journalists are not left entirely to their own devices to consider it. We can be guided by the work of other journalists, contemporary and historical; we can be guided by the work of philosophers, commentators and other thinkers; and we can be guided by the people whom we serve and by ideas of citizenship. We may come up with different answers. The most important

thing is that we are asking the question, both of ourselves and of other journalists.

Journalists can also be guided by ethical codes. To help its journalists decide what is in the public interest, within the context of justifying deception, the BBC has issued the following guidance, which goes beyond the PCC definition cited earlier:

> There is no single definition of public interest, it includes but is not confined to:
>
> - exposing or detecting crime;
>
> - exposing significantly anti-social behaviour;
>
> - exposing corruption or injustice;
>
> - disclosing significant incompetence or negligence;
>
> - protecting people's health and safety;
>
> - preventing people from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation;
>
> - disclosing information that allows people to make a significantly more informed decision about matters of public importance.
>
> There is also a public interest in freedom of expression itself. When considering what is in the public interest we also need to take account of information already in the public domain or about to become available to the public.
>
> In news and factual programmes where there is a clear public interest and when dealing with serious illegal or anti-social behaviour it may occasionally be acceptable for us not to reveal the full purpose of the programme to a contributor. The deception should be the minimum necessary in proportion to the subject matter. Any proposal to use deception must be referred to a senior editorial figure…and in the most serious cases to Controller Editorial Policy. (BBC, 2005.)

Any guidelines that contain words such as "significant", "clear", "serious" and "in proportion" must be open to interpretation, but their message is plain enough to explain why, even if they wanted to, BBC staff would be unable to uncover many of the stories that are splashed across the Sunday redtops.

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Not that intrusion is restricted to such newspapers, to undercover reporting, or to the activities of prominent people. Consider the way that the provincial press routinely reports inquest hearings into the deaths of local people, for example. Editors of most such newspapers take it for granted that these hearings should be reported because they are both newsworthy (by definition, inquests involve tragedy) and cost-effective (hearings typically last only around an hour or so yet provide good copy). However, at least one editor has questioned this policy and now requires there to be some form of "public interest" element to justify intruding on what is a personal tragedy:

> For instance, if a schoolboy was found hanged, then there were possible issues relating to the pressure of exams and bullying. However, if a man committed suicide because he was depressed over marriage difficulties, then there was no clear public interest and so we didn't cover it. (Quoted in *Press Gazette*, 2003b.)

This editorial decision, taken within the offices of a small regional newspaper in the middle of England - the *Scunthorpe Evening Telegraph* - suggests that public interest considerations do not come into play only when journalists engage in what is commonly known as investigative journalism. Investigative journalism, as defined by John Ullmann and Steve Honeyman, involves:

> [T]he reporting, through one's own work product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organisations wish to keep secret. The three basic elements are that the investigation be the work of the reporter, not a report of an investigation made by someone else; that the subject of the story involves something of reasonable importance to the reader or viewer; and that others are attempting to hide these matters from the public. (Quoted in Keeble, 2001b: 188-189.)

Such investigative journalism has been described as "the first rough draft of legislation", which makes explicit the link between the revelation of a wrong and action to put it right (de Burgh, 2000: 3). However, if we conceive of journalism as existing fundamentally to serve the interests of citizens then the concept of the public interest can inform more than just specifically investigative reporting. James Ettema and Theodore Glasser (1998: 61 and 181) argue that investigative journalism offers a different model from what they term "daily journalism" because it makes claims that

certain facts are verifiably true and is not afraid of making moral judgements, for example about the performance of public institutions. But, rather than a wholly different model, can that not be seen as an intensification of what *all* serious journalism seeks to do? That was certainly the view of veteran investigator Paul Foot, who told me:

> It's a complete fraud, the idea that there is a race apart called investigative journalists. An ordinary reporter doing a perfectly ordinary story carries out these functions, the difference would be the enthusiasm and the scepticism with which you approach something.

Such a view is also the starting point of many whose journalism has been practised within alternative, rather than mainstream, media. When I began my journalistic career on an alternative newspaper, we had open editorial meetings in which any of the contributors and readers who took part might suddenly declare: "I don't see the point of this story. What's it *for*?"

It is a question worth asking, as is Karen Sanders' one about whether the concept of the public interest could be better expressed as the *public good*:

> Undoubtedly the notion of public interest serves a useful normative role: it is the yardstick by which editors, publishers and broadcasters determine the boundaries of ethical behaviour. However, it is also unclear and abstract… The notion would repay closer scrutiny and perhaps recasting in the form of public or common good rather than that of "interest" which smacks of economism. Invading privacy for the public good expresses the truth that justice sometimes requires a private good to be subordinated to a public one. (2003: 90.)

Asking questions is, arguably, what journalists do best. We may sometimes get things wrong, but we are usually better at asking questions than, say, were the Buckingham Palace officials who employed Ryan Parry as a footman. Or the government's Security Commission (2004: 2) which, during its six month long investigation did not bother to ask any questions either of Parry or his referees; by the end of it all the Commission still seemed to be under the false impression that he had actually worked for his father's company. "The official report was laughable," says Parry. It did seem to vindicate his investigation, though, concluding that he had uncovered flaws in the system that "could be exploited by terrorists or

others to endanger the Queen, her family and official guests and thus to endanger national security". In other words, as the paper had claimed all along, it had done the Queen a favour. That some security lessons were learned was indicated when, early in 2006, two undercover reporters who tried to get jobs at Buckingham Palace were arrested on suspicion of "attempting to obtain pecuniary advantage" (Gibson, 2006). However, former *Mirror* editor Roy Greenslade (2006) was unimpressed by the public interest claims of such journalism, dismissing the palace stories as childish stunts "without merit or purpose".

Following Ryan Parry's palace escapades, other journalists began sending off bogus CVs left, right and centre, getting jobs everywhere from airports to parliament, planting fake "bombs" and taking sneak pictures – all in the name of the public interest. "It's getting a bit boring now," says Parry. "It has to have a valid point, don't do it for the sake of it. Sometimes these days it's just the tabloids having fun." It certainly wasn't much fun when he had to pull out of another undercover job as a security officer – because the rival *Sun* newspaper also had an undercover reporter in the same company and published the story first. Oh well, Ryan, you can't win them all.

Chapter Five: Danger: news values at work

Just a few months before a small group of suicide bombers brought terror to its public transport system, London hosted one of the largest debates about war, peace and global justice ever held. For three days somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people, most of them young, from more than 60 countries took part in a series of lively discussions at the European Social Forum; they even managed to find a use for the Millennium Dome, as 5,000 participants slept on the floor of the much-mocked monument. But anyone relying on mainstream UK media for news would have been hard-pressed to know that the forum was taking place. This non-coverage prompted a senior BBC journalist to bemoan the news values that prevailed during the event:

> As I write the fate of Dino the Dog is in the running order of the main news bulletins. But it seems to be of no interest to BBC News, or the many current affairs outlets, that the biggest political

conference of the year in Europe is taking place in London. Major political thinkers and campaigners, whom it would cost thousands of pounds to interview via satellite, are on our doorstep. Ditto articulate young people engaged in politics in a way everybody thinks they are not. Decisions are taken by a frightened bunch of editors who believe that politics begins and ends within 200 metres of Millbank, and that "world affairs" equals the war on terror. The war on poverty, injustice, corruption and environmental destruction – being waged by millions of people – is of little interest to them, even though it is setting the agenda of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, much of the corporate world, and many governments in the global South. Of course if there is a riot, a full complement of cameras and crash-helmeted reporters will be deployed. (*Journalist*, 2004b)

There was no riot so, except for the *Guardian* newspaper, the forum was largely ignored. The same cannot be said for Dino the German shepherd dog, whose experience gave the lie to the maxim that "dog bites man isn't news, man bites dog is". Actually, Dino had bitten a woman and had previously been sentenced to death by magistrates. When Dino's owner successfully challenged the destruction order - with a media-savvy judge remarking that "a dog will have his day" (BBC, 2004) - the story attracted copious amounts of coverage in print and broadcast media. Saving the life of one dog was, it seemed, of more significance than trying to save the planet.

Animals such as Dino put in frequent appearances in news output, where they are portrayed variously as villains, victims or simply as objects of amusement. Regional television news in the UK is particularly keen on such stories, often provoking the cry among discerning viewers: "Why is *that* news?" It's a very good question. Although I have not yet spotted any skateboarding ducks or dogs that can say "sausages" – archetypal inconsequential stories that have passed into TV legend - a moving menagerie of fluffy animals is daily paraded before our eyes accompanied by reporters feigning enthusiasm while secretly wondering if it was for this that they entered journalism. But killer beasts and cute pets are by no means the only journalistic clichés in the news, and they frequently find themselves in the company of other stereotypes such as the brave cancer victim, the

heartless thief, and the have-a-go-hero; all stock characters in stories that, we are told, write themselves.

This sounds like a job for…Reverend Utah Snakewater. The self-styled Reverend and his Newsbreakers offer a radical critique of television news in the United States by staging "parody and non-traditional media transformations," it says here (Newsbreakers, 2005). Put more bluntly: they take the piss. Their speciality is disrupting live two-way outside broadcasts in protest at the trivialisation of local TV news. As a hapless reporter tries to answer questions from a presenter in the studio, the Newsbreakers prance around in fancy dress and Rev Snakewater performs on-air exorcisms (Shaw, 2005). It's all the idea of former television journalist Chris Landon, from New York, who is campaigning for real news to replace the "voyeur's fantasy" that he says has "shifted from the role of challenging those in power to exploiting the weak" (quoted in Lunscombe, 2005). A study by the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism lends credence to such criticism by pointing to the three-stage "hook-and-hold" approach favoured by local TV news, in which the lead item may be a weak story with strong pictures (a fire in which nobody is hurt, for example), harder news stories about politics or industry are squeezed in the middle, and the final stories are largely inconsequential human interest items. "TV defines reality for a lot of people," according to Landon. "We just want to startle them enough to disrupt that view of reality" (quoted in Lunscombe, 2005).

Such stunts may be a bit of fun – for viewers, if not for the poor reporters caught up in them – but they highlight the serious point that much TV news in the US has become a spectacle of banality. Not just in the US, and not just on television. Journalists have long attracted criticism for their selection of news, and even at the birth of printing there was concern about a disproportionate interest in "lewd and naughty matters", ie sex and violence (Williams, 1998: 16-17). UK tabloid journalist Harry Procter (1958: 58) recalled that, when he joined the *Daily Mirror* as a reporter before the Second World War, the paper's key ingredient was sex: "Sex, the *Mirror* discovered, sold papers – papers by the million. Hard news was merely the

third course." He later moved to the *Sunday Pictorial*, where the recipe for building circulation was similar: "Sex, scandal, surprise, sensation, exposure, murder. And as many pictures of half-dressed, big-bosomed damsels in distress as possible" (Procter, 1958: 141). Such fare remains the staple diet of the UK's biggest selling newspapers today.

But it is not only "downmarket" tabloid newspapers that have a distorted sense of news values, argued the Labour party politician and radical campaigner Tony Benn at a James Cameron Memorial Lecture in London:

> Every hour we're told what's happened to the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Footsie [Financial Times Share Index] and the value of the pound against the dollar and the value of the pound against the euro, though I've no idea how many people are hanging on every hour to hear this news... The news media continue to be obsessed by business, yet the statistics which really might be interesting you get perhaps once a year if there's a relevant report. One of the local London radio stations the other day reported that 74% of the children in the borough of Tower Hamlets live in poverty. Why isn't that statistic deemed worthy of being broadcast every hour?... I've always believed that if the number of accidents on building sites were broadcast on a daily basis for a couple of weeks there would be legislation immediately to deal with the problem...I was with [pensioners' leader] Jack Jones in Blackpool this year at a rally of 2,000 pensioners, and I pointed out to Jack that the meeting would not be reported in the media at all - unless he were to throw a brick through the window of McDonald's: then there would be two bishops on *Newsnight* talking about the rising tide of violence among older people. But Jack didn't throw the brick, and there was no report of the meeting. (2001: 334-335.)

Such news values apply not just to pensioners on parade in Blackpool but also to campaigners at G8 summits of world leaders, such as the one held in Scotland in July 2005. A 250,000-strong peaceful march through Edinburgh to Make Poverty History received considerably less media coverage than did fighting between police and a small number of protesters in the days that followed, prompting *Herald* columnist Iain MacWhirter to lament: "I'm afraid the lesson of these demonstrations is that violence works. The Battle of Princes Street was a minor public disorder, but it was magnified out of all proportion" (quoted in Mackay and Pike, 2005). Again, this is not a new phenomenon. Roy Greenslade (2003: 238) recalls a time when, to decide

whether a riot in Northern Ireland was worth reporting, UK newsdesks would ask: "How high are the flames?" For Greenslade, such a query reflected a flawed news agenda, concerned only with "results rather than causes".

A symptom of this concern with the latest consequence rather than the deeper cause is the tendency for journalists - especially editors and news editors - to lose interest in stories after a short while. Many perceive their audience as having an even shorter attention span. Many significant issues of the day are seen as worthy but dull, made of interest to a wider public only occasionally by a dramatic event or a celebrity photo-call, before the media circus moves on. Many long-term issues that affect large numbers of citizens are likely to be squeezed out by more immediate and individual stories, complains Robert McChesney (2000: 49-50), an academic and media campaigner in the US who argues that "the historical and ideological context necessary to bring public issues to life" is too often absent.

The funding of local authority Social Services departments is seen as boring; until, that is, a social worker is blamed for letting a child be abused or killed by its parents. Protecting health and safety at work is dismissed as a dull subject, until there is an explosion, preferably with dramatic pictures. And the homeless are a story just for Christmas, not for life. Even natural disasters are relative, judging by how quickly most of the UK news media lost interest in the 2005 earthquake that devastated parts of Pakistan and Kashmir. As one news executive explained: "Lots of poor people far away get killed. Nothing more to be said" (quoted in Cole, 2005). The poor may always be with us, but they appear to be of little interest to most news editors most of the time. Although we had a week of coverage of poverty in Africa around the time of the G8 summit in July 2005 – aided and abetted by the presence of rock stars doing their bit for the cause and their careers - we get comparatively little coverage of poverty the rest of the time. Poverty is still out there even when the cameras are gone but, as Richard Keeble (2001a: 34) notes, "the experiences of the poor are marginalized" in most news.

"People tend to suppose journalists are where the news is," observes former BBC journalist Martin Bell. "This is not so. The news is where journalists are" (quoted in Marr, 2005: 292). Where too many senior metropolitan journalists appear to be is a curious place: a world of rich lists and celebrity parties, where it is taken for granted that rising house prices are a good thing, speed cameras are a bad thing, and that individual wants should come before social needs. Such "aspirational" journalists may not leave their desks very often to mingle personally with the rich and famous, but it is upon them that their gaze is fixed; the poor and the powerless rarely seem to come into their field of vision at all, at home or abroad.

News, then, happens where journalists are – or, at least, where they are looking – and news is that which editors decide to publish. Studies of news values suggest that decisions about what makes a news story are informed by ground rules that, although they may not be codified in a formal sense, govern daily newsroom practice. Notwithstanding differences between media and within different sectors of the market, research suggests that, when assessing potential news, journalists look for one or more of the following elements: *The power elite* - stories concerning powerful individuals, organisations or institutions; *Celebrity* - stories concerning people who are already famous; *Entertainment* - stories concerning sex, showbusiness, human interest, animals, an unfolding drama, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, entertaining photographs or witty headlines; *Surprise* - stories with an element of the unexpected and/or contrast; *Bad news* - stories with negative overtones such as conflict or tragedy; *Good news* - stories with positive overtones such as rescues and cures; *Magnitude* - stories perceived as sufficiently significant either in the numbers of people involved or in potential impact; *Relevance* - stories about issues, groups and nations perceived to be relevant to the audience; *Follow-ups* - stories about subjects already in the news; *Media agenda* - stories that set or fit the news organisation's own agenda (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001: 279). The existence of such news values means that stories are not selected according to their social significance or to their prevalence in society; indeed, they often seem to be selected in inverse proportion to those

qualities. Coverage of crime, for example, is skewed by the operation of news values that privilege the unusual, the dramatic and the tragic – see Chapter Seven – but crime is not the only area of such concern.

Research into the way that health issues are covered in the UK reveals unhappiness among public health experts that news media give undue prominence to short-term "scare" stories while failing to explain more complex or long-term developments (Harrabin and others, 2003: 2). A study for the King's Fund thinktank found that news media prefer stories about new health risks and "crises" in the NHS to ostensibly less dramatic ones about things that might affect far more people, such as measures to improve health, prevent illness or reduce health inequalities (Harrabin and others, 2003: 1). In an earlier study of media coverage of health issues, sociologist Clive Seale (2002: 187) even claimed that there were a disproportionate number of news stories about breast cancer compared with other illnesses, "because of the presumed appeal of such 'soft' news to a female readership, as well as because it provides male readers and news editors with the opportunity to contemplate breasts".

When asked why there might be such disparity between the scale of public health risks in the real world and the reporting of health risks in the media world, editors and reporters all gave the same answer: news values. This is hardly surprising - after all, as *Times* science correspondent Mark Henderson (2003) comments: "News, by definition, involves the unexpected and dramatic, not the run-of-the-mill" - but it does raise concern about potential effects on public behaviour and public policy. Does it really matter? Yes, according to the King's Fund, because news coverage can influence the decisions of policy-makers and the behaviour of the public (Harrabin and others, 2003: 1). Yes, according to Professor Seale (2002: 213), who says that too much health reporting amounts to a sensational "fairy story" of bad bugs and good people, resulting in audiences changing their behaviour in response to scare stories rather than to "more realistic dangers that have not been covered in the media".

The world is not always made up of the unambiguous blacks and whites of such journalism, but of "many shades of grey", argues Seale (2002: 40). To illustrate the point, he gives the example of a road bridge in New York, which collapsed and caused 10 deaths. Suddenly, bridges were news and "for a while every reporter in the state was alert to possible bridge stories so that every crack, groan or sign of dilapidation became evidence of a pattern, which was now the story". Bridge stories captured the journalistic imagination for a period, but in such a way as to simplify what were complex realities involving different types of bridge, different types of location, and different types of problem:

> Typically, monocausal, simple explanations were preferred by news media, since complex multicausal explanations made it harder to allocate blame completely and threatened readers with the prospect of "good" people sharing responsibility for the bad event…Phenomena that were previously disregarded and unconnected were, through the alchemy of the media, noticed, their significance heightened, and ultimately classed as instances of a pattern. (2002: 33-34.)

In their classic study of news values, Galtung and Ruge (1965) argued that the more clearly an event could be understood and interpreted unambiguously, without multiple meanings, the more likely it was to be selected as a news story. However, it is not necessarily the event itself that is unambiguous; a lack of ambiguity might be due to the way an event has been perceived and/or described by the journalist. A study of news values operating in the UK press found "many news stories that were written unambiguously about events and issues that were likely to have been highly ambiguous", such as military interventions or government announcements (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001: 270).

Increased news coverage of an issue may in fact be a response to political rhetoric, argues the academic researcher Justin Lewis, who points out that international terrorism has been the subject of many more news stories since 2001 than it was in the 1980s when more terrorist incidents actually took place. As with the health stories cited above, Lewis argues that "this kind of coverage distorts our perception of risk", adding: "So, despite the

government's chief scientific adviser's warning that global warming is a much greater threat to life than global terrorism, terrorism ranks high on the public's list of concerns, while climate change scarcely registers" (2004).

It is interesting to note that, even in the short time since Lewis wrote those words, the issue of climate change seems to have moved higher up the media agenda; however, the bulk of such coverage has erred on the side of simplistic explanations.

It is this lack of perspective and context within much reporting – an absence of shades of grey – that has prompted academic commentators Stephen Baker and Greg McLaughlin to wonder aloud about the usefulness of news itself:

> News is an institutional and professional selection of contemporary events that produces nothing more than an inventory of proceedings. Curtailed by time and space, it has no opportunity to expand upon or explain the events and issues it presents each day. In short, news just isn't up to the job of making the world intelligible. So here is a radical proposal: let's abolish it! And in its place let's invent a new media genre that can be relied upon to investigate, contextualise, inform and scrutinise. (2005: 5.)

I would not go all the way with their claim that "watching or reading the news can impair your ability to understand what's going on in the world". People I know who regularly consume news generally seem to have a better handle on the world around them than those who don't. This anecdotal evidence is backed up by research, according to academic Pippa Norris (2000: 11, 17 and 311), who refers to a "virtuous circle" in which "attention to the news media gradually reinforces civic engagement, just as civic engagement prompts attention to the news". With this in mind, although we may not wish to abolish news as Baker and McLaughlin suggest, we may usefully ask questions about what news is, for whom it is intended, and about whether mainstream news values serve the democratic participation and civic engagement of citizens as well as they might.

Challenging conventional ideas of news in this way has been one of the motivating factors behind the production of a range of alternative media,

from local newspapers to international websites. A local radical newspaper called the *Liverpool Free Press*, for example, operated with an alternative concept of news as being "useful information" (Whitaker, 1981: 105). That may be so wide a definition as to be of limited use, but it has the virtue of beginning from the starting point that news should have more than novelty value. The alternative local press that grew in the UK from the late 1960s into the 1980s prioritised the news and views of otherwise marginalised groups: people living on low incomes, people in social housing, people involved in community groups, trade union activists, the unemployed, and people active within the women's and gay movements and the black communities, among others. Such newspapers were an alternative to a mainstream press whose prevailing attitude was summed up by a former editor of the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, when he recalled: "At my first meeting with members of the black community I was told, 'The *Mail* has lots of black faces – they are all on the Crimestoppers page'" (quoted in Elliott, 2005: 14). Despite limited resources, the alternative press attempted to provide such otherwise marginalised groups with useful information, and with a voice.

A sympathetic reporter from a mainstream newspaper once told a gathering of alternative journalists that they could usefully "fill in the gaps the straight press leaves" by setting stories in a broader context (National Conference of Alternative Papers, 1984: 2). Another newspaper that tried to do just that was *Leeds Other Paper* (*LOP*), which had a news agenda constructed in opposition to what it regarded as the shallow approach of too much journalism (Harcup, 1994; 2006). Whereas mainstream journalists too often seemed content to get an "angle" on a story before moving on to the next one, contributors to *LOP* – of whom I was one for a while - were expected to think about the meaning of stories and to cover them in both depth and breadth, as another of the paper's journalists explained in an internal discussion document:

> [P]olitically, a good story for me is one that reinforces the ability of the mass of people to do things for themselves and decreases their reliance on others (especially in work and in the community)… We

> are committed to doing justice to the subjects we cover. This means well-researched, in-depth articles often and *LOP* stories are longer on average than those in the commercial press… We should be conscious of the need to slow down our readers – to reverse the in-one-ear-out-the-other process – and create lasting impressions… (Leeds Alternative Publications, undated: 1-3.)

If that sounds like a highly political approach to news values, that's because it is, transparently and unapologetically so. It can be argued that the news values that favour Dino the dog over the European Social Forum are no less political, while less transparent. For the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973: 235), although the news values of mainstream journalism may appear to be "a set of neutral, routine practices", they are part of an "ideological structure" privileging the perspectives of the most powerful groups within society by allowing them greater access to the media and greater influence over social attitudes. The creation of alternative journalistic practices and outlets is one way of countering this, as another journalist who has worked in both alternative and mainstream media told me:

> There's always a need for alternative viewpoints and diversity if any change is to be made to current conditions. One example might be: in the 1970s feminist journals raised issues which were taken up by trade unions in the 1980s and became copy for (a part of) the mainstream in the 1990s – issues like domestic violence or sexual harassment at work, which were "unsayable" till said by the alternative media… Taking a longer view, there are numerous other issues (over the centuries) which were first aired in contemporary "alternative media" before becoming part of the mainstream, like the struggle for universal adult suffrage. (Quoted in Harcup, 2005b: 368.)

Journalism produced by alternative media today features heavily in the *Project Censored* compilation of significant stories that have been either ignored or under-played in mainstream media in the United States. Compiled every year by staff and students in the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University, a typical selection of the "top 25 censored stories" includes evidence of government manipulation of scientific information to support a pro-business agenda; high levels of uranium found in civilians and soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq after the United States' use of uranium weapons; US destabilisation of the government of Haiti; and a

legal ruling that apparently gave Fox News the right to distort its news reports (Phillips, 2004). None of these stories were actually censored in the sense of the police kicking down doors and removing presses or computers, of course. They were just deemed too boring, too contentious or too expensive to warrant much attention from news organisations that were too busy following each other and watching their own backs. As investigative journalist Greg Palast writes in an introduction to *Censored 2005* (Phillips, 2004: 31-32), important stories have been "blocked, ignored, crushed, buried while the Fox in the news henhouse lingers on the investigative revelations in the latest *Sports Illustrated* swimwear issue".

Journalism need not be as shallow as that, believes Peter Phillips, director of Project Censored. Echoing the old *Liverpool Free Press* ethos of news as useful information, Phillips asks us to envisage what "real news" might look and sound like:

> Imagine "real news" as media information that contributes to the lives and socio-political understandings of working people. Such real news informs, balances, and awakens the less powerful in society. Real news speaks truth to power and challenges the hegemonic top-down corporate entertainment news systems. Real news empowers and keeps key segments of working people…tuned in, informed, and active.   (2004: 229.)

The Committee of Concerned Journalists came up with a similar idea after holding 21 public meetings across the United States to discuss what journalism was for. They concluded that its first principle was "to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2003: 12).

If that sounds as if it might be a little on the dull side, it needn't be. Consider the following examples.

During the G8 summit in July 2005, BBC television's *Newsnight* had all the usual heavyweight political coverage you would expect on such an occasion, but they also sent correspondent Paul Mason out into the fields to spend the week embedded with groups of protesters. Mason's illuminating despatches from behind the demonstrators' lines helped inform us about

what was going on and why, and gave a contrasting perspective to the mainstream media view from behind police lines. This was enhanced by the imaginative decision to have him writing a blog on the *Newsnight* website in addition to filming reports for the programme itself (Mason, 2005).

A similar shift in perspective was used to good effect in BBC Wales' coverage of the aftermath of a recent flood that hit a village. A journalist took a lightweight video camera and spent several days with a local family, recording how the flood had affected them. When a government minister paid the village a visit, the event was filmed not by the usual crew accompanying the politician on his whistlestop tour, but by the journalist in the house. In a reversal of the conventional approach to such an event, the action is seen from the villagers' point of view as they open their front door and find the minister on their doorstep (Kinsey and others, 2006).

The alternative news-sheet *SchNEWS*, published in Brighton since 1994, has a popular "Crap arrest of the week" column that details and ridicules examples of over-zealous policing from around the world. This idea found a powerful echo in the mainstream media when the *Independent* newspaper devoted its front page to a juxtaposition of three separate court cases that happened to take place on the same day:

> WAR CRIMINALS
>
> *Maya Evans*, 25, convicted for reading out names of 97 British soldiers killed in Iraq at unauthorised protest
>
> *Douglas Barker*, 72, threatened with jail for withholding part of his tax payment in protest at the Iraq conflict
>
> *Malcolm Kendall-Smith*, a 37-year-old RAF medical officer, facing court-martial for refusing to serve in Iraq (*Independent*, 2005)

On another occasion, the same newspaper gave over its front page to a story so simple and effective it is a wonder that nobody had thought to do it earlier. Faced with the US and UK governments' refusal to do "body counts" of civilian casualties in occupied Iraq, Robert Fisk (2005) did what good reporters do in such circumstances: he went to see for himself. The people described in his resulting story about the mortuary in Baghdad were

the "ordinary" victims of conflict, people who rarely get much coverage in mainstream journalism when they are foreign and far away:

> The Baghdad morgue is a fearful place of heat and stench and mourning, the cries of relatives echoing down the narrow, foetid laneway behind the pale-yellow brick medical centre where the authorities keep their computerised records. So many corpses are being brought to the mortuary that human remains are stacked on top of each other. Unidentified bodies must be buried within days for lack of space… In just 36 hours – from dawn on Sunday to midday on Monday – 62 Baghdad civilians had been killed. No Western official, no Iraqi government minister, no civil servant, no press release from the authorities, no newspaper, mentioned this terrible statistic. The dead of Iraq – as they have from the beginning of our illegal invasion – were simply written out of the script. Officially they do not exist… (Fisk, 2005.)

That's the worthy *Independent*, of course, which has also challenged the prevailing discourse about immigration, with headlines such as: REVEALED: HOW IMMIGRANTS HELP THE ECONOMY (14 May 2005). But the more popular papers are also capable of revelation and insight when they remember that news need not begin and end with sex and celebs. In an echo of its "shock issues" of the 1960s, the *Daily Mirror* devoted several pages in 2003 to challenging some of the prejudices against asylum seekers:

> MIRROR SPECIAL ON THE ISSUE TEARING BRITAIN APART: ASYLUM – THE TRUTH
>
> It is the most hotly debated issue of our time, a debate driven by fear, myth and the hysteria of the right-wing press. Asylum seekers – scroungers sponging off our over-stretched state or global victims who need help?… [A]ccording to a Home Office study, migrants – including asylum seekers – actually contributed around £2.5 billion in taxes in 1999-2000. A recent Mori poll showed that people in the UK believe that Britain takes in 23 per cent of the world's refugees. But in reality, we take in less than two per cent. Although seen as a soft touch, Britain is actually only ranked 10th in the EC in asylum applications in relation to overall population…   (Donnelly, 2003.)

Even the *Daily Express* – which, as we shall see in Chapter Nine, has been accused by its own journalists of pandering to racism – can resist its kneejerk impulse on occasions, as when it reported on a London school

where pupils speak 58 languages as a success story rather than as the end of civilisation as we know it (Willey, 2005).

One Thursday in the middle of August every year the A Level results are published, accompanied on that day's TV news and the following day's newspapers with the predictable row about falling standards and the even more predictable pictures of teenage girls in crop tops hugging each other. But, while doing its duty in this manner, the *Sun* also had an original thought in 2005, which was to go to the family of black teenager Anthony Walker who had been killed in a racist attack three weeks earlier. Sure enough, the family had just received the news that Anthony had achieved straight As in his exams and the *Sun* got a front page splash: WHAT **A** WASTE: TOP GRADES FOR ANTHONY (19 August 2005). Of course, a racist attack on somebody who is good at school is no better or worse than a racist attack on somebody who fails their exams, but the story did remind readers of the murderous results of racism.

The *Sun* put its enormous influence to good use again when it decided that domestic violence had for too long been a hidden crime:

> EVERY WEEK TWO WOMEN ARE KILLED BY THEIR PARTNERS
>
> By the end of this week two more women will be dead – victims of their abusive partners. More British women aged 19 to 44 are killed as a result of domestic violence than anything else… (Hunter and Bolouri, 2005)

The paper's editor Rebekah Wade inadvertently raised the profile of domestic violence even further when, shortly after launching the *Sun* campaign, she hit the headlines for allegedly hitting her husband, much to the amusement of other journalists throughout the land (Edwards, 2005). Apparently it was "just a silly row which got out of hand," Wade told her own newspaper (*Sun*, 2005). In the normal course of events, however, domestic violence attracts much less news coverage than does violence by strangers.

Recounting the hidden story of those at the bottom of the social heap is the speciality of Nick Davies, a journalist who has frequently been given large amounts of space in the *Guardian* newspaper, as with a series on poverty that began:

> Ryzard studied banking and finance in Warsaw. He has ended up in a bank in London – sleeping in its doorway… It is half past six in the morning. Ryzard rolls up his sleeping bag and sets off for a day of survival. He calls it "walking for food", tramping miles in search of the soup kitchens where he can eat, and of the hidden refuges where he can find the others who, like him, have fallen off the edge and tumbled back to the days of Dickensian London. A day with Ryzard is a journey through a secret city.   (2005.)

Personal stories of individuals such as Ryzard are not just recounted with empathy but are placed in a wider context. Such reporting seems to be an example of what the academic Simon Cottle argues that we need a lot more of:

> [R]eportage…which seeks to go beyond 'thin' news reports, headlines and news values, to reveal something of the deep structures, contending perspectives and lived experiences that often underpin if not propel news stories forward and which grant them meaning – both for the participants and protagonists involved as well as potentially for us, the audience. (2005a: 109.)

Cottle (2005a: 116-117) cites the example of a report on BBC television's *Panorama* (5 October 2003) that sought to give a "human face" to the "terrorism suspects" being held without trial by United States forces in Guantanamo Bay, people who are rendered "speechless" in most coverage.

 Although such contextualised reporting is too often absent from the news, it does get in sometimes, according to an academic study that highlights several further examples, including:

- A report on BBC News 24 concerning global warming, which focused on the Greenland ice caps and explained the ways that this could impact everywhere on the globe.

- A Sky News report on congestion charging, which explored the way in which it could work, the impact on the average motorist, and experience from where it had been tried.

- A report on BBC One's *Ten O'Clock News* that covered the refugee crisis in Sudan by looking back at British Commonwealth involvement in the country and at how the crisis had developed.

(Lewis and others, 2005: 471-472.)

By stepping back to gain perspective in this way, journalists attempt to give the audience a bigger picture of what is going on in the world.

And there are many other examples. Such as when ITV News combined reports from those parts of the world most affected by climate change with details of the impact made by individuals' decisions in the UK (*Press Gazette*, 2006a). Or when local newspapers have told some of the real life horror stories lived by refugees who have moved to their areas (Grant, 2006). Or when, within the context of noises in the US about a possible attack on Iran, *Channel Four News* (6 March 2006) went back to the 1953 US-backed coup to put the story in context for viewers today. These are just a few of the ways in which journalists are reporting the news in a thoughtful way - not in some supposed golden age 20, 50, or however many years ago, but here and now in the twenty-first century - and giving the lie to the cynical view that ethics and journalism have to be opposites. I could have selected other stories to illustrate this point, from journalists working in a range of media in a range of locations, and readers of this book may well be aware of further examples. It cannot be denied, however, that such examples are too often the exception rather than the rule.

Anyone who despairs of the unethical excesses, the debased news values and the lack of proportion of some journalism should perhaps go to the website of BBC Radio Four's long-running *From our own Correspondent* and listen to the recent despatches archived there. This is a programme in which reporters are freed from the constraints of news values and the diary, freed from the necessity of providing audio soundbites, and freed from the

requirement to sum up a complex situation in a few seconds. Instead, their stories can live and breathe, with the best examples blending the personal and the political, painting a small picture in sufficient detail to illustrate a bigger picture. Not everyone is a fan. *Panorama*'s Tom Mangold (2006) dismisses *From our own Correspondent* as "anodyne". Certainly, some items are too twee, the audience is assumed to be middle class and middle aged, and even unorthodox reporting can develop its own clichés; but mostly the programme leaves its listeners better informed about the world and its contributors less frustrated about their craft. BBC world affairs editor John Simpson says that it is the favourite programme among BBC foreign correspondents because it allows them to tell stories in more depth than they are usually allowed on broadcast news:

> We still have endless battles with editors who think a minute and a half (about 270 words) is long enough for a complicated story, but…the detail is what matters. If a report is too brief, people can't understand what is happening; so why bother to broadcast it? Explaining things is the basic purpose of reporting… You don't lose the detail in *From our own Correspondent*: it luxuriates there in full, florid complexity. Long may it survive.   (2005.)

Indeed. But rather than restricting such an approach to the ghetto of a specialised programme that covers only overseas events, could the windows of more newsrooms not be opened similarly to let a bit of fresh air blow across other stories?

Not that everyone would welcome such a departure from reporting conventions, judging by reaction to the following description on *From our own Correspondent* by Barbara Plett of events surrounding Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat:

> The world watches the unfolding drama as the man who has become the symbol for Palestinian nationalism seems to hover between life and death… To be honest, the coverage of Yasser Arafat's illness and departure from Palestine was a real grind. I churned out one report after the other, without any sense of drama. Foreign journalists seemed much more excited about Mr Arafat's fate than anyone in Ramallah… where were the people, I wondered, the mass demonstrations of solidarity, the frantic expressions of concern? Was this another story we Western journalists were getting wrong, bombarding the world with news of what we think is an historic

> event, while the locals get on with their lives? Yet when the
> helicopter carrying the frail old man rose above his ruined
> compound, I started to cry - without warning. In quieter moments
> since I have asked myself, why the sudden surge of emotion?…
> (Plett, 2004.)

In a calm and measured manner, Plett went on to analyse both her own reaction and those of the Palestinian people. But it was all too much for the BBC Board of Governors (2005) which, following a complaint by a listener, ruled that "the reference to the reporter starting to cry did breach the requirements of due impartiality". It was not clear if the objection was to the act of crying itself, or to mentioning the fact. However, we did not hear the governors speaking out when the BBC repeatedly reported that "the whole nation" was mourning the death of Princess Diana or the Queen Mother, when most people seemed to be getting on with their lives as normal… much as the people of Ramallah were apparently doing as Arafat lay dying.

It ought to go without saying that the reporting of death is a sensitive business, perhaps never more so than in the case of suicide. How, then did the *Times* come to publish a graphic photograph of a woman falling through the air, having just jumped from a hotel window ledge? The decision to publish the photograph over most of a page was apparently taken after lengthy discussions involving senior editorial figures. But it left many commentators, including Peter Cole (2006), unhappy about the use of such a picture for "ghoulish entertainment". Mike Jempson (2006), director of the media ethics charity Mediawise, condemned the decision to publish by the *Times* and a minority of other national newspapers as irresponsible, because of the additional distress caused to friends and relatives, and also because research suggests there is a risk of copycat behaviour when such coverage occurs. In rejecting a complaint by a friend of the dead woman, the PCC (2006) said it was wary of restricting "the right of newspapers to report newsworthy events that take place in public".

There are occasions when journalists have been accused of prompting suicide. The headteacher of a school apparently killed himself after appearing in court on a child abuse charge, having gone missing the day

before the case was due to be reported in his local newspaper. The National Association of Headteachers blamed his death on the publicity the case had attracted, but the newspaper's editor defended publication:

> I didn't think twice about naming him. He appeared in open court and was charged. We carried two or three pars of straightforward, factual reporting; we didn't dress it up in any way. No representation was made to me to keep his name out of the paper, but I wouldn't have done anyway…[T]here is a public interest in reporting that a headmaster has appeared on charges like that. The moment you start making moral judgements about which cases to include and which to leave out, you are on a slippery slope. (Quoted in Pape and Featherstone, 2005: 182-183.)

Death can bring out the worst in journalism – "How would you describe Diana's greatness?" I seem to recall one distinguished TV hack asking another distinguished TV hack on that cringeworthy Sunday morning back in August 1997 – but it can also bring out the best. When Rosa Parks died, the *Guardian*'s Gary Younge wrote a piece that treated her with the dignity she had seized for herself and other black citizens of the United States 50 years earlier, while also placing her individual story within a wider geographical and historical context:

> "Y'all better make it light on yourself and let me have those seats," the bus driver, James Blake, told three black passengers on the fifth row of his bus when it stopped outside Montgomery, Alabama's Empire Theatre. Two gave up their places so a white man could sit down. Rosa Parks stayed put.
>
> "If you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested," said Mr Blake. "You may do that," said Ms Parks.
>
> And so with a passive aggressive act of political rebellion against the racism of the deep south, Ms Parks, who died yesterday aged 92, took her stand by keeping her seat…
>
> At a time when apartheid was the international rule – enforced by all colonial powers including the British – rather than the exception, her challenge was to the established order of the global south as well as the deep south. Within the next 10 years 20 African countries would gain independence from white minority rule…
>
> From the position where she was ushered off the bus on Dexter Avenue she could see the point where Jefferson Davis had stamped his foot and declared an independent Confederacy to defend slavery

> less than a century before, and where the former governor George Wallace would promise "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation for ever" less than 10 years later…
>
> As an icon Ms Parks entered not just history but mythology, constantly misportrayed as an accidental heroine…The truth was that she was a lifelong anti-racism activist and feminist who had often been expelled from the local buses for refusing to comply, including once by the same Mr Blake some 12 years previously… (Younge, 2005.)

That article was on the news pages, but it is in the Obituaries sections of papers such as the *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent* and *Guardian* - full of extraordinary people in ordinary circumstances and ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances - that you are more likely to find such a good read. Australian academic Nigel Starck (2005: 281), a connoisseur of obituaries in UK newspapers, has noted a shift in their tone and style over the past two decades: "The reverential voice and faithful recitation of curriculum vitae have been replaced by inventive phrase, shafted observation, and understated humour… Quite simply, the best obituaries of today are sublime to read." True. But must we always wait for people to die before we can write about their lives with insight and shafts of observation?

Speaking of waiting to die, what of Dino the dog? There is something to be said for reporting his fate and that of others like him, just as long as we don't squeeze out more consequential stories while doing it. It might help if more of us paused occasionally to ask the question: "Why is *that* news?" And if we looked beyond the end of our "nose for news" to find the answer.

The news values of alternative media are contrasted with the mainstream approach in Whitaker (1981), and Phillips (2004) gives plenty of examples of stories that have been ignored or downplayed by mainstream journalism. Chambers et al (2004) explore the extent to which the increase in the proportion of women journalists has impacted upon news values and newsroom culture. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) unpick the whole idea of news values and use the work of Derrida and other critical theorists to analyse what the authors see as mainstream journalism's structural bias in

favour of event over process, effect over cause, and dominant discourse over critical reflection.

Chapter Six: Can I quote you on that? Journalists and their sources

John Simpson still recalls his first assignment as a BBC reporter. That's hardly surprising: it ended up with him being punched…by the prime minister of the day. It was 1970 and Simpson was a fresh-faced young radio journalist. The news editor told him that the prime minister's office had organised a photocall for London's Euston station, from where Harold Wilson would be catching a train to his parliamentary constituency of Huyton. This was considered potentially newsworthy because of speculation that Wilson might call a general election at any moment. When the prime minister arrived, surrounded by the usual posse of security men and flunkeys, none of the more experienced reporters tried to ask him anything. So the BBC's newest recruit stepped from the hack pack into Mr Wilson's path and, thrusting a microphone towards him, said: "Excuse me, prime minister..." Simpson describes what happened next:

> My entire world exploded. Wilson grabbed the shaft of the microphone with his left hand and tried to break it out of my grasp. With his right he punched me hard in the stomach. He was saying things to me, but I couldn't give them my undivided attention because I was too busy bending over and gasping… Then he let go of my microphone and swept past… The journalists gathered round laughing. "You can't just doorstep the PM like that, sonny," said one of the older reporters, patting me comfortingly on the shoulder… It was only five past eleven on my first working day, and I had been physically assaulted by the prime minister. My career was finished before it had begun. (1999: 93-94.)

Not quite. Wilson didn't carry out his threat of making an official complaint, and Simpson went on to become the BBC's world affairs editor, no less. But the episode hints at the shift in the relationship between journalists and sources over the decades, with questions such as, "Is there anything else you would like to tell the grateful nation, prime minister?" giving way to a rather less deferential style of journalism. And a good thing too. Back in 1970, despite the presence of numerous photographers and TV crews, nothing was broadcast or printed about the incident at Euston station;

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if the same thing happened today we would be treated to action replays for days afterwards, and then everyone would have a good laugh about it on *Have I Got News For You?*

John Simpson was neither the first nor the last journalist to be thumped in the line of duty, of course. Gerry Brown (1995: xiv) recalled turning up on the doorstep of a 17-year-old boy who was due to marry his 26-year-old teacher. As soon as Brown announced himself as being from the *News of the World*, the teenager shouted "Yaaaa baaastard", punched him on the nose, and slammed the door on the hack, who by this time had blood pouring down his face. Even for a foot-in-the-door man from the tabloids, however, this was not an everyday occurrence. Thankfully, not every relationship between a journalist and a source is as fraught as John Simpson's meeting with Harold Wilson or Gerry Brown's clash with the young bridegroom.

Probably no encounter between journalist and source has been scrutinised more closely than was Andrew Gilligan's meeting with Dr David Kelly in a London hotel on 22 May 2003. As would soon become all too well known, Dr Kelly was the UK's top scientific adviser on so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and he worked as a weapons inspector and a consultant to the Ministry of Defence; Andrew Gilligan was the defence correspondent for BBC Radio Four's flagship *Today* programme. The subject of their meeting was a dossier published by the UK government on 24 September 2002 entitled *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: the assessment of the British Government*. That was the dossier in which prime minister Tony Blair wrote a foreword that stated:

> …In recent months, I have been increasingly alarmed by the evidence from inside Iraq that…Saddam Hussein is continuing to develop WMD… What I believe the assessed intelligence has established beyond doubt is that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons, that he continues in his efforts to develop nuclear weapons, and that he has been able to extend the range of his ballistic missile programme… I am in no doubt that the threat is serious and current, that he has made progress on WMD, and that he has to be stopped… And the document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them… (HM Government, 2002: 3-4.)

The 45 minutes claim was referred to several times in the dossier. The executive summary emphasised that Iraq had "military plans for the use of chemical and biological weapons" and that "some of these weapons are deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them" (HM Government, 2002: 5-7). Because of evidence to both the Hutton and Butler inquiries, we would later learn that the dossier was revised in the days before publication. During this process, Downing Street chief of staff Jonathan Powell was asking: "What will be the headline in the *Standard* on day of publication? What do we want it to be?" (quoted in Norton-Taylor, 2004: 4). Entirely predictably, given the seemingly specific nature of the deadly threat outlined by Tony Blair, that day's London *Evening Standard* carried the headline 45 MINUTES FROM ATTACK, a theme adopted by the bulk of the UK media over the following 24 hours. As the *Guardian*'s security affairs editor Richard Norton-Taylor (2004: 5) notes, Downing Street seemed "only too delighted at headlines in the press at the time warning of a 45-minute threat to Britain".

Eight months later, Andrew Gilligan met his source in the Charing Cross Hotel for a background conversation about how things were going in Iraq. By this time, the country had been invaded, US President George Bush had declared hostilities over - although the killing had only just started - and awkward questions were being asked about why WMD had been neither fired nor found. "This was an informal and off-the-record meeting that I wasn't expecting to become a story at all, let alone the big deal that it did," recalls Andrew Gilligan when I ask him about it in another hotel bar three years later.

Big deal it certainly became, when conversation between Gilligan and Kelly turned to the September 2002 dossier that had helped pave the way for the UK's involvement in the Iraq war. According to notes typed into an electronic organiser by Gilligan, Dr Kelly told him:

> Transformed week before publication to make it sexier. The classic was the 45 minutes. Most things in dossier were double source but that was single source. One source said it took 4[5] minutes to set up a missile assembly, that was misinterpreted. Most people in

> intelligence weren't happy with it because it didn't reflect the considered view they were putting across. Campbell: real information but unreliable, included against our wishes. Not in original draft – dull, he asked if anything else could go in… (BBC, 2003a.)

The Campbell referred to was Alastair, the former Fleet Street journalist who had become Tony Blair's confidante and spin-doctor-in-chief. A week after this conversation, Andrew Gilligan reported on the *Today* programme with reference to the prime minister's 45 minutes claim:

> …Now that claim has come back to haunt Mr Blair because if the weapons had been that readily to hand, they probably would have been found by now.
>
> But you know, it could have been an honest mistake, but what I have been told is that the government knew that claim was questionable, even before the war, even before they wrote it in their dossier. I have spoken to a British official who was involved in the preparation of the dossier, and he told me that until the week before it was published, the draft dossier produced by the Intelligence Services, added little to what was already publicly known. He said, "It was transformed in the week before it was published, to make it sexier. The classic example was the statement that weapons of mass destruction were ready for use within 45 minutes. That information was not in the original draft. It was included in the dossier against our wishes, because it wasn't reliable. Most things in the dossier were double source, but that was single source, and we believed that the source was wrong." Now this official told us that the transformation of the dossier took place at the behest of Downing Street, and he added, "Most people in Intelligence weren't happy with the dossier, because it didn't reflect the considered view they were putting forward."… (BBC, 2003b.)

Those words had been scripted by Gilligan on the basis of his conversation with Dr Kelly, whose identity he did not reveal. They were first broadcast just after 7.30am on 29 May 2003 and were repeated in edited form on BBC news bulletins throughout the day. However, little noticed at the time, the reporter had used rather looser language in a two-way interview broadcast on *Today* at 6.07am (see Chapter Two). In this earlier item, he had reported being told by his source that the government "probably knew" that the 45 minutes claim "was wrong, even before it decided to put it in" (BBC, 2003b). Those words were not exactly what Dr Kelly told Andrew Gilligan, according to the latter's electronic notes. The BBC man would eventually

concede this point, telling the Hutton inquiry that it had been a slip of the tongue to say that he had been told the government probably knew the 45 minutes claim to be wrong. His imprecise wording was not the focus of much attention around the time of the broadcast because the government's aggressive response concentrated on denying the more general charge that it had "sexed up" the dossier to strengthen the case for war.

Looking back on the whole affair, Andrew Gilligan says it was a mistake to run the initial report as a two-way broadcast, because that had made it easier for such a slip of the tongue to occur:

> We shouldn't have done a story like that as a live, frankly, but we didn't know it was a big story. It was quite wrong to get that one sentence in that one very early morning two-way wrong. *I* could have said it, but the key words were "I've been told" when I hadn't been told. Even though it does turn out to be in fact right, it's not quite what I was told. Actually, I would have been perfectly justified in saying it on my own. Quite clearly, the government did know it [the 45 minutes claim] was wrong, and I don't mean they knew it was a lie or that they'd made it up, but that they knew it was exaggerated. They didn't make a fuss about that at the beginning, then they realised it was the chink in our armour.

The conversation between Kelly and Gilligan is an example of what is termed a journalist-source relationship. The journalist-source relationship has been described by academics such as Herbert Gans (1980: 116-117) as part dance and part tug-of-war, while Jerry Palmer (2000: 17) calls it a transaction in which "both journalists and sources have motives which lead them to interpret events in particular ways". Dr Kelly was not a novice as a source, and he frequently provided reporters with background information on his areas of expertise, but he was certainly a stranger to the kind of media storm that erupted around him after the UK government took exception to Andrew Gilligan's reporting. Downing Street, in the person of Alastair Campbell, demanded that the BBC apologise; the BBC, not unused to attacks from that quarter, stood by its story. As this battle of wills continued for several weeks, Dr Kelly volunteered the information to his employers that he had met Andrew Gilligan but did not recognise himself as the source of the controversial story. Events moved fast: Downing Street made Dr

Kelly's name public and he was questioned by two committees of MPs before, apparently, going for a walk alone and killing himself, thereby setting in train the Hutton inquiry (Hutton, 2004; Coates, 2004; Rogers, 2004).

The final report by Lord Hutton was dismissed by many commentators as an Establishment "whitewash". However, the process of the inquiry itself exposed to scrutiny not just the innards of the normally secret state, but also the workings of journalism in general and the journalist-source relationship in particular. Aspiring journalists – indeed, *all* journalists - would do well to study the evidence collected on the inquiry website, to reflect on issues such as a journalist's responsibility to a source, a journalist's responsibility to the audience, the importance of taking and keeping good notes, the importance of precise wording in journalism and dossiers alike; and to imagine themselves in the position of journalists Andrew Gilligan, Susan Watts or Gavin Hewitt, who were all called before the inquiry to be questioned in public about their working methods. As their BBC colleague Andrew Marr (2005: xv) later observed: "Many of the reporters slouched at the back of the courtroom…wondered how their own practices would stand up to that kind of examination."

Although Dr Kelly was the source for the Gilligan story, he attempted to distance himself from it, telling the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons: "From the conversation I had with him [Gilligan], I do not see how he could make the authoritative statement he was making from the comments that I made… It does not sound like my expression of words. It does not sound like a quote from me" (FAC, 2003). The next day Dr Kelly told the Intelligence and Security Committee: "I actually very rarely meet journalists although I do talk to them on the telephone and on this occasion, I must admit, I'd regarded it more as being more a private conversation than I had a briefing or in any way a disclosure at all" (quoted in Coates, 2004: 133). Yet we know that Dr Kelly had said some similar things to another journalist: Susan Watts, science editor of BBC Two's *Newsnight*. We know that because Susan Watts had a written note – in a

mixture of shorthand and longhand - and a tape recording of separate conversations with Dr Kelly. The whole world can now read her notes as well as a transcript of the taped telephone conversation on the inquiry website (BBC, 2003c; 2003d). You might like to pause and think of that fact the next time you are about to interview somebody: how would your notes stand up to such scrutiny?

We know that, a fortnight before he met Andrew Gilligan, Dr Kelly told Susan Watts that it had been a mistake to include the 45 minutes claim in the government dossier. He said it had been included because Alastair Campbell had seen it and thought it had sounded good, even though the information had not been corroborated. Unlike Andrew Gilligan, Susan Watts did not make a story out of this, seeing it as a "gossipy aside comment" rather than a real revelation (quoted in Rogers, 2004: 104). The day after the *Today* programme had run Gilligan's story, Susan Watts told Dr Kelly: "I may have missed a trick on that one" (BBC, 2003d). Following the *Today* broadcast, Dr Kelly had also been contacted by Gavin Hewitt, a special correspondent for BBC One's *10 O'Clock News*. Gavin Hewitt's note of what Dr Kelly told him on the telephone includes at the top of the first page, clearly legible in longhand, the words: "Dossier. No. 10 spin came into play" (BBC, 2003e), and that was the phrase Hewitt used on television news. So, although Dr Kelly apparently said similar things to these journalists, all three ran slightly different stories. If the journalist-source relationship is indeed a dance, then clearly it takes two to tango (Gans, 1980: 116).

Academic commentator Steven Barnett (2005: 333-336) notes that Gilligan, Watts and Hewitt had all discovered "a legitimate story of huge public significance" from "a senior and reliable source": the story being that changes were made to the September 2002 dossier at the behest of Downing Street. Each of the three journalists had spoken to the same source independently and used the information slightly differently. Barnett argues that Gilligan was the one who broke the dossier story, but without the scrupulous care that was required. Intelligence experts Anthony Glees and

Philip Davies (2004: 65) write that "virtually the only BBC journalist to come out of the Kelly affair with an enhanced reputation" was Susan Watts, who had treated Dr Kelly's comments about the 45 minutes warning as gossip rather than the basis for a story.

In the final days of his life, Dr Kelly told his daughter Rachel that he did not understand how Gilligan could have made "such forceful claims" based on their conversation (quoted in Dodd, 2004: 77). He would not be the first person to talk to a journalist and then be surprised at the resulting story, as we saw in the very different case of Joe McGinniss and Jeffrey McDonald discussed in Chapter Two. And, if Dr Kelly felt that what he told Gilligan in the Charing Cross hotel had been more of "a private conversation" than a disclosure, then he would not have been the first source to speak to a journalist who had a different understanding of the "transaction". We also know that he was not the last, because another Kelly – Tom, an official spokesman for Tony Blair at the time – appeared to suffer from just such a misunderstanding. Two weeks after the death of Dr Kelly, the *Independent*'s deputy political editor Paul Waugh (2003) quoted an un-named "senior Whitehall source" as describing the deceased scientist as a "Walter Mitty" fantasist who had exaggerated his own role in the dossier saga. After the Walter Mitty story appeared, a spokeswoman for the prime minister was asked about it at the daily Downing Street press briefing; if the resulting exchange as written up on the Downing Street website was any kind of dance, it appears to have been a dance around the subject as far as the spokeswoman (PMS) was concerned:

> Asked for a reaction to a report in today's *Independent* newspaper in which a "source" had suggested that the government considered Dr Kelly to be a "Walter Mitty" character, the PMS said that she did not know where the comment had come from, but we wanted to make it absolutely clear that no one would say such a thing with the approval of the prime minister - or indeed anyone else within Downing Street… Asked if she was saying that those in Downing Street who spoke to the press did not do so with the prime minister's approval, the PMS said that she was making the point that no one would say such a thing with the approval of the prime minister. Asked by the *Independent* correspondent to explain in what capacity those who had spoken to him had been acting, the PMS said that she couldn't

> say because she did not know where the comment had come from. Put to her that it must have come from someone in authority in Downing Street, the PMS repeated that she did not know where the comment had come from. Put to her by the *Independent* that it was clearly a government "line to take" given other people had been saying similar things last week, the PMS repeated that she did not know where the comment had come from and underlined once again that it had not been made with the approval of the prime minister or anyone else in Downing Street. Asked the prime minister's view of the comment, the PMS said that she hadn't spoken to the prime minister this morning. (Number Ten, 2003.)

Dr Kelly's grieving widow Janice would later tell the Hutton inquiry that the fantasist claim had left her feeling even more "devastated" because it was so far from the truth (Rogers, 2004: 204). The story rumbled on, and Downing Street eventually admitted that the offending briefing had been given by Tom Kelly (Hall, 2003) who, for his part, expressed regret that "what I thought was a private conversation with a journalist…has led to further public controversy" (quoted in Rogers, 2004: 143).

As we saw in Chapter Two, sources sometimes feel themselves to have been betrayed by journalists. What an examination of the David Kelly case shows is that things are rarely that simple, and for Richard Norton-Taylor (2004: 7) the evidence suggests that "almost everyone" involved was to blame in some way for "the whole ugly and, in the end, tragic episode".

Reflecting on this episode with the benefit of hindsight, Andrew Gilligan is prepared to accept his share of the blame – but only his share. That is, in the initial live two-way (which he points out was not his idea), he should not have said his source told him something that may well have been true, but which his source did not actually tell him. He feels BBC management was also at fault for not subsequently examining every word that was broadcast to see what could be defended and what should be corrected. And he feels that David Kelly himself was less than frank when questioned by his employers and MPs:

> He is not exempt from blame. He probably should have come out and said, "Yes I did say that", but he was worried that he would lose his job. Had he but known it, he couldn't possibly have been sacked, because he'd have been a national hero. The political climate

> became much more aggressive, because clearly the war in Iraq was not going well, and David realised that he might have been getting into more trouble than he anticipated, I suppose.

But the bulk of whatever blame there is belongs on the government side, insists Andrew Gilligan:

> The complaint from the government was that the entire story was wrong. Had we corrected the 6.07 broadcast during the row, it wouldn't have made any difference. The government would have settled for nothing less than a complete retraction of the story, which was not something that I or the BBC could ever truthfully have given, because it *was* true. It was totally absurd that the Hutton inquiry became about me and my story as it did, rather than about Tony Blair and his dossier. My story, even if it had been completely wrong, it's a news story, whereas the dossier sent the entire country to war and was responsible for something like 30,000 deaths. The trouble is that a lot of the understanding of my story has been in the light of what happened afterwards, and because it resulted in the resignations of the chairman and director general of the BBC, then it must have been a terribly bad story. But actually, if you go back and look at it, it's a terribly limp little thing, it's awfully measured and equivocal.

So why does he feel that Dr Kelly was willing to talk to him and other journalists? Specifically, because he was concerned about the credibility of the dossier. Generally, because "he was naturally chatty and enjoyed talking to journalists and displaying his knowledge". After a political storm erupted over the dossier story, Andrew Gilligan again tried to contact Dr Kelly, but this time without success:

> I was worried about compromising him. I was fairly sure that the numbers I called were being logged and I thought it entirely possible that somebody was listening to my calls. I did call him from a pay phone, but I couldn't get through, and I didn't want to leave a message, I didn't want to do anything which would compromise him because it was very, very frightening. I had a great deal of unpleasant stuff written about me but I coped because I knew that most of it wasn't meant personally, it was political rhetoric. The trouble is, I think David didn't realise that, he thought it was real, and he thought it was all terribly serious. And it was terribly serious in one way, but in another way it was a political game that was being played, one of those Westminster games, and he didn't realise that, he took it all very much to heart. For all that I've said about the political game, it was extremely frightening, and it must have been absolutely terrifying for him. I was an experienced practitioner, I'd seen it happen before to other people, I'd done it to other people, I'd

been part of it. I've doorstepped people. But God knows how
frightening it was for him, to have that kind of thing orchestrated
against oneself by the government.

In the context of political reporting, Andrew Marr writes that there are times
when a journalist "must behave like a shit – must build up close sources and
then, quite often, betray them". Betray them, that is, by revealing what the
journalist sees as the truth, if and when the public interest in revelation is
judged to outweigh the personal loss of a source; a source who may also
have become a friend, or almost a friend. This complex and delicate
situation is illustrated by Marr's description of his relationship with a
politician:

> As a rising Tory minister he was an excellent and frank source, loyal
> to the prime minister but also outspoken about the dilemmas ripping
> through Whitehall. I thoroughly enjoyed his company, and his
> wife's, and we lunched together regularly. I visited him at home; he
> was a wonderful host, and generous with stories. Then came the time
> when, as education secretary, he was visibly struggling and his
> policies were unravelling. Instead of writing supportively and
> understandingly, I joined the critical pack. It seemed to me to be the
> correct objective judgment of his performance, and therefore a kind
> of journalistic duty. It seemed to him a personal betrayal and he
> never forgave me, cutting me dead for years… This pattern…is
> common across Westminster. The cynical but professional answer is
> to have a range of good sources, with more always under
> cultivation… But we all go easy on pals occasionally – the decent
> among us, at least. In return, we hope, the public gets a better feeling
> about what's really happening behind closed doors. (2005: 184.)

Some journalists manage to avoid the feeling that they are behaving like a
"shit" by avoiding personal contact with those in their firing line. Former
Private Eye editor Richard Ingrams (2005: 95) recalls that Paul Foot, for
example, "was often loath to meet any of his potential victims because he
was afraid he might like them too much". Not all reporters at the sharp end
enjoy that luxury. One for whom it eventually became too distasteful was
Harry Procter, a Fleet Street veteran who was accused of betrayal by the
father of a 16-year-old boy who had shot dead a policeman. Procter (1958:
187-188) covered the story and befriended the boy's family, keeping them
away from rival reporters in the process. When the Old Bailey trial was
over, his newsdesk wanted a dramatic conclusion in which the father would

condemn his own son, as a warning to other parents. The reporter "ghosted" a piece based on the many expressions of regret that the father had uttered during their friendship. Procter asked him to sign it if it was true; the father agreed it was a truthful account and reluctantly signed on the understanding that the newspaper would not treat it sensationally. The next day's paper had a splash headline - MY FAILURE: BY CRAIG'S FATHER - and Procter recalled: "Some months later, when we met again, he refused to shake my hand; he told me our friendship was at an end." Within a few years the reporter's Fleet Street career was also at an end, when he left his job because he had had "more than my fill" of such stories (1958: 218).

Before he told his employers about his meeting with Andrew Gilligan – and before his employers "outed" him in public – Dr David Kelly had been what is known as a confidential source: that is, somebody who gives information to a journalist on the understanding that they will not be identified as the source. Such people are highly valued by journalists, which is why a common thread running through most of the ethical codes discussed in this book is that confidential sources of information should – indeed, must - be protected. If that means a journalist faces prison for refusing to reveal their source, then so be it.

There is broad agreement among journalists that it is preferable to be able to attribute information to an identifiable source, but there are occasions when this is not possible. A source may wish to place information in the public domain but be unwilling to be identified for a number of reasons: they may lose their job because they are revealing their employer's secrets; they could be breaching the Official Secrets Act; they may be prosecuted if they have been involved in criminal activity; they may be embarrassed politically or personally if they are seen to be "leaking" information; they may fear physical or other reprisals for spilling the beans. The journalistic justification for agreeing to confidentiality is that citizens need access to such information even without a named source, if it is in the public interest. This was the argument put forward by Robin Ackroyd, a freelance journalist who spent more than six years fighting off legal attempts by Merseyside

National Health Service Trust to force him to reveal the identity of a confidential source who had supplied him with information. His story, published in the *Daily Mirror*, revealed that Moors murderer Ian Brady was on hunger strike and was being force-fed in a high security mental hospital. Ackroyd risked the possibility of being jailed for contempt of court; instead, a High Court judge ruled that he was "a responsible journalist whose purpose was to act in the public interest" (quoted in Ponsford, 2006).

Another journalist who has risked jail to protect a source is Steve Panter, a crime reporter who fell out big time with the police. Based on information supplied to him confidentially, he revealed in the *Manchester Evening News* that the prime suspect for a huge bombing was not to be arrested or prosecuted. Detectives had identified a man they alleged was behind an IRA attack on Manchester in 1996, which injured around 300 people and caused damage estimated at up to £300 million; but Crown lawyers decided that there was insufficient evidence to secure a realistic chance of conviction. Until Panter's article three years after the bombing, the citizens of Manchester had no knowledge of the decision not to proceed; a decision that some observers suspected was taken for political rather than policing reasons. Publication of the story prompted the police hierarchy to go after Panter, who was arrested and questioned about where he obtained his information. "If you upset authority, they're going to hammer you," he explained when I asked him about the case several years later. When he refused to reveal his source, the police went through his phone bills and bank accounts in an unsuccessful effort to find the mole, and "they even drew a three mile radius around my house and identified every phone box, and got British Telecom to back-check phone calls made from the kiosks to see if they could find a pattern".

A police officer was arrested and charged with leaking the information. He was cleared after Steve Panter went to court to testify that the officer was *not* his source. In court, the reporter risked being jailed for contempt of court by again refusing to reveal the identity of his confidential source, despite an instruction to do so by a High Court judge presiding over the

case. As with Robin Ackroyd, he managed to avoid being sent to prison thanks largely to legal support supplied by the National Union of Journalists, and a later decision by the Attorney General not to prosecute for contempt of court. Although Panter won in the end, the case had involved several years of worry about what would happen, and it effectively ruined his chances of continuing as a crime reporter because sources would assume he was a marked man; he discovered that some detectives had been asked why they had telephoned his office in the past. Why had he taken such a stand?

> It's both personal and professional. On a personal level, you don't bayonet those people who actually stick their neck out for you and help you. Professionally, if you go down that road of betraying sources, you are letting down the profession, you're letting down your employer, your own professional integrity, and you're making it more difficult for any journalist in the future to maintain sources. You're doing it for the public because, if you're not going to protect your sources, then eventually the public are the losers because whistleblowers will not come forward any more, they won't trust journalists, and journalists won't be able to inform the public. Even though I was genuinely scared at the time, I was convinced I was doing the right thing for all those reasons. Between 1991 and 1996, Irish terrorists attacked Manchester on four separate occasions, and the police have only made two arrests – a reporter and a policeman. The story was in the public interest, overwhelmingly. But the NUJ helped save my skin, and I was grateful for that.

As we have seen, then, we can find out more by occasionally agreeing to keep the identity of our sources secret; and any journalist who "betrays" a confidential source makes it less likely that such sources will come forward in the future. Simple. But real life has a habit of being more messy than that, as indicated by the case of Judith Miller, a *New York Times* journalist who served 85 days in prison in 2005 to protect the identity of a government official whose identity had already been reported (Borger, 2005). Argument over the rights and wrongs of the Miller case is likely to continue for years to come.

One journalist who did not end up in jail - but whose source did - is Peter Preston. Foreign Office clerk Sarah Tisdall delivered to the *Guardian* newspaper's London office a photocopy of a confidential Ministry of

Defence document, concerning the controversial siting of US cruise missiles in the UK. She did so anonymously. Preston, then editor, did not know her identity, and had no way of communicating with her, so in a sense his newspaper had no obligation towards her. However, once it was decided to publish a story based on the leaked document, the newspaper could be seen as assuming responsibility for protecting the anonymity of their confidential source. It was a responsibility that the newspaper failed to fulfil. The newspaper fought and lost in the courts; then, after much agonising, the *Guardian* complied with a court order to hand over the photocopy. Markings on the document identified Sarah Tisdall as the source, and she was duly jailed under the Official Secrets Act. As Welsh and others (2005: 303) comment in their legal "bible", *Essential Law for Journalists*: "Journalists should note that had the *Guardian* destroyed the document after it was used to prepare the article but before its handing over was ordered, the paper would have escaped the painful necessity of having to reveal the identity of its source." But journalists, trained to support their stories with documentary evidence, are notoriously reluctant to shred material. Looking back on the sorry saga from a distance of more than two decades during which he has been haunted – even taunted – by the case, Preston (2005: 52) concludes that running the story based on the leaked document was "the bargain moment", and not destroying the document as soon as the story was written had been his stupidest move because "we need to honour our bargains". Journalist Paul Foot (2000: 85) went further and declared the *Guardian*'s actions "an outrage", adding that "no one will ever know how many future whistleblowers decided to keep quiet for fear that they might end up behind bars".

Somebody who makes no apology for failing to honour a bargain with a source is Nick Martin-Clark, a freelance journalist based in Northern Ireland who went to court not to protect the identity of a confidential source but to help convict that source of murder. Martin-Clark (2003: 35-39) describes how, when he was visiting a loyalist prisoner who was inside for armed robbery, the man swore him to secrecy before boasting about taking part in a paramilitary killing. The journalist continued to visit the prisoner who, he

says, came to trust him. That trust was shattered when Martin-Clark revealed the story in a *Sunday Times* article and agreed to give evidence in the subsequent murder trial. He explains why:

> [D]espite the difficulty of going against a source this was a promise I eventually felt, after some agonising, that I could not keep… There was a clear public interest in solving a murder… The answer is not to take a black and white view, but to face up to the difficult balances we have to strike as journalists with values, and be prepared to defend those values. In exceptional cases, and this was one, striking the right balance can involve overriding the principle of extending confidentiality to sources… [S]omeone who might well have killed again will now almost certainly never have the chance to do so… How can I not be glad I helped put him in jail?

However, Martin-Clark's actions won him few friends among the journalistic community in Northern Ireland; a community that has lived through a series of ethical battles since the outbreak of the "troubles" in the late 1960s. John Coulter of the *Irish Daily Star* typified the reaction of most of Martin-Clark's fellow journalists when he argued:

> For me, the fundamental ethical principle of journalism is that we have a moral imperative to give a guarantee of anonymity to genuine confidential sources providing bona fide information… If we sacrifice that trust, we betray our credibility as reporters of the truth… [I]f you can't keep your word, don't do the story.   (2005: 66-67.)

So, although journalistic codes of conduct tend to agree that confidential sources should be protected, there are different views on whether this principle should be considered as absolute. If it is absolute, does that mean that a journalist should not pass on potentially life-saving information – "X told me he is intending to plant a bomb," for example – yet, if it is not absolute, can it be regarded as a principle at all?

A problem with the more "absolutist" position is that it seems to require journalists to follow codes of ethical conduct out of a sense of duty to a set of rules rather than out of consideration of the consequences of their actions, argues journalist and academic Michael Foley. He suggests an alternative position:

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> Maybe it is now time for journalists to adopt a new imperative to judge and guide their actions, trustworthiness. Are my actions or decisions likely to increase the trust between me and my readers, viewers or listeners? Such an approach would have journalists seriously question the use of anonymous sources and ensure that they are used rarely and when a full explanation is given as to why. With trust placed central to journalist practice fewer anonymous sources would be used and so the problem of anonymity would arise less often.   (2004a: 19.)

In any event, adds Foley, anonymous sources are just as likely to be manipulative spin doctors as courageous whistleblowers; and how is the public interest served by a journalist's willingness to go to prison to protect the identity of somebody who is spinning a yarn on behalf of the rich and powerful?

Few journalists are going to come within punching distance of a prime minister, have their actions scrutinised by a public inquiry, or face jail to protect a source. Although one of the joys of journalism is that you never know what the next story will bring, most journalist-source relationships are more straightforward than those described in this chapter so far. Yet, even in routine encounters, many of the same issues will arise: trust, responsibility, reliability, accuracy. That is why, in the wake of the Hutton inquiry, the BBC issued new editorial guidelines to cover all the corporation's journalists, not just those burrowing away trying to uncover state secrets. The guidelines include the following sections, which have been informed by the Gilligan-Kelly encounter:

Gathering material

We should try to witness events and gather information first hand. Where this is not possible, we should talk to first hand sources and, where necessary, corroborate their evidence.

We should be reluctant to rely on a single source. If we do rely on a single source, a named on the record source is always preferable…

We should record our interviews with sources wherever possible. In circumstances where recording might inhibit the source, full notes should be made, preferably at the time, or if not, then as soon as possible afterwards.

Note taking

> We must take accurate, reliable and contemporaneous notes of all significant research conversations and other relevant information.
>
> We must keep records of research including written and electronic correspondence, background notes and documents. It should be kept in a way that allows double checking, particularly at the scripting stage, and if necessary by another member of the team.
>
> We must keep accurate notes of conversations with sources and contributors about anonymity. A recording is preferable where possible.
>
> When we broadcast serious allegations made by an anonymous source, full notes of interviews, conversations and information which provide the basis for the story must be kept…   (BBC, 2005.)

Many journalists point to Andrew Gilligan's lack of shorthand as a crucial weakness in his dossier story. But he regards the issue as a "red herring":

> Clearly my employers did not think it necessary for me to have shorthand. I doubt very much if any shorthand note I could have produced would have been greatly more comprehensive. Lawyers like things on paper. They were worried about something in an [electronic] organiser, they didn't understand it. But a shorthand note would have made no difference whatsoever. It didn't come down to a dispute about what was and was not in my notes because Hutton ruled that the dossier was not sexed up, not embellished in any way, despite having heard weeks of evidence that it was. A shorthand note might have made our lives a bit easier at the inquiry, but it wouldn't have saved David Kelly's life.

Following his experience at the Hutton inquiry, Andrew Gilligan now tapes all his interviews as a matter of routine. He actually had a BBC tape recorder with him when he met Dr Kelly, but he did not use it. Why? Because it was intended to be an informal meeting:

> I had my tape recorder in my bag, but it has a great big microphone with it and I thought that would have scared him off. Frankly, people aren't always quite so keen to be full and frank if they think that their every word is going to be taken down for use against them. This conversation was never intended to be something that would be quoted under David Kelly's name, it was intended to be a background conversation that would be reported as the words of an off-the-record source. And that's what it was.

Post-Hutton, there has certainly been renewed emphasis on the importance of journalists recording accurately what they are told by sources, but it has long been a central part of journalism as *reporting*. Newspaper historian Bob Clarke argues that the role of the reporter – as opposed to the recycler of second-hand information - developed in the UK during the eighteenth century:

> Instead of being solely dependent on reports from soldiers and sailors and other third parties, the papers paid reporters to attend trials, interview felons in the condemned cell and provide eyewitness accounts of executions… The growing use of shorthand gave the newspaper a special air of authority and increased the status of the reporter as the possessor of a specialized skill. Through the shorthand reporter, the newspaper became the accepted channel by which a speaker, whether politician, churchman, scientist or teacher, could speak from a platform and reach thousands of people all over the country the next day.   (2004: 255.)

Indeed, argues Michael Foley (2004b: 376): "The journalist inscribing his notebook with a shorthand note at a public meeting was, in effect, facilitating the development of a public sphere within which political debates took place."

Not that every reporter who brandishes a notebook necessarily has facilitating the public sphere uppermost in his or her mind. Andrew Marr (2005: 74) notes how the growth of shorthand among court reporters allowed Victorian newspapers to run lengthy and voyeuristic verbatim accounts of the cross-examination of witnesses in juicy trials and divorce cases. And, in the wake of the July 2005 London bombings, St Mary's hospital complained about a number of Australian journalists who walked on to wards to interview survivors and relatives. One hospital press officer complained that a reporter had obtained an "interview" with an injured Australian academic, who was distressed and on medication, after arriving with flowers and claiming to be one of his students: "In the 13 years I've worked in PR I have never once come across such outrageous reporting practices" (quoted in Michael and Fixter, 2005). If those journalists had been working for UK print media, their alleged behaviour would have been in breach of item eight in the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) code:

> *Hospitals
>
> i) Journalists must identify themselves and obtain permission from a responsible executive before entering non-public areas of hospitals or similar institutions to pursue enquiries.
> ii) The restrictions on intruding into privacy are particularly relevant to enquiries about individuals in hospitals or similar institutions. (www.pcc.org.uk)

Anyone wondering why hospitals have their own special place in the PCC code has, presumably, not heard about the day that a reporter and photographer pretended to be medical staff and turned up in the hospital room where TV actor Gordon Kaye was seriously ill with a severe brain injury. They photographed and even tried to extract some quotes from the semi-conscious star of *Allo Allo*. They were not the first journalists to have invaded someone's privacy in hospital, but their high-profile intrusion embarrassed the press as a whole. The "newspaper" involved, the *Sunday Sport*, was ticked off by the Press Council (Frost, 2000: 190); hence the sensitivity to hospital intrusions when the PCC replaced the Press Council shortly afterwards. However, you may have noticed the little asterisk next to the word "hospitals", signifying that "there may be exceptions…where they can be demonstrated to be in the public interest". The public interest no longer seems to include asking an actor, who is at death's door, "How does it feel?"

The *Sunday Sport* staff's unwelcome appearance at Gordon Kaye's hospital bedside – "a landmark in atrocious intrusiveness" (Shannon, 2001: 26) - is one of many low points in the relationship between journalists and their sources. However, it would be wrong to think it typical. We do not necessarily hear much about them, but many journalists are scrupulous in their relationships with sources, particularly with people who are telling sensitive stories or who have little experience of how the media operates. One journalist told me how he tries to put this into practice:

> I think I tend to care quite a lot that my work is "honest" journalism – that's using the word honest in a fundamental sense, to mean among other things not simplifying issues in a lazy way, or exploiting the people I'm interviewing or reporting. Unusually for many journalists I will often check quotes back or explain to people

> how I intend to use their contributions. Not business or PR
> professionals who know the score, but ordinary people who can be
> mesmerised by a media inquiry and not realise the importance of
> choosing their words carefully. (Quoted in Harcup, 2005b: 367.)

Many journalists insist on not showing copy to people before publication,
and the idea of "copy approval" is generally frowned upon. However, on
sensitive or technical stories – and when deadlines permit - some are willing
on occasion to let interviewees see what they are going to be quoted as
saying, and to point out any errors or misunderstandings. Even when this
happens, control of - and therefore responsibility for – what is submitted for
publication remains in the hands of the journalist.

Just as important as the relationship between journalists and sources is the
question of who becomes a source in the first place. Academic studies of
news sources and the routines of news production suggest there is a
tendency for those with the most economic and political power within
society to enjoy the most access to journalists, resulting in the interpretive
frameworks of the powerful tending to be accepted as the norm, and the
consequent "marginalisation of resource-poor social groups and interests"
(Cottle, 2000: 433). News tends to be dominated by sources drawn from "a
limited set of professions: specifically politics, business, law and order, and
the news media", according to a study by Lewis and others (2005: 463).
This is bad news for democratic societies, argues academic Paul Manning
(2001: 227), because it means "the market in which news is commodified
works against diversity in coverage and perspective".

Paradoxically, people whose stash of social capital gives them access to the
media when they want it also seem to be more capable of – or more
interested in – protecting their privacy against what they see as media
intrusion. Journalists invariably find it hard to get people to talk when they
are sent to knock on doors in well-to-do areas, whereas reporters calling on
working class housing estates are more likely to be followed around by
excited locals eager to tell you their neighbours' business. That is a dreadful
caricature, of course, but in my experience there is more than an element of
truth in it. Having journalists descend on a locality when some tragic event

occurs, asking people to provide local reaction and colour, does not alter the everyday power relationships that appear to be reflected within much mainstream journalism; if some sources have the power to set a media agenda, others are restricted to making the occasional comment while bringing around the tea trolley. Few journalists seemed to be interested in asking about the opinions or experiences of people living in the Beeston area of Leeds, for example, before the area hit the international headlines as the place where several of the London "suicide bombers" had lived. For a few days afterwards, any local venturing on to the streets was likely to be asked for a comment. Then the world media's satellite trucks disappeared, and only the local media have shown much interest in the area since then.

Yet journalism does not have to restrict itself to the traditional sources that dominate so much of the news: courts, police, central government, local councils, big business, political parties, universities, thinktanks, showbiz and the public relations industry. Proof that journalism can engage with a wider range of people and perspectives lies in the existence of a range of alternative media that, from the working class press of the industrial revolution to the anti-capitalist websites of today, privilege the opinions and experiences of an altogether different cast of sources (Harcup, 2003). One journalist who has worked in both alternative and mainstream media describes her journalism as stemming from "a commitment to helping give a voice to people who aren't usually otherwise heard"; for example, by going directly to the people directly affected by an issue, such as homeless people on the streets, rather than to those who may speak *about* them, such as housing professionals (quoted in Harcup, 2005b: 367). Many journalists working within mainstream media also go out of their way to consult a wide range of sources, including those directly affected by issues, but the news agenda tends to be dominated by the established sources of information. This routine dominance needs to be challenged if citizens are to be adequately informed, argues Manning:

> News audiences are active and sceptical but the political economy of
> news reminds us that audiences can only begin their critical
> decoding with the available tools, or information, to hand. The

> obstacles faced by subordinate news sources in the struggle to supply a wider range of sharper tools are rather more perplexing than is good for democracy.   (2001: 227.)

Maybe not as perplexing as a punch from a prime minister, but still worth thinking about before we pick up the phone to make another round of calls to the usual suspects.   See Manning (2001) and Palmer (2000) for further discussion of the sources used in mainstream journalism, while Atton (2002) and Whitaker (1981) deal with the ways in which alternative media have blurred the lines between journalists and sources.

Chapter Seven: Round up the usual suspects - how crime is reported in the media

I once spent a night in the company of the police, but I wasn't helping them with their inquiries. In fact, they were helping me. They took me on patrol in an inner-city area, beginning with a briefing on local villains - whose mugshots decorated the walls of the operations room - and ending back in the police station with all of us diving into some Chinese food that had been provided free by a restaurant apparently keen to impress the forces of law and order. The takeaway was the highlight of the night, because nothing much else happened. Some motorists were questioned before being allowed to proceed, some burglars ran away when disturbed by a resident, and in between our genial copper took a photographer and me on a guided tour of the remains of cars that had been twocked (taken without consent) and burned out. The nearest we came to some action was when a message came over the police radio that a man had reacted to the clamping of his car by threatening the clampers with a Samurai sword. By the time we got to the scene he and his sword were safely locked into the police van that had got there before us; hardly surprising, given that our lone police officer seemed reluctant to put his foot down on the accelerator of his patrol car when faced with the prospect of tackling a Samurai warrior on his own.

I wrote up an account of my night on the town with the police, squeezing in every conceivable bit of colour and anecdote to make up for the lack of thrills and spills. But the article was spiked by the newspaper editor who

commissioned it, because I couldn't hide the fact that nothing much happened, and "nothing much happened" is not much of a story. There may be a million stories in the naked city, but that wasn't one of them. Running it would have required a conscious decision by the editor to defy the conventions of news values, which is something that may be commonplace in alternative media but rarely happens in the mainstream.

What if pot luck had been different and my jaunt with the police had coincided with a few juicy crimes? It would have been just as much a random snapshot as was my "quiet night, nobody hurt" story, but it would not have been spiked. It may have been splashed with a headline such as WELCOME TO LAWLESS BRITAIN. And it might even have prompted a leader along the lines of the following, in which the *Daily Mail* laments the latest crime wave:

> Hardly a day passes without the report of some atrocious act of violence. Murders of children and women after assault, attacks on old people, hold-ups by gunmen, and the shooting of policemen, have become almost commonplace…

Those words could have been written today, but they were published on 8 July 1949. They are quoted in a history of the press by Roy Greenslade (2003: 38-39), who notes that the UK popular papers of the 1940s were "full of gruesome murders, petty assaults, robbery and racketeering", with headlines such as WORST MONTH OF CRIME YARD HAS KNOWN *(Daily Herald*, 11 December 1945) appearing with alarming frequency.

There was nothing new about any of this, even in the 1940s. A hundred years earlier there were newspapers running headlines such as BRUTAL MURDER AT PRESTON, MURDEROUS BURGLARY, and A DEATH-BED CONFESSION OF A MURDER (Clarke, 2004: 244). Indeed, nineteenth century newspapers were said by one contemporary observer to be almost entirely filled with "murders and robberies, and rapes and incest, and bestiality and sodomy…and executions and duels, and suicides" (quoted in Marr, 2005: 68). Similarly, anybody picking up a newspaper or tuning into broadcast news today is likely to be bombarded with headlines about stabbings, shootings, muggings and sexual assaults. The incidents might not

be in our street, neighbourhood or even town - and we probably won't know anybody involved - but we are left with the knowledge that the other side of our front door is a very dangerous place. The experts tell us that this "knowledge" is quite out of proportion to the chance of any one of us becoming a victim of serious crime in real life; but their voices tend to be drowned out by screaming headlines. As reporter Richard Harbinger says in the spoof TV news broadcast *Broken News*: "One thing's for certain, things will get a lot worse before they get worse still" (quoted in Armstrong, 2005).

Crime stories have been described as "the lifeblood of British newspapers", offering tales of bravery, stupidity, viciousness, greed, justice and injustice (Hanna, 2006: 192-3). Not only does crime provide some cracking human interest stories, but reporting the resulting court cases is "one of the bedrocks of our democracy", argue Susan Pape and Sue Featherstone:

> Essentially, the court reporter is acting as the eyes and ears of the public, ensuring not only that justice is done, but also that it is seen to be done. It is an important function and one that journalists should feel privileged to fulfil. On the other hand, let's be realistic, court reporting remains a staple of newspaper coverage because, as Mark Bradley, editor of the *Wakefield Express* observes, readers lap it up: "Everybody loves it," he says…"people like to look at the list and see their mates, their enemies, their neighbours." (2005: 64.)

Although all but the smallest newsrooms will have specialist crime and court reporters, *all* journalists involved in news will find themselves working on crime stories at times, as will many journalists who work in features and even sports. Given its central importance to everyday journalistic practice – not to mention the claim that it is part of our democratic duty - it is surprising that the ethical considerations of crime reporting seem to prompt so little critical reflection among journalists. There is no shortage of books by and about war correspondents, for example, but there are far fewer about the rather more common task of reporting from the frontline of crime.

This state of affairs is to be regretted because a serious examination of the ways in which crime is represented in the media can be, as Philip

Schlesinger and Howard Tumber (1994: 11) argue, a useful way of exploring "the workings of the flawed, contemporary public sphere". And what such an examination reveals is that, although crime stories are prevalent in much of our news media, there is little attempt at putting them in context. There are occasional backgrounders or specials, usually at the more serious end of the news market. An example of contextualised reporting was the item on *Channel Four News* (2002) at the height of the investigation into the murder of two schoolgirls in the village of Soham, which placed the dangers to children in perspective: "Today the chance of a child being killed by a stranger is one in 185,000 – about the same risk as being hit by lightning." But on a daily basis we hear relatively little of such statistics, of wider trends, of "hidden" crimes such as domestic violence, or of the social, economic, psychological, educational and political factors that may influence the prevalence of criminal behaviour. As ex-crime reporter David Krajicek (1998) complains, too many crime stories "begin and end with who did what to whom, embellished with the moans of a murder victim's mother," rather than seeking to enhance our understanding.

In the real world, it seems, the risk of being a victim of crime is generally falling; in 2004-2005 it was at the lowest since the British Crime Survey was launched in 1981 (Nicholas and others, 2005: 1). The survey, based on interviewing around 45,000 adults, is generally regarded as more accurate than the recorded crime figures, which require crimes to be formally reported to the police and which can be distorted by changes in how police record certain incidents. However, because some serious offences are excluded from the British Crime Survey, any definite claim that crime is up, down or stable should be greeted with scepticism, as all the statistics offer "only a partial view of the reality", as BBC home affairs correspondent Danny Shaw (2004) points out. If the figures tell one story - or, rather, stories – the headlines tend to tell other stories, which may help to explain why the British Crime Survey also shows that more than six out of ten people believe the crime rate is actually increasing (Nicholas and others, 2005: 21). The headlines drip-feed us an unrelenting diet of random and terrifying acts of violence; of things getting worse, and then worse still. Of

course, selective reporting of crime, as of any other phenomenon, is inevitable; otherwise newspapers would be the size of Mount Everest. Such selection is based on news values rather than on any conscious intention to deceive; and those news values may change over time as once-novel crimes become commonplace, thereby ratcheting up the threshold another notch. However, just because journalists are never going to be able to report every crime that is committed - nor are we going to be able to append a contextualising essay to every piece of crime news – does not absolve us of responsibility for the fact that citizens may be getting a distorted picture of society because of the way we do our jobs. The least we could do is to think about what we are doing.

The fact that each of us is statistically unlikely to become a victim of a horrific crime will be of little comfort to anyone who *does* become a victim of serious crime; nor will it overly impress people living in high-crime areas, where their neighbours are unlikely to include many senior journalists, criminologists or chief constables. Social inequality is one of the factors that is reflected in patterns of offending but finds little expression in journalistic accounts, argues Danny Dorling, a professor in human geography at the University of Sheffield. Writing in the alternative magazine *Red Pepper*, he points to evidence that the increasing number of murders in recent years has been concentrated among men of working age living in our poorest areas:

> Despite regular panics in the mainstream media, the evidence shows that for the majority of the population the chances of being murdered have fallen, in some cases considerably. For males aged over 60 and under five, and for females of all ages, the chances of being murdered have either fallen or remained constant over the past 20 years… Women are now far less likely to be murder victims because they are in a better position than they were two decades ago to escape violent relationships before those relationships become deadly. By contrast, the chances of being murdered have increased significantly for most men – with those between 20 and 24 facing twice the risk now compared with 20 years ago… Most murders of men by men occur within relationships of friendship turned bad – situations in which the murders and victims know each other well…There is a common myth that gun crime is behind high murder rates in poor areas. In fact, a higher proportion of rich people

> are killed by guns than poor people. The most common way of being murdered in poor areas is through being cut with a knife or broken glass. Most murders are shockingly banal – such as a fight after a night out drinking in which a threat was made and someone died. Such murders do not make the headlines. (Dorling, 2006.)

Nor do such banal murders usually lead to what is known among sociologists as a "moral panic"; that is, when an issue comes seemingly from nowhere to dominate the headlines and the thoughts of politicians, church leaders and others concerned about the latest threat to civilisation. In recent years the UK has seen such panics over everything from road rage, air rage, and so-called "happy slapping" to the presence of paedophiles and asylum seekers in our midst. In the process, the atypical is presented as typical, and the question, "How could it happen in a place like this?" is transformed into the statement, "It could happen anyplace" (Cohen, 2002: px-pxii). One of the periodic moral panics that occur over the criminality of young people took place in the mid-1990s and focused on an 11-year-old child who became known as "Balaclava Boy". A television news crew filmed him and his mates wearing ski masks and cavorting around a crashed stolen car on a Hartlepool housing estate, putting two fingers up at the authorities both literally and metaphorically. The images briefly dominated TV and the tabloids, and Balaclava Boy was born. His televised show of bravado was condemned by Tony Blair – who, as shadow Home Secretary, used it to attack the Conservative government of the day – as "behaviour that scars the very fabric of our society". The boy at the centre of all this attention died just a few years later, while still a teenager, by which time he had 40 convictions to his name. One of his neighbours felt the media attention had encouraged his law-breaking: "Before he became Balaclava Boy, he was just a naughty kid. Afterwards, he was a criminal with something to live up to" (Brockes, 2000).

It is not only individuals who get labelled in this way. Groups of people, ways of life, particular activities, and geographical areas can all become labelled by sections of the media as deviant, lowlife, "other" – as them rather than us. It is as if the UK's popular tabloids try to establish a "community" of their own readers by creating moral outrage against "evil

outsiders" (Conboy, 2006: 104). The rest of the media may not adopt the more extreme prejudices of some of our redtop newspapers, but the tabloid agenda can still influence the priorities of other journalists, often to the detriment of background and context. The process of simplification inherent in journalism that deals in the "binary oppositions" of good versus evil - and normal versus sick – deprives citizens of exposure to more complex realities and more subtle shades of grey (Jewkes, 2004: 45).

Also absent from most media discussion of crime are those crimes that slip under the radar of mainstream journalism: the misappropriation of public funds by profiteering corporations, perhaps, or fraud and corruption in high places. Maybe they do not look like crimes because those responsible do not look like our image of criminals. There are certainly plenty of victims, though. Take the hundreds of people who die each year in workplace accidents, many of which are caused by employers breaching health and safety legislation. Or the 5,000 people every year that the International Labour Office estimates are still dying in the UK as a result of work-related exposure to asbestos - along with 21,000 people in the United States and 110,000 people in China – more than a century after it was discovered that asbestos was a killer (Hazards, 2006: 14; Tweedale 2001). If they are reported at all, such deaths tend not to be reported as crime stories, and the perpetrators tend not to be "monstered" in the way that more easily recognised villains are. That seems to be common sense. But, in crime reporting as in other areas of reporting, it is surely part of the job of good journalists to question the very concept of common sense (Harcup, 2004: 65).

You will not normally pick up stories of corporate manslaughter on police calls. Nor will you be handed details of governments breaking international law on issues such as torture and war (Sands, 2006). Such things are not part of the beat of a crime reporter. Although I have never been a specialist crime reporter, I have done my fair share of sitting in grim police stations picking up stories, making the routine calls to all the emergency services, and going door-knocking after murders. I know from experience the

adrenalin rush that a journalist gets when working on a big crime story; and I know that newsrooms will continue to rely on a steady supply of crime stories to fill their pages and bulletins. Much everyday crime news is a form of "churnalism", a word coined by BBC journalist Waseem Zakir to describe the way in which too many newsrooms rely on journalists simply processing – churning out – copy that arrives from news agencies and press releases (Harcup, 2004: 3-4). Recorded telephone newslines, frequently updated by police, provide a stream of leads and nibs that can be gathered even by inexperienced reporters who need never leave the office.

But the best crime stories are not necessarily those handed out in press releases or put on recorded voicebanks, argues Steve Panter, who spent 25 years covering such tales, more than 10 of them as crime reporter for the *Manchester Evening News*. He told me about his modus operandi:

> I'd try to find out what's behind the press release from the police, what are they not telling us? And very often I'd find something behind the scenes that was quirky and would make a better story. If you are a crime specialist – and it's the same with education, health, whatever - you cultivate your own contacts so that hopefully one day they come to you and say, "I'll tell you this off-the-record, use it but it's not from me."

Why does he think people are prepared to speak to journalists on a confidential basis? A variety of reasons, it seems, of which the public interest is just one:

> I think very often because they feel the hierarchy are covering things up. Some are disillusioned with their organisation or have an axe to grind, some like to wind-up a colleague by revealing their big secret, and sometimes I think it was for the thrill of it. I never paid a policeman. Hospitality maybe, but I never paid a policeman. No policeman could ever say that I betrayed a confidence or a source, and I am proud of that. I could be accused by very senior police officers of being anti-police, which I wasn't, but the people who used to work with me knew I would never, ever betray them and that's why they would trust me.

He would be told about all sorts of things that had not been made public by the police press office, but he still had to weigh up whether they were worth pursuing:

> You have to decide whether or not what you've been told is a story, has it got potential, and whether there are any ethical issues involved. As a crime specialist, if you have a quiet spell the newsdesk think you're skiving, they want to know why you're not bringing in stories any more. The pressure is always there, so probably the desire or need to get stories in the paper outweighs the ethical considerations.

He tells me that news values have changed during his career in journalism, and he points to the example of an armed robbery. A few years ago such a "blag" would have made a front page splash but today it would not get much of a show in a busy city evening newspaper. There are just too many such robberies to have much shock value unless there are other factors, such as it being the largest amount of money ever stolen.

What stories are most likely to get picked up, then?

> I'd be looking for more interesting crime stories, more offbeat ones, with a general appeal. I was looking around for more human interest, really. Certainly, if they find the body of a schoolgirl and the parents will talk to you, then that's the sort of story that will have a wide appeal compared to a guy out in the street, 35, who's involved in a fracas and he dies, which is more common.

A spotlight was briefly shone on this process of journalistic selection in 2006, when Metropolitan police chief Sir Ian Blair accused the news media of "institutional racism" in the way that deaths of people of different races were covered. "With one or two exceptions," said Blair, "the reporting of murder in minority communities appears not to interest the mainstream media" (quoted on BBC, 2006). Steve Panter was one of many journalists who took exception to Blair's remarks, which seemed to simplify the factors involved in the selection of stories, but he recalls a time when the UK media certainly did distinguish between victims from different communities:

> I'll give you an example. Twenty-odd years ago I witnessed a situation in a newspaper office on a Saturday morning. We'd no splash and then a reporter said to the newsdesk that we had a story from early morning calls of a car that turned over, killing six people in the early hours of the morning. The news editor said, "Great, that's our splash." The reporter did a few more calls and turned round 10 minutes later and shouted across the office, "The victims are all Asian." And he got the reply, "Four pars." Now, he wasn't

> being overtly racist. His mindset was that Asian people at that time didn't read newspapers, and that was the selection process.

People are more likely to be treated on an equal basis now, he believes, but that does not mean that issues of race do not arise:

> When I used to cover murders in the Moss Side area of Manchester, there were black gangs shooting at each other. You had kids of 10 or 12 years using machine guns, killing each other, and I was accused of being racist by some people in the community for covering it too much rather than ignoring it. They were using machine guns, it was new, it was novel, it was unique in this country at the time. That drove the news interest, and if it had been white guys it would have been the same coverage, because it was so unusual and so dramatic.

In contrast, drama was oddly lacking in the case of Dr Harold Shipman, who turned out to be the UK's biggest serial killer. Panter was not alone in finding the story of the family doctor quietly murdering his patients less exciting than many of the smaller cases he has covered:

> It was a strange story. The attitude among certain journalists – me included, really – was this was a terrible, terrible thing that had happened, but there was no sex, no rock'n'roll, no secret bank account. It lacked a degree of salaciousness, really. There was no drama, we were looking for it and it wasn't there. Maybe it was the age profile of the victims. Had they all been young women it would have been an even more massive story, but they were older women. And it was the method of execution as well: needles, rather than a savage, violent act.

That absence of spice did not prevent another journalist – Brian Whittle of the Cavendish Press agency – from spotting the implications of the Shipman case early on and breaking a series of stories about so-called "Dr Death" (Harcup, 2004: 79). "Brian, to his credit, taught me a lesson because he saw it as being a massive story and I was fairly cold about it," says Panter as he looks back on the case today.

He has been doing a lot of such looking back since leaving the typeface for the chalkface and becoming a journalism lecturer in 2003. "I've become more reflective now," he says, before describing a story he covered a few years ago about which he has more ethical qualms now than he did at the time. One of his contacts told him that police had been called to investigate

a break-in at a posh boys' school, and that they found gay pornography in the headmaster's study. The source said the whole thing had been hushed up, as Panter recalls:

> Now, it wasn't illegal to have them, it wasn't paedophilia, it was simply adult gay pornography. The police looked at it and decided no action should be taken. The chair of the governors was aware of it, the headmaster was aware of it, I was aware of it, and one or two police were aware of it. The chair of the governors wasn't going to tell the rest of the governors. I had to decide whether or not that was a story. I look back on this now and think that maybe it wasn't in the public interest, but at the time I just wanted to get a splash out of it, simple as that. I told the newsdesk, they had no qualms about it. You've got to think about the operational side and the ethical side. Operationally, you've got to make sure you don't lose your exclusivity. Obviously you've got ethical considerations as well, but looking back I didn't consider those, it was purely operational for me.

So he pursued the story and confronted the headmaster and chair of governors with what he knew:

> Operationally, you were always trying to go to these people saying you know it's happened rather than asking, "Has it happened?" That would put them on the back foot. In this case, they tried to put me off. The chair of governors was saying it was not in the public interest and the headmaster's family had to be considered. The headmaster said his family didn't know - "If you publish this story you might wreck my family life." I knew he had a family but, looking back, I didn't even consider them. Maybe I should have done. That's what disturbs me a little now, really. At the time, to be honest with you, I had no sympathy at all, I just wanted the story. I went back and reported all this to the office, and we published it. One editorial manager on that day has told me since that, as the story was being put to bed, one of the more respected sub editors approached him and said, "Congratulations, you've just destroyed a good man's life."

At the time, the editor justified running the story on the grounds that it was in the public interest because the parents and governors had not been informed. Panter is no longer totally convinced:

> Looking back, I think even though the parents hadn't been told, the public interest argument there was a bit thin, but the editor decided it was right. Personally, I just wanted an exclusive story on page one, which was what I got. That was the adrenalin flowing.

Confronting people who may have been accused of wrongdoing is just one part of a journalist's job. Another is to approach victims or their relatives for information, quotes and pictures. Some people are happy to talk to reporters in such circumstances, others are not; either way, the reporter wants the story. Panter looks back with a sense of embarrassment on some of the "tricks of the trade" that he used to obtain such stories, particularly in the years before the Press Complaints Commission's code of practice began to be taken seriously in newsrooms (see next chapter):

> When you go to a door now you have to say who you are, be upfront. If they say, "I don't want to talk," you say, "OK" and you go away. But going back before the code, at the time of the Hillsborough disaster, for example, I was sent out to interview relatives. I remember going into one guy's house, at that time I had dark hair and a moustache and a tie, and invariably they thought I was in the CID. I never said I was a policeman, but I used to go into houses many a time when they thought I was a policeman. I'd knock on the door and say, "Excuse me, can I talk to you about whatever?" I'd never show a press card, conversely I never said I was a policeman. If they thought I was, I'd regard that as fair game. I'd go into a house, Hillsborough is one example, where the guy made me a cup of tea, we sat in his living room and he said to me, "OK officer, how can I help you?" At that point I said, "Actually I'm a reporter." The psychology was that if you were actually in the house they were more reluctant to say to you, "Go away."

And such psychology usually worked. As did using what he describes as "emotional blackmail" on the doorstep of a bereaved relative, to persuade them to talk:

> You would go to a house and they'd say they don't want to talk about it and I would say, "OK, well if you don't talk about it, and if I get it wrong in tonight's paper, then you're partly to blame." It was disgraceful behaviour, looking back. That's why the code is a good thing because, on reflection, I'm ashamed of that. But I was doing a job, my only instruction was to get the story. Ethics was a county down south, as far as I was concerned in those days.

Sometimes it was a question of getting a picture as well as a story, and he recalls that early morning visits often paid dividends:

> I'd go along to a house at about half past seven in the morning – these might be totally innocent people who had lost a child in a road accident – and I'd go along there with a photographer and we'd

> work out how we were going to get the picture of the victim's mother on her doorstep without her knowing it, in case they turned down a polite request. I'd take the milk bottle off their step and put it halfway down the driveway or pathway and I'd knock on the door and stand to one side. The photographer would be in place behind a hedge or in a car. They come to the door unaware, see the bottle, walk down the pathway and pick it up. Then they'd see their picture in the paper that night. It was scurrilous really. Again the code says you can't do that, and quite right. This was the culture, it was the way things were done. Victims were regarded as being fair game. You'd be sympathetic, you knew you weren't going to a villain, but then again you had to get the picture and the words, so it was par for the course, just one of the tricks of the trade.

Today Steve Panter recounts such experiences in the hope of encouraging the journalists of tomorrow to think more about the ethical implications of what they are doing, and to keep in mind that they are dealing with human beings. "I want my students to go on to be incisive, inquisitive reporters," he explains, "but at the same time to respect people's human rights."

To find out what it might feel like to be on the other side of a crime story, I turned to Janet McKenzie, whose family suddenly found itself the focus of journalists' attentions when her sister Liz Sherlock was murdered in 2001. The behaviour of reporters covering the case was not particularly appalling, and the facts were mostly reported fairly accurately; yet her account of being on the receiving end of our trade should make uncomfortable reading for journalists, because it highlights the ways in which we sometimes trample over people's feelings even when we are simply doing our jobs.

Most deaths – most murders, even – do not make the national news. As we have seen, journalists apply news values to select those that are most newsworthy. The manner of Liz's death was both dramatic and unusual: she chased a woman who had stolen her handbag at a crowded London railway station, she ended up on the bonnet of a getaway car, and she was killed by being thrown off the moving car that was then driven over her by its male driver. Journalists immediately labelled her a "have-a-go heroine" (Coles and Sullivan, 2001). So, at the same time as the family were trying to absorb the shocking news of Liz's death, journalists were informing the rest of the world what had happened. To the family, however, the person referred to in

national headlines bore little resemblance to the real woman, as Janet explains:

> The day after Liz was killed she was described as an unknown woman, which was a kind of label. Then she was described as a wife, which is another label - a crass one, because there was more to her than that. In the later cuttings she was described as a BBC costume designer, which was a new form of labelling to make her more interesting because she had worked with celebrities, but again there was more to her than that. It was as though the media was selling a commodity, packaging her to sell newspapers or TV airtime. She was labelled and sold like a tin of beans, and we weren't in control of the labelling. There was a feeling of horror that our personal misery was other people's entertainment. That's hard - that feeling of a lack of control and of being used. The circumstances were that two drug addicts were stealing to feed their habit – they scavenged off her, she was a thing to be used by them, and then she was used by the media as a tin of beans to be sold.

During this period, police had warned the grieving family against speaking to journalists, to avoid the possibility of them saying anything that might prejudice a fair trial for the accused. In any event, in the days immediately following Liz's death, her distraught parents were in no condition to talk to reporters. That didn't stop the press trying, as Janet recalls:

> After my parents got home from viewing Liz's body - she had been run over and dragged, and there had been an autopsy, so it was very traumatic - a journalist from a national newspaper turned up and asked how they felt. She was very polite and very nice, but she was persistent and didn't go away. Neither of them were in a fit state to talk to her. The upshot was that I got a phone call saying, "She won't go away". She was just sat outside the house on a wall. So I phoned the police in London and they told the local police, and as a result a policeman went round and told her to, "Fuck off". She got the message. My mother was very shocked at a police officer saying that, but it did the trick.

After a trial at the Old Bailey, the man who drove the getaway car was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder, and the woman who had stolen the bag got three years for theft. The court heard that both were drug addicts who funded their £300-a-day habits by shoplifting or stealing people's bags (Clough, 2001). After the trial, the family wanted to talk to the media. They spoke at a press conference because they were keen to correct what they saw as misconceptions about Liz's actions on the day she was killed; they

wanted to pay tribute to the real person they knew and loved; and they wanted to challenge those who celebrate the use of drugs, by pointing to the connection between drug habits and the sort of crime that Liz had fallen victim to. But they found that this was deemed too complex for the press and broadcast news, who wanted simple, snappy quotes. Janet describes some of the reporting that upset the family:

> The image that was created was that Liz had leapt onto the bonnet of a car, but the evidence that came out in the trial was that she was standing to the side, leaning over the bonnet and banging on the windscreen. She was trying to stop them driving off but they did drive off and she ended up on the bonnet. She didn't *leap* onto the bonnet. She was gung-ho, but not that gung-ho. What offended us in the press reports was the implication that people shouldn't fight back, that people should just accept being vulnerable and hand over their possessions. It was also reported that her handbag didn't have much money in it, implying that she shouldn't have tried to get it back. But she was a self-employed costume designer and the bag had her contacts and her keys and so on. The bag also had sentimental value and she had splashed out on it - it was symbolic. Although we had a press conference immediately after the trial, only soundbites and brief quotes were used, and none of what I said about drugs was reported. When we felt able to speak, there was a lack of interest, and we felt silenced.

As is often the way of these things, news stories about the end of the trial were followed shortly afterwards by newspaper columnists having their say on the subject. The family were particularly distressed when their local paper ran a piece that was critical of Liz and other victims who had fought back against criminals. Although a letter putting the family's side of the story was published later, the article had a damaging impact on Janet and her parents:

> That paper arrived on the day dad had a heart attack. It was waiting on the mat when mum returned from the hospital. Up to that day I'd managed to keep going OK, but after that I went on anti-depressants and sleeping tablets, and the family really struggled. I feel that the newspaper was irresponsible. Did they consider us? I don't know. We were feeling insecure and vulnerable, and it felt like secondary victimisation of Liz and us.

Interestingly, the tiny local newspaper covering the scene of one of the biggest crime stories of recent years – the Soham murders – went out of its

way to consider the victims' relatives at the time of the subsequent trial. The *Ely Standard* kept the story off its front page at a time when the case was the splash in virtually all national media. Deputy editor Debbie Davies explained why the paper defied conventional news values:

> It was one of the biggest stories ever for us and the natural instinct was to put it on the front page, but I created a scenario in my head where I could see the parents of the two little girls coming home from the court day after day and they did not want to see our billboards screaming at them or go into the local shop and see front page headlines in the *Standard*. (Quoted in Pape and Featherstone, 2005: 181.)

The result of that newspaper's empathy towards the families may encourage other journalists to realise that things do not always have to be reported in the same old way.

Meanwhile, several years after losing her sister, Janet McKenzie is trying to put her own experiences to good use by helping other families cope with the long-term repercussions of homicide, which can include physical and mental illness and the breakdown of relationships. She trains police family liaison officers to deal with bereaved families; she works with voluntary organisations such as Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM), the Victims of Crime Trust, and Victims' Voice; and she is writing a book about it all. "We're a positive family," she explains, "and we've risen to the challenge."

Somebody else who has risen to a challenge is Eric Allison. After giving up on school at the age of 11, he has spent most of his adult life as a career criminal who viewed spells in prison as an occupational hazard. That all changed when, in his sixties, he became a journalist. He had always enjoyed writing, despite his lack of formal schooling, and he discovered the power of the pen whilst in prison:

> I started writing petitions and letters to MPs, mostly about other people's problems, because I wouldn't watch anyone be bullied. I gradually built up a portfolio of contacts among MPs, journalists, prison reform groups, professors of criminology and so on.

One thing led to another and he ended up co-authoring a book about a riot at Strangeways jail, which he observed from outside the prison walls. After leaving prison for the last time in 2000, he saw an advert in the *Guardian* for a job as that newspaper's prisons correspondent:

> It was to be the first prisons correspondent on any national newspaper. They said applications from ex-offenders were welcome, so I wrote them a letter. I've read the paper since 1969 and I've always admired it. I got a lot of education from it and always had an affinity with it. I used to pass it on to a lot of other prisoners after I'd read it.

The letter resulted in an interview and, much to his surprise, he got the job.

Allison loves his new career as a reporter, but he admits to being somewhat disillusioned – angry, even - about what he once imagined to be a noble craft:

> Because I'm very new into journalism, I often look at this job through the eyes of a reader. I'm not running the *Guardian* down particularly because I'm sure it is one of the best of a bad bunch, but I had perceptions about this job that have been completely shattered. I thought that reporters went out to look for stories, but of course they don't. They sit down and wait for press releases.

He is not impressed by journalists who "don't bother to get off their arses and ask questions", nor by the "random" way in which crime is reported. He recalls a case that has clearly stuck in his mind for decades:

> Something occurred to me 40 odd years ago, when a local woman was caught shoplifting. She was a paragon of virtue in the area, a gossipy woman, and her case was in the paper. It struck me then how unfair that was because there would have been half a dozen cases of shoplifting in that court that week, but the stringer just happened to pick that one, and her punishment was completely out of proportion with the rest of the people who didn't get reported. That struck me, even then at a very early age, as grossly unfair. My view then was that you either report everything or you report nothing. To suddenly be selective about one shoplifter ruined that woman's life more than any fine that the court could impose, no question about it.

Selective reporting also results in the demonising of certain types of people and, he believes, in disproportionate public fears about certain categories of crime. "The fact is that the vast majority of child abuse occurs within the

home," he explains. "You're far more in danger from a member of your family than you are from a stranger."

Perhaps not surprisingly for someone who has spent so much time on the other side of the law, Allison has little time for journalists who, as he sees it, simply regurgitate police or Home Office handouts:

> They don't question the police. And why would they question them, when they're the supplier of their material all the time? There's a very unhealthy relationship between the police and most journalists, it's an incestuous relationship; I say "most" because there are shining exceptions. Of course you've got to have a working relationship, and you don't expect to be spitting at them, but it becomes too cosy.

One result of this overly cosy relationship, he feels, is that too much prejudicial material is published before cases ever get to court:

> The more shocking the murder, the more they get away with it. Because they work with the police so much, the investigating officer will say to the journalist, "We've got the right geezer here, no question about it." That is dangerous. I've always thought that in high profile cases, when the jury file in and look at the defendant in the dock, they don't say, "Is that the man who's done this?", they say, "Oh, that's him, is it?". They've already read so much about him and they've already read so much about the crime.

Allison is concerned that prejudicial reporting can lead to miscarriages of justice, in which innocent people are convicted of crimes they did not commit. People wrongly convicted of serious offences may be believed only by members of their own family in the early days, and campaigns to prove their innocence often begin with a desperate parent or other relative writing to a journalist asking for help. Although journalists have a long record of exposing miscarriages of justice, such as in the cases of the Birmingham Six and the Bridgewater Four, he feels it is getting harder to arouse the interest of mainstream journalists:

> No-one's interested unless it's massively high profile. The perception of newsdesk is that people have had enough of them, but I'm sorry, I haven't had enough of them. And if the wrong person is inside, it means the real killer is still out there. The law isn't going to put its house in order, the police aren't going to put their house in order, so who does that leave? Journalists. Journalists should go out

to see people, make some effort to attend trials every day, not just the opening and closing, get hold of transcripts and read every word, and go beyond the press release. If X didn't do it, then where's the guy who did do it? That's in the public interest to find out.

Someone who did receive such a plea for help was Steve Panter. He recalls being contacted by the mother of Stefan Kiszko, a man who had been jailed for killing an 11-year-old girl:

> She used to ring me and say, "My son's not done it." My cops said, "Oh yeah, he has done it," and I didn't believe her. She eventually got hold of a very good lawyer who did believe her, and her son was proved beyond doubt scientifically to be innocent.

By that time, Stefan Kiszko had spent 16 years in prison for a crime that he had not committed. Panter can't help thinking that, if he and other journalists had looked into the case more closely, an innocent man might not have spent so long behind bars:

> I got involved with the family retrospectively - I was the first reporter his mother rang on the day he died, a year after he came out of prison - I was just so sorry I never looked at it in the first place. I believed my cops rather than her. The cops I spoke to genuinely believe he'd done it, and I was swayed by them. Looking back it was probably lazy journalism. I should have investigated it. I regret that. I always will, really.

If Panter followed the police line on that particular case, he has not always done so, as we saw in the last chapter. His investigations have led to him being arrested twice - once at gunpoint, trying to get close to Myra Hindley on Saddleworth Moor – and he frequently ran stories that embarrassed the police hierarchy. He explains why:

> My loyalty was to the readers, the public, not to the police. They're a publicly funded body, and if there was a cop being disciplined for drink driving, or some sort of internal complaint, what I saw as information the public should have, the police hierarchy would see it as private, internal. They used to hate it if I got anything that wasn't given in a press release, and they would have mole hunts. I was told by one very senior officer that they used to go through all the phones of Greater Manchester Police to find out who was ringing me. It's a balancing act, it's tricky, but ultimately you are respected more as a crime reporter if you are prepared occasionally to write what they might not like. If you're in their pocket all the time, they don't respect that. I get the impression that some current crime reporters

> are a bit too cosy with the cops and it's a danger, trying to stay onside with them too much you lose your sense of objectivity. I'm quite proud that I was never, ever invited to the CID dinner. I say that because my contacts would never invite me in case they were accused of being one of my moles. It was a backhanded tribute, really.

Eric Allison shares this ethos that journalists should keep their distance from those in positions of authority on whom they are reporting:

> Yes, have a healthy working relationship with the people you have to work with every day – the Crown Prosecution Service, the police press office, police on the ground - but make it a healthy relationship and don't jump into bed with them. It's a cosy little club, journalists are invited into that club, and the lazy ones join it. Basically, journalists should be outside the club.

Perhaps the final word should come from someone who has experienced crime reporting not as a journalist, but from the other side of the barrage of microphones, cameras and notebooks. Looking back, what advice would Janet McKenzie give to journalists who find themselves covering crimes such as the one that changed her life?

> Journalists in such situations should see themselves almost as social workers, not simply entertaining people or informing people of the bare facts, because there are very few bare facts without a context. They should feel a sense of responsibility to the community. What we want is to have our own say and be faithfully reported, but the impact of being bereaved by homicide was a feeling of complete and utter powerlessness and of being silenced by the media. It was secondary victimisation. They haven't reproduced what we wanted to say, they were in control. Some people want to talk to the press, but if you are told to go away – go away, and leave your card. You can feel for the journalists who have been sent on that job, and perhaps it's the people who send them that are at fault. But it's ridiculous to ask someone how they feel after a murder. How can you put it into words?

She points out that, unlike most celebrities who find themselves at the centre of journalistic feeding frenzies, "ordinary" people unexpectedly thrust into the limelight do not normally have access to public relations consultants:

> Victims and relatives need an intermediary between themselves and the media, and perhaps that's something that former journalists could do, because without that we don't know who we can trust. When journalists deal with celebrities, the celebrities have teams of

people looking after their interests and advising them. We have
nobody, and journalists should appreciate that.

Janet adds that journalists could do more to publicise the existence of
voluntary organisations such as the Victims of Crime Trust and to include
contact details alongside crime stories. Such useful information may not
make exciting copy or a dramatic headline, but it may just provide someone
with a lifeline when they need it. The trust's website is
www.victimsofcrimetrust.com and telephone number is 0870 8428467.

Chapter Eight: The regulation of journalism

"A sick GP who was jailed for downloading and distributing graphic and
'disturbing' images of children has been struck off the medical register," it
says in my local newspaper (YEP, 2005). Quite right too. Who wants their
doctor to be someone who gets his kicks from viewing and exchanging
images of rape and other forms of child abuse? By striking him off its
register, the General Medical Council ruled that he could not return to
practise as a doctor after his release from jail. A week later, in an unrelated
case, the *Daily Telegraph* reports that the General Medical Council has
struck off a hospital consultant who took "active measures" to end the life of
a patient, against the wishes of the family (Davies, 2005). Again, who wants
to be treated by a doctor who might hasten death when you would prefer
them to postpone it? The media report such cases with alarming frequency,
although our alarm at the actions of the doctors is assuaged by the
knowledge that they will no longer be able to practise their profession.

Suppose for a moment that they were not doctors, but journalists. Journalists
who had distributed images of child abuse in their spare time; or journalists
who had been cavalier with the facts of a story; or journalists who had
entrapped some vulnerable individual in a "sting" operation; or journalists
who had accepted bribes; or journalists whose stories had resulted in riots
and bloodshed; or journalists who had formed a press pack that camped
outside an address and caused someone inside to feel suicidal? A journalist
who had done such things may well be sacked from his or her job. And, if
they had broken the law of the land, they may face prosecution. But there

would be absolutely nothing to stop them from continuing to work as a journalist in the future. They cannot be "struck off" a register, because there is no register. Not in the UK, at least, where we have enjoyed an essentially "free press" since the failure of attempts at more formal regulation in the seventeenth century (Shannon, 2001: 3).

This freedom from official registers contrasts not just with the medical profession, but also with several other occupations, from schoolteachers to gas fitters. Builders who install gas appliances in people's homes can be sent to prison if they have not been registered with Corgi, the Council for Registered Gas Installers. This is a matter of life and death, because an untrained fitter can kill people by exposing them to carbon monoxide poisoning or the risk of an explosion. This registration scheme, which is policed by the Health and Safety Executive, is a way of ensuring that only trained and competent individuals can work as gas fitters (Hopkinson, 2005).

So why are the untrained and incompetent, as well as the unscrupulous, allowed to call themselves journalists as long as they can find an outlet for their work? Partly because the relationship between journalists and "life and death" matters is less obvious than with doctors and gas fitters, although the work of journalists has sometimes been blamed for ruining people's lives, even for prompting suicides or murders. But mainly because of history: the way that journalism developed out of a democratising print culture, as discussed in Chapter Three. The consequences of a system of registration would be rather more disturbing for journalists than for doctors or gas fitters; disturbing, too, for the concept of journalism as a way for citizens to engage in rational discourse with each other in a public sphere. Because, if a journalist has to be officially registered, then that journalist can also be de-registered and classified as a non-journalist. That is a dangerous power to give to the state. It is what has happened in Zimbabwe, for example, where newspapers that have been critical of the government have had their licences to publish withdrawn, and where journalists can be prosecuted and jailed simply for working without state accreditation (Slattery, 2005).

That's why most journalists in most democratic societies have traditionally resisted any suggestion of an official "register" of approved journalists, and that's why the concept of such a register has been rejected as unacceptable in the UK. However, this does not mean that we are above the law of the land. In England and Wales, for example, I have counted around 60 laws that impinge on how journalists may gather or disseminate information (Harcup, 2004: 22), but these laws do not place journalists apart from other citizens. Yes, journalists can be sued for libel or jailed for contempt of court; but so can anyone else. Journalists are citizens with notebooks, tape machines, and/or cameras; and our status in law is the same as that of any other citizen. Which is not to say that journalism is entirely unregulated. Print journalism in the UK is "self-regulated" by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), an industry-funded body that can tick journalists off but cannot strike them off. And it all works swimmingly, according to proprietors and their editors.

"We are very proud of the PCC definitely and self-regulation," declared *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade in what for her was an extremely rare appearance in public. She was defending the role of the Press Complaints Commission in evidence to a group of MPs, and she continued in similar vein:

> We are very proud of it and the way it has changed our industry over the last 10 years. Self-regulation is working… The PCC and self-regulation has changed the culture in every single newsroom in the land – not just in Fleet Street but every regional newspaper too… The fact that it is quick, fast, free, easy to use and efficient is perfect for ordinary people… The threat of a complaint being upheld by the PCC is what terrifies editors… Self-regulation is not just about an adjudication but it is raising press standards, and that is what the PCC has done, and the last 10 years have seen those press standards steadily become higher and higher and higher…All I can say from starting off as a reporter to becoming the editor of the *Sun* is that all I have seen is constant improvement.   (Select Committee, 2003.)

"All is beautiful in the garden, everything is rosy," commented Chris Bryant MP, summarising the Rebekah Wade vision of the press. But there are many people out there who feel that the PCC has proved to be rather a toothless watchdog. Former *Daily Telegraph* editor Max Hastings (2002: 282), for example, who believes that "the PCC sometimes appears to perceive that its

function is to provide figleaves of justification for 'redtop' excesses".
Certainly, it is hard to see why Wade should be so terrified of having a
complaint upheld, when there appears to be so little chance of it actually
happening. An examination of the figures reveals that, although the *Sun* is
the most complained against newspaper, only 18 complaints against it were
upheld in a 10-year period (Frost, 2004: 109). That is an average of just one
breach of the code for every 173 issues of the *Sun* published. If things really
are that rosy even at the popular redtop end of the garden, then perhaps the
proprietors and their editors are right to be so self-congratulatory about self-
regulation.

The UK press has been subject to this system of self-regulation since the
middle of the twentieth century. Following World War Two, calls for a
Royal Commission to investigate the press were initiated by the National
Union of Journalists (NUJ) on behalf of members who were concerned both
at the political power of the press owners and at what is now called the
"dumbing down" of news. A journalist by the name of Preston Benson told
the union's 1946 conference in Liverpool that increasing commercialisation
"has reduced news to the quality of entertainment and the gathering,
reporting, discussing, and commenting on news has lost its social interest"
(quoted in Bundock, 1957: 185).

So the NUJ put pressure on the post-war Labour government led by
Clement Attlee, and a Royal Commission was duly established in 1947 to
inquire into the ownership, finances and management of the press. "For the
first time in its embattled history," notes Richard Shannon (2001: 9), the
"rough old trade" of journalism was to have "its entrails exposed to
searching official examination". When the Commission reported two years
later it declared itself happy with the system of newspaper ownership –
"free enterprise is a prerequisite of a free press," it asserted – but not with
the way newspapers were fulfilling what was seen as their key role in a
democratic society. The Commission proposed the establishment of a
General Council of the Press:

> [T]o safeguard the freedom of the press; to encourage the growth of
> the sense of public responsibility and public service amongst all
> those engaged in the profession of journalism – that is, in the
> editorial production of newspapers – whether as directors, editors, or
> other journalists; and to further the efficiency of the profession and
> the well-being of those who practise it. (Quoted in Shannon, 2001:
> 10.)

It further recommended that the new council should be able to deal with complaints. This report led to the establishment in 1953 of the General Council of the Press, and its first ruling was that a poll in the *Daily Mirror* on whether Princess Margaret should marry Group Captain Townsend was "contrary to the best traditions of British journalism" (Keeble, 2001a: 15). Its membership, although dominated by newspaper editors and proprietors, included representatives of the NUJ and the smaller Institute of Journalists (O'Malley and Soley, 2000: 58). As Shannon (2001: 12) notes, the council was "informal, part-time, and cosy"; although it could consider complaints, it had "no powers of punitive sanction".

The General Council of the Press changed its name to the Press Council in 1963, following a second Royal Commission. Although still dominated by industry representatives, the Press Council did include some members of the public. A third Royal Commission on the Press in the 1970s was critical of the Press Council's performance, and this resulted in the lay representatives becoming a majority (Shannon, 2001: 16). Increasingly, however, Press Council pronouncements were treated with contempt by newspaper editors and owners, who were too busy fighting circulation wars to be bothered by what amounted to an occasional slap on the wrist with a wet lettuce. In 1980 the NUJ withdrew from the Press Council on the grounds that it was "wholly ineffective" (O'Malley and Soley, 2000: 79). The union maintained its boycott for 10 years, deciding to rejoin the Press Council only after a series of reforms had been agreed.

But the Press Council was then hastily disbanded, to be replaced by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), on which no trades unions were to be offered seats (Frost, 2000: 189-191). The PCC's sudden arrival on the scene in 1991 followed a review of privacy issues that had been ordered by

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The mood of this review was provided by the *Sunday Sport*'s hospital intrusion (see Chapter Six) and by the warning from minister David Mellor that the press was "drinking in the Last Chance Saloon" (quoted in Kinsey and others, 2005: 30). A committee chaired by David Calcutt QC recommended that the new self-regulatory complaints body be given a probationary period of 18 months; if press excesses had not stopped by then, there should be statutory regulation. So, from the start, the PCC was the newspaper proprietors' pre-emptive strike, designed to ward off any possibility of a tougher regulatory regime (Keeble, 2001a: 16). It was dominated by newspaper editors plus a handful of "toffs and profs", as Paul Foot called them (quoted in Frost, 2000: 191); a creature of the industry that funds it, the PCC has the "whiff of the Establishment" about it (Jempson, 2004a: 7). Calcutt reviewed the PCC's performance during its probationary period and concluded in 1993 that it was so ineffective that it should be replaced by a statutory tribunal. However, the government rejected the idea and the PCC continues to this day (Kinsey and others, 2005: 31).

The PCC operates by responding to complaints about breaches of its code of practice, which was drafted – and is occasionally updated - by a committee of editors drawn from national and regional newspapers and magazines. Although few complaints are actually adjudicated, if the PCC finds that a newspaper or magazine has breached its code, then that publication must publish the adjudication. Ian Beales, a former regional newspaper editor who helped draw up the code, explains the thinking here:

> There are no fines or compensation, since these would inevitably involve lawyers, making the system legalistic, slow and expensive… Adverse adjudications are effective. Editors dislike having to publish them. It means their mistakes are exposed to their own readers, and often to criticism and ridicule in the columns of their commercial rivals, which is doubly damaging. (2005: 8.)

It is accepted by many journalists and critics that much of the UK press has improved some of its behaviour since what are perceived as the excesses of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. We heard from Steve Panter in Chapter Seven that ethical dimensions of stories are now more likely to be considered

within newsrooms than they were in the years before the PCC arrived on the scene. There appear to be fewer media scrums in which packs of journalists camp on people's doorsteps shouting through the letterbox with offers of money or threats of unfavourable coverage; there appear to be fewer examples of casual or calculated homophobia or racism within news coverage; and there appear to be more examples of editors declining to publish intrusive photographs of prurient interest that would have been run without hesitation a few years earlier. We still have the curious phenomenon of the soft-porn "page three" picture that debases the journalism around it, and women in the news are often treated differently from men, but at least these days we see far fewer examples of the automatic use of sexist language in news stories than we saw in previous decades.

How much any of these perceived shifts in newspaper practice are down to the role of the PCC - and how much they reflect wider changes in social attitudes and newsroom composition - is a moot point. But the PCC is gradually building up a large body of cases that journalists can consult, if they are so inclined, to see what might be regarded as acceptable under the code. They can, for example, read that the *News of the World* was found to have breached the privacy of one celebrity, while the *Sun* was justified in publishing personal information about another. Both stories involved alleged affairs, but the difference was that whereas the woman in the *Sun* story "had previously put her own personal details into the public domain in self-promoting articles and interviews", the woman in the *NotW* one "had not compromised her privacy by revealing details of her private life" (Beales, 2005: 34). They can discover that photographs of a couple on a publicly accessible beach in Majorca seem to be OK, but that a picture of someone in a tearoom in Dorking is quite another matter. The PCC ruled that, whereas nobody could "reasonably" expect privacy in the former case, people should not have to worry about public exposure in a quiet café (Beales, 2005: 38). And journalists can get an idea of when persistence can become harassment, as in this case:

> A couple whose daughter, aged 16, committed suicide declined a
> weekly newspaper's offer to publish a tribute, saying they would be

> in touch if they changed their minds. But the reporter, with deadline pressing, called four times in a few days. The PCC said common sense should have dictated that repeated calls in a short time to recently-bereaved parents were inappropriate. The complaint was upheld. (Beales, 2005: 42.)

Most complaints to the PCC are not about intrusions of privacy or harassment, but about inaccurate reporting. Although the PCC often finds such complaints hard to decide, it does sometimes rule against a newspaper on matters of fact, as when the *Sun* stated that gay men had an average life expectancy of just 43 and were 17 times more likely to be paedophiles than were heterosexual men. The newspaper later defended the figures as "broadly accurate", but the PCC upheld a complaint that such claims should not have been presented as fact (Beales, 2005: 26). This was an unusual finding, as the PCC has rarely found fault with press stories about groups of people. Many complaints about alleged racism, for example, have been dismissed on the grounds that no individuals have been named and/or that the report was presented as comment rather than fact. Ian Beales defends the PCC's role in the following terms:

> [T]he code does not cover generalised remarks about groups or categories of people, which would involve subjective views, often based on political correctness or taste, and would be difficult to adjudicate upon without infringing the freedom of expression of others… [T]he PCC…has upheld the press's right to make robust comment, as long as the distinction between opinion and fact is clear.   (2005: 71.)

One person's "robust comment" might be another's racist diatribe, of course, and many people still feel that our newspapers are too often allowed to get away with inaccurate, intrusive and inflammatory reporting. For its critics, this stems from the PCC's narrow remit and the fact that, from the start, it was based on the model of a customer complaints department rather than on an engagement with journalism and ethics as components of citizenship, social responsibility and democracy.

The PCC's code has been described by academic John Tulloch (1998: 81) as "a set of loopholes bound together with good intentions". Keeble (2001a: 13) notes that such codes of ethical conduct tend to provoke one of two

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responses: either they are dismissed as "rhetorical devices" to camouflage hypocrisy, or they are lauded as vehicles of increased professionalism. However, a third response is for journalists to behave as if such codes did not exist. James Hipwell - one of the two "city slickers" at the *Daily Mirror* who were convicted of using their articles about share prices to boost their personal investments - told his trial: "To the best of my knowledge, no one at the *Mirror* had a copy [of the PCC code] or had ever seen a copy" (quoted in Daley, 2005).

In evidence to a group of MPs considering the issue of privacy, the NUJ argued that a self-regulatory body as "tightly focussed on editors" as the PCC was unlikely to be seen by the public as a truly independent arbiter on media behaviour. The NUJ called for a wider membership, including representatives of working journalists and the public, and also suggested that journalists should be protected from disciplinary action or dismissal if they refused an employer's instruction to behave unethically. The NUJ told the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee:

> This approach would offer real support rather than the present system where newspaper proprietors and editors attempt to switch the sole responsibility for good behaviour onto journalists by writing the PCC's code of practice in contracts of employment, allowing editors to sack journalists for breaching the code, but not forcing editors to insist that journalists abide by it. Many journalists believe this forces them to do things that they feel are unethical, knowing that if the matter becomes one of public debate they are likely to be dismissed as a convenient scapegoat. (NUJ, 2003.)

MPs on the committee agreed, and their report recommended that journalists should be given the power to refuse assignments that breached the PCC code. In its official response, the PCC rejected this as unnecessary, declaring:

> The Commission has no evidence that journalists are asked to undertake such assignments that would breach the code in the absence of any public interest. This would in any case seem to be a matter for the employer and employee concerned rather than the Commission. (PCC, 2004.)

Such a sanguine view of what goes on within newsrooms ignores the power relationships in the real world, argues Mike Jempson:

> Journalists operate in a hostile employment environment with no formal career structure, and fierce competition for jobs… Like most people, journalists are prone to take the easy way out if it presents itself. Especially now that so many are freelances or on short term contracts, they may feel their personal interests are best served by satisfying the demands of editors whose own security rests upon improving the commercial prospects of their titles.   (2004b: 40.)

It is because of such power relationships – and because of a bullying culture within some newsrooms – that this idea of a so-called "conscience clause" has been gaining ground in recent years. Arguing in favour of the concept of the "virtuous journalist" whose behaviour is subject to ethical codes of conduct, Tulloch (2004a: 29) points out that "this is only feasible if journalists establish a right to refuse instructions that breach the code". Similarly, writing in a US context, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003: 183) argue: "Allowing individuals to voice their consciences in the newsroom makes running the newspaper more difficult. It makes the news more accurate." Journalists at the sharp end of ethical dilemmas in the UK national press have themselves called for such a "conscience clause", as we shall see in Chapter Nine.

If the PCC is a customer complaints department, it is one that prides itself on adjudicating very few of the thousands of complaints it receives. This lack of adjudications often leaves complainants frustrated. A detailed study of the PCC's first decade of operation shows that, of almost 23,000 complaints received, fewer than one in 25 were even adjudicated on (3.8 per cent), and just one complaint out of every 60 (1.6 per cent) was actually upheld (Frost, 2004: 106). Throughout this period, the PCC did not uphold even one complaint about press coverage that discriminated on the grounds of race (Frost, 2004: 111). Of more than 600 complaints about alleged racism against Gypsies and Travellers, for example, not a single one was upheld and most were rejected out of hand because the "victims" did not complain personally (Petley, 2004b: 23). Critics point to the small number of adjudications and the smaller number of upheld complaints as evidence

of weakness, but "maximising nice conciliation and minimising nasty adjudications" is regarded by the PCC as a sign of success rather than failure (Shannon, 2001: 337). Those who avail of its complaints service do not always agree. One unsatisfied customer who succeeded in obtaining a correction to an inaccurate newspaper story still did not feel that justice had been done:

> The PCC seemed to think I was extraordinarily lucky. But I didn't want to settle for that – I wanted an adjudication and a ruling from the PCC. I wanted the editor to be admonished by his peers. However, I was told that if I declined their offer of an apology, the PCC would probably just chuck my complaint out because it was a reasonable offer. I just felt that the newspaper got away with it, really. What did it cost them? All they had to do was publish a postage-stamp [sized] apology, and they have impunity to do it again. (Quoted in Cookson, 2004:13.)

Having studied the PCC's record, Chris Frost concludes that it is hardly the unmitigated success story claimed by Wade, Beales and others:

> The PCC makes two main claims about its activities. The first is that self-regulation works and that the PCC is a "first-class complaints handling organisation" that "deals with complaints quickly and effectively"…and the second is that the PCC "changed the entire culture of British newspapers and magazines" by raising "standards through its adjudications"… There is no evidence for either of these claims in the data gathered from the PCC's own reports. (2004: 113.)

Shannon, in contrast, argues that the PCC is doing a grand job:

> The industry set up the PCC as an evil lesser than legislation. Legislation, it is arguable, would be contrary to the public interest. Does it not then follow that it is publicly beneficial that there be an identity of interest between the industry and its self-regulatory body, always providing that while the industry defines the terms and conditions of that interest in its Code, that Code in turn is both validated and administered by the self-regulatory body? It would not serve the public interest if the industry and its self-regulatory body were constantly at odds in the manner of criminals and police. The starting point of the whole arrangement, after all, is the generally accepted axiom that it is in the public interest that the press be free. A free press must persuade itself to be responsible. That is what the PCC does for it. It cannot be other than an intimately internal debate. The more intimate, it might well be argued, the better. (2001: 335-336.)

However, when Shannon refers to "the industry", he – and the PCC itself - appears to be thinking of proprietors and editors. Journalists lower down the hierarchy do not usually get much of a look-in, but we shall hear from some in the next chapter.

The PCC is not the only form of self-regulation operating within the UK press. Since 1997, the *Guardian* newspaper has pioneered the idea of a readers' editor (Ian Mayes), who deals with complaints independently of the editor and who has a regular space in the paper to correct inaccuracies and discuss wider journalistic issues. More newspapers have since established corrections and clarifications columns and/or appointed people to deal with readers' complaints, and the *Guardian* model has been adopted by the Danish daily *Politiken*, and by the *Hindu* in India, whose editor N Ram explained:

> Freedom of the press is important. So is its social responsibility, which must begin with interaction with and accountability to readers. For a daily newspaper, this must happen on a daily basis. (Quoted in Mayes, 2006.)

This willingness to admit mistakes in public is a relatively new phenomenon, and contrasts with a determination to avoid printing corrections at all costs that was drummed into previous generations of journalists. As the *Guardian*'s assistant readers' editor Helen Hodgson says: "In an industry that calls for accountability in others it seems hypocritical not to be accountable yourself" (quoted in Cookson, 2004: 15). It remains to be seen how many publications will be quite as prepared to admit in public to serious shortcomings. After all, it may be far more palatable to correct simple mistakes in dates and spellings than to publish more substantial corrections, such as the one the *Guardian* (2005) ran in relation to its treatment of a story about the radical intellectual Noam Chomsky. That correction contained words such as, "misleading", "wrong", "unjustified", "misrepresentation", and "misunderstanding". But, painful as it is in the short-term to make such admissions, the long-term gain may be that a more open approach leads to an increase in levels of trust. It seems to be working, judging by the newspaper's own research which suggests that three out of

four readers feel the existence of the readers' editor makes the paper more responsive to their views and opinions (Guardian Newspapers Ltd, 2005: 12).

Not all journalists work within a system of self-regulation, however. Broadcast journalists in the UK work under a much more strict regulatory regime, which has the backing of the law. Print and broadcast journalism are both products of the different times in which they developed, and of different technologies, and the regulatory regimes reflect such differences. Hundreds of years ago, the printing press was a new technology that - potentially - allowed anyone to become a publisher. Attempts to control who could have access to this technology proved impossible to enforce. When radio and television came along, in contrast, the new technology depended on the limited number of wavebands available, which allowed the state to restrict the number of broadcasters by issuing licences. There was also a fear of the consequences if broadcast technology fell into the wrong hands. As a committee of MPs reported in 1936, a medium pumped into millions of homes "needs very careful safeguarding if it is not to be abused", because it could allow a controlling party to "influence the whole political thought of the country" (quoted in Marr, 2005: 304).

Such concerns led to the undeniably messy but oddly effective system of broadcast regulation that evolved during the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The BBC is publicly-funded by a licence fee but operates at arm's length from government; commercial broadcasters are licensed by the state; and both sectors are regulated more tightly than print media. What this means for journalists is indicated by the stricter wording of both the government's Office of Communications (Ofcom) code for broadcasting (www.ofcom.org.uk) and the BBC's editorial guidelines (www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines), when compared with the PCC code (www.pcc.org.uk). Most obviously, UK broadcasters have to observe the sort of political impartiality that would take much of the fun out of being a newspaper proprietor. And, unlike the press, a broadcasting organisation found to have breached the Ofcom code can be fined and/or have its licence

withdrawn. The contrast with the cosier world of print self-regulation can be seen as soon as you go onto the Ofcom website and browse the adjudications on complaints about broadcasters. For example, Ofcom considered a number of listeners' complaints that Key 103 FM, run by Piccadilly Radio in Manchester, had broadcast offensive comments about the death of British hostage Kenneth Bigley in Iraq, had incited racial hatred, and had given undue prominence to the views of a presenter on a matter of political controversy. Piccadilly, which is owned by Emap, made no attempt to defend the offending broadcasts. Ofcom's Content Sanctions Committee fined the company £125,000 and ordered it to broadcast a summary of the ruling, written by Ofcom, three times every day for a week (Ofcom, 2005). That is very different from anything the PCC could do to an offending newspaper or magazine.

Broadcast regulation in the UK is, in the view of Andrew Marr, a very British compromise, which has turned out to be "an act of political wisdom" because it has (thus far) prevented broadcast news becoming distorted by the sort of party political bias that is evident across the Atlantic:

> In America, Fox News openly avows Rupert Murdoch's politics: but its British cousin Sky News, constrained and influenced by British television culture, does not. A relatively young tradition of politically impartial news was established here and has taken root. And this came about, let us remember, not because British journalists were more virtuous than journalists anywhere else, but because parliament decided to set up a system which was in deliberate tension – a licence fee for the BBC which kept the politicians relevant, and other constraints for the commercial companies, but day-to-day freedom for broadcasters. (2005: 305-307.)

Which is not to say that the tension inherent in this "day-to-day freedom" is not stretched to breaking point at times of crisis, such as when the Thatcher government fell out with broadcasters who asked awkward questions about the conflict in Northern Ireland, or when the Blair government turned on the BBC over Andrew Gilligan's reporting of the Iraq war.

Online journalism is something completely new at the same time as being something familiar, a hybrid form of existing journalisms. Some journalists

work on web versions of newspapers, which have an orientation towards the PCC model of regulation; some journalists work on web versions of broadcast news, with a consequent orientation towards the BBC/Ofcom model of political impartiality; some journalists work for online-only outlets, some of which are beginning to develop their own models of self-regulation; and some people produce online journalism without necessarily thinking of themselves as journalists at all.

There is no reason to assume that the above systems of self-regulation and regulation will remain in place for all time. Since the Broadcasting Act of 1990 and the Communications Act of 2003, commercial television companies have been allowed to reduce their commitment to public service broadcasting and to chase ratings by cutting back regional output and pushing current affairs programming to the margins. At the same time, the BBC has faced political and economic pressure around the licence fee and the renewal of its charter, prompting media academic Tom O'Malley to warn:

> We now face a future where the government, the elites in the civil service and those at the top of the commercial media industry have embraced a system that will only allow choice to those with privilege and money. For the rest of us it will simply mean we get whatever cheap product can be foisted on us for whatever price the market will bear.   (2005: 26.)

Tom O'Malley is a leading member of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF), which has lobbied on media issues since 1979. During the last UK general election, the campaign drew up a "manifesto" of proposals for media reform, which included:

- Giving Ofcom the primary task of promoting the public interest and public service values;

- Making the Ofcom board and the BBC governors more democratically representative;

- Allowing journalists to be represented on national media bodies, including the BBC governors and Ofcom;

- Removing the BBC from Ofcom's remit;

- Reducing concentration of media ownership and setting tight limits on cross-media ownership;

- Establishing a statutory right of reply to factual inaccuracies in the press;

- Replacing the Press Complaints Commission with an independent body backed by law and containing both working journalists and lay people;

- Enforcing a statutory "conscience clause" in journalists' contracts, allowing them to refuse to work on unethical material, without fear of reprisal.

(CPBF, 2005.)

It is perhaps little surprise that the above calls for media reform were ignored within mainstream media coverage of the election, given that such policies represent the opposite of what most media owners have campaigned for so effectively in recent years. Granville Williams, another leading light in the CPBF, has charted the "easy access" to governments in the UK and elsewhere enjoyed by Rupert Murdoch and other big media players. Williams warns:

> Corporate lobbying plays an ever-increasing role in the development of media policy, and the remorseless growth of global media groups as a result threatens freedom of expression and the presentation of viewpoints and issues inimical to the commercial or political interests of those groups.   (2005: 34-37.)

Tackling the power of the global media giants is likely to be a long, slow process; a process that may feel far removed from what goes on in our newsrooms on a daily basis. However, there have been occasions when journalists themselves – acting alone or standing together – have felt compelled to defend ethical standards of journalism against such

commercial or political pressures. We will hear some of their stories in the next chapter.

Chapter Nine: Standing up for standards

Newspaper reporters love to see their bylines in print, the more prominent the better. So it was a sign that something was wrong when journalists on a UK national newspaper began to be embarrassed if their name was attached to a splash. Worse, these journalists came to dread receiving the sort of telephone call that is usually very gratifying: a reader calling to say, "You're doing a great job, keep up the good work." Such words of encouragement are not so welcome when spoken by avowed racists who think you are on their wavelength. But that was the experience of some journalists on the *Daily Express* when their newspaper ran a series of front page stories attacking Gypsies in the run-up to the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU), with headlines such as 1.6 MILLION GYPSIES READY TO FLOOD IN – BRITAIN HERE WE COME and WE CAN'T COPE WITH HUGE GYPSY INVASION (Ponsford, 2004a). Although labelled "special investigation", these and other similar stories were following up a smaller item in one of the Sunday newspapers and appeared designed not so much to illuminate the issue as to chime with existing anti-Gypsy sentiments as expressed in readers' telephone polls.

This was neither the first nor the last time that the *Express* had published stories that seemed to some of its staff to be pandering to readers' prejudices; and the *Express* was by no means the only newspaper to go large on the issue. But, after a whole week of such coverage, many *Express* staff were deeply unhappy at their newspaper's apparent obsession with the story of an imminent Gypsy "invasion" of the UK, and several journalists were openly discussing walking out on their jobs. "A few involved in those pieces were very upset and were considering whether to resign," confirms Michelle Stanistreet, a feature writer on the *Sunday Express* who speaks for the journalists' trade union[34] on the Express titles in London. "Reporters were

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[34] A note of explanation for the benefit of readers born after 1979: trade unions are "associations of workers for the common representation of their interests", dealing in a

being bombarded with calls, some of which were critical but the vast majority of which were praising the coverage, with British National Party-type people ringing up saying 'well done, keep it up'. It was very upsetting, there was a great deal of anguish." Some journalists complained that they had been put under pressure to produce stories to fit a pre-conceived editorial line, and this became a late addition to the agenda of what was to have been a routine meeting of National Union of Journalists members at Express Newspapers.

NUJ chapels do not usually concern themselves with editorial content or ethics, being more bothered about "bread and butter" issues. In the early years of the 21st century, for example, most meetings of the chapel at the *Express* had been about changes (downwards) in staffing levels or the closure of the staff canteen (a bread and butter issue if ever there was one). But, in late 2003 and early 2004, such traditional trade union issues merged with concerns about the type of journalism that was being produced in their name, when a desire to stick up for colleagues combined with disquiet about the newspaper's editorial line. It resulted in an almost unprecedented collective intervention on ethical journalism, when a crowded and angry meeting of *Express* journalists passed the following motion:

> This chapel is concerned that *Express* journalists are coming under pressure to write anti-Gypsy articles. We call for a letter to be sent to the Press Complaints Commission reminding it of the need to protect journalists who are unwilling to write racist articles which are contrary to the National Union of Journalists' code of conduct. (Quoted in Ponsford, 2004a.)

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collective way with issues such as pay, hours and working conditions (Elliott, 1973: 464). Trade unions were created by working people because, as Robert Taylor (1994: 5) explains, "the worker as an individual in the workplace suffers from having an unequal power relationship vis-à-vis his or her employer". Taylor, who was a longstanding labour correspondent of the *Financial Times*, continues: "Only when workers decide for themselves to combine together collectively can they establish enough unified strength to provide themselves with a strong and credible workplace voice to counter the often arbitrary demands being made upon them by the employer." One such union is the National Union of Journalists, known as the NUJ, which was founded a century ago to represent those whom its first historian described as the "starveling scribes" of journalism, who were working up to 90 hours a week for "the paltriest remuneration" (Mansfield, 1943). As well as a national structure with full-time officials and a leadership elected by the members, the NUJ has workplace organisations - called "chapels" for reasons lost in the mists of time - in which every member at a workplace can have their say.

In other words, *Express* journalists were appealing to the PCC for protection against their *own* newspaper. As one *Express* journalist told the trade magazine *Press Gazette* at the time: "There's a feeling of resentment that people are being pressured into writing articles which they believe to be racist and inflammatory" (quoted in Ponsford, 2004a). The newspaper's editor later defended the stories, telling one interviewer:

> I have never forced anyone to write anything. There were stories at the time that needed running and I have never shrunk from stories that needed to be written. We are not an operation too much concerned with political correctness. (Quoted in Snoddy, 2006)

Members who spoke at the chapel meeting emphasised that they had no problem with the paper running stories about EU enlargement. The issue was the *way* such stories were being written and presented, and the feeling that staff had been expected to take part in the production of material felt by many to be biased, inaccurate and even pandering to racism. It was also argued that, just because the *Express* was not alone in taking such a stance, it did not excuse the newspaper's journalists from speaking out. So a letter was duly despatched to the PCC asking it to insert a "conscience clause" into its code of practice, whereby journalists who refused unethical assignments would be protected from disciplinary action or dismissal. Michelle Stanistreet recalls how the letter was rejected out of hand by the PCC: "We wrote to them asking for a conscience clause, but they said that journalists don't come under such pressure, so there is no need for one, and it's just a matter between the employer and the employee." This stance was reiterated when the PCC's Professor Robert Pinker told an ethics conference in December 2004 that a conscience clause would be both unnecessary and counter-productive, adding: "It is not our job to become involved in disputes between employers and their staff" (quoted in Bayley and Macaskill, 2004: 17).

Although the proprietors and the PCC regard such issues as being of no concern to a trade union, Stanistreet - as *Express* Mother of Chapel (MoC, workplace union representative) - has a different perspective. For her,

raising concerns in a collective way can offer an alternative to the otherwise limited choice between suffering in silence and resigning:

> We didn't see pressure to write anti-Gypsy stories as separate from other workplace issues like job cuts, disciplinaries and so on. It was about sticking up for someone at work, and if we took it to the chapel and stuck together, it would be harder for them to pick on us all than to pick on one. Where does it get us if all the decent people resign? If people leave, who will staff the paper then? People just out of college who will be desperate to do anything to impress? In any case, most people can't just walk out on their jobs, and we can't all work for employers we agree with. After all, we don't agree with them on issues like pay and conditions, so why should it be presumed that we have to agree with them on editorial content?

Sometimes individual journalists feel they have no alternative but to vote with their feet and leave. Such an occasion was 1950 and such a journalist was James Cameron (1968: 85-88), who resigned from his job because he disapproved of the methods used by his newspaper – the *Express*, as it happens – to link a Cabinet minister to an alleged spy scandal. Cameron explained his action by arguing that a journalist who moaned about the ethical shortcomings of his or her employer was like a "rueful whore":

> His [sic] condition may be unfortunate but it is hardly irremediable; the journalist who feels that the methods of the organization that pays him are a doleful burden upon his principles can as a rule resolve his dilemma: he can stop taking their money, and get out. (1968: 84.)

Another member of journalism's principled "awkward squad" was George Seldes, who spent most of his long career - he died in 1995 at the age of 104 – working as a freelance or on alternative publications, after walking out on the *Chicago Tribune* in protest at the suppression of a story (Randall, 2005: 71-91). Such resignations continue today. In March 2003, for example, Katy Weitz left her job as a features writer on the *Sun* because she could not square the paper's gung-ho coverage of the Iraq war with her conscience (Press Gazette, 2003); and technology columnist David Hewson quit the *Sunday Times* in 2005 because he felt the paper was too uncritical of the new technology business (Ponsford, 2005).

For Francis Williams, such a willingness to "stand up and be counted" should be a fundamental part of being a journalist, as ethics cannot be trusted in the hands of proprietors:

> [T]he guardianship of journalistic values rests primarily with the journalist… He [sic] cannot dissociate himself from this responsibility without ceasing, in a fundamental sense, to be a journalist. Nor is there any final excuse for him in the claim that he is, after all, simply a hired man who must do as he is bid. He must be ready, as must all men when issues of principle arise, to stand up and be counted.   (1959: 226.)

One editor who did this was Richard Stott (2002: 210-229), an editor of the *Sunday People* and the *Daily Mirror* - when they were owned by Robert Maxwell - who did his best to protect his staff and the newspapers from the proprietor's baleful influence. On being commended for putting his job on the line by running a leader that was critical of Maxwell, who was about to become his boss, Stott writes: "Newspapers and their editors are nothing if they cannot stand up for what is right when it matters personally to them." Editors of *The Lancet* took a similar stance when they published a leader that criticised the medical journal's own publisher – Reed Elsevier – for its involvement with the international arms trade (Fixter, 2005). Such commendable public assertions of editorial independence are relatively few and far between. Far more common is the strategy adopted by individual journalists of using a variety of dodges – diversions, flattery, inertia, making sure they are useless at certain tasks, and so on – to avoid what they see as unethical or just plain bad "suggestions" by their boss. Such everyday ducking and diving may not seem very heroic, and it is rarely acknowledged in the academic literature about journalistic ethics, but it is one of the ways in which journalists strive to do the best they can, often in difficult circumstances.

The responsibility of the individual journalist is a recurrent theme in debates about ethics. Ian Hargreaves (2003: 167), for example, argues that journalism is a "highly individualistic" job with ethical responsibility resting "as much with the individual journalist as with any institutional framework". John O'Neill (1992: 28) cites "principled resignation" as a

form of resistance to the commercial pressures that can compromise a journalistic sense of ethics:

> Journalists, like other workers, are not totally passive in their attitude to their own faculties. They also have the capacity to resist the pressures of the market place. The constitutive values of journalism have some power through such resistance, despite the countervailing tendencies of the market place.

David Randall (2000: 133) also says that journalists have the "sanction" of changing jobs if they disapprove of the ethical approach of their organisation. True. But is that it? Not according to journalist and campaigner Barry White, who wrote in a review of Randall's otherwise highly regarded book, *The Universal Journalist*:

> Surely the real issue is one of collective action through the trade union. There is some relationship between the decline of ethical standards in the press and the weakening of the media unions. So why no reference to collective action in defence of ethical standards? And what of the journalists overseas who, with union support, stand up to state and media owners' abuses of ethical standards, often at the expense of their own personal freedom and sometimes, their lives? (2000.)

What of them? What of the journalists in the Russian republic of Komi who stuck together and saved the job of newspaper editor Tatiana Borisevich, who was threatened with dismissal for publishing articles critical of the proprietor, who was also president of Komi? Or the Greek journalists who went on strike against censorship? Or the members of the Newspaper Guild in Canada, who took a court case over editorial independence? These cases and others are highlighted by the International Federation of Journalists (2005b) as examples of journalists' trades unions acting as "an important bulwark against undue commercial or political pressure".

Similarly, journalists in Ukraine took collective action against censorship before and during that country's "Orange Revolution" in 2004. Yegor Sobolev, former president of the Kyiv Independent Media Trade Union, recalls:

> I will always remember 25 November 2004 as a happy day. On that day, truthful information was broadcast in the news bulletins of all

> TV channels…The fight for free speech started, and has to start, with a search for like-minded people who can encourage colleagues at their offices to take a stand. When our publicity campaign began, the journalists seemed to be completely helpless and fearful. But that was only at the start. In each office we found one person who, by their determination and belief, inspired others to resist… Our first serious action in October 2004 – when about 40 journalists from all the TV channels announced that they were being compelled to lie on air, and promised not to do so in future – was preceded by about three months of active campaigning. We talked with our colleagues about the fact that censorship cheapened and degraded their professionalism, as it rendered skills and knowledge unnecessary… The feeling that you are not alone makes people stronger. (2005: 52-54.)

In the UK and Ireland, the one organisation with the potential to help journalists stand up and be counted collectively is the NUJ. Yet the union tends to be ignored in most discussion of the ethics of journalism, during which more individualistic arguments tend to be privileged. As Michael Bromley (1997: 331) notes: "In the extensive and expanding body of literature addressing journalism which has been produced over the past 40 years journalists appear only rarely as workers." Instead, resistance to the pressures of the market place tends to be seen purely in individual terms, with no reference to the possibility of any form of *collective* intervention. But ethical responsibility should not be assumed to be the sole responsibility of the individual journalist, argues journalism lecturer Deirdre O'Neill:

> In an uncertain job market where you are only as good as your last byline, journalists are not likely to question news gathering techniques or the news values or news agenda in operation… To expect individuals to make a stand at the expense of their careers is unrealistic – what is needed is a collective response.   (2004: 48.)

A collective response does not have to mean getting together in a trade union, of course. Contributors to the *Guardian* women's page once banded together to defend what was seen as an important public space for women against plans to abolish it. And some people have expressed their dissatisfaction with mainstream journalism by working collectively to establish alternative forms of media - print, broadcast or online – that challenge the accepted news values and ethical frameworks of dominant media. Sometimes such media have been created by journalists unhappy at

what they have been asked to produce by their employers (Whitaker, 1981); more often alternative media have been created by disgruntled consumers of journalism, some of whom may go on to work as journalists in the mainstream as well (Harcup, 2005b). However, the role of alternative media also tends to be ignored within "the dominant media (and academic) discourse" (Keeble, 2005: 62-63).

As with principled resignation, the creation of alternative media is likely to remain a minority option for journalists. When it comes to standing up for ethical standards within mainstream journalism itself, it is the NUJ that offers the most likely platform. Earlier, I described the actions of the *Express* NUJ chapel in 2003/2004 as almost unprecedented. In 2001 *Express* staff had also reported their own newspaper to the PCC following a series of front-page headlines such as: ASYLUM: WE'RE BEING INVADED. "That was all to do with the headlines," recalls Michelle Stanistreet, "not the stories themselves, which weren't changed and which therefore didn't reflect the headlines put on them." After the *Express* had splashed on asylum seekers for six days in a row, journalists' alarm at the "inflammatory" tone of such headlines coalesced with separate claims that the business pages had been used to promote the proprietor's interests, hardly a complaint unique to that newspaper. One journalist insisted: "We are not the proprietors' stenographers" (quoted in Morgan, 2001). Such concerns came to the fore at a chapel meeting that had been called to discuss proposed job cuts. After debating the spate of recent headlines, the journalists voted to express their disapproval of what they saw as a "sustained campaign against asylum seekers", and their motion continued: "This chapel believes the media has an important role to play in a democratic society and should not distort or whip up confrontational racist hatred, in pursuit of increased circulation" (*Journalist*, 2001b). The NUJ complained to the PCC on behalf of its members at the *Express*, alleging that the asylum stories breached the PCC's own code of practice which says the press should avoid prejudicial references to race. The complaint was rejected on the grounds that no individuals had been named in the copy, prompting NUJ organiser John Toner to comment: "This is absurd. If you

make pejorative references to a particular group or race you are applying those remarks to every individual within that group or race" (*Journalist*, 2002).

Express staff were not the first journalists to use their trade union as a mechanism to raise ethics as well as economics, as Mansfield records:

> In 1931, as the result of journalists being asked to behave in a distasteful and unseemly manner in getting news, the union issued a strong protest and appealed to proprietors, editors and managements to endeavour to come to an understanding as to the limits of licence which should be allowed to, or imposed upon, reporters and photographers… The union suggested that reporters should not be expected or permitted to intrude into the private lives of private people, that they should not usurp the function of official or private detectives, and that they should confine their activities to the reporting of, and commenting upon, facts. Moreover, to give practical effect to these views, the union promised to treat the case of a member who was dismissed for refusing to carry out instructions repugnant to his sense of decency, as one of victimization, ie to maintain him while getting fresh employment. (1936: 372.)

Five years later the NUJ became the first body in the UK to establish a code of ethical conduct for journalists, more than 50 years before the industry's self-regulators got around to it (Bundock, 1957: 128-129; Frost, 2000: 175 and 224). The union code pledged backing for journalists who refused to do work "incompatible with the honour and interests of the profession", and asserted: "In obtaining news or pictures, reporters and press photographers should do nothing that will cause pain or humiliation to innocent, bereaved, or otherwise distressed persons. News, pictures and documents should be acquired by honest methods only" (quoted in O'Malley and Soley, 2000: 43). The NUJ code became an appendix to the NUJ rule book, and members found guilty of breaking it could – in theory, at least - be reprimanded, fined, or even expelled (Frost, 2000: 224).

Roy Greenslade (2003: 247 and 282-284) notes that newspaper proprietors feared that increasing NUJ influence within newsrooms – particularly in the form of de facto "closed shops" whereby only union members would be employed – could lead to frequent battles over editorial content as well as wages. However, he adds, there were no cases in which editors were

prevented by NUJ members from publishing what they wanted. In fact, despite the wishes of a minority of members - including Greenslade (2003: 282) himself at one time - the NUJ has hardly ever attempted to use whatever industrial muscle it possesses to influence editorial content. But it has attempted to improve journalistic standards by other means.

During its period of exile from the Press Council (see Chapter Eight) the NUJ created its own Ethics Council in 1986. This had two functions: to promote higher ethical standards through a process of education, and to hear complaints against members who were alleged to have breached the union's code (Frost, 2000: 224). The Ethics Council began life as the "custodian" of the union's code of conduct at an unfortunate time, against the backdrop of the 1986 News International dispute. Rupert Murdoch moved his national newspaper titles to Wapping, sacking thousands of workers in the process, and his eventual victory encouraged other media employers to take advantage of the anti-union legislation introduced by Margaret Thatcher's government – a government that had been cheered on within the pages of Murdoch's newspapers.

There was early suspicion of the Ethics Council among many journalists, with some critics dismissing it as the "thought police" (quoted in NUJ, 1988: 32). Its first chairperson was Wapping "refusenik" Pat Healy, a journalist on the *Times* who had declined Murdoch's invitation to cross the sacked printworkers' picket lines. She conceded that many journalists saw the role of the Ethics Council as representing "undue interference in their working lives" (NUJ, 1987: 19). Undeterred, in its first nine months the Ethics Council received 62 complaints, three of which resulted in members being reprimanded and one of which saw a member being fined £100; several other complaints were resolved by conciliation. The following year the Ethics Council received 132 complaints, of which 25 went to formal hearings. Four journalists were fined, two of whom were later expelled for non-payment while two others had their fines reduced to reprimands on appeal. Another case resulted in a reprimand and two resulted in no penalty being imposed. The remaining complaints were withdrawn, dropped after

investigation, or resolved through conciliation. After this high water mark, the number of complaints gradually declined (NUJ, 1989: 31; 1990: 30). One member of the union's national executive was quoted as saying that such attempts at enforcing the code of conduct had not been "a happy experience", adding: "Journalists say they want a union to represent them, not to tell them how to do their jobs" (quoted in Snoddy, 1992: 197).

The work of the Ethics Council during its early years was not helped by the Thatcherite industrial relations climate within most of the media at the time; a climate of intense employer hostility to trade unions in general and to the NUJ in particular. The 1980s and 1990s saw the temporary ending of collective bargaining for a majority of journalists, the forcing down of wage and staffing levels, the denial of union representation on disciplinary and other issues such as health and safety, the removal of union facilities including noticeboards, and the sacking of some union activists (Gall, 1993; Gall and McKay, 1994; Smith and Morton, 1994). Journalist Paul Foot (cited in Keeble, 2001a: 6) claimed that this employers' onslaught on wages, conditions and union organisation led to an atmosphere of fear, obsequiousness and conformity within newsrooms that also seeped into editorial content by making journalists more compliant. Foot wrote:

> My own strong view is that the smashing of the trade unions [ie at Wapping and its aftermath] was part of the centralizing of control and bureaucratization in the press which have done so much to damage investigative journalism. The purpose of an organized union in a newspaper office is not just to look after wages, conditions and employment practices - or even to organize against the widespread nepotism and corruption in recruitment which is now commonplace in the national press. It is also to provide a centre where journalists can collect and discuss their common problems, free from the management hierarchy. A recognized trade union adds to the spirit of independence inside a newspaper which is so crucial to successful investigative journalism.   (2000: 86.)

Journalist David Walker (2000: 242) also observed that the "nakedly authoritarian occupational culture" within UK newspapers after Wapping created a climate in which "editorial whims go unchallenged". As Chris Frost records:

> The anti-union stance of the government during the 1980s and 1990s led to a general weakening of union power and this played a part in reducing the role of the Ethics Council. No longer did journalists have to have an NUJ card in order to work in the more prestigious jobs in television and what used to be Fleet Street. This meant that breaching the NUJ code, with the consequent risk of discipline and possible expulsion, was no longer the risk it once might have been. The union, too, was less inclined to deal harshly with members as workers became less confident of the benefits of belonging to a union. (2000: 224.)

This situation has resulted in the Ethics Council focusing increasingly in recent years on raising awareness about ethical issues, and trying to create a more ethical climate within newsrooms, rather than acting as a form of "policing" body. This change of emphasis was articulated when an NUJ spokesperson described the union's code of conduct as "a beacon for journalists to aim for rather than a means to punish" (quoted in Keeble, 2001a: 15).

The union's activity on ethical issues has not been confined to its Ethics Council, however. The NUJ has also been involved in a range of free speech issues and has worked with the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the Campaign for Freedom of Information to defend the fourth estate concept of journalism as a check on the powerful, and with the charity Mediawise and others to encourage a more ethical approach to journalism. Other interventions have included condemnation of a "homophobic scare campaign" waged in much of the Scottish press (*Journalist*, 2000a), the production of guidelines on the reporting of mental health, AIDs, race, disability, and on avoiding sexist language (Frost, 2000: 78 and 93), and bringing together journalists and refugees to discuss media coverage of the asylum issue (*Journalist*, 2001a). The union also has a long record of supporting individual journalists who have been threatened with jail for protecting confidential sources, from EDG Lewis who was prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act in 1937 (Bundock, 1957: 145) to Robin Ackroyd and others who have similarly stood by their principles in the twenty first century (Gopsill, 2005).

Yet a trawl through the union's publications reveals relatively few examples of journalists doing what those at the *Express* did in the early years of this century; that is, voicing ethical concerns collectively within the workplace. Not that all such incidents will have been recorded. I was told by one veteran FoC (Father of Chapel), for example, that his chapel had intervened on ethical matters several times over the years "on the quiet", but he did not wish to go on the record about it because it might damage the relationship with management that it had taken so long to build. Notwithstanding this, however, it cannot be denied that, as Mark Hollingsworth notes:

> British journalists have rarely, if ever, taken any kind of industrial action to protest at political bias and distortion in their papers' news columns. The nearest came during the 1983 general election when the *Daily Mail*'s NUJ chapel passed a motion expressing their concern at the one-sided coverage of the campaign. Sir David English, the editor since 1970, replied that the content of the paper was the sole responsibility of the editor and of no concern to the National Union of Journalists.   (1986: 25.)

Similarly, in the wake of the *Sunday Times* publishing what turned out to be fake diaries by Adolf Hitler, the NUJ chapel on the newspaper demanded that editor Frank Giles come and speak to them en masse; he declined, arguing that it was not an appropriate matter for a trade union meeting (Greenslade, 2003: 465). Historically, many NUJ members appear to agree that the topic of editorial content should be off the union agenda. Hollingsworth (1986: 29) reports that, on the *Sun*, just one journalist attempted to discuss editorial issues during chapel meetings throughout the 1980s. During the 1984-5 miners' strike the *Sun*'s NUJ chapel sided with management rather than the print unions when the latter objected to the publication of a photograph of miners' leader Arthur Scargill raising his right arm beneath the banner headline MINE FUHRER. The NUJ FoC at the paper said: "Our chapel believes we should not interfere in editorial matters, and must remain neutral" (quoted in Hollingsworth, 1986: 276).

Around the same time, the *Guardian* NUJ chapel intervened to secure a correction – long before its famed Corrections and Clarifications column made such things routine - after the newspaper had mistakenly labelled a

striking miner a strikebreaker (Hollingsworth, 1986: 260). The NUJ chapel at the *Guardian* has also involved itself in editorial matters by organising hustings to allow members to question candidates for the job of editor (Greenslade, 2003: 586). But the same chapel refused to come down hard on the then editor who, in 1983, handed over a leaked memo to the authorities, resulting in the jailing of civil servant Sarah Tisdall who had blown the whistle on what she saw as government deception over nuclear missiles (see Chapter Six). NUJ members on the paper did, however, raise a collection and bought Ms Tisdall a bike when she came out of prison after several months (Taylor, 1993: 253). Bless.

Occasionally - very occasionally - ethical issues have sparked off strikes or other forms of industrial action by journalists. When an *Oxford Mail* photographer was disciplined after refusing to take a snatch picture of a disabled five-year-old outside school, following appeals by the child's mother for an end to media attention, the NUJ chapel walked out for a one-day strike in protest (McIntyre, 2004). Industrial action on a much larger scale occurred in July 1985 when NUJ members in the broadcasting sector staged a one-day strike in protest at censorship of a BBC *Real Lives* television documentary concerning Northern Ireland (NUJ, 1989: 6; Bolton, 1990: 166-167; Schlesinger, 1987: xx). The *Times* reported that the 24-hour walkout "represented the most serious industrial action ever undertaken in British television, and attracted more support than has ever been won by a pay claim" (quoted in Curtis, 1996: 279).

Over the years, reporting "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland resulted in numerous small local ethical difficulties punctuated by the occasional full scale battle, such as when the UK government banned broadcast journalists from using the voices of Sinn Fein leaders and certain other political activists between 1988 and 1994 (Miller, 1994; Rolston and Miller, 1996). The broadcasting ban resulted in repeated protests by the NUJ but was eventually lifted after the IRA declared a ceasefire. Another high-profile row over journalistic ethics was prompted by an attack by sections of the UK press on the Thames TV documentary *Death on the Rock* concerning

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the killing of three Irish republicans in Gibraltar in 1988. After the *Sunday Times* attempted to rubbish the programme makers, the newspaper's own journalists used their NUJ chapel to call for an independent inquiry into the *Sunday Times'* own reporting of the subject; meanwhile, a number of journalists left the paper, unhappy at its treatment of the story (NUJ, 1989: 5; Bolton, 1990: 292).

Remarkably, when *Sunday World* reporter Martin O'Hagan was shot dead – apparently by "loyalist" paramilitaries – in September 2001, he became the first journalist to be killed during the Troubles. "For 30 years there was an 'unwritten rule' in Northern Ireland that journalists were not shot," notes Michael Foley, former media correspondent of the *Irish Times* and now a journalism lecturer. One factor in this was that all sides in the conflict saw the need to influence public opinion via the media, argues Foley:

> Another factor was the NUJ. Journalists in Northern Ireland were always members of a union that offered solidarity and a bridge across the sectarian divide, regardless of the editorial stance of their publications. They stood together, loyalist and nationalists, in their opposition to censorship – notably, with very few exceptions, against the UK broadcasting ban introduced in 1988. They carried the same press card… Even when working for highly sectarian outlets, journalists were able to demonstrate a professional detachment that allowed the media to be viewed as something between a necessary evil and a trusted conduit.   (2001.)

For NUJ members in a divided society, their membership of the journalists' trade union – a union that predates partition and so organises throughout the island of Ireland – was one way of asserting their journalistic independence and integrity at a time of political and military conflict. Those journalists in the rest of Ireland as well as England, Scotland and Wales who joined their colleagues in protesting against broadcasting bans and other forms of overt censorship also asserted their independence; independence from governments that sometimes seemed to expect journalists to act as state propagandists.

Most western journalists, most of the time, will not find themselves engaged in such high-profile ethical confrontations as strikes against government-imposed censorship. That does not mean they don't face ethical issues every

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day. To what extent have journalists looked for support from their fellow journalists, through the NUJ, when faced with ethical dilemmas large or small? Not a lot, according to a small survey conducted at provincial newspapers in the north of England and the English midlands. Journalists in six chapels reported just three modest instances of ethical interventions, including the following macabre tale:

> The *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* compiled a Death League where staff were rated on their performance during death knocks. For example, a full story and collect pics was worth, say, ten points and a total knockback zero points…Bearing in mind the editor is a member of the PCC, the chapel raised this issue. We were told it was only a bit of fun organised by the reporters themselves. However, immediately after chapel intervention the scheme was abandoned and the Death League tables taken down from offices. (Quoted in Harcup, 2002.)

When asked to assess the extent to which journalists were aware of the NUJ code of conduct, and whether they thought it had any impact on members' daily work, most chapels reported that there was a general awareness of its existence but that few journalists conscientiously tailored their work to comply with its detailed provisions. One reported: "In 10 years as FoC I have never had an issue raised citing the code of conduct." That study, which was conducted before the *Express* chapel's interventions discussed above, concluded:

> An examination of the NUJ's engagement with ethical issues suggests that, if ethics are not to remain a marginal concern for working journalists, journalists do not need their trade union to act as a form of "thought police", but they do need a collective voice in the workplace, and the confidence to use it. Without a collective voice and collective confidence, control of the ethics of journalism will remain largely in the hands of editors and proprietors, with individual journalists being left with little choice but to do what they are told or resign – conditions of production hardly conducive to a journalism that contributes to a well-informed citizenry… [J]ournalistic ethics cannot be divorced from everyday economic realities such as understaffing, job insecurity, casualised labour, bullying and unconstrained management prerogative. (Harcup, 2002: 111-112.)

The way in which journalists on the *Express* gave confidence to each other by sticking together – confidence enough to question their own newspaper's

ethics – has only added weight to that conclusion. But what, if anything, has their stance achieved? Michelle Stanistreet doesn't make any great claims. Indeed, she seems rather embarrassed at the fact that, on the surface at least, not a lot has changed:

> Obviously the company finds it embarrassing to have its staff make complaints about it, and the editor certainly didn't want to be labelled as racist. In the short-term, there was some effect in that there was discussion at editorial conferences about being seen to be more even-handed in the paper's coverage of Gypsy and asylum issues. But I certainly wouldn't claim it as a great success and, in the long-term, who knows? I wouldn't be at all surprised if this is an issue the chapel has to confront again in the future.

The long-term impact may be difficult to predict, but it could be profound. It is possible, for example, that the actions of the *Express* journalists, modest as they were, will act as an example to inspire others; to show that doing something together can be an alternative to saying nothing alone. Maybe, as a result, a journalist coming under what he or she regards as unethical pressure might be more likely to look for support from colleagues rather than simply obey or resign.

Listening to descriptions of discussions within the *Express* chapel, I am reminded of a story Paul Foot once told me about his early days in journalism about 40 years earlier. Apparently, several Scottish newspapers were at each other's throats over who had "bought up" a man involved in a notorious Glasgow murder case that had just ended. This resulted in an undignified scramble outside the court followed by a high-speed chase through the city, during which one set of reporters tried physically to drag the man from a rival newspaper's car. Competing journalists complained about each other's behaviour and matters came to a head at the next NUJ meeting, as Paul Foot recalled:

> The monthly meeting of the branch, usually six people and a cup of tea, turned into a mass meeting of 200 or 300 people. Most came to say *their* newspaper had behaved properly. It developed into the most fascinating argument between those who were putting the point of view of their proprietors and those few active trade unionists who argued that the whole thing was a disgraceful episode and chequebook journalism of the worst kind. What I remember was

how the mood changed. The meeting started off: "You bastard, you seized our man." Then the alternative view: "This is rubbish, we're all doing this job together and we're being made into hooligans by our newspapers." As a result of that discussion, the resolution passed was that the NUJ, representing *all* these journalists, was absolutely opposed to chequebook journalism. You can only have an alternative to the control of the editorial hierarchy and the proprietor if you've got the discipline of being in a collective body behind you.

Collective discussion may not always result in collective wisdom, individuals may still feel the need to stand out against the crowd, and newsrooms should have room for maverick characters. But a workplace climate in which ethical concerns can be discussed openly by journalists – informally and/or formally, individually and/or collectively - can only be good for journalistic standards. This lesson may have been learned the hard way at the *New York Times* where, as discussed in Chapter Two, a culture that discouraged people from speaking out contributed directly to the Jayson Blair scandal. When Joe Lelyveld stepped in as interim editor to help rescue the paper's credibility, he promised his staff: "The cure for what has ailed us is called journalism. The only way to communicate is to speak up in an atmosphere where outspokenness is sometimes rewarded and never penalized" (quoted in Mnookin, 2005: 213).

Who can tell what long-term effect on journalistic standards there might be if journalists gain more confidence to reflect on what they are doing, to discuss it openly with colleagues, and - every now and then - to stand up and be counted? The Chinese leader Chou En Lai was once asked to assess the impact of the French Revolution that had taken place a couple of hundred years earlier. He replied: "It's too early to tell."

Chapter Ten: Ethical journalism is good journalism

Respect for truth is the first principle in the International Federation of Journalists code of conduct (www.ifj.org). There are two key words here. The one that gets most attention is "truth". What truth might be, how we can identify it, whether it exists, and whether there might be occasions when it is better not told, are all subjects of discussion. But every bit as important is the word "respect". If journalists have no respect for their journalism and for

their fellow citizens, then they will probably have little respect for truth either. Ethical journalism, as a former crime reporter puts it in Chapter Seven, involves respect for people's human rights. Without such respect, who knows what horrors might be committed, from the thoughtless intrusion into an individual's grief to disturbing actions on a far greater scale? Consider what happened in the central African state of Rwanda in 1994, when journalists working on a Hutu radio station described the Tutsi population as devils, snakes and cockroaches, inciting Hutus to go out and kill Tutsis. Names, addresses and vehicle number plates of Tutsi people were read out on air, and listeners were even encouraged to phone in with details of where Tutsis were hiding (Melvern, 2000: 442-456). An estimated 800,000 people were massacred in the resulting bloodshed. Almost 10 years later a number of journalists were jailed for "incitement to genocide and crimes against humanity" (Reporters Without Borders, 2004).

Rwanda is an extreme example, but extreme examples help make the point that our actions and our words can have consequences. That is true whether we are reporting from a war zone or reviewing the latest Hollywood movie. The codes of ethical conduct discussed in this book represent different attempts to anticipate and take account of such consequences; their purpose is to encourage the good that journalists can achieve while minimising or eliminating any harm that may be done in the name of journalism. Such codes can be useful reference points for journalists, but they do not stand on their own. We need a newsroom culture in which journalists are aware of, and have the freedom to discuss, the ethical issues involved in their work. And journalists need some kind of guiding principles beyond the specifics of the codes' provisions. Some people will look to religion, philosophy or political ideology to steer them through potential ethical conflicts. I prefer the idea that, fundamentally, journalism is about informing and empowering the citizens of a society, holding the powerful to account, and facilitating a public sphere of rational discussion.

The healthy functioning of such a public sphere – space in which informed citizens can engage with one another in reasoned debate and critical

reflection (Habermas, 1989) - depends on a diversity of people and perspectives having access to the media. Not the type of limited access offered by vox pops, letters' pages or phone-ins, but access on a more equitable basis. As James Bohman (2004: 152-153) argues, people can exercise citizenship in a public sphere "only if they stand as equals". Thus, widening "democratic inclusion" is fundamental to creating a more just society (Young, 2000: 17). However, the less powerful groups in society can face structural obstacles in gaining access to mainstream journalism (Manning, 2001: 137 and 226-227). The perspectives of people living in poorer societies, and poorer areas of wealthy societies, are often marginalised in favour of the powerful and glamorous, just as the sharp tongues of anti-globalisation protesters, peace activists, eco-warriors and other critics of the new world order are only rarely allowed to puncture the complacency of a mainstream journalism that too often allows its agenda to be set by the slick PR operations of resource-rich organisations. This results in what has been described as a "democratic deficit" (Hackett, 2005: 95).

"An eerie silence pervades the contemporary public sphere," argues Stephen Coleman (1997: 135 and 153) in his history of struggles around the idea of free speech. He continues: "The unaccountable power to relegate public ideas and events to the margins or beyond the scope of the media agenda is a matter for democratic concern." One result of this appears to be that many people disengage from a mainstream media that too often seems to have disengaged from them. In contrast, some of the marginalised have found their voices through the "democratised media practices" of what are termed alternative media, many of which are now online (Atton, 2004: 7); and others have been sought out by journalists within mainstream media who go beyond the press release and the soundbite. One way of addressing the democratic deficit is for journalists to recognise that their primary duty is to a society's citizens. This was the approach taken by the veteran American journalist Martha Gellhorn who, after receiving praise for her coverage of the Vietnam war, said: "All I did was report from the ground up, not the other way round" (quoted in Pilger, 2004: 1). Doing journalism from the bottom up is not simply interesting and illuminating; it is vital.

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As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003: 18) point out, the concepts of journalism and democracy are so entwined that "societies that want to suppress freedom must first suppress the press". Journalism, they argue, owes its first loyalty to citizens and has as its primary purpose providing those citizens "with the information they need to be free and self-governing" (2003: 12-17). Yet journalists are citizens too, and do not cease to be so upon entering a newsroom. For Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003: 52), journalists are not like employees in other industries because they "have a social obligation that can actually override their employers' immediate interests at times". This social obligation means that journalism is not just about entertaining people, though it might do that as well. Nor should it primarily be about making money, though it might do that too. Reflecting on his brief period as editor of the *Independent*, Andrew Marr (2005: 197) recalls being told by his boss that there should be fewer dreary scenes of poverty and "dead black babies" in his newspaper; instead, there should be more aspirational stories about fashionable people driving Porsches and wearing Rolex watches. Although proprietors do not necessarily spell out what they want in such an unsubtle manner, their values may become "internalised" by journalists over time (Tracy, 2004: 454); hence the importance of external reference points to remind us that there are other perspectives, other expectations, and other loyalties.

As argued elsewhere, journalism matters because knowledge is power. We have heard a lot about journalism's claim to be a fourth estate acting in the public interest as a check on the powerful; yet we have heard counter-claims that too much journalism fails to live up to this ideal. Some critics, such as John Lloyd (2004: 22), bemoan a journalism that damages democracy by displaying "constant suspicion towards politicians and public officials". Others argue that most journalists display not too much suspicion towards those in power, but too little (Baker and McLaughlin, 2005: 5). David Leigh, investigations editor of the *Guardian*, rejects the Lloyd thesis out of hand and calls for a greater degree of scepticism:

> [W]hen a journalist asks members of British institutions uncomfortable questions about what is going on, they respond with

> more or less polished evasions or with downright lies… [W]e do not need to reduce the quantity of confrontational and mistrustful journalism. We need to encourage a good deal more of it. (2005.)

It is not only investigative journalists who want to see more muck-raking; and let's face it, they would, wouldn't they? Journalism professor John Tulloch (2004b: 5) has highlighted the need for "active mischief-making, and scepticism and suspicion of the motives of the powerful, even if some of that mischief is damaging and even dangerous to the body politic". A prominent public relations consultant has also defended the validity of journalism's "central defence, that it does what it does in a mucky, imprecise way but with the best intentions, namely to uncover truth that those in power might prefer to have remain hidden" (Hobsbawm, 2004). Contrary to what some doom-sayers seem to think, media criticism of the ruling elite does not necessarily stir up apathy, according to research by Pippa Norris:

> A citizenry that is better informed and more highly educated, with higher cognitive skills and more sources of information, may well become increasingly critical of governing institutions, with declining affective loyalties towards traditional representative bodies such as parties and parliaments. But increasing criticism from citizens does not necessarily reduce civic engagement; indeed, it can have the contrary effect. (2000: 319.)

If the health of a public sphere can be judged on "how well it functions as a space of opposition and accountability, on the one hand, and policy influence, on the other" (Young, 2000: 173), then it is likely to be improved by the actions of journalists who scrutinise the actions of the powerful, including those whose power lies is in the media.

This role need not be the sole preserve of those who style themselves investigative journalists, as has been pointed out by James Ettema and Theodore Glasser (1998: 189-200), among others. They identify three achievements of investigative reporting. First, bringing instances of systems failures to public attention. Second, demanding an account from those responsible. Third, establishing an empathetic link between people who have suffered in the situation and the rest of us. Although these roles – or ideals – have emerged specifically from investigative journalism, they could

legitimately be held up as "a new set of values to all others who practise the reporter's craft".

Journalists try to shine a small torch into a very large, very dark cupboard. But a torch will not work if the batteries are not replaced when they run out, and that is what happens when those in charge cut editorial budgets and under-invest in journalism by reducing the number of reporters, closing local offices and turning journalists into churnalists. Nor will a torch illuminate a cupboard if it is pointed somewhere else. That is why journalist Ignacio Ramonet, of *Le Monde Diplomatique* in France, has called for the creation of a "fifth estate" – made up of journalists and other concerned citizens - to rescue the idea of socially responsible journalism from the clutches of giant media corporations:

> Over the past 15 years, with the acceleration of globalisation, this fourth estate has been stripped of its potential, and has gradually ceased to function as a counterpower… We have to create a new estate, a fifth estate, that will let us pit a civic force against this new coalition of rulers. A fifth estate to denounce the hyperpower of the media conglomerates which are complicit in, and diffusers of, neoliberal globalisation… Press freedom is no more than the extension of collective freedom of expression, which is the foundation of democracy. We cannot allow it to be hijacked by the rich and powerful. (2003.)

There are fears that it may already be too late for journalists working in some of the more profit-hungry sectors of the media. Academic Bob Franklin (2005: 148) uses the term "McJournalism" to characterise the predictable, standardised and "flavourless mush" produced when journalists have to work in conditions that are more commonly associated with the fast food sector: conditions produced by the relentless drive for economic efficiency. Interestingly, the founder of the international *Metro* chain of free newspapers – not to be confused with the UK *Metro* - once described his product as the "Big Mac" of the press (Marriner, 2005). It is not exactly the healthiest of diets and, just as the prevalence of fast food is now being countered by a Slow movement that puts quality above speed (Honore, 2004), so "time is needed to prepare, publish and understand careful journalism which explains the working of society to its citizens" (Lloyd,

2004: 188). A campaign for slow journalism may be unlikely to set pulses racing, but the point is well made that journalists need time and space within which to function properly. Journalists are far more likely to get things wrong, or to behave unethically, when they are denied the necessary time and space: time to get out of the office, time to nurture a range of sources, time to build trust, time to check things out, time to read documents properly, time to think, and the space to discuss with colleagues any ethical implications without the fear of being ridiculed.

Despite changes in technology and ownership, a journalist's basic responsibility remains what it has always been: "It is to report honestly, to comment fearlessly, and to hold fast to independence" (Williams, 1959: 247). It was to protect this role that, in 2006, journalists in the UK launched a Journalism Matters campaign highlighting the threat to the democratic process posed by constant reductions in editorial budgets, primarily in the regional press but in other sectors of the media too. There are also movements in many countries attempting to resist and reverse the takeover of media outlets by corporate giants. In the UK and US, respectively, the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (Fair) have both worked over the years to highlight trends, spark public debates and counteract the lobbying of the big commercial players. Of necessity, they are playing a long game. Yet journalists do not need to – indeed, cannot afford to - wait for structural changes to media institutions before trying to improve our journalism. Individually and collectively, we can reflect on and improve our practice despite the constraints of the way the industry currently operates.

Every day, in little ways and in big ways, with quiet words or grand gestures, journalists make decisions to act in a more ethical manner. Not all journalists and not always, but more often than many of the harshest critics of journalism seem to believe. Women in the news are – mostly - no longer crudely labelled according to their appearance or assumed to be housewives in the way that they tended to be just a few years ago, because for one reason or another most journalists stopped doing it. A contributory factor to

this change was that many women journalists, and some men, spoke up and challenged what had previously been accepted practice. It is not just practice that can be changed: people can change too. Steve Panter, for example, looks back on some of his actions as a younger reporter with embarrassment, even shame, conceding that the desire for a story often meant that ethical considerations were either brushed aside or not even noticed. Having thought deeply about such stories in recent years, he has become a more reflective practitioner. And he is not alone.

We saw in the previous chapter that some individual journalists have resigned on matters of conscience when they disapproved of what was being done in their names. We have also seen evidence of a growing groundswell behind the idea of a "conscience clause" in journalists' contracts of employment, whereby an individual would have the right to refuse an unethical assignment. On rare occasions, groups of journalists have intervened collectively, standing up for standards of journalism and ethical conduct alike. Such outspoken responses are likely to remain the exception rather than the rule.

A concept of ethical journalism influences the actions of countless journalists in innumerable ways, whether they are thinking about which word to use in a headline or deciding whether to knock one more time on the door of a bereaved family. It is true that journalists have sometimes been willing to trample on the feelings of people to get a story, using tricks of the trade to obtain quotes or pictures; that prevailing news values can give us a distorted vision of society; and that easy labels can result in people being stereotyped. But it is equally true that journalists sometimes go out of their way to give the "ordinary" people on whom they are reporting an opportunity to understand and comment upon the way in which their words are going to be used; that journalists have been prepared to go to prison to protect whistleblowers; and that journalists have sometimes agonised over whether keeping a promise to a confidential source is always right, in every circumstance. Journalists have been willing to take personal risks, going undercover to bring to light matters that are in the public interest to know;

yet journalists cannot always agree on what the public interest is. Journalists have reported from below as well as from on high, taking seriously the trust placed in them by sources and audiences alike - their fellow citizens.

Ethical journalism is not an oxymoron. Ethical journalism is not only possible, it is essential; not just for journalists' sense of self-worth, but for the health and well-being of society. It requires journalists - wherever they work - to be reflective practitioners, engaged in a constant process of reflection and learning while doing their job. And it requires journalists to be prepared to voice their concerns within the newsroom, as Kovach and Rosenstiel argue:

> Innumerable hurdles make it difficult to produce news that is accurate, fair, balanced, citizen focused, independent-minded, and courageous. But the effort is smothered in its crib without an open atmosphere that allows people to challenge one another's assumptions, perceptions, and prejudices. (2003: 181.)

Far from being a luxury, ethics are integral to being a good journalist. An ethical journalist is one who cares: cares about accuracy, cares about people, cares about journalism, cares enough to speak out, and cares enough to challenge preconceptions and prejudices.

Which brings us back to where this book began: the story of Hattie Carroll, a crime victim from nearly half a century ago. You may recall that the story was from a local newspaper but became something else when Bob Dylan got hold of it. Although the songwriter later received some flak for making the facts fit "his preconceived notions of injustice and corruption" (Heylin, 2001: 124-125), the facts as presented in the lyrics tally with newspaper reports of the time. Today, we know the story of Hattie Carroll, if we know it at all, only because Dylan turned it into a song all those years ago. Ian Frazier points out:

> On the long and sad list of victims of racial violence, from Emmett Till to Amadou Diallo, most names are forgotten after the news moves on. Dylan's poetry has caused Hattie Carroll's name, and the sorrow and true lonesomeness of her death, to stick in some people's minds. (2004.)

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It sticks in people's minds because it tells the story from the bottom up - from the perspective of an individual victim of injustice – while subtly placing events within a wider social context. Although written as "a piece of reportage that describes a real event", observes Nigel Williamson (2004: 262), the song "transcends the 'who, what, when, where and why' role of the journalist". Maybe the songwriter transcended journalism, and maybe the story is alive today only because it stopped being journalism and became something else; but neither Dylan nor the rest of us would ever have heard of Hattie Carroll without the efforts of the journalists who found out about the case, who checked it out, and who decided it was worth reporting. They did this despite the fact that many of their readers at the time may not have cared two cents about a poor black mother-of-10 being killed by a wealthy white man. Bringing such stories to public attention is in the public interest. Not only is it ethical journalism: it is good journalism.

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Unless otherwise indicated in the text, comments by the following are taken from interviews by the author:

Eric Allison; Paul Foot; Andrew Gilligan; Janet McKenzie; Steve Panter; Ryan Parry; Kevin Peachey; Michelle Stanistreet.

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'Reporting the voices of the voiceless during the miners' strike: an early form of "citizen journalism"

This is the author's accepted manuscript version of the article, included in this thesis with the permission of the journal publishers, Routledge. The final edited and published version of record is:

Abstract: The phrase 'citizen journalism' has been much in vogue over the past decade yet it is a contested concept, not merely in terms of the extent to which participants can be seen to be acting as active citizens but also in terms of the extent to which what they are doing may be characterised as journalism. The aim of this article is to explore what 'citizen journalism' might mean when it comes to what is often described as the lifeblood of journalism: reporting. It does so by studying the ways in which earlier forms of alternative or non-mainstream media engaged in reporting the voices of the voiceless; the case study considers coverage of the strike by UK mineworkers in 1984-5. The article argues that information and insights obtained from this case study can be used as benchmarks against which to measure the performance of alternative and so-called 'citizen journalism' today.

In recent years the phrase 'citizen journalism' has entered the language of those journalists, scholars and indeed citizens who have proclaimed 'that the interactive and participative nature of the web means that everyone or anyone can be a journalist with the right tools' (Fenton, 2010: 10). It has been defined as the action of citizens who, although neither trained nor employed as journalists, play 'an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating information' (Bowman and Willis, cited in Long and Wall, 2009: 263). Yet citizen journalism is a contested concept; 'the object of a discursive struggle', according to Carpentier et al (2009: 172). Whilst some see in citizen journalism the hope of what Deuze (2009: 255) conceptualises as a 'participatory media culture, civic emancipation, and an emerging new humanism', other journalists, scholars and citizens see it as little more than 'opening the floodgates to unverified,

de-professionalized gossip… The arguments are multi-faceted and contradictory…and often in uncharted territory', as Natalie Fenton (2010: 10-11) puts it. But it is only uncharted territory if we see such ideas about non-professionalized media as synonymous with the internet and digital technology. Arguably, at least, scholarship that explores earlier forms of alternative media – particularly alternative forms of reporting that gave 'voice to the voiceless' (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 45) – can help illuminate contemporary debates about the future of journalism.

This article will examine how a major event was covered contemporaneously by alternative media; in the process, this case study will point to practices that could be seen as benchmarks against which to measure the performance of alternative and so-called 'citizen journalism' today. The 1984-5 miners' strike in the UK is widely seen as one of the key struggles between labour and capital within late 20th century UK history, in which much mainstream media mobilised behind the latter. Coverage of the strike lends itself to such a study not merely because it was a key historic event but also because it lasted long enough to allow for practitioners even in poorly resourced forms of media to build contacts, develop reporting practices, and to sustain them over a significant period of time.

One study of audience beliefs about the miners' strike concluded that it was 'very difficult to criticise a dominant media account if there is little access to alternative sources of information' (Philo, [1991] 1995: 41). That dominant account was, according to the *Daily Mirror*'s former industrial editor Geoffrey Goodman (2009), hostile to the strike, with much of the UK's mainstream media willingly 'marshalled by Downing Street to provide the propaganda that helped defeat the miners'. As we shall see below, alternative media provided alternative sources of information and alternative perspectives. This went beyond commentary and opinion to embrace forms of reporting that, arguably, could justifiably be labelled as 'citizen journalism', produced by citizens who were not formally trained as journalists and who operated outside the commercial and mainstream media industries and structures.

An alternative perspective

Nicholas Jones, who covered the strike for the BBC, recalls that reporters, photographers and TV crews were often scared away from the strikers' side of picket lines, not least because of National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) leader Arthur Scargill's tendency to declare that 'the media should be regarded as the enemy'. A quarter of a century later, the veteran broadcast journalist drew a stark analogy:

> Reporters were simply not welcome in numerous pit villages and such was the hostility towards television crews that they had little alternative but to seek protection behind police lines… Once corralled in this way, television crews and photographers were as limited in what they could observe as embedded reporters were in the Iraq War. (Jones, 2009: 87.)

But there *was* an alternative, as was demonstrated by the numerous examples of reportage and photography from pit villages and the miners' side of the line published in the contemporary alternative press. It is tempting to take the Jones analogy further to suggest that alternative media of 1984-5 could be seen as having been 'embedded' within what Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described as 'the enemy within'; in reality they were too independent to be embedded with anyone.

Alternative media have been defined as 'media forms that are on a smaller scale, more accessible and participatory, and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them' (Coyer et al, 2007: 1). At the time of the miners' strike there existed a (very) loose network of local alternative newspapers, and at a national conference of such papers in Yorkshire in April 1984 they defined themselves as 'local; anti-racist; anti-sexist; politically on the left; overtly, rather than covertly, political; not produced for profit; editorially free of the influence of advertisers; run on broadly collective principles' (National Conference of Alternative Papers, 1984: 1). There were also national publications such as the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, a range of party mouthpieces for left-wing organisations, community newsletters, and fanzines. Beyond print there was the Miners Campaign

Tape Project, a series of short films distributed on VHS video cassettes during the strike by a network of film workshops that worked directly with mining communities and featured the voices of rank and file miners and their supporters, including women from the coalfields (Coyer et al, 2007: 38-39).

This article will now examine how the dispute was covered in Yorkshire, where the strike began, by the local alternative press. It will do so by looking at what Atton (2009: 274) terms the 'industrial practice' of such media; that is, what the practitioners actually produce and how they go about doing it.

An alternative public sphere

One of the publications represented at the Spring 1984 alternative press conference was *City Issues*, a Sheffield alternative paper launched two years previously. It was published more or less monthly during the miners' strike. From the wishful thinking of its early front page headline MINERS: ON THE ROAD TO VICTORY (*City Issues*, May 1984) to its listing of local food collection points and contact details for strike support groups, it sided openly with the striking miners. However, *City Issues* published comparatively little original reporting from the picket lines, soup kitchens and coalfield communities; it focused more on reports of support meetings and events taking place within Sheffield itself and on the activities of the 'Sheffield Policewatch' group that monitored policing of the strike.

It was not until nine months into the dispute that it ran a substantial and original first-hand account of the mood and comments of strikers in a coalfield community, rather unimaginatively titled: VISIT TO KIVETON PARK (*City Issues*, December 1984). One explanation for this is suggested in a column in which the paper referred to the declaration of the National Conference of Alternative Papers (1984: 1) that 'small need not mean insignificant', prompting the paper to invite more readers to become involved: 'The not insignificant Sheffield *City Issues* would now like to become a bit less small… [T]he editorial and production group is a bit small

at the moment: just eight of us producing this not insignificant publication. Come and make us a bit bigger' (*City Issues*, May 1984). The people formerly known as the paper's audience (Rosen, 2006) were thus invited to become its producers.

Despite a relative shortage of people power, and notwithstanding a relative dearth of eyewitness accounts from the front line of the dispute, *City Issues* served an alternative community of strike supporters within its circulation area – a form of 'alternative public sphere' (Atton, 2002: 35), after Habermas' (1989) public sphere and Nancy Fraser's 'counter-publics' (cited in Atton, 2002: 156). *City Issues* went beyond commentary to provide some genuine reportage such as the aforementioned visit to the pit village of Kiveton Park (December 1984) and accounts of Policewatch activities (June 1984 and November 1984). The paper also revealed that hundreds of police officers were being billeted at the University of Sheffield during the dispute, much to the chagrin of those students and lecturers who backed the strikers (Summer 1984).

If *City Issues* managed to produce some alternative reportage despite its relatively infrequent publication schedule and small number of contributors, how much might be achieved by a longer running alternative paper with more frequent publication, a wider pool of contributors, and even some paid staff? The following case study of *Leeds Other Paper* (or *LOP*) provides some answers. As I was one of those who helped produce *LOP* – I had no formal journalism training and turned up to volunteer at the paper when I was 19, taking part in a range of editorial and other tasks before later becoming one of the paper's (low) paid staff – this raises the possibility that what follows could be seen as a form of 'native researching', after Atton's (2002: 112) 'native reporting'.

Case study

Leeds Other Paper was one of the longest running of the local alternative newspapers that sprang up in towns and cities across the UK from the late 1960s into the 1970s; papers that, in the words of Angela Phillips (2007:

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53), 'bloomed and then shrivelled like flowers in a field'. *LOP* survived from 1974 to 1994 and, at the time of the strike, it was far from shrivelled; run co-operatively without an editor, it was produced weekly by a large and fluctuating pool of unpaid contributors in addition to a small core of low-paid staff (Harcup, 1994; 2006). Although the pit villages were outside the paper's normal circulation area, the city of Leeds saw a large amount of activity in support of the strike.

The paper's coverage of the miners' strike began with a photograph and caption featuring laughing and smiling pickets, a far cry from the 'mob fury' line taken by much of the mainstream media (*LOP*, 16 March 1984). A fortnight later another photograph captured a side of the dispute rarely acknowledged in mainstream media: volunteers from the National Union of Mineworkers loading coal onto a lorry to maintain emergency supplies to local hospitals. The same issue also featured a lengthy interview with striking miners conducted in a miners' welfare club plus a first-person account written by the wife of a Yorkshire miner addressed 'to the women of Nottinghamshire' (*LOP*, 30 March 1984). A week later a striking miner who was the union's lay representative (NUM delegate) at a Yorkshire pit wrote a double-page spread analysing economic and energy issues behind the dispute (*LOP*, 6 April 1984). Reporting over the next few weeks included further analysis of the employers' case; reports from the coalfields including the police being insulted at rugby league matches for their role in the dispute; an account of an evening spent with miners' wives; details of groups collecting food and money to help sustain the strike; and the announcement that the paper itself had begun collecting food to take out to pit villages. From June 1984 until the strike ended in March 1985 there was markedly more 'front line' reportage from pits and villages.

During the 12 months of the strike, *LOP*'s reportage included numerous diary-style reports from picket lines and soup kitchens, in which the paper's contributors including volunteers would spend hours noting down activities from the dramatic to the mundane, along with photographs of and comments from those taking part. The paper's reporting also included an examination

of ways in which the benefits system was being used to increase hardship among strikers' families; scrutinising the role of the police and of elected politicians; reporting in detail from trials of arrested miners; and analysing the economic and technological issues involved in the dispute. *LOP*'s coverage is detailed in Table One, which shows that in the 51 issues published in the period there were 265 articles about the strike and 130 photographs of the strike. There was some overlap of subject matter, but each item has been listed only once, under what was judged to be its dominant theme. Excluded from these totals are adverts, listings, reviews, and readers' letters, of which there were many concerned with the strike.

What is most striking about the figures in Table One is the amount of reporting undertaken. Just 10% of articles about the strike were background analysis or commentary, and even most of those stories quoted a number of different sources. A further indication of the level of reporting published by *LOP* is given in Table Two, which is based on examining those 265 articles and counting the sources that can be clearly identified from the text. The number of sources listed in Table Two is likely to be an underestimate as it excludes sources not specifically attributed in the text; when in doubt the counting has erred on the side of caution; and it does not take account of the numerous witnesses quoted from court cases arising from the strike. Nor does it count as sources the *LOP* workers or volunteers even when they were reporting on events as witnesses or participants.

This study has found that, during the year of the strike, *LOP* stories quoted or cited at least 281 sources, of whom 191 (68%) were those typically rendered 'voiceless' in much of the mainstream media: that is, the 'ordinary' men and women involved in the strike in the villages, on the picket lines, in the kitchens, and in the support groups. These were in addition to other sources such as the NUM research department, solicitors representing arrested miners, academics commenting on aspects of the dispute, and so on. Almost without exception, giving voice to these 191 sources depended upon *LOP* reporters or contributors going out and about within coalfield communities, making contacts, talking to people face to

face and asking them questions. These sources were not approaching the paper – indeed, most had probably never heard of it.

The paper's contacts and coverage took time to build up, but from June 1984 onwards the numbers of miners and miners' wives directly quoted in the paper increased markedly, and reportage from picket lines, soup kitchens and pit villages became a staple of its coverage. These were overwhelmingly 'ordinary' rank and file strikers rather than full-time trade union officials. The name of union leader Arthur Scargill was scarcely mentioned in a whole year of *LOP* coverage; he was quoted as a source for a story on just three occasions.

Gordon Wilson, one of the paper's founders and, in common with most of its contributors, someone with no formal training as a journalist, was centrally involved in this coverage. Interviewed later about the paper's approach, he recalled that it was several weeks into the strike before he began going out into coalfield areas on a regular basis:

> The mainstream press concentrated on Scargill and what he was doing, but when you went out on picket lines he was rarely mentioned. It was their struggle rather than his. We very rarely dwelt on anything Scargill was saying. We went out week after week. Once we were on the miners' side of the picket lines they were usually OK, we always used to take copies of the paper out with us. Sometimes we went through the whole gamut of pickets being fed at the miners' club at three o'clock in the morning before going out picketing. (Gordon Wilson, interviewed by the author.)

His comments indicate the investment of time that went into the paper's reporting of events that were taking place outside its normal circulation area and some distance away, often in difficult to access locations at awkward times, overnight or in the early morning.

Evidence of the reporting practices of *LOP*, and of the paper's relationship with those involved in the strike, occasionally found its way into print. An account of an evening spent at a meeting of the Sherburn Miners' Wives Group drew attention to this relationship:

> …Sheila announces that there are two women from *LOP* who want to do a feature on the women who are against pit closures, adding advisedly, 'It's OK, they're on our side'. This gives them the go-ahead to speak to us – they have good cause to be suspicious of the press… (*LOP*, 29 June 1984.)

Similarly, in a report of a public meeting in Bradford about how the strike was being photographed, one *LOP* contributor wrote:

> …As someone who has taken photographs on the picket lines I can say that the only people who obstructed me taking pictures are the police, 100%. The assistance offered by pickets has been embarrassing. At the Prince of Wales pit I was offered help up onto a bus-shelter. 'You will get a better shot up there,' I was told. I declined the help on that occasion… (*LOP*, 7 December 1984.)

And in a report from a pre-dawn picket line outside Kellingley colliery, the paper reported:

> …We have brought about 30 copies of *Leeds Other Paper* – the one with the poem from Kellingley striker, John Hampson, on the front – which we distribute. He often pickets at Kellingley, we are told…[T]hey will make sure he gets a copy. 'Our resident poet,' as he is known… (*LOP*, 21 December 1984.)

The inclusion of the voices of so many strikers and their supporters within the pages of *LOP* was not an accident; nor was it a result of such people approaching the paper with their comments. It was the result of a commitment to reporting that involved going out and about repeatedly, building up contacts, knowledge, understanding and trust with those at the sharp end of the struggle. The evidence of this case study is that alternative media such as *LOP* created independent journalism that was not confined to trained or paid journalists but was open to a wider range of contributors including volunteers and participants in events (such as the NUM delegate who was given a double-page spread); whilst operating outside the mainstream media, they used the techniques of journalism to seek out, record and amplify the voices of those citizens actively engaged in the dispute, whose voices were largely absent from mainstream coverage.

A rich record of reporting: discussion

The ways in which alternative media covered the miners' strike provide a stark contrast with how the bulk of the UK's national press conducted what has been described as a 'propaganda assault on the miners' (Williams, 2009: 39). That is unsurprising because providing such a contrast is precisely what alternative media were established to do, as was made explicit in the first issue of *LOP*:

> *Leeds Other Paper* exists to provide an alternative newspaper in Leeds, ie a newspaper not controlled by big business and other vested interests. It is our intention to support all groups active in industry and elsewhere for greater control of their own lives. (*LOP* No 1, January 1974, quoted in Harcup, 1994: 1.)

This was a form of alternative or 'citizens' media' that involved 'opening social spaces for dialogue and participation, breaking individuals' isolation, encouraging creativity and imagination, redefining shared social languages and symbols, and demystifying the mass media' (Rodriguez, 2001: 63). It was also recognisably journalism, based on techniques of reporting, albeit using 'advocacy and interpretative and subjective styles' rather than reporting that claimed to be objective or impartial (James Curran in Coyer et al, 2007: xvi).

The case study of *Leeds Other Paper* provides evidence of a rich record of reporting and of direct and sustained journalistic contact and engagement with a wide range of sources, most notably the so-called 'ordinary' men and women involved in the strike at ground level. As shown above, the industrial practices of those who produced *LOP* in 1984-5 involved them going out into different locations and communities and proactively making contact with people who were barely, if at all, aware of the paper's existence; it involved reporting the views and actions of participants who were mostly indifferent or hostile to the media; it involved observation and description; and it also involved traditional reporting such as spending hours or days covering meetings or court cases. The resulting coverage arguably gave readers a much more rounded picture of life in the striking communities – including the humour and the mutual aid as well as the

hardship and the confrontations – than was available in mainstream media whose resources dwarfed those of the alternative press.

The kind of reportage featured in alternative media in 1984-5 is different in kind from much of what is today often labelled 'citizen journalism', a contested term that encompasses sending mobile phone clips to mainstream media, writing blogs, and contributing to social networking websites (Tilley and Cokley, 2007). Digital technology means that, from now on, 'the public will help choose, research, produce, and disseminate' journalism (Beckett, 2008: 52). Yet, although such phenomena have grown exponentially in recent years, predictions that everyone will become an online journalist do not appear to be borne out by evidence. 'The revolution did not happen,' according to Quandt (2008: 735); at least, it hasn't happened yet. Whilst non-professionals can indeed express themselves online, 'these ordinary voices tend to be self-selected, rather than sought out and encouraged as in the local alternative press' (Atton, 2009: 270). As Tilley and Cokley (2007) put it: 'In citizen journalism…a particular kind of voice (one comfortable with entering the public sphere directly) is selecting itself to appear.'

Speaking to and hearing from a self-selected audience online may be an effective way of covering certain topics or 'communities'; but it remains essentially the self-selected speaking to the self-selected. A recent study of online 'citizen journalists' in Israel found they relied to a large extent on text-based sources, meaning that 'the citizen journalists are freed of the burden of having to confront, negotiate with, and come to terms with fellow human beings' (Reich, 2008: 749). This is quite distinct from the journalistic practice of *LOP* contributors who were going out, personally asking the 'voiceless' their views, and reporting them to a wider audience. At issue here is not merely commentary versus reporting; the question also arises of *whose* comment.

'Citizen journalists are disrupting old media monopolies,' argues Naila Hamdy (2009: 92). But not everyone is online and not all those who are online use the technology to give themselves a voice; many 'forget about journalism completely in the face of other attractions such as gaming, social

networking, and sex' (Beckett, 2008: 21). According to Mick Temple (2008: 212): 'Blogs and suchlike are great ways to spread opinion and information, especially when it is unconventional, but they should not be confused with journalism.' More specifically, perhaps, they should not be confused with *reporting*.

Conclusion

As Thorsten Quandt and Jane Singer (2009: 138) argue, 'striking possibilities exist for a truly participatory media culture that breaks the publication monopoly of institutionalised media'. They are referring to digitisation, but such possibilities were also opened up by earlier forms of participatory media such as *City Issues* and *Leeds Other Paper*. The phrase 'citizen journalism' was not heard in 1984-5 but it could be applied to the ways in which the miners' strike was covered by alternative media: the use of journalistic techniques such as sourcing, interviewing, observing, inquiring, questioning, verifying and editing, by citizens who were not trained journalists yet who were participating in alternative journalism as a form of active citizenship (Harcup, 2011). As this study has found, they did so by leaving their comfort zone and engaging directly with the men and women involved in the strike, seeking out and reporting the experiences and voices of numerous participants who would not otherwise be heard.

In his questioning of the concept of citizen journalism, Temple (2009: 244) contrasts 'information and analysis that have been journalistically informed' with a 'billion bloggers bleating in cyberspace'. More participatory media does not have to be reduced to uninformed and uninformative bleating, as has been demonstrated by the reporting practices of alternative media such as *LOP*. This study suggests that there is much that those who aspire to be citizen journalists can learn from their offline forerunners of a quarter a century ago; not least the importance of the fundamental journalistic practice of going out and about, talking – and listening - to people. The record of such reporting as outlined in this study could be used as benchmarks against which to measure the performance of alternative and so-called 'citizen journalism' today: those benchmarks being journalism that

is independent of the mainstream and open to non-professionals, yet which utilises journalistic skills such as reporting, interviewing, verifying and sourcing. The creation of social networking sites, opinion-based blogs, invitations to submit user-generated content and suchlike may increase the numbers of voices speaking, but we should not suppose that everyone with something worth saying will choose to express themselves in such ways, even in societies with widespread access to digital technology. Some voices may remain unheard unless reporters venture where mainstream journalists tend not to tread.

The future health of journalism – alternative, mainstream or hybrid – depends on the application of reporting skills, whether by trained and paid journalists, by self-taught and unpaid citizens, or by a combination of the two. Amidst all the doom and gloom about the state of contemporary journalism (Davies, 2008), it is worth reminding ourselves of what can be achieved journalistically even with little money and few resources. Technology alone is not a determining factor and should be seen within economic, political, cultural and historical contexts (Fenton, 2010: 6). This case study of *Leeds Other Paper* suggests some of the possibilities of a commitment to reporting as the heartbeat of journalism. Today's technology opens up fresh potential, but such potential is more likely to be fulfilled if journalists, scholars, journalism educators, students and citizens are aware of and informed by the journalistic practices of earlier generations of alternative or 'citizen' journalists, whose activity could be seen as prefiguring such participatory potential (Howley, 2010: 6). This article is offered as a modest contribution towards keeping alive this collective memory.

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Tables for 'Reporting the voices of the voiceless' article

TABLE ONE

Subject matter of reportage	No. of articles	% of total	No. of Photos	% of total
Collections and appeals re food, money, baby clothes, Christmas presents, and so on	55	21%	10	8%
Marches, meetings, rallies, galas & other events in support of the strike	39	15%	29	22%
Picket lines at pits	32	12%	54	41%
Background analysis or comment	27	10%	1	1%
Court hearings, inquests, and Police Authority meetings	24	9%	0	-
Soup kitchens and/or life in pit villages	19	7%	26	20%
Other stories re the dispute, including use of the benefits system, role of media, comments by local politicians, actions by other unions, first-person accounts by miners and miners' wives, and so on	69	26%	10	8%
Total	**265**		**130**	

Table One: coverage of the 1984-5 miners' strike in the 51 issues of *Leeds Other Paper* published during the dispute. (Percentages rounded up/down so may not add up to exactly 100%.)

TABLE TWO

Sources cited or quoted in *LOP* stories about the 1984-5 miners' strike	Number	% of total
'Rank & file' striking miners	55	20%
Miners' support groups	54	19%
Miners' wives etc	45	16%
Other residents of pit villages	28	10%
Councillors and other politicians	20	7%
Mainstream media	13	5%
NUM itself (ie research dept briefings, *The Miner*, etc)	12	4%
Solicitors, barristers, magistrates	10	4%
NUM pit delegates who were also striking miners	9	3%
Academics, economists etc	9	3%
Other trade unions and trade unionists	8	3%
NUM regional and national officials (including Arthur Scargill)	5	2%
Police	4	1%
Legal Action Group	4	1%
Citizens Advice Bureau	3	1%
Other alternative media	2	1%
Total	**281**	

Table Two: identifiable sources quoted or cited in the coverage of the 1984-5 miners' strike in the 51 issues of *Leeds Other Paper* published during the dispute. (Percentages rounded up/down so may not add up to exactly 100%.)

'Alternative journalism as active citizenship'

Abstract: This article explores relationships between alternative forms of journalism and political concepts such as democracy and citizenship; in the process of doing so, it explores the role and purpose of alternative media. By means of an exploratory empirical study, utilising qualitative research methods with a sample group of alternative media practitioners within the UK, the article discusses differing concepts of alternative media, paying particular attention to the journalistic methods and outputs of such media and the ways in which they can be seen as supportive of citizenship. The findings are discussed within the context of the work of international scholars on issues such as alternative media and democratic participation. The article concludes that, although a precise and universal definition of alternative media remains elusive, there appears to be a considerable degree of agreement amongst practitioners and scholars of alternative journalism alike that such media can play a role in reflecting, nurturing and demonstrating what can be identified as active citizenship.

The production of alternative and participatory forms of media can be seen as an example of active citizenship, yet it is an example that tends to be little discussed within mainstream literature about relationships between journalism and politics. Alternative media can provide 'a rich vein of journalism which is simply invisible in journalism studies', laments John Hartley (2009: 314). Similarly, Richard Keeble (2009: 60) points out that: 'Despite the vast economic power of the mainstream press, a lively alternative print industry (ethnic minority/left-wing/peace movement/feminist/single-issue campaigning) survives against the odds – yet it tends to be ignored by both Fleet Street and academe.'

However, although the journalism of such alternative media may indeed be regarded as of marginal interest within much of journalism studies, it is

neither completely invisible nor totally ignored. Journalism has 'several legitimate registers, which contribute in different ways to the functioning of democracy,' writes James Curran in his foreword to the *Alternative Media Handbook* (Coyer et al, 2007: xvi). Those registers include the 'advocacy and interpretative and subjective styles of journalism' that are to be found in much of what is labelled 'alternative media'; forms of media that, for Curran, 'enable divergent social groups to define and constitute themselves, facilitate internal strategic debate, and further the forceful transmission of their concerns and viewpoints to a wider public.' Curran's contribution comes amidst a recent flurry of book length studies of media practices and products that might be termed 'alternative'; in addition to the *Alternative Media Handbook* in 2007 we also have *Understanding Alternative Media* by Bailey et al (2008) and *Alternative Journalism* by Atton and Hamilton (2008). Such studies of alternative forms of media production can inform us not just about the alternatives themselves, but, it is argued, can also shed light upon more established media practices, because:

> Alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news. Its critique emphasizes alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism of a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver. (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1.)

These books build on what has been a gradual increase over the past decade in scholarly attention to alternative media (Atton, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Atton and Couldry, 2003; Atton and Wickenden, 2005; Baker, 2005; Bareiss, 2001; Beckerman, 2003; Bolton, 2006; Caldwell, 2003; Davis, 2003; Downing, 2001, 2003; Forde et al, 2003; Gibbs, 2003; Haas, 2004; Hamilton and Atton, 2001; Harcup, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Howley, 2003; Khiabany, 2000; Platon and Deuze, 2003; Rodriguez, 2001, 2002; Shaffer, 2003; Waltz, 2005; Welch, 2003). Many of these studies were informed by earlier research (such as Aubrey et al, 1980; Berry et al, 1980; Dickinson, 1997; Fountain, 1988; Harrison, 1974; Landry et al, 1985;

Traber, 1985; Whitaker, 1981), arguably going back to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1970 *New Left Review* article 'Constituents of a theory of the media', which discussed potential 'emancipatory' use of media (Enzensberger, 1970: 26), or perhaps even to EP Thompson's (1952) polemical pamphlet *The Struggle for a Free Press*.

Informed by such literature and utilising a qualitative empirical study involving a sample group of alternative media practitioners, this article will discuss the relationship between forms of journalistic activity that might be labelled 'alternative' and expressions of citizenship that might be labelled 'active'. But, first, what is meant by the concept of active citizenship?

Active citizenship

Active citizenship can perhaps best be understood in terms of agency and participation. For the influential feminist political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1992: 3), 'the notions of citizenship and community have been stripped of much of their content by liberal individualism, and we need to recover the dimension of active participation that they hold in the classical republican tradition.' For Mouffe, active citizenship is central to what she sees as a necessary project to create a more radical and inclusive form of democracy: 'A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking' (Mouffe, 1992: 4, emphasis in original). According to this analysis, although citizenship as a legal status may be conferred on an individual merely by birth or residence in a particular nation state, active citizenship requires the use of human agency, as Ruth Lister argues:

> To *be* a citizen, in the legal and sociological sense, means to enjoy the rights of citizenship necessary for agency and social and political participation. To *act* as a citizen involves fulfilling the full potential of the status. Those who do not fulfil that potential do not cease to be citizens; moreover, in practice participation tends to be more of a continuum than an all or nothing affair and people might participate more or less at different points in the life-course. (Lister, 2003: 42, my emphasis.)

Thus for Lister, active citizenship is a process – an activity – rather than an outcome or a status, and it is through 'struggle' that 'citizenship emerges as a dynamic concept in which process and outcome stand in a dialectical relationship to each other… Citizenship as participation represents an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined' (Lister, 2003: 6 and 37). An active and informed citizenry may well become more critical of a society's power structures but, as Pippa Norris (2000: 319) points out: 'increasing criticism from citizens does not necessarily reduce civic engagement; indeed, it can have the contrary effect'.

The idea of participatory democracy cannot be understood in isolation from the concept of social justice, argues political theorist Iris Young (2000: 17), because 'in the real world' there is unequal access to democratic processes and forums for discussion. Therefore, the inclusive idea of widening intervention within a political – lower-case p – arena of civic engagement opens up the possibility of oppressed and marginalized groups constructing the sort of collective identities and narratives of solidarity that the theorist Nancy Fraser has described as 'the standpoint of the collective concrete other' (cited in d'Entreves, 1992: 158). Yet, as Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves (1992: 165) observes, 'the ability of citizens to enlarge their opinions and to test their judgements can only flourish in a public culture of democratic participation that guarantees to everyone the right to action and opinion.' Having space/s in which citizens can exercise their voice/s is seen as 'crucial to their possibilities of acting as citizens' (Couldry, 2006: 326). This is where alternative media come in, as one way in which the public sphere, or spheres, can become more inclusive and less male, less bourgeois and less dominated by the market. It is by encouraging and *reflecting* a culture of participation that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by *being* participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship.

Alternative media

'Sometimes,' writes media theorist Denis McQuail (2000: 160), 'dissatisfaction with established media has found expression in the

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celebration of completely different forms, free from established systems.'
He has proposed the concept of 'democratic-participant' media as a way of
explaining, or at least labelling, the 'many ideas expressed on behalf of
alternative, grass-roots media that expressed and looked after the needs of
citizens'. He writes:

> The theory found expression in the 1960s and 1970s in pressure for
> local and community radio and television. It challenged the
> dominance of centralized, commercialized, state-controlled and even
> professionalized media. Often the key to applying this theory was
> seen to lie in the new technology of the times…It favoured media
> that would be small in scale, non-commercial and often committed
> to a cause. Participation and interaction were key concepts. At the
> present time, quite a lot of expectation for re-invigorating political
> life is invested in the promise of new interactive media. (McQuail,
> 2000: 160.)

Peter Dahlgren (2006: 274-275) has written of how 'all kinds of horizontal
"mini" media such as organizational newsletters, neighbourhood bulletins,
union newspapers and activist pamphlets', in addition to various online
locations, can facilitate media audiences to become 'publics'; that is,
'citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various
kinds'. He continues:

> Audiences that coalesce into publics who talk about political issues –
> and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic
> competencies – move from the private realm into the public one,
> making use of and further developing their cultures of citizenship.
> (Dahlgren, 2006: 275.)

Such alternative media have been understood as being concerned with
process as well as product, emphasising 'the organization of media to enable
wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination
than is possible in the mass media'; with involvement in such activity
typically being open to 'ordinary people without the necessity of
professional training' (Atton, 2002: 25). These alternative media structures
have been described as forming part of an alternative or plebeian public
sphere (Atton, 1999: 54 and 71; Atton, 2002: 35 and 50; Habermas, 1989:
xviii; Habermas, 1992: 430) or as 'counter public spheres' that 'comprise
the communicational efforts of groups and organisations that challenge

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existing power relations' (de Jong et al, 2005: 11). Historically, such media can be understood as 'a crucible in which people could become aware of a range of alternative strategies for understanding and changing the world as they found it' (Conboy, 2004: 101).

Not just aware but involved. Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) is particularly concerned to emphasise the 'transformative processes' involved in the production of such horizontal forms of media. She draws deeply on the work of Mouffe and other feminist scholars to place alternative media at the heart of democratic communication and active citizenship. Whilst doing so, she rejects the term 'alternative media' in favour of 'citizens' media', explaining that:

> [R]eferring to 'citizens' media' implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimised identities, and institutionalised social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible. (Rodriguez, 2001: 20.)

She argues that the participation and 'empowerment' offered by such citizens' media constitute citizenship in action:

> As defined by the theory of radical democracy, the concept of citizenship implies that social subjects claim a space for their public voices, that these social subjects tenaciously intervene and shape their identities, altering circulating social discourses and cultural codes, and that, as a result of the above, these negotiations and renegotiations empower the communities involved. Seen from a radical democracy perspective, citizens' media materialize as important sites where citizenship is forged. By participating in these media experiences, reshaping their identities, reformulating established social definitions, and legitimising local cultures and lifestyles on the personal as well as the local level, communities are actively enacting citizenship. (Rodriguez, 2001: 158.)

In this way, for Rodriguez (2002), participants in alternative media become 'active citizens' and 'exercise their own agency in re-shaping their own lives, futures, and cultures'.

The participants speak

In the very production of their own media, alternative media participants have given themselves a voice. Yet, as noted earlier, such voices tend to be heard only on the fringes of journalism studies and political studies. This is perhaps surprising because, as Atton and Couldry (2003: 580) observe, studying alternative media practice can inform us 'both theoretically and empirically' about a range of wider media issues; after all, those involved in producing such media are precisely people 'who are *not* satisfied with the exclusion from the means of symbolic production which is most media audiences' lot' (emphasis in original). To this end, this article will now go on to report and then discuss the findings of a study that asked a sample group of such practitioners to reflect upon the meaning of their alternative media practice.

The sample

These practitioners, each of whom completed a questionnaire inviting open-ended responses, enjoy a particular vantage point, having worked as journalists initially in alternative media and subsequently in mainstream media. The sample group all contributed to the production of what they define as alternative media within the UK, mostly but not always on an unpaid basis. As we will see below, they regarded such activity as a form of social participation that could be seen as active citizenship; that is, an intervention on behalf of what they perceived to be a common good. Between them, the 22 respondents identified 40 alternative media projects on which they had worked in a period stretching from the late 1960s to the 2000s, including 'party' newspapers *Militant* and *Morning Star*, feminist publications *Spare Rib* and *Outwrite*, underground magazines *Oz* and *Ink*, campaign mouthpieces such as *Anti-Nuclear Action* and *Troops Out*, non-aligned publications such as *Leveller* and *Red Pepper*, alternative local newspapers, and fanzines based on a musical or sporting identity. Print was the dominant medium, but there were also examples from community cable television, community radio and online journalism.

The findings

The ways in which reflective practitioners define their own activities can help inform the scholarly exploration of media practice, and this becomes apparent in the simple listing of respondents' alternative media experiences, which highlights the slipperiness of the label 'alternative media'. Questions arise such as: Can a party newspaper be defined as alternative, if it is the mouthpiece of a hierarchical organisation? Are trades union journals or student newspapers mainstream or alternative? Did the London listings magazine *Time Out* start out as alternative and then become mainstream; if so, at which precise point? Can a sports website such as *MatchON.com* be considered as alternative, simply because it was an early example of bypassing traditional print and broadcast models to publish only on the internet? Even before we examine what the respondents had to say, interesting questions have already been raised about how alternative media might be defined and who does the defining; there are already signs that the answers are unlikely to be simple ones.

For one freelance journalist, 'alternative media' was 'probably not the term I would use these days, though everyone knew what it meant back in the 1970s and 1980s'. He went on to place the alternative media of the 1970s-1980s within a longer history of radical publishing, part of 'a tradition which could be traced right back to the 19th century publications like *Northern Star*, *Poor Man's Guardian* etc, through *Workers' Dreadnaught*, *Call*, etc'. However, not all respondents articulated such a conscious link with historical radicalism. Another freelance journalist responded, when asked how he would define 'alternative media':

> I'd never even thought of the label until I read your letter in *Journalist*. I'm not sure I could define it! How about: 'Media, usually small-scale, that is produced mainly to promote a personal interest or belief, with minimal desire to become an expanding business but maximum desire to share or argue a particular point of view'?

Defining alternative media is more complicated than it used to be, according to a magazine journalist:

> It used to be everything that your newsagent didn't deliver or wasn't in WH Smith[35] but it's completely collapsed now as a definition, largely but not exclusively because of the internet. It could mean *Indymedia* but it could also mean *Al-Jazeera*. I'm tempted to say that the distinction is between taking advertising and not.

A number of respondents offered definitions of alternative media that amounted to a form of self-fulfilling negative; that is, alternative media are alternative media because they are not mainstream. For one magazine journalist, alternative media were 'non-commercial, non-consensual, off-message', whilst a newspaper journalist suggested 'anything which has a view which is contrary to and challenges the status quo'. A range of broadly similar definitions included the following points about alternative content, perspectives, and working methods:

> A look at a situation from a different angle. Not traditional or restricted in its reporting, not tied to 'sexy' news. *(Former alternative media journalist; now newspaper journalist.)*

> Media which provide different information and perspectives from those provided by the dominant media, political bodies, organisations etc. *(Former alternative media journalist; now freelance journalist.)*

> Anywhere working in a different way - collective, for example. Media which sets out to challenge the norms generally accepted by society at that point in time, or that is born of protest or which seeks to subvert. *(Former alternative media journalist; now freelance journalist.)*

This concept of providing an alternative to established and/or commercial media led directly to consideration of questions of ownership and funding, as identified in one broadcast journalist's definition of alternative media as 'any publication/radio/TV not funded commercially or through a licence fee'. Another broadcast journalist offered the formulation of 'media not produced and funded by large corporations'. The absence of a proprietorial influence was key for the freelance journalist who argued that alternative media were 'beholden to no one, neither owner, political thinking or pressure group'. Another freelance expanded on the theme in the following terms:

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[35] The leading chain of newsagent shops in the UK.

> It's got a *lot* to do with ownership. From this follows issues like it being more important to get the material out that it is to get paid for it. This is clearly still the attitude on the web and in the various propaganda/humour sheets we still punt out around town when we feel like it… 'Alternative' should sit with the Alternative Society, which is a concept I was attracted by in my teens and 20s and still subscribe to, to some extent… Alternative Society journalism always was committed, campaigning and not interested in an immediate financial return.

Having heard a range of perspectives on what alternative media are *not* - ie, they are not mainstream - we will now turn to the sample group's views on what alternative media *are*: a form of active citizenship. The practitioners described their engagement with alternative media typically in terms of encouraging participation by non-professionals, by sharing jobs and responsibilities ranging from unblocking toilets to editing pages, by being prepared to say what the mainstream regarded as 'unsayable', and by having a commitment to give voice to those directly involved: 'talking to the homeless person before the housing officer', as one put it. Alternative publications and other outlets were seen as reflecting a point of view - or, more often, points of view (plural) - that were not otherwise seen or heard in the media. In this sense, alternative media can be seen as facilitating democratic debate and participation among otherwise marginalized groupings. As one freelance journalist put it:

> I would say that alternative media is…journalism designed to serve fringe political or environmental interest groups, particularly from a left-leaning perspective. The label is imperfect - often suggesting merely a degree of poverty.

Similarly, a newspaper journalist defined alternative media as:

> Any format or technology which offers minority groups, disenfranchised groups or non-mainstream groups within society an independent method for disseminating non-mainstream, alternative and unmediated information.

The content of such alternative media was typically described as being broadly left wing and radical in its political orientation. In the words of a freelance journalist, alternative media were 'not tied to any particular political or religious grouping, or to any business interests, pursuing a

radical/left outlook'. He added: 'I know 'em when I see them.' Another freelance offered the following definition that clearly links the perceived purpose of such media to ideas of political – again, with a small p - participation and change:

> Media produced by people with an ulterior motive, that is in order to campaign for something like peace or justice, rather than make money. Those who work in it are primarily motivated by a desire to change the world rather than have a career.

This equation of alternative media with left wing political perspectives was largely accepted by the sample group, although other alternative perspectives were also considered. A freelance explained: 'I guess Christian publications could be seen as alternative, as could ecological and environmental as well as political.' A newspaper journalist commented: 'I suppose this could also mean stuff which comes from the far right, but it's not usually used in that sense.' And another freelance journalist argued:

> The word 'alternative' carries a definite hint of a political or environmental agenda - a stance that is that of the outsider, that places itself beyond the usual political discourse. In theory, 'alternative' could apply to a right wing political publication - of a libertarian nature, for instance. But somehow the label doesn't quite fit.

Some respondents pointed to the participatory ethos of alternative media leading to a blurring of roles between journalist and source and between journalist and audience. In this sense, alternative media could be seen as empowering, according to one newspaper journalist; as 'anything produced by its potential audience', but with the difference that this 'audience' has more potential of editorial *control* than do audience members who contribute to mainstream radio phone-ins, the letters' pages of commercial publications, or even the moderated comments facilities that are now a standard feature of mainstream online media.

The motivations that led people to become involved in alternative media in the first place also speak to us about the role and purpose of alternative media. One respondent, who now works for a mainstream regional newspaper, explained that she had been motivated to volunteer at *Leeds*

Other Paper by a desire 'to expose dishonesty, unfairness, hypocrisy, wheeling and dealing and general skulduggery going on in the establishment and to lend a hand to "save the planet"'. And a broadcast journalist explained his motivations in helping to produce the *Leveller* magazine:

> We were pretty non-aligned. I can't remember too many conversations about our collective ambitions other than [to] bemoan the fate of the country under Maggie[36]. We did want to work collectively - which at times was exciting and at others incredibly frustrating and difficult. We wanted to produce an alternative source of independent news and information covering arts and politics both in this country and overseas, which was non-aligned to any of the traditional parties of the left. Personally I felt part of a collective endeavour, I met some interesting people and I acquired some very useful skills.

This idea of alternative media as itself a form of collective action, not merely a place to comment on the actions of others, was commonly held by practitioners; however, another respondent defined alternative media in a less overtly political sense as primarily a means to 'let off steam'.

All members of the sample group went on to work in what they defined as mainstream media within the UK, suggesting that alternative and mainstream media could be seen as part of a continuum rather than as binary opposites (see Harcup, 2005a). Certainly, all continued to see a role for alternative media; indeed, society's need for alternative perspectives was seen by some respondents as axiomatic. A newspaper journalist said simply that 'there has to be an outlet for dissent', whilst a broadcast journalist stressed the importance of alternative media in providing 'an alternative, unorthodox, and questioning voice' in society. As one freelance journalist put it: 'If there's a role for media, there's a role for alternative media.'

Many respondents were explicit in stating that alternative media must be understood in terms of fostering democratic inclusion and participation and countering social exclusion and political disengagement. Alternative media are seen as playing a vital, democratic role in influencing public debate because, as one freelance argued: 'There's always a need for alternative

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[36] Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979-1990.

viewpoints and diversity if any change is to be made to current conditions.'
In this sense, alternative media could be seen as products of active citizens,
which perform a socially useful function, as the comments by these two
practitioners make clear:

> Democracy is dead without them. The mainstream media is
> governed by commercial success. Therefore it sticks to safe and
> popular ideas, tried and tested formulae, and very rarely rocks the
> boat. The alternative media are governed by ideas, no matter how
> initially unpopular they may appear to be - that's the whole point of
> them. *(Former alternative media journalist; now PR adviser.)*

> The idea of an organisation not bound by commercial pressures is
> healthy for society, but the people running it have to be prepared to
> put in an enormous amount of hard work for little or no pay.
> *(Former alternative media journalist; now broadcast journalist.)*

Without such alternative forms of media, the practitioners argue that many
individuals and grouping would in effect be rendered voiceless, at worst, or
isolated, at best. As a freelance journalist put it: 'There is too much
influence in mainstream media on what is and isn't included and so it is
easy for some social groups or cultural minorities to be left out.' Others
agreed that mainstream media excluded many valid perspectives, leaving a
gap that alternative media could help citizens to fill for themselves:

> Alternative media can showcase the work of people not considered
> right for the mainstream, disregard conventions, profit margins and
> other constraints to present a valuable fresh perspective… [It] can
> also provide a service to a community on a very small scale that
> would never be commercially viable. *(Former alternative media
> journalist; now newspaper journalist.)*

In this way, alternative media were seen as giving sections of the population
spaces within which they could communicate with each other. A freelance
journalist related this communal function to alternative media's more
overtly counter-hegemonic role when offering the following explanation of
the purpose of alternative media:

> To throw a spanner in the works, to remind people who are isolated
> in their radical, subversive, mad, nihilist beliefs that they are not
> alone, and to tell others that there is more to heaven and earth than
> they had imagined.

As another freelance journalist put it: '[It] is vital that everyone in society has a place they can call theirs.'

Although all members of the sample group saw a continuing role for alternative media - and the majority continued to use alternative media as sources for their own journalism within mainstream media – they were not uncritical. A national newspaper journalist offered the following reflections:

> Journalism at its best is often independent social activism… The concept of 'alternative media' is now very different from the mid-1980s due to the emergence of the internet and email. The need and market for [a] radical press has been completely supplanted by digital media… Its [the internet's] influence and effectiveness has grown significantly since the late 1990s, and is a much more democratic, accessible and free-flowing medium than any other preceding technology. It allows interest groups, campaigners and umbrella groups such as Stop the War to directly reach their target audience, produce independent news sources and connect up with like-minded information sources. Also, the internet's power to subvert or overtake traditional news forms has been proven by the speed with which international news circulates… What has not yet appeared in my (probably limited) experience are alternative media outlets that have the credibility and influence of printed predecessors, such as *City Limits*, early *Time Out*, or *Leeds Other Paper*… [The] alternative media no longer digs up genuine scandal as it might have in the past. My personal attitude towards alternative media journalism (in its professional sense), having now had 14 years in the mainstream press, is increasingly sceptical. Much of it now appears to be commentary and editorialising, rather than objectively journalistic… Modern alternative media is far more valuable for me in giving me direct access to the sources and subjects of a story.

This development of alternative spaces on the internet was also heralded by a former alternative journalist who now works in public relations. He observed that young people had led the way in exploring the potential of the internet to express active citizenship:

> Their parents sit at the breakfast table tutting over the latest 'outrage' highlighted by the indignant *Daily Mail*, while upstairs their children are surfing all sorts of weird and wonderful sites. We can see this from the mass demonstration against the Iraq war[37]. With the exception of the *Daily Mirror*, most sections of the mainstream media were either neutral or for the war. Yet anything between one

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[37] On 15 February 2003 in London.

> and two million people turned out on the streets… It was the plethora of 'alternative' websites internationally that ignited this mass protest.

As is perhaps illustrated by the above example, the internet can be used to organise expressions of active citizenship not merely online, but on the streets too.

Discussion of practitioner perspectives

Notwithstanding the diversity of their alternative media experiences, and despite the fact that the individuals concerned went on to work for mainstream media that mostly enjoyed far higher profiles and much larger audiences, the respondents in this study continue to value the practices and products of alternative media. They articulate a commitment to social justice and active citizenship that sees alternative media as being healthy for society, even as vital for democracy. Although the practitioners' experiences are necessarily specific to the UK where they have worked, their motivations and explanations of practice may have a wider resonance with those involved in alternative forms of journalism within other locations. Their reflections can help to illuminate more scholarly consideration of what Atton and Couldry (2003: 580) refer to as 'the means of symbolic production' and of what scholars such as Lister (2003: 37) describe as 'citizenship as participation'.

In their different ways, the alternative media practices engaged in by the practitioners in this study reflect what has been identified as a typology of alternative media practices, being concerned as they are with politically or culturally radical content, alternative style of presentation, innovative use of technology, alternative methods of distribution, a blurring of roles, and horizontal rather than hierarchical communication (Atton, 2002: 27). Similarly, the definitions of alternative media offered by the practitioners in this study find echoes in the more theoretical formulations that have emerged from the academy, such as McQuail's (2000: 160) 'democratic-participant' media and Downing's 'radical alternative media'. For Downing (2001: ix-xi), the dividing lines between different forms of media 'are

always blurred', with alternative media found 'in a colossal variety of formats…typically small-scale, generally underfunded, sometimes largely unnoticed at least initially'.

As the practitioners in this study have argued, alternative media tend to be organised along more democratic lines than are mainstream media, with audiences encouraged to become producers. For Downing (2001: xi), such media serve two main purposes: expressing opposition '*vertically* from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behaviour', and/or building 'support, solidarity, and networking *laterally* against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure' (my emphasis). This dual role, noted by a number of respondents in this study, has also been identified by Gary Younge, a journalist within the mainstream who also contributes to alternative media from time to time. For Younge (2004), alternative media help create and sustain communities of activists by providing 'an alternative prism through which to examine the world'.

Clemencia Rodriguez makes explicit the link between such practices and theories of radical democracy and citizenship when she argues that even diverse forms of alternative or citizens' media have the common characteristic that 'they express the will and agency of a human community confronting historical marginalizing and isolating forces, whatever these may be'. She continues that such media open up 'spaces for dialogue and participation, breaking individuals' isolation, encouraging creativity and imagination, redefining shared social languages and symbols, and demystifying the mass media' (Rodriguez, 2001: 63). Whilst the alternative media practitioners in this study speak of taking part in a collective endeavour, and of creating spaces in which marginalized voices can be heard, Rodriguez writes at a more theoretical level of opening up spaces for dialogue and participation. Atton (2002: 4) is similarly concerned with such transformative processes, defining alternative media 'as much by their capacity to generate non-standard…methods of creation as I do by their content'. This opening up of such participatory spaces for social dialogue is,

for Atton (2002: 154-5), akin to the ideal of the Habermassian public sphere, in which 'participants do not simply consume reflexively, but produce reflexively'.

Several respondents pointed to the growth of the internet as offering avenues of communication unmediated by mainstream mass media, opening up the possibility of what Natalie Fenton describes as 'a new form of political activism with consequences for the way we conceive of and carry out our political citizenship'. She continues:

> The internet is now home to a multitude of groups dedicated to objecting to and campaigning against particular issues and politics. Public communications online are part of the process of realizing the public sphere – a space where democracy can be enacted – allowing us to analyse how shared democratic values and identification as democratic citizens are achieved and maintained. (Fenton, 2008: 233.)

However, although the internet can be seen as comprised of 'a plurality of voices', it has been noted that these voices may not have equal strength or resources, meaning that, for Kavada (2005: 219), 'to a lesser extent, the internet seems to replicate the power structures of the offline media'.

Whether they operate online, offline or both, we have seen that alternative media participants do not concern themselves only with the production of alternative content; they also embody alternative ways of producing such content. By doing so, they disrupt established 'power relationships' on multiple levels (Rodriguez, 2001: 16). Such participation goes far beyond the mediated and moderated spaces of mainstream media, even those that invite audience contributions. As Bailey et al (2008: 13-14) put it, true participation relies on participants having power to influence an outcome: 'Alternative media not only allow but also facilitate the participation (in its more radical meaning) of its members (or the community) in both the produced content and the content-producing organisation.' In this sense, participation in alternative media as described and reflected upon by the participants in this study can best be understood as a form of active citizenship.

Conclusion

This study suggests that scholars and practitioners of alternative media concur that 'alternative journalism' seeks to engage with 'ordinary people…as a set of voices which have as equal a right to be heard as do the voices of elite groups' (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 126). Having such a right to be heard, and having access to spaces in which to engage in dialogue with others, is seen as crucial to the possibility of people 'acting as citizens' (Couldry, 2006: 326). For feminist theorists of inclusivity such as Mouffe (1992) and Lister (2003), active citizenship implies active participation in society and engagement in some form of collective or political endeavour. This study has suggested that one form of collective undertaking in which 'citizenship is forged' (Rodriguez, 2001: 158) is the production of alternative and participatory forms of media.

For Rodriguez, as with Mouffe, citizenship is constructed, not given: 'Citizens have to enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis, through their participation in everyday political practices… [C]itizenship has to do with empowerment' (Rodriguez, 2001: 19). This is not about empowering people to dominate or to exclude others, but empowering people to challenge and to be inclusive; in this sense the production of alternative media can be understood as forms of active citizenship and empowerment.

The practitioner perspectives expressed in this study support the concern of many commentators with the concept of the public sphere as a space in which informed citizens can – or *should* be able to - engage with one another in reasoned debate and critical reflection. The health of such a public sphere, argues Paul Manning (2001: 137 and 226-227), depends on 'the success of a diverse range of political groups and organisations in submitting their arguments and evidence to the news media'. He stresses the importance of 'alternative benchmarks' – alternative sources of information by which citizens may measure mainstream output - in helping news audiences to engage critically with and 'decode' the messages produced by mainstream media. His study of news and news sources echoes others in suggesting that these less powerful groups in society continue to face

structural obstacles in gaining access to mainstream media. It is precisely such groups that, according to the self-definitions of participants considered in this article, are given voice in alternative media's forms of alternative journalism.

'Participatory media production,' writes Atton (2009: 269), 'can be thought of as providing the constituents of an alternative public sphere, where agendas are set and discussion is developed through the journalism of social movements and communities'. The results can be messy, but in a good way, argue Bailey et al (2008: 153), because 'alternative media should be seen as a multiplicity of public spaces, a colourful – but at times also contentious – myriad of media initiatives as diversified as society itself'.

For the group of reflective practitioners and active citizens whose views have informed this study, the continued existence of some form of alternative media and the opening up of 'social spaces for dialogue and participation' (Rodriguez, 2001: 63) remains essential for the healthy functioning of society. In addition to operating as a critique of much mainstream journalism, such participatory forms of media can be said to help foster – and, indeed, to be an expression of – active citizenship. Despite a paucity of resources, such media can in fact be far more inclusive than their mainstream counterparts. Therefore, it must be hoped that alternative forms of journalism will not continue to be seen as of marginal importance whenever the relationship between journalism and democracy is discussed and analysed.

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'"News With a Kick": A Model of Oppositional Reporting'

This is the author's accepted manuscript version of the article, included in this thesis with the permission of the journal publishers, John Wiley and Sons. The final edited and published version of record is:

Abstract: This article explores uses of reporting techniques by de facto journalists operating within alternative media, paying particular attention to the extent to which people who tend to be marginalised by mainstream journalism may be heard via alternative journalism. The article is based on an empirical study of an online provider of alternative local news operating in one UK city. Drawing on broader conceptualisations of alternative journalism (Forde, 2011; Atton, 2002), this article proposes a more specific model of "oppositional reporting," combining pragmatic use of journalistic skills with an ideological critique of the hegemonic discourses of powerful social groupings and mainstream media alike. Oppositional reporting speaks up for the powerless and, at times, allows the powerless to speak directly for themselves.

This article considers "oppositional reporting" as a form of alternative journalism that is produced by, and/or on behalf of, those who tend to be excluded or marginalised by mainstream media. Journalism involves the provision of sourced information on topical events and reporting is its heartbeat. This article will examine a form of reporting that can be found within some examples of alternative media: "oppositional reporting" that sets out to speak up for the powerless in society, that facilitates the powerless to speak for themselves, and that seeks to inspire action for change. Such reporting provides citizens with alternative news as well as additional contextual information to help explain (and sometimes debunk) mainstream news. It does this as part of a project aimed at encouraging audiences "to take part in democracy, in civic society – to participate, to *do something*" (Forde, 2011, p. 165; emphasis in original). In this sense, alternative journalism in the form of oppositional reporting can act as a means of "democratic communication" (Atton, 2002, p. 4), providing

"information for action" (Atton, 2002, p. 85), in the phrase adopted as a motto by both *SchNews* (2013) and *Corporate Watch* (2013).

This study will explore how oppositional reporting provides such information for action in Manchester, a city in the north-west of England in the UK. From 2007 to date the city has been home to *Mule*, which describes itself as "a Manchester based non-profit independent media project, looking to promote social justice by getting out the news and views you won't find elsewhere, from the rainy city and beyond," aiming to "cover the burning issues that the mainstream media neglect, without screaming down peoples necks, being boring or preachy, or speaking to a select, in-the-know audience" (*Mule*, 2012; see also Mule Collective, 2011). *Mule* was at first a free newspaper with an added website onto which print content was simply shovelled, unaltered, but it soon abandoned its print version to become a standalone website, now with an additional presence on Facebook and Twitter. Its style and format are relatively conventional but its ethos and content are far from conservative.

*Mule'*s journalism goes beyond providing information and entertainment to become a form of oppositional reporting that is underpinned by scepticism. *Mule'*s journalism is designed to speak up for the powerless and to inspire and inform social and political action. It does this, in part, by rejecting objectivity in favour of articulating what it sees as the interests of the relatively powerless in society against those of the relatively powerful. *Mule* engages in oppositional reporting to speak up for the powerless, allow the powerless to speak for themselves, and provide information for action in the pursuit of social change. In doing this it declares itself as, broadly, on the side of labour against capital; women against sexism; communities against corporations; need against greed; and minorities against discrimination.

This article will use quantitative and qualitative methods to explore how it does this, paying particular attention to its sourcing practices. It will feature a detailed content analysis of one month's output as well as a consideration of examples put forward as case studies by *Mule* itself. This material will be contextualised with explanatory material obtained via face-to-face

discussions and e-mail exchanges. The article will then analyse the resulting evidence in the light of recent scholarship on alternative media and alternative journalism. Finally, the article will propose a model of oppositional reporting that combines pragmatic use of journalistic skills with an ideological critique of mainstream discourse. But before we turn to the case study, we must acknowledge that *Mule* and other contemporary examples did not simply emerge one day to change the world; they have history.

Alternative journalism and oppositional reporting

Mule's alternative journalism is a 21st century example of a type of alternative media that emerged in the late 1960s and during the 1970s. Informed by ideas broadly identified with anarchism, socialism, feminism, secularism, environmentalism, the peace movement, antiracism, anti-imperialism, and antimaterialism, elements of what has been termed the "1968 generation" created an alternative local press that frequently used, and on occasion subverted, many of the established techniques of mainstream journalism and reporting (Harcup, 2013). Many of the 1968 generation's alternative media activists were aware of, and inspired by, oppositional movements and media from earlier decades, even earlier centuries (Forde, 2011; Harcup, 2013). In this spirit they created media projects that had relatively open and nonprofessionalised structures, "available to ordinary people without the necessity of professional training" (Atton, 2002, p. 25). Despite most participants' lack of formal journalistic training – some might argue it was *because* of their distance from the industry's norms – this post-1968 alternative press produced some in-depth reporting, not just commentary (Whitaker, 1981).

Amongst many other things, this press produced something that I label *oppositional reporting*: reporting that provided new information at the same time as critiquing mainstream narratives. For example, one comparative study of coverage of the 1981 riots in the UK found marked differences between mainstream and alternative media. Whereas mainstream media tended to frame events within a story of criminality, and to quote only

senior police personnel and politicians in the role of primary definers, the alternative press of the time pointed to complex social and economic reasons behind the disturbances and relied more on sources found on the streets than on any official version of events (Harcup, 2003). Another case study found reporters from alternative media conducting extensive ground-level, "grassroots" reporting during the 1984-1985 mineworkers' strike in the UK. This contrasted with the narrow range of overwhelmingly antistrike perspectives that tended to frame coverage within contemporary mainstream journalism. One weekly alternative local newspaper published 51 issues during the strike, in which there were 265 articles about the dispute, using 281 identifiable sources. Of those sources, no fewer than 191 (68%) were those more normally left "voiceless" in much of the mainstream media for the duration of the dispute: that is, the "ordinary" men and women involved in the strike in villages, on picket lines, in kitchens, and in support groups. Such reportage depended upon alternative journalists physically going out and about, talking to people face to face, seeking out and recording their stories for wider circulation, not simply for the sake of spreading information but also in the hope of inspiring action (Harcup, 2011). This was oppositional reporting in practice and, in the *Mule* case study (below), we will now explore how it works three decades on, in the digital era.

Mule: "a tool for social change"

The people who founded the media project known as *Mule* saw it, essentially, as a political act. They created *Mule* as "a tool for social change," as the collective made clear in its online "About" statement:

> At its best independent media supports progressive social movements by raising public awareness and providing information that is a tool in the hands of campaigners. This starts at home. The place we can be most effective is in our backyard, holding power to account in Manchester. (*Mule*, 2012)

They selected the tools of journalism and reporting from all those available in the media toolbox, and they taught each other how to use them. Although a few people with prior journalistic experience have been involved in *Mule*

over the years, most of its activists had never before written a story. They learned from each other, taking decisions together, editing articles by a process of discussion via e-mail lists and wikis in addition to editorial meetings. As its masthead promised, *Mule* offered "news with a kick." For the founders, and for those still involved today, alternative journalism is inseparable from political activity. It is not a case of choosing to report *on* political activism: These activists' journalism is *part* of their political activism.

Mule's founders despaired of much mainstream media, which they saw as far too docile to be an effective watchdog, but they were also critical of what they saw as the dogmatism of much alternative and radical media. So they decided to produce their own version of information for action to fill the gap left by deficiencies of existing alternative media as well the mainstream. *Mule* described itself as "an old form of left journalism not seen since the radical papers of the past"; namely, "well-researched articles about things people care about, such as schools, cuts, racism, local councils and housing, not just counter-culture stuff that's only read by people already interested" (Mule Collective, 2011). Although they were young enough to fit the label "digital natives," the collective's initial plan was for a newspaper with an added website. They later dropped the print edition due to the physical and financial strains involved in producing and distributing it. The content and reporting style of the newspaper and website were virtually identical, but members of the collective still have misgivings that some of the most deprived communities in the city may now effectively be denied access to the online-only *Mule*. They have not ruled out an occasional return to print at some point in the future, to provide a physical product that could be distributed to community centres and other locations to reach potential readers and sources on the wrong side of the "digital divide."

Mule's journalism is consciously informed by its activists' knowledge of the "propaganda model," the explanation offered by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky of how mainstream media tend to propagate the world view of the

wealthy and powerful whilst marginalising dissenting perspectives (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). *Mule* believes that most mainstream media are inherently but covertly biased, so it sets out to counter such hidden bias with an alternative media project that would be *overtly* biased in the other direction. As a member of the collective explains:

> We wanted it to be openly biased about the things we felt were important. It was meant to be connected to social movements as a resource for the activist community in Manchester, to use the paper as a tool for social change, trying to get a message out there that wasn't ranty, that was well-informed, well-researched. (Interview)

Mule shows its bias in its selection of stories (there is no celebrity news and little or no standard crime reporting, for example), in a commitment to researching how the decisions of the powerful impact on those lower down the social order, and in privileging the voices of activists, campaigners and 'ordinary people' over the more powerful voices that tend to dominate so much mainstream coverage. Readers can take bias into consideration only if it is out in the open, so *Mule*'s argument goes.

Mule's reporting therefore begins from a stance that views events from an oppositional, primarily class-based, perspective. That is both its purpose and an essential part of its methodology. *Mule*'s politics and journalism are inseparable, and we can see this most clearly at the local level where its journalism is not merely an observation on the life of the city: it is an intervention. As one member of the collective explains:

> We found that a lot of activists could tell you what the International Monetary Fund was but they couldn't really tell you what a "local enterprise partnership" was, even though they make major decisions - especially with housing, which is a really key driver of socio-economic pressures - which we thought deserved a look in our area. (Interview)

This localised and oppositional perspective informs the practice of *Mule* journalists as they go out and about around the city talking to people, attending council and other formal meetings, and devoting considerable time and effort to reading through official documentation and numerous other texts.

Rather than relying on oppositional rhetoric, then, *Mule*'s activists-cum-journalists explore empirical evidence. They pay particular attention to official documents produced by local authorities, government departments, nongovernment organisations (NGOs), regional development organisations, university research projects, business forums, and assorted "thinktanks." *Mule* journalists search through economic reviews and strategies, company annual reports, and transcripts of parliamentary debates and questions to be found in *Hansard*, the official record of proceedings in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. *Mule* synthesises yet at the same time delves beneath the surface of such material to analyse and contextualise what it might mean for everyday citizens. It records the views of those on the receiving end of, as well as those campaigning against, such policies. And *Mule* journalists then report the results in what they intend to be a measured and accurate manner, adopting a readable and accessible style, without distorting or oversimplifying the often complex issues involved.

Underpinning *Mule*'s exploration of such evidence is a default position of scepticism. This scepticism informs *Mule*'s reading of what appears in other media, and in public relations, just as it informs *Mule*'s original reporting. It is journalism with attitude. A member of the collective describes that attitude in the following terms:

> When you see a council press release about regeneration we look very carefully through it and think, "What assumption is being made here, what assumption is being made there?", and then going to people in those areas and saying, "What do you think about this, what's your experience been?"…We basically look through every local story every day…and we think, "What are they up to?". (Interview)

When asked for examples of how this works in practice, members of the *Mule* collective pointed to the three stories that will be discussed below. Consideration of these exemplars will be followed by analysis of a whole month of *Mule* output (that was not suggested by the collective).

Example one: the workers speak

Story one covers an industrial dispute and this example of oppositional reporting is notable for the way in which it is entirely framed from the perspective of the workers involved. It describes a long-running series of conflicts at a further education college in Manchester (*Mule*, 2010). Looking back on "a year of struggle" between management and staff, *Mule* frames the story explicitly from the perspectives of workers' detailed allegations and grievances about the way their workplace is run. It directly quotes seven members of staff, all anonymously, and makes it clear that many other workers have also been spoken to. A worker describes one encounter with their employer:

> My line manager said to me, "I don't like to call this or see it as a demotion, it's more of a revision of your role and regarding." 20 per cent less pay and three weeks holiday removed, which we will not be compensated for, seems like a demotion to me, but we are scared to rock the boat as we have been made to feel lucky we have kept our jobs. (*Mule*, 2010)

Another worker is quoted explaining that some changes amount to discrimination against parents, particularly mothers:

> By changing holidays and increasing working hours the college has not taken childcare needs into account. When confronted by someone who says it looks like they cannot continue in their job due to the changes, the college just says there is "no negotiation." (*Mule*, 2010)

Management declined to comment to *Mule* but the story quotes from a number of e-mails senior managers had sent to staff, which provide some evidential backup to the workers' version of events. *Mule's* other steps to verify material include pointing to a motion on the issue circulated by Members of Parliament, and repeated but unsuccessful attempts at eliciting direct comment from the local authority and local politicians. This story has attracted 10 online comments from readers, including several from workers directly involved in the dispute adding further information. Overall, not only does the workers' perspective frame *Mule*'s coverage of the dispute, but

many of the workers involved are given the opportunity to speak for themselves directly.

The way in which *Mule* has reported this story contrasts with mainstream coverage, where the words of 'ordinary' workers directly involved are rarely heard. The mainstream *Manchester Evening News* has devoted little space to the disputes at the college and its stories from this period do not quote a single worker, allowing only a college spokesman and the general secretary of a trade union to speak on the issue (*MEN* 2010a, 2010b). Alternative and mainstream reporting, therefore, can be said to differ markedly in the quantity of coverage, in whose perspectives are reported most prominently, and in whose perspectives are actively sought (or not).

Example two: utmost scepticism

Story two covers the way in which a claim about new jobs collapses under scrutiny from *Mule*'s critical perspective. The story examines an airline's announcement of an £175 million investment at a local airport, tests the company's account of the numbers of jobs involved against available evidence from other sources, and highlights discrepancies (*Mule*, 2011a). *Mule*'s version includes 20 links to 15 different sites or documents, ranging from the airline's original news release to reports and analysis produced by organisations such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Aviation Environment Federation, and various economic analysts. *Mule* cites, discusses and links to evidence found within official records of meetings of, and reports presented to, organisations such as the Executive of Manchester City Council and the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority, and a number of items from other media ranging from the uber-mainstream *Financial Times* to a specialist *Regeneration and Renewal* blog.

This is an example of how healthy scepticism, when combined with oppositional reporting's exhaustive approach to multiple sourcing, can debunk a powerful industry's public relations spin. It contrasts with how the airline's announcement is treated by the *Manchester Evening News*. The city's major newspaper trumpets the £175m announcement and the

supposed creation of 2,000 jobs in its headline; all it adds to the original press release is a positive quote from the managing director of the airport (*MEN*, 2011a). As a result, *Mule* accuses the mainstream media of, in effect, exaggerating the number of new jobs likely to be created. The *Mule* story concludes that all such claims made by the aviation industry, politicians and media alike should be scrutinised and approached with "the utmost scepticism."

Example three: the riot in context

Story three concerns reaction to an outbreak of rioting in Manchester city centre, and was published online shortly after a night of disturbances. It is *Mule*'s attempt to make sense of what took place on the streets that night, and why it happened (*Mule*, 2011b). *Mule* places events within the context of evidence of "structural inequality, deprivation and exclusion," including reporting figures for poverty, social deprivation, unemployment and life expectancy taken from a range of sources including the council and the charity Save The Children, all with links to take readers to see the original evidence for themselves. The article also points readers back to some of *Mule*'s own earlier coverage of relevant issues, including a piece that cited a letter from community activists warning the council that cuts to the city's youth services could result in street violence. On this occasion *Mule* does not set out to record the views of "voiceless" youths on the street. Nor does *Mule* seek out the usual suspects among community leaders and other primary definers to offer their opinions. The oppositional reporting in this example hinges more on *Mule*'s own analysis, although it also includes nine links to different sources. The story has generated further discussion among those posting comments online, who contribute a range of different perspectives and opinions on the events of that August night.

In contrast, the *Manchester Evening News*'s extensive coverage of the same events echo that found in mainstream coverage of riots 30 years earlier (Harcup, 2003). That is, it focuses on criminality, law and order, and details of specific incidents rather than consideration of what might lie behind them. For example, the headline of the *MEN*'s major story on the August

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2011 riots describes them as one of the worst events in the city's history, and the following words and phrases all appear in the scene-setting intro: "rampaged…trail of devastation…targeted by yobs…smashed…looted…" (*MEN*, 2011b). Such mainstream coverage tends to downplay possible underlying social issues (Wadsworth, 2012), and seems to leave little room for the kind of reflective discussion offered by *Mule*.

From specific examples to one month's entire output

The three *Mule* stories discussed above use a variety of oppositional reporting techniques to speak up for the powerless against the powerful. In the first example, in particular, we can see the way in which *Mule* sometimes allows the powerless to speak directly for themselves. Considered together, the stories show how *Mule* operates journalistically to provide an alternative voice in the city, to enable voices and perspectives from the margins to be placed centre-stage, and to inspire action for change. But the above stories were suggested by members of the *Mule* collective themselves, as examples of their own practice, so it would perhaps have been strange if they had failed to live up to their billing. To what extent is such oppositional reporting standard practice for *Mule*? A content analysis of one month's entire output will help answer that question (see Tables 1, 2 and 3). A sample calendar month was selected without notification to *Mule* workers. March 2012 was chosen as it was the first full calendar month after completion of initial groundwork for the research project. It was a relatively "normal" month, with no particularly spectacular events that might have distorted the findings. The next section will examine *Mule*'s range of stories, sources and links, to explore the extent to which it speaks up for the voiceless and promotes action for social change.

The range of stories

Table 1 records in detail the number of items published during the sample period, along with the number of sources referred to, the major theme of each item, and any source/s used in the role of primary definer. During the month *Mule* published 25 items of editorial matter on its website,

comprising 17 news stories, four previews, three feature articles, and one review. This is overwhelmingly political material about the impact of spending cuts, tuition fees and climate change, and campaigns around human rights issues. Even the one review is of a series of political films from a Spanish and Latin American festival. The number of sources cited for each story ranges from just one in some cases up to double figures in four of the stories, and these will be broken down in Table 2.

The range of sources

Table 2 takes the 110 identifiable sources used by *Mule* during the sample period and places them into categories, as far as it is possible to do so from the published material. The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that, despite having few financial resources and no team of paid reporters, *Mule* manages to use multiple sources for approximately three-quarters of its stories. The tables also point to there being no overwhelming domination of sourcing by any one section of society, with a range of official and mainstream sources being used alongside campaigning and oppositional ones. These figures support the contention that *Mule* engages in a form of oppositional reporting, but to what extent does it routinely allow the most powerless to speak directly for themselves? Activists and campaigners do top the league table of *Mule* sources, and we ought not assume that such individuals cannot also be "ordinary," but those "ordinary" people who are not also activists do not appear to have their voices recorded and amplified quite as often as might be expected from *Mule*'s stated intentions.

An interactive tool for social change

Table 3 records how *Mule* uses interactive and multimedia techniques and goes beyond observation to encourage active participation in events. *Mule* uses technology that would have been impossible for earlier generations of alternative journalists to imagine, even though it is nowhere near the cutting edge of interactivity or multiplatform storytelling. The 25 published items contain more than 50 links to evidence or relevant organisations, have attracted 25 readers' comments directly to the website, and use four pieces

of audio-visual material. More noteworthy when it comes to inspiring action is the fact that almost half the published output contains details of a forthcoming event, with many of the stories also including contact details for events or organisations. This suggests that *Mule*'s reporting and sourcing practices are not ends in themselves but are means to an end: that end being social change.

Contrast with the mainstream

Mule's choice of stories during the sample month contrasts with the prevailing news values of most mainstream media, in which entertainment, celebrities and elites tend to dominate (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Similarly, *Mule*'s range of sources, as indicated in the above tables, differs markedly from the way in which even some "quality" mainstream newspapers rely on the content-subsidy provided by the public relations industry (Lewis et al., 2008). *Mule*'s sourcing appears to be far more diverse than that found in much local and regional media, in particular, where overworked journalists are "becoming more passive" and frequently produce stories based on a single source, mostly a PR source, according to a study by O'Neill and O'Connor (2008, p. 498). Such reporting contrasts with the sourcing practices of *Mule* that can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

The following section will discuss the extent to which the above evidence demonstrates a form of reporting that sets out to speak up for some of the least powerful in society and enable the voices of the powerless themselves to be heard, all driven by a desire to inspire social action and political activity. After considering the record of *Mule* in relation to further scholarship about alternative journalism, this article will conclude by proposing a model of such oppositional reporting.

Oppositional reporting: discussion

The foregoing exemplars and content analysis suggest that *Mule* engages in recognisably journalistic techniques and that it does so for alternative and oppositional purposes. The depth and breadth of much of *Mule*'s information, analysis and sourcing of stories appear to go well beyond the

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norm found in mainstream media, particularly at a local or regional level. This journalistic material is written in a relatively plain and easy-to-read style, making some use of interactive technology to allow readers to see much of the original evidence for themselves, by way of links, and to have their own say, via the online comments facility and social media.

Mule permits some of the people formerly known as the "voiceless" to speak on their own behalf about issues that concern them. *Mule* does not just permit the voiceless to speak, it facilitates and encourages it. The evidence suggests that, on some occasions, such views and experiences are *actively* sought out for publication by *Mule*, which may then use such sources as primary definers whose perspectives can frame its coverage of issues. However, the evidence also suggests *Mule* does not do this as often as it might. As one member of the collective acknowledges: "I don't think you can ever do as much as you should." (Interview.)

Despite the fact that it could get out and about among the otherwise voiceless even more than it does, *Mule* appears to meet all the defining characteristics for alternative journalism that have been suggested by Susan Forde (2011). These include: a commitment to encouraging political, social and civic participation among citizens; the prioritising of news that is of most relevance to what are deemed to be the interests of such citizens; the blurring of boundaries between audience and journalist; and the critiquing of dominant discourse, including that of mainstream media (Forde, 2011, pp. 174-175).

Going further, I suggest that *Mule* engages in a set of practices that we might call not just alternative journalism in general, but oppositional reporting in particular. Such reporting involves discovering, verifying, analysing, and communicating fresh information on topical events (the reporting element) and doing so overtly in the service of a form of ideological critique of the hegemonic consensus (the opposition element). Typically, those engaging in such reporting are not striving for a form of binding ideological party line associated with the Leninist model of radical media (Downing, 2011, p. 302). Rather, their ideological critique of

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mainstream discourse tends to be informed by an arguably more open-minded and more inchoate set of beliefs that are concerned with providing a voice for the voiceless and the downtrodden and to support and provoke social action for change. This is perhaps best summed up in the statement contained in the first issue of *Leeds Other Paper*, back in 1974: "It is our intention to support all groups active in struggle in industry and elsewhere for greater control of their own lives" (quoted in Harcup, 2013, p. 169). That is, such reporting is not content to quote the otherwise voiceless as 'victims' but as active participants in social change; or, at least, as *potentially* active participants.

To this end, oppositional reporting combines practical reporting with ideological critique and incorporates within its journalistic methodology a broad critique, not just of the actions of a society's ruling elements, but also of how their actions are portrayed in most mainstream media, most of the time. Oppositional reporting makes use of multiple primary and secondary sources, including both official/elite sources and unofficial/"voiceless" sources. It does this to dig out new facts and provide, question, verify, evaluate, and analyse evidence. The oppositional element of such reporting comes when it is deployed openly on the side of, roughly speaking, labour as opposed to capital, working class communities as opposed to corporations, social need as opposed to individual greed, and freedom and human rights as opposed to oppression and repression. At heart, such reporting is produced more to inspire social participation and political activity than it is to entertain a passive audience (Forde, 2011). One form of participation it can inspire is the creation of further examples of alternative media, as more of the formerly voiceless find their own voices and, in turn, create their own outlets for democratic communication (Harcup, 2013). In this sense, providing a voice for the voiceless and seeking to inspire social action can be one and the same thing.

By working within such democratised spaces, alternative journalists and oppositional reporters ask some fundamental questions about journalism itself. For Chris Atton, oppositional reporting "is able to challenge

dominant official narratives," to encourage citizens "to consider sources of information beyond those routinely presented in mainstream news," and attests "to the multiple realities that may be derived from the world and how journalists position themselves as active participants in constructing those realities" (Atton, 2013, p. xiii). By allowing media audiences to speak and the otherwise marginalised to be heard, the production of such journalism entails performing "radical critiques on what it means to be 'in the news,' what it means to be an audience and what it means to be a journalist" (Atton, 2013, p. xi).

Taking such questioning a stage further, we might ask if this form of journalism is limited to media projects informed by the open, leftish spirit of 1968 or could something akin to oppositional reporting also characterise other forms of nonmainstream media production? What of the party newspapers of Marxist political organisations, for example, or the publications and websites produced by far-right groups and by religious organisations? Atton (2004: p. 88-90) suggests that far-right media display few signs of the sort of democratised spaces found "in other alternative media formulations, little space for the sharing or exploration of ideas and arguments," being "replete with closure: organisationally, dialogically, discursively." Even liberal or leftist alternative journalism is not necessarily as alternative, or as radical, as it appears at first sight, according to Tamar Ashuri (2012). Her study of an online project that monitors the human rights of Palestinians at Israeli military checkpoints concluded that, by embracing elements of a journalistic approach that emphasises evidence-gathering and facts, the activists behind the site are in effect adopting a *conservative* approach to recording reality. For Ashuri, this means that, although "members of this organisation, through the very act of reporting, expose a marginalised social reality…which in turn makes it possible to change realities," there is also a downside. Their privileging of journalistic techniques over direct personal testimony has the unintended consequence of "legitimising the conventional practices of mainstream news organisations," she argues (Ashuri, 2012, p. 54).

But, rather than legitimising the methods of mainstream media, is it not possible that alternative media's use of such journalistic practices is actually a process of *reclaiming* them? As Forde (2011, p. xi) reminds us, "the practices of alternative journalism are older than the practices of professional commercial journalism." Old or new, alternative journalism continues to be produced in a variety of forms today, one of which is the type of oppositional reporting discussed in this article. The final section will seek to outline precisely what it entails.

Conclusion

Mule and others may produce journalism that critiques what it means to be a journalist, and what news is, but such media critiques are only by-products. The purpose of such media is essentially to report on, and thereby support, people's struggles. Having examined such oppositional reporting in practice at *Mule*, we may now more clearly identify the factors that comprise it, which are:

* Speaking up for labour against capital; for working class communities against corporations and bureaucrats; for the concept of social need as opposed to individual greed; for human rights and freedom from oppression, repression, discrimination, sexism and racism.

* The use of routine journalistic practice to achieve the discovery, verification, analysis, and communication of new information about topical events of importance to citizens and of relevance to the above.

* The use of multiple primary and secondary sources to uncover, check, question, and evaluate evidence in connection with the above.

* The production of multiple-sourced and evidence-based journalism that makes no claim to be free of bias and which declares its bias openly.

* The seeking out and privileging of the voices of those directly involved in events, allowing them to speak for themselves as active agents rather than passive victims.

* The production of counterhegemonic journalism that incorporates not simply a critique of how a society is ruled but of how issues tend to be reported in mainstream media.

* The use of all of the above to encourage "ordinary people" to become active participants in the public, social, civic, cultural, political, and, not least, media spheres.

Alternative journalists produce such oppositional reporting not primarily because it might be interesting, entertaining, fun, or a way of building a journalistic profile or "brand," although it can be all of those things. Rather, alternative journalists practise oppositional reporting because it speaks up for the powerless against the powerful and, at times, it allows the powerless to speak directly for themselves as active agents, not merely as people on the receiving end of others' actions. It does this in the hope of recording, supporting and encouraging action for social change.

Mule shows that it is possible to produce journalism that can inform and inspire, speak up for the powerless, and facilitate the voiceless to speak for themselves. It may not always manage to carry out oppositional reporting of the depth to which members of the collective aspire or to give voice to as many of the voiceless as it would like; but its record stands out in illuminating contrast to the passive and uncritical nature of too much mainstream journalism. Furthermore, *Mule*'s oppositional reporting in the digital age demonstrates that online journalism can be so much more than what it so often is: celebrity gossip, shouty propaganda, or mere aggregation of the work of others.

Mule is inspired by knowledge of radical journalism and examples of democratic communication from days gone by; in turn, awareness of *Mule*'s reporting has the potential to inspire others to take action in the future in the hope of changing the world for the better. Journalists, scholars and citizens might all benefit from such knowledge, especially at a time when mainstream journalism in many countries is suffering seemingly incessant cutbacks and closures, and when so much so-called "citizen journalism"

remains lost somewhere between the vacuous and the banal. In contrast, *Mule* demonstrates the possibilities of using reporting skills to amplify the voices of the voiceless and to produce work of genuine social value and democratic potential, even with few resources and little or no capital. This modest study points to just a little of what can be achieved when journalism is produced by and for active citizens, and the need for more such oppositional reporting is not likely to go away anytime soon.

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Tables for 'News with a kick' article

TABLE 1: Major themes and primary sources of *Mule* output in March 2012

Mule stories	Story type	Number of sources cited	Major theme/s	Primary definers
Story a)	News report about a protest	11	Human rights of refugees	An asylum seeker; activists; campaigns; charities
Story b)	News report about prison deaths	4	Lack of care by the state/prison authorities	Campaigning charity; official prisons inspector
Story c)	News report about a demonstration	4	Impact on women of public spending cuts	Anti-cuts campaign; activists
Story d)	News report about industrial dispute	1	Workers' resistance to pay cuts	None identified
Story e)	News report of arrests of protesters	6	Unfairness of compulsory 'workfare' for unemployed people	Campaigners
Story f)	News report about a documentary film	2	Employers 'blacklisting' of trade union activists	Alternative video collective
Story g)	News report about a debate on riots	1	Causes of riots go beyond simple criminality	Academic researchers
Story h)	News report about a protest	1	Impact of public spending cuts	Campaign
Story i)	News report about a charity event	7	The amount of unpaid labour carried out by women	Campaigners; activists; local MP
Story j)	Feature about International Women's Day	12	The danger of sanitising the day's political message	Women workers; trade union officer
Story k)	Preview of film screening	1	Remembering an anti-fascist fighter from the Spanish Civil War	Festival organisers
Story l)	Feature about arts courses	3	The value of education	Art students
Story m)	Preview of conference about the economy	4	The need for 'an economy for the 99%'	Campaigners; conference organisers (who included *Mule* itself)
Story n)	News report about a protest	2	The unfairness of tuition fees	Students' union
Story o)	News report about funding for stadium	1	The co-operative nature of the scheme	The alternative football club FC United
Story p)	News report about a demonstration	9	The 'corporate takeover' of the city	Protesters; eyewitnesses
Story q)	News report about a meeting	11	Riots were partly a response to poverty and inequality	A youth worker; academic researchers; charities; police; council
Story r)	Interview with a local musician	4	Independent cultural practice	The musician
Story	News report about	10	The contrast between the	Squatting campaign;

s)	proposed anti-squatting law		numbers of empty homes and homeless people	squatters
Story t)	News report about a conference on climate change	4	The lack of action and transparency on climate change locally	Two activists wrote the story themselves
Story u)	Preview of local arts festival	3	Independent cultural practice	Festival organisers
Story v)	News report announcing new cultural section for *Mule*	1	Giving a voice to local events and organisations usually ignored by mainstream media	*Mule* itself
Story w)	Film review	1	Review of political films from Spanish and Latin American film festival	N/A
Story x)	Preview of exhibition	3	Independent cultural practice	Arts collective; the artist
Story y)	News report about campaign against deportation of local woman	4	Human rights of victims of trafficking	The woman herself; human rights charity
Total: 25 stories		**Total: 110 sources**		

TABLE 2: Identifiable sources cited in *Mule* output in March 2012.

Identifiable sources cited or quoted in the 25 *Mule* stories published in March 2012	Number	% of total
Individual activists, campaigners	16	14.5%
Campaigning organisations, campaign representatives	15	13.6%
Mainstream media	13	11.8%
Government reports, departments, spokespeople	9	8.2%
Alternative media	8	7.3%
Rank and file workers, students	7	6.4%
Independent cultural organisations	7	6.4%
Independent cultural practitioners, artists	4	3.6%
Charities, charity representatives	4	3.6%
Trade unions, union representatives	4	3.6%
Academic research, researchers	4	3.6%
Local authorities, councils	4	3.6%
Other community organisations	3	2.7%
Asylum seekers	2	1.8%
Police	2	1.8%
Councillors and MPs	2	1.8%
Businesses	2	1.8%
Eyewitness to events	1	0.9%
Youth worker	1	0.9%
Lawyer	1	0.9%
Margaret Thatcher archive	1	0.9%
Total	**110**	

TABLE 3: Interactive and multimedia elements incorporated into *Mule* output in March 2012

Mule stories	Number of link/s, if any	Details about upcoming event/s?	Contact details for organisations?	Number of comments, if any	Audio or video?
Story a)	5		Yes		
Story b)	1				
Story c)	1	Yes			
Story d)	1				
Story e)	5			4	Audio
Story f)	2		Yes		Video
Story g)		Yes	Yes		
Story h)		Yes			
Story i)	1				
Story j)	2	Yes			
Story k)		Yes		3	
Story l)					
Story m)	6	Yes	Yes		
Story n)		Yes			
Story o)				1	
Story p)	2			12	
Story q)	6				
Story r)	3	Yes	Yes		Video
Story s)	8		Yes	1	Video
Story t)	4		Yes	2	
Story u)	3	Yes	Yes		
Story v)	1		Yes		
Story w)		Yes			
Story x)	1	Yes	Yes		
Story y)	1	Yes		2	
Total: 25 stories	**53 links**	**12 upcoming events**	**10 contact details**	**25 comments on website**	**4 stories with audio/video**

'Listening to the voiceless: the practices and ethics of alternative journalism'

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https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Alternative-and-Community-Media/Atton/p/book/9780415644044

It has become something of a cliché, perhaps even a truism, to describe alternative media as existing to give "voice to the voiceless". The phrase is widely used among both scholars and practitioners (this author among them) because it seems to express why some people feel compelled to create such media in the first place; its alliterative and rhetorical qualities no doubt help too. However, although declaring an intention to give voice to the voiceless may produce an attractive motto or slogan, we must dig deeper if we are to discover how such an ethos might be put into practice within media projects that entail "becoming one's own storyteller, regaining one's own voice" (Rodriguez, 2001: 3). Crucial to such an exploration, certainly when we focus more narrowly on the practices and ethics of alternative journalism (rather than wider forms of alternative media production), is what might be described as the fundamentally ethical practice of empathic, active *listening*.

"Listen to the loons"

Giving voice to the voiceless was something that the English radical journalist and activist Paul Foot tried to do, although he preferred to operate under two alternative mottos: "Listen to the loons" and "Never believe anything until it is officially denied" (Foot, 1999: 82). By the first he meant that reporters ought not immediately dismiss someone just because their

story initially appears outlandish or unbelievable; the second conveyed the sceptical mindset necessary for independent-minded reporting, whether in alternative or mainstream media. Foot himself worked variously for the mainstream UK tabloid *Daily Mirror*, the left-wing party mouthpiece *Socialist Worker* (the Leninist theory of the press made flesh or, at least, newsprint) and the hybrid alternative-commercial satirical magazine *Private Eye*. For whichever of those three very different publications he happened to be working at the time, he made a point of listening to those dismissed by many others as "loons", challenging official versions of events, championing those ordinary people who were seeking some kind of social justice, and encouraging all kinds of "whistleblowers, grasses and finks" to contact him directly (Foot, 1999: 83). When he died, many tributes were paid by the everyday people at the centre of his stories who said that he had been one of the few journalists to have genuinely listened to what they had to say; many pointed out that not only did he listen to them, but he would routinely read out his draft story over the phone to check for accuracy, something that is far from the norm in mainstream journalism (*Private Eye*, 2004).

Foot's sources - whistleblowers, campaigners, victims, and people who simply found themselves "on the other side of the railway line, breadline, the picket line, the barbed wire fence" from those holding power (Wasserman, 2013: 80) – were those who are written out of much mainstream journalism just as they tend to be written out of the versions of history that are narrated from the perspective of the victors. There are exceptions, with Paul Foot's period at the *Daily Mirror* merely being one of the more high profile ones, but the tendency of mainstream newsroom sourcing and reporting practices is to produce journalism that in effect often "sides with power" while presenting such a position as "neutral" (Wasserman, 2013: 69). The practices and ethics of alternative journalism offer something quite different precisely by placing the marginalised centre stage and by amplifying their voices rather than silencing them.

Both "Listen to the loons" and "Never believe anything until it is officially denied" were passed on to Foot as guiding journalistic principles in the early days of *Private Eye* by Claud Cockburn (Foot, 1999: 82). Something of a veteran troublemaker, Cockburn had several decades earlier left his job as a *Times* journalist to publish his own alternative duplicated newssheet, *The Week*, as well as report for the communist *Daily Worker* (Cockburn, 1967: 128-152). Clearly having a way with words, Cockburn is also credited with suggesting the name for a new feminist magazine that was being planned in 1972: *Spare Rib*, which survived for two decades, during which time it gave voice to women who had felt silenced on multiple levels, including those marginalised within the male-dominated "underground" press, women who rejected the consumerist approach of commercial women's magazines and women who were either ignored or patronised by mainstream news and current affairs media (BBC Radio 4, 2013; Rowe, 1982: 13-19).

Reporting from below

Alternative media and alternative journalism come in many forms and do many things, but Susan Forde identifies a "consistent message", which is:

> to give a voice to the voiceless, to fill the gaps left by the mainstream, to empower ordinary people to participate in democracy, and in many instances, to educate people with information they cannot access elsewhere. (Forde, 2011: 45)

Over the centuries, countless examples of non-commercial, ideas-driven media predicated on the democratised practices of "alternative media activism" (Hesmondhalgh, 2000: 108) have sprung up to allow alternative voices, alternative modes of expression, alternative experiences and alternative ideas to circulate within what has been described variously as a public sphere (Habermas, 1989), a plebeian public sphere (Habermas, 1992: 430), an alternative public sphere (Atton, 2002: 35), and a "subaltern counterpublic sphere" (Pavarala and Malik, 2010; after Fraser, 1992). Sometimes long-lived and relatively popular, sometimes short-lived and marginal, and more often a mixture of the above, alternative media can open up a gap – a "fissure", to use Clemencia Rodriguez's term – through which

citizens' voices "can have a presence in the public realm" (Rodriguez, 2001: 165).

Examples within the UK alone might include:

* 18th century campaigners against the slave trade being given voice in radical journals;

* The Chartist press of the 19th century articulating the pro-democracy demands of the organised working class;

* The women's suffrage press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries influencing second wave feminism in the late 20th century and, in turn, a third wave of feminist media in the 21st century.

In these and numerous other cases, alternative journalists have been prepared to think the otherwise unthinkable and report on those who are saying the otherwise unsayable. In rejecting a top-down approach to social issues they have adopted a bottom-up approach to journalism. As the feminist and socialist activist and alternative journalist Sylvia Pankhurst put it, when describing her *Woman's Dreadnought* newspaper:

> Our volunteer working women reporters, when investigating conditions, produced far truer accounts than any Fleet Street journalist, for they knew what to ask and how to win the confidence of the sufferers. (Pankhurst, 1931 [1977]: 526)

As South African academic Herman Wasserman (2013: 79) put it in a different century, on another continent: "Journalists who listen can facilitate a politics from the ground up." Such an approach entails listening to Pankhurst's "sufferers" even when nobody else appears to be doing so; or rather, especially when nobody else is doing so. That is precisely what appears to have happened with a story that was reported by one of the hundreds of alternative local newspapers that emerged in the UK from the late 1960s through to the mid-1980s.

When *Rochdale's Alternative Paper*, known as *RAP*, appeared in that working-class northern English town in 1971, its first cover featured what

might today be described as a mission statement but was more a statement of intent. *RAP*'s manifesto of alternative journalism read:

> Questions…Asked
>
> Bubbles…Pricked
>
> Information…Open
>
> Workers…Heard
>
> Issues…Debated
>
> Rights…Explained
>
> Bosses…Challenged
>
> The Unspoken…Said
>
> Life…Explored (*RAP* No. 1, November 1971)

Alongside those words was a caricature of powerful local politician Cyril Smith, known in the mainstream media as Mr. Rochdale, in the shape of a giant inflated balloon: a bubble ready to be pricked. Smith was on the cover of *RAP* again eight years later when he was the subject of a substantial piece of investigative journalism into claims that he had abused his power and influence to gain access to vulnerable teenage boys living in a hostel in the town – boys whom he went on to physically and sexually abuse. *RAP* reported how some of the victims had given statements to police years earlier, how the police had gathered sufficient evidence for charges to be laid, but how no charge or prosecution ever resulted. The paper tracked down and interviewed many of the boys (who were adults by then), and it was their stories (with their identities protected) that formed the centrepiece of *RAP*'s investigation into Smith. (*RAP* No. 78, May 1979.) The story was immediately followed-up in *Private Eye* – and nowhere else.

Smith, who by that time had become a familiar face on the national as well as local political scene, denied any wrongdoing and threatened legal action against anyone publishing the allegations (although he never did sue). National newspaper newsrooms all bought copies of *RAP* 78 but none published a word about the abuse despite the meticulous, multi-sourced and measured way in which the story had been researched and presented. That is, none published a word for the next few decades. It was not until two years after Smith's death in 2010 that, in the wake of the unrelated Jimmy

Savile sex abuse scandal, the Smith story was revisited by 21st century alternative media *Northern Voices*, politics blogger Paul Waugh and *Private Eye* (again), which belatedly prompted mainstream media to report the story, safe in the knowledge that a dead man cannot sue (Walker, 2013: 3; Waugh, 2012). This time, both the Crown Prosecution Service (2012) and the police even felt the need to issue public statements on the case, with the latter going so far as to state as fact that "young boys were victims of physical and sexual abuse committed by Smith" (Greater Manchester Police, 2012). The "boys" had finally been listened to, although it had taken until the perpetrator was dead and the victims were of pensionable age for that to happen beyond the pages of the alternative media.

The question arises: why had their voices been ignored by the bulk of the media back in 1979? There is no shortage of internet warriors out there who will insist it was because of some high-powered conspiracy to protect a senior national politician, but the reality is probably more prosaic. After all, compared to resource-rich organisations boasting sophisticated public relations operations, "ordinary people" can be "difficult, expensive and inefficient sources" (Whitaker, 1981: 38). All the more so, perhaps, if those ordinary people have been damaged by troubled backgrounds or by being subjected to abuse by those in power. Why would a mainstream news organisation invest in a labour-intensive and legally risky piece of investigative journalism that would stand or fall on the perceived reliability of a group of victims on the margins of society? Whatever the "truth" of the matter might be, whose version was more likely to be believed if the matter ever came to court: a former Lord Mayor of Rochdale who became a member of parliament and was a frequent guest on the sofas of TV chat shows, or former boys' home residents who, almost by definition, had experienced dysfunctional lives?

In this sense, it was not a special alternative journalistic toolkit that was used to craft the Smith story, but the application of fairly standard reporting practices to a story (and to a group of people) that the mainstream media either did not recognise as a story or did not believe was worth the risk. It

was the determination of *RAP* (and *Private Eye*) to listen to and amplify the voices of a marginalised and (up until then) silenced group of victims that could be said to exemplify the ethics as well as the practices of alternative journalism. John Walker, one of the *RAP* journalists who worked on the original investigation, told a television documentary 34 years later:

> These lads were triply abused. Firstly, many of them had pretty tough upbringings. Secondly, they were abused by Smith. And thirdly, they were each told in no uncertain terms that complaining about it would go nowhere because no-one would believe them… This was the untold story and so we felt that we owed it to those lads, to that town, and to ourselves, that we should at least have a go. (Channel 4, 2013)

The fact that Walker and his colleagues spent more than six months on the story before they were ready to publish is an indication that alternative journalism and listening to the "loons" is not a question of merely reproducing unsubstantiated rumours or indiscriminately amplifying each and every voice spouting any old rubbish. Just as *RAP* felt it "owed" it to Smith's victims to look into their stories, so alternative journalism owes it to its community of producers and audience (who are sometimes the same people) to not publish stories or allegations that do not stand up to scrutiny. In this sense, ethical alternative journalism can involve taking people's stories seriously, endeavouring to check them out, and ultimately *not* publishing anything about those stories that do not stack up.

Not that reporting from below is confined to recording the lives of "sufferers" or victims. It is also about listening to, and amplifying, the voices of those actively involved in seeking social change; active agents, not just passive victims. As *Leeds Other Paper* put it in 1975: "We are not aligned to any particular political party but try to support groups and individuals struggling to take control over their own lives – whether it's in the factory, the housing estate, or the home" (cited in Harcup, 2013: 54). Or, indeed, groups and individuals struggling to take control of their own representation in the media. A similar ethos can be seen at work four decades on, informing the practice of the activist video collective *Reel News*, among others:

> *Reel News* will try and cover it all, from pensioners protesting against cuts in voluntary services, artists and musicians looking at the world in a different way, through strikes against privatisation, right up to the astonishing social movements in Latin America which have brought down governments through uprisings, mass direct action and general strikes. *Reel News* is intended as a two-way resource, so let us know about your campaigns. Better still, film them yourself and send us the video.   (*Reel News*, 2011)

Many of the collective's DVD current affairs bulletins and online video reports consist of extensive footage of protests and demonstrations in which numerous participants are allowed to speak at some length, and in some detail, about whatever issue has brought them onto the streets (see *Reel News* 2012 and 2013). Such reports would undoubtedly be dismissed as too dull or boring to be considered for broadcast on most mainstream media because they do not feature dramatic shots of confrontation: nobody burns a flag and no masked figures kick in the windows of a bank or a McDonald's restaurant. What they do feature are the voices of people struggling to take control of their own lives, speaking for themselves. These voices are not wholly unmediated because they have been recorded, selected and edited into watchable packages but, to the extent that it is possible in any form of journalism, the speakers' voices are largely allowed to speak for themselves.

Citizens not consumers

The privileging of the voices of marginalised people or activist communities stems from an attitude that conceives of people primarily as citizens – not primarily as consumers. Such an approach connects the practices of alternative journalism such as "oppositional reporting" (Harcup, 2013: 164) to the ideal of supporting democratic participation (Forde, 2011: 174) and of serving some kind of "public interest" in a way that is more deeply rooted than tends to be the case in much mainstream journalism (Harcup, 2013: 15), despite the latter also drawing on the rhetoric of acting as the people's watchdog (Harcup, 2007: 33-47). If by the public interest we mean something along the lines suggested by the National Union of Journalists, for example – protecting public safety, preventing people from being misled, and exposing crime, corruption, conflicts of interest, hypocrisy and

corporate greed (Harcup, 2007: 153) – then it could be argued that a higher proportion of the journalism found within alternative media is imbued with the public interest than that found within the commercial mainstream. In this sense, alternative journalism – at least, the more open and less propagandistic varieties of alternative journalism as practised by *Spare Rib*, *RAP*, and myriad other projects - can be seen as an expression of active citizenship (Harcup, 2011).

Central to such citizenship is what Susan Bickford (1996: 2) terms "political listening", whereby democratic participation within the public sphere requires citizens not merely to allow others to speak but actually to listen to one another. This may not necessarily always result in sweetness and light or eradicate social conflict but, she argues, it can at least enable more informed democratic deliberation on issues of public concern: "Deciding democratically means deciding, under conditions in which all voices are *heard*, what course of action makes sense" (Bickford, 1996: 2; my emphasis). Such an ethic of listening is about people being treated with dignity in a fundamental sense, for Wasserman (2013: 77), who insists that "to treat people with dignity primarily means taking their stories seriously", rather than regarding people's stories as not worth listening to if they cannot be turned into a piece of entertainment that might help boost advertising income.

Feminist thinkers in recent decades have contributed much to our understanding of how ideas such as democratic participation, active citizenship, and the ethics not only of giving voice to the voiceless but of listening to such voices, can inform the approach of alternative media, including alternative journalism. An ethical approach to listening, informed by such feminist thinking, implies more of a dialogic relationship rather than the one-way transmission of messages, even alternative or radical ones. For Fiona Robinson:

> Listening in this sense means not just hearing the words that are spoken, but being attentive to and understanding the concerns, needs and aims of others in the dialogue. (Robinson, 2011: 847)

Furthermore, such dialogue may need a sustained period of time to develop and deepen; it is not so much an event or a one-off exchange of views as a "long process" that "does not have a clear beginning or end" (Robinson, 2011: 855). Feminist scholar Carol Gilligan has argued along similar lines that people who are not listened to – attentively, deeply, empathetically – do not really have a voice even when they speak, because the acts of speaking and listening are so closely related, "like breathing out and breathing in"; the trouble starts if people hold their breath and either stop speaking or stop listening (Kiegelmann, 2009). As she explains:

> To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a
> person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an
> intensely relational act. (Gilligan, 1993: xvi)

Such listening goes way beyond what might be thought of as mere "politeness", and is "a political process that is potentially difficult, conflictual and aimed at justice", argues Tanja Dreher (2009: 448), just as alternative journalism itself is an essentially *political* activity for Susan Forde (2011: 45). In this sense, it may not be sufficient to ask "Who speaks?" when a more pertinent question may be: "Who is heard?"

Practices and ethics can be the same

It would of course be simplistic to claim that all alternative media contain alternative journalism, that all alternative journalism is produced while in listening mode or that all mainstream journalism merely amplifies the voices of the rich and powerful. It has been observed that there can be "hybridity" (Atton, 2003: 26) or a "continuum" (Harcup, 2013: 114) of journalistic practice and it ill-serves the cause of alternative media to paint the mainstream as a monolithic entity. Both mainstream and alternative journalism are heterogeneous categories and both are subject to change; neither can be understood as if it is a homogeneous sector within which journalists adopt a uniform approach. That mainstream journalism ignored the victimised Rochdale boys for so many decades does not tell the full story, because the voices of another group of children on the margins of the same town did later find an empathic ear on a mainstream national

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newspaper; *Times* reporter Andrew Norfolk even won the 2012 Paul Foot Award for his investigation into the systematic sexual abuse of vulnerable teenage girls by gangs of men in Rochdale (*Private Eye*, 2013). It was painstaking reporting that, arguably, had more in common with the 1979 *RAP* story than some of the output of more hectoring alternative media. That Norfolk won an award set up in the name of the late Paul Foot lends credence to the argument that the *Times'* reporting of this later Rochdale case was the exception rather than the rule. In contrast, seeking out, listening to, and then reporting the voices of the sufferers – alongside the voices of activists – is the very purpose of alternative journalism. Such active listening is fundamental to the practices and ethics of alternative journalism. In this sense, the practices and ethics of alternative journalism can perhaps best be understood as being one and the same thing.

There has long been a tendency within much mainstream journalism, especially in the UK, to regard ethics either as a matter primarily concerned with industry regulation or as a series of discrete issues capable of being ticked off a checklist. This can result in ethics being regarded as "crises that pop up from time to time" rather than as issues that need to be "dealt with almost on a minute-by-minute basis" (Frost, 2011: 4). Journalism within alternative media tends to be less concerned with regulatory mechanisms or with following formal codes of practice on issues such as privacy, intrusion, harassment and suchlike; rather, the ethical approach of (much) alternative journalism within alternative media is more about an attitude and approach towards the people who may be a story's subject, source, narrator, or audience, sometimes all at the same time. As a result, the "ordinary people" are afforded dignity not because of legalistic or commercial considerations but because that is the very reason for such media to exist.

The ethics of active listening can subvert traditional perceptions of journalists as "gatekeepers", suggests Wasserman "by turning them into 'gate-openers' who decentralise the power structure inherent in media production and involve news subjects as equal partners in the production process" (2013: 79). Similarly, by listening to and amplifying the voices of

media audiences that are otherwise unheard except in the "banal" sense of so-called user-generated content, "the self-reflexive activities of alternative media production thus perform radical critiques on what it means to be 'in the news', what it means to be an audience and what it means to be a journalist" (Atton, 2013: xi).

It is worth recalling that, when the *WikiLeaks* source Private Bradley/Chelsea Manning began thinking about blowing the whistle on US military activities in Iraq and leaking information that "would have enormous value to the American public", his/her first thought was to approach mainstream rather than alternative media. Manning telephoned the *Washington Post* and spoke to a reporter, but "I do not believe she took me seriously" and that was the end of that. Manning's own account continues:

> I then decided to contact the largest and most popular newspaper, the *New York Times*. I called the public editor number on the *New York Times* website. The phone rang and was answered by a machine. I went through the menu section for news tips. I was routed to an answering machine. I left a message stating I had access to information about Iraq and Afghanistan that I believed was very important. However, despite leaving my Skype phone number and personal email address, I never received a reply from the *New York Times*. (Manning, 2013)

Only then did he/she approach the alternative media in the form of *WikiLeaks*; the result was a series of leaks during 2010 that amounted to the most extensive release of secret information – and perhaps the most extreme form of "gate-opening" - that the world had ever seen. Whether on a global or local scale, for the previously voiceless to be listened to can be an empowering experience. "We can talk now," as one of the women involved in a small community radio station in rural India put it (quoted in Pavarala and Malik, 2010: 107): "We used to sit silent. Government officials will come and we let them talk. Now we question them."

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'Alternative journalism as monitorial citizenship? A case study of a local news blog'

This is the author's accepted manuscript version of the article, included in this thesis with the permission of the journal publishers, Routledge. The final edited and published version of record is:

Abstract: Recent years have seen claims that some examples of online alternative journalism in the form of hyperlocal and local blogs are helping address society's "democratic deficit" by subjecting the actions of the powerful to increased public scrutiny, in a process that has been described as "monitorial citizenship". To explore how this might work in practice, this study examines the origins, motivations and practices of one such site in the UK: the *Leeds Citizen*. The aim is to provide the sort of detailed consideration in depth that is almost by definition missing from wider surveys of the field. To this end, the case study is based on a series of interviews with the site's creator, augmented by analysis of content, all discussed within the context of scholarly literature on how alternative, non-commercial forms of journalism operate in the digital age. The article concludes that this contemporary form of alternative journalism may indeed be described as an example of monitorial citizenship in action, but there is also a need for further research.

Much has been written in recent years about the "democratic deficit" that is said to have been caused in the UK, USA and elsewhere by too few journalists being employed to scrutinise and hold to account those in positions of power, particularly at a local level (BBC, 2015: 21). However, alongside gloomy talk of the "economic crisis in the news business" resulting in journalism "failing people where it matters most, namely where people live and work" (BBC, 2015: 6; and 21), some more hopeful voices can also be heard. Participatory forms of online journalism, sometimes referred to as citizen journalism, have been held up as offering new and dynamic ways of fostering civic engagement among citizens (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 602), and have even been heralded as having "the potential

to democratise both journalism and society at large" (Borger et al, 2013: 125).

For Moss and Coleman (2014: 416), online communications technologies combined with moves towards freedom of official information open up potential for forms of "monitorial citizenship", in which "making public information and data more widely available is thought to increase transparency and accountability in government, allowing individuals and groups to monitor and evaluate particular policies, services, and the performance of government in general".

This article is based on a case study of a blog established on a non-commercial basis precisely to carry out such a function in the Yorkshire city of Leeds, in the UK. The site's creation was prompted by the increased availability of official data and a recognition that it was not sufficient for raw data to be published – it needed to be explored, understood and contextualised, all of which takes time and skill.

Literature review

There is a long history of alternative forms of journalism being produced outside and alongside what may be thought of as a mainstream journalism industry. Susan Forde points out that many practices now considered alternative were once the mainstream (Forde, 2011: xi), and the pioneers of a radical press set up to question the actions of the powers-that-be did so mostly out of political commitment rather than as a way of earning a living (Harrison, 1974). Alternative journalism is a heterogeneous label, covering those elements of alternative media "that involve reporting and/or commenting on factual and/or topical events" (Harcup, 2014a: 11). Together, this diverse range of activities, motivated to a large extent by dissatisfaction with mainstream media (Dickens et al, 2015: 104), comprise "an ever-changing effort to respond critically to dominant conceptions of journalism", as Atton and Hamilton (2008: 9) put it. Such a response can range from facilitating "local talk" via volunteer-led community radio stations (Meadows, 2013) to the production of more ideologically-driven

and investigative "oppositional reporting" (Harcup, 2014b); somewhere near the middle of such a continuum might be the local blog that, although not committed to any particular ideology, may be motivated by a questioning or monitorial approach.

However, participation alone is not enough for some scholars. Christian Fuchs (2010) is dismissive of what he regards as vague definitions of alternative media that put an emphasis on openness and celebrate the small and the local. "This is not to argue that process is unimportant, but that a minimum requirement for speaking of an alternative medium is critical content or critical form," writes Fuchs (2010: 180). Calling for what might be seen as a more hard-line approach, he warns that small local alternative projects might otherwise become mere "psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change projects" (Fuchs, 2010: 189).

Fuchs contrasts that with a more "critical media" in which critical form and content are privileged over the participatory processes by which they may be created. The content of such critical media "expresses oppositional standpoints that question all forms of heteronomy and domination," writes Fuchs (2010: 179): "So there is counter-information and counter-hegemony that includes the voices of the excluded, the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, the estranged, the exploited, and the dominated." There are some similarities between Fuchs' critical media and the journalistic concept of "oppositional reporting" (Harcup, 2013 and 2014b). However, not all forms of alternative journalism are as ideologically driven as these, and in any event Fuchs' model actually extends beyond journalism to take in protest songs, avant-garde films and other forms of wider media output (Fuchs, 2010: 187).

One form of journalism that might not fully meet Fuchs' definition of critical media, but which can arguably still offer a critique of society's structures, is the local or hyperlocal blog. Hyperlocal media have been defined by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) as "online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, a

single postcode or other small, geographically-defined community" (cited in Ofcom, 2014: 51). The UK's media and telecommunications regulator Ofcom, in its *Internet Citizens 2014* report, noted that "hyperlocal media is a growing sector", with 408 hyperlocal websites active in the UK in 2014, of which 36 were in Yorkshire; however, the situation was "quite fluid, with some sites starting up and closing in quick succession" (Ofcom, 2014: 51-55). Noting that the definition of hyperlocal is "contested" (Ofcom, 2014: 51), the report found on the basis of the latest research into the sector:

> Despite these differences in definitions, services described as "hyperlocal" are rooted in place and are more narrowly localised in terms of geographical and story focus. Many of the stories covered may therefore differ from those in mainstream news outlets in terms of content and perspective… The sites are complementing, and in some cases substituting for, a reduction in or absence of traditional local news media… [H]yperlocal media plays an important role in representing communities back to themselves, potentially fostering community cohesion…in some cases, setting themselves up as an alternative voice to critique or contest more established news sources. (Ofcom, 2014: 52-53.)

Whenever hyperlocal blogs are hailed in this way as providing an alternative, it is worth pausing to reflect on the curious fact that so much of the recent treatment of this phenomenon seems to be oblivious to earlier pre-digital forms of alternative journalism. As Clemencia Rodriguez and colleagues observe, researchers have a tendency to think they have discovered a virgin area of study and to write "as if they were the first ones" to explore it (Rodriguez et al, 2014:162).

The concept of an alternative voice is key to much discussion of alternative media – digital or otherwise - and it relates to notions of civic engagement, democratic participation and active citizenship. Having a voice and the space in which to use such a voice is, for Nick Couldry (2006: 326), crucial if people are going to be able to act in any meaningful sense "as citizens". However, if having a voice is a precondition for citizens' democratic participation, then so must be having such voices actually listened to (Harcup, 2015). Writing of the connection between participatory notions of democracy and the idea of social justice, Iris Young notes how "in the real

world some people and groups have significantly greater ability to use democratic processes for their own ends while others are excluded or marginalised" (Young, 2000: 17). Yet, she adds, this is not inevitable, because by organising to help ensure the public sphere can function "as a space of opposition and accountability", otherwise marginalised citizens can help create a more inclusive democracy and by implication a more just society (Young, 2000: 3; 17; and 173).

In this sense, as Jurgen Habermas (1992) argues, we might think of "competing public spheres" involving "counterprojects" and "countereffects" rather than the total domination of one "hegemonic public sphere" (Habermas, 1992: 425-427). Of value here might be the concept of "civil society" which, according to Habermas, has come to be identified as being:

> constituted by voluntary unions outside the realm of the state and the economy and ranging…from churches, cultural associations, and academies to independent media, sport and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned citizens, and grass-roots petitioning drives all the way to occupational associations, political parties, labour unions, and "alternative institutions". (Habermas, 1992: 453-454.)

When put like that, the groups that comprise civil society can be equated more or less to those sections of society from which forms of alternative media emerge and to whom such media are often addressed.

It is not that civil society groups are necessarily always progressive or democratic, argue Downey and Fenton (2003: 192), but that the democratic potential of a public sphere depends on "a favourable organisation of civil society". Therefore the growth of "public communication" in the form of blogs and other online alternative media "presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy" (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 200). In other words, it remains all to play for.

If citizenship is conceived of as an active process, a form of agency rather than a passive state (Campbell, 2014; Lister, 2003; Mouffe, 1992; Rodriguez, 2001; Young, 2000), then the production of journalism that

stems from a commitment to informing civil society – helping to form an informed citizenry - rather than a commitment to making money from consumers can itself be seen as a form of active citizenship (Harcup, 2011). And if civil society can be seen as "the realm of free association where citizens can interact to pursue their shared interests, including political ones" (Dahlgren, 2006: 271), then forms of media that are produced specifically with the intention of scrutinising the actions of the powerful and/or encouraging the participation and deliberation of citizens might be seen as playing a potentially vital role in nurturing such a realm.

It is often at the local level that such media emerge because, as Dickens et al (2015: 98) note, "it is often audiences' feelings of not being recognised in national news agendas that drives them to generate and consume news stories more locally". In their small-scale, localised and often short-lived ways, local manifestations of alternative media can become spaces in which can gather the "real flesh-and-blood people with relevant values, virtues and competencies" that are necessary for genuine democracy (Dahlgren, 2006: 272).

For many commentators it is the internet that is helping some of the people formerly known as the audience (Rosen, 2006) to become more active citizens. For Dahlgren (2013: 159), although "we must avoid reductionist thinking that seeks technological fixes for societal ills…the fact remains that the digital media have altered the way politics gets done and offer possibilities that can enormously expand civic agency." Similarly, for Dutton (2009: 8), the internet has facilitated "a novel means for holding politicians and mainstream institutions accountable through the online interaction between ever-changing networks of individuals". Within this context emerges the concept of what is termed "monitorial citizenship", whereby citizens either individually or collectively act in a watchdog capacity (Moss and Coleman, 2014). This latter concept entails an active, quasi-journalistic form of monitoring power and making information available to fellow citizens. It goes beyond more passive conceptions of the monitorial citizen who is mostly content just to consume information

(Campbell, 2014: 8), although even those who appear to be inactive and merely "keeping an eye on the scene" may be "poised for action if action is required", as Michael Schudson (1998: 311) puts it.

The internet has been hailed for making possible active monitorial citizenship in the sense used by Moss and Coleman (2014) in part because of the democratic implications of wider dissemination of data online and in part because the internet hosts spaces that seek "to raise people's awareness, to give a voice to those who do not have one, to offer social empowerment, to allow disparate people and causes to organise themselves and form alliances, and ultimately to be used as a tool for social change" (Fenton, 2008: 233). Among such heterogeneous spaces are what Engesser (2014: 575) labels "participatory news websites", which are being "constantly established, modified, and dissolved". With this context in mind, let us now turn to explore in depth how all this has played out in one example of such online local media.

Research question and methodology

The research question for this study is:

> How can non-professional forms of journalism subject the actions of the powerful to public scrutiny?

For the purposes of this research project, the term "non-professional" will be taken as referring to journalism produced outwith, and independent of, the established commercial and/or professionalised structures of mainstream journalism. The specific form of such journalism to be studied in this instance is an example of that which is sometimes referred to as "citizen journalism", "alternative journalism", "hyperlocal journalism" or "local political blogging", among other labels.

Other questions likely to arise in the process of addressing the central research question may include whether such journalism has the potential to help fill the so-called "democratic deficit" by fostering civil society, encouraging democratic citizenship, and making up in some ways for the

perceived inadequacies of a mainstream news industry that is neither sufficiently resourced nor sufficiently critical.

Alternative forms of journalism are often described or analysed in rather broad terms that can tell us much about the bigger picture but, arguably, rather less about the little details. By taking a case study approach to explore the research question in relation to a single project, this study is aimed at filling in some of the detail by prioritising focus and depth over breadth. Such focus on a single case study can be at least as valuable as large surveys when it comes to achieving insight, argues Bent Flyvbjerg (2006: 226), although no one method will provide all the answers:

> The case study is a necessary and sufficient method for certain important research tasks in the social sciences, and it is a method that holds up well when compared to other methods in the gamut of social science research methodology… The advantage of large samples is breadth, whereas their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse. Both approaches are necessary for a sound development of social science. (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 241.)

The case study described in this article presents us with an opportunity to hear at first-hand, at length and in depth, from a practitioner of alternative digital journalism. Any insights gained may then be considered alongside findings of wider studies of alternative journalism, each informing understanding of the other.

The study that follows focuses on the motivations and methods behind one city-based online site that was set up specifically to scrutinise the actions of a local power elite. The philosophy and practices of the *Leeds Citizen* blog will be explored by interviewing the site's creator and by detailed consideration of the site's content. Through a series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, together lasting several hours, augmented with email exchanges, the man behind the *Leeds Citizen* explains his thinking and his methodology. In addition, an entire sample year's output of the *Leeds Citizen* is analysed in terms of topics covered, frequency of publication, use of sources and styles of writing and presentation. Material gathered from this qualitative content analysis and the interviews is introduced, discussed

and analysed in relation to ideas about citizenship, democratic participation, hyperlocal blogging and alternative journalism.

This article is part of a larger project - aimed at deepening our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of alternative forms of journalism - that includes audience perspectives on the *Leeds Citizen* (Harcup, forthcoming).

The Leeds Citizen: a case study

The *Leeds Citizen* is a website that has been published using Wordpress blogging software since July 2011. It describes itself as "a minor irritant on the flesh of the body politic of Leeds", a city in Yorkshire, in the north of England in the UK. It was the creation of Quentin Kean after he returned to the city of his birth upon semi-retirement from paid work; his previous jobs included a lengthy stint at the BBC monitoring service in Reading many years ago. Production of the *Leeds Citizen* blog and its parallel presence on Twitter and Facebook is essentially a one-person operation, to which Kean estimates he devotes between 20 and 40 hours every week, unpaid. The site is open access, non-commercial and unfunded, with the only cost being Kean's time.

In one sense it can be seen merely as the hobby of one individual. But in another sense it might be seen as an example of what a questioning journalistic approach to power can achieve even without a fraction of the resources available to mainstream media.

The *Leeds Citizen* has been described as "an inspiring feat of perseverance", a "rigorously researched and engaging website", and a "single-handed mission to bring accountability to Leeds civic life" (Hughes, 2014: 36). Kean himself is reluctant to make such grand claims, saying when interviewed for this study: "Work dried up so I had time. I do feel a bit of a fraud because it's just a poxy little blog, it really is. I do it for my own pleasure most of the time, or distraction, so I don't want to make it out as being more than it is." Such self-deprecation fits well the character of the site and appears to be part of its charm, helping to distinguish it from the

"shouty propaganda" found in some other online alternatives (Harcup, 2014c).

When setting it up Kean was aware (unlike some recent scholars of online media, it seems) of earlier forms of alternative media such as the print newspaper *Leeds Other Paper*, which operated in the same city from 1974 to 1994 (Harcup, 2013). He took that earlier generation of alternative journalism as something of an inspiration, and it is his similarly questioning approach to power that helps distinguish the *Leeds Citizen* from some less political blogging voices in the city. "Endless people are publishing about cakes and restaurants and gigs, all of which is fine," he says, "but people aren't doing blogs of this kind or providing news." Not many people are, at any rate, and this is something he finds both surprising and disappointing given how easy it is to publish online compared to the days in which a physical product had to be laid-out, printed, collated and distributed. "I miss the fact that there are now so few independent voices talking about the kind of stuff that *Leeds Other Paper* was interested in. Where are they? What's happened?"

Although the *Leeds Citizen* has been included in a recent study of community-oriented "hyperlocal news" websites - alongside a disparate range of what the researchers describe as "the unstable and shifting cultural form of the UK hyperlocal news blog" (Williams et al, 2014) – the label seems an inexact fit and is not one that Kean himself fully embraces. It would be hard to describe the *Leeds Citizen* as "hyperlocal" in any meaningful sense when it covers a large metropolitan area of more than 500 square-kilometres with a population of more than 750,000 people making up many diverse geographical and cultural communities. Nor does the *Leeds Citizen* offer much in the way of what might commonly be regarded as "news" (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), making little or no attempt to keep up with major events or to cover the tales of crime, human interest, weather or sport that unfold daily in any major city.

If it is uncertain whether the *Leeds Citizen* ought to even be described as belonging to the category of hyperlocal news blogs, perhaps there *is* a case

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for it to be seen as sharing the much-trumpeted potential of such sites "to foster citizenship, democracy and local community cohesion" while "producing news which fulfils the watchdog function of holding local elites to account" (Williams et al, 2014)? The creation of the blog was largely prompted by a change in UK government policy that, since January 2011, has required local authorities to publish details of all their spending above £500 (Pickles, 2010).

"Information is power", goes the legend, but commentators point out that access to data is not sufficient to understand its meaning or significance. As Moss and Coleman (2014) argue, the mere fact of public authorities making raw information publicly available – or, at least, less hidden than it was previously - might not on its own greatly enhance democratic citizenship and deliberative democracy. They write: "Being able to access information and public data is one thing, but realising the benefits of increased openness depends on citizens being able to interpret and understand the meaning of information and data" (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 417). They refer to the possibilities of what they term "monitorial citizenship" being facilitated by official data being made more publicly available, but warn of the danger of such material being scrutinised wholly negatively, whereby "positive political agendas degenerate into unreflective and reactive forms of populism" (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 418).

The *Leeds Citizen* might be seen as an example of such monitorial citizenship in action. When introduced to the term monitorial citizenship, Kean immediately sees the resonance with his own practice:

> Absolutely. The phrase monitorial – I used to work at the monitoring service at the BBC which had a similar sort of function. It is watching stuff and seeing what's interesting, and then condensing it. So it's a bit similar in that way. Yes, I think that's pretty much a good description.

Not just watching for what might be interesting but also aiming to act as a sort of watchdog on those in power? "I do see that as being what I do," he says. "I've always taken an interest in how the places I have lived work, how power operates. I've always dug around a bit."

Kean explains that his creation of the *Leeds Citizen* was prompted by the introduction of rules requiring local authorities to publish details of all their spending above £500:

> I started looking at that partly just out of interest at the beginning. They were a complete mess, it was almost impossible to find out anything significant. There are thousands of lines of data every month, so unless you know what you're looking for it's very difficult, but I started playing around with what they were spending on construction. Then I started to look at council reports that related to the data, and found a couple of stories.

Having previously set up a specialist musical site as a hobby, Kean knew how easy it could be to publish online. So he decided to self-publish the council stories he had found and established the *Leeds Citizen* on which to do so. "I'd done a blog before but on music, so I thought, 'Why don't I do it?' I like writing, so I'd set something up and just see what happens. It was done on Wordpress, cheap as chips, and the technical side held no problems for me really."

Apart from curiosity about power and the coincidence that he enjoyed writing and had some time on his hands, another motivating factor was the "cosiness" that Kean has long observed in much mainstream media coverage of local power structures. He says the city's main commercial newspaper, the Johnston Press-owned *Yorkshire Evening Post*, tends to report at face value the line that "everything in the garden is rosy, and I think people ought to have another view available".

When the *Leeds Citizen* appeared online on 13 July 2011 his debut post set the tone for what would follow. Under the headline, "HOW much per house?", the first story examined the details behind a new social housing development in a poor part of the city known as Beeston, on streets where existing houses had been demolished. The item used official figures that had not featured in the council press release to estimate the cost of building the 55 new houses at more than £17m, or £315,000 per home. Contrasting this figure with the £25,000 per house spent by a nearby community housing project on renovating rather than replacing properties, the *Leeds Citizen* asks: "Surely that can't be right? Have I done the sums wrong?" (*Leeds*

Citizen, 2011a.) The evidence was presented and linked to, enabling readers to judge for themselves.

Despite using the word "I", Kean's name did not appear on the site. This initial anonymity caused some consternation, as he recalls:

> It was a bit of a game in a way, people did start asking on social media, "Who is this?" Particularly from the council, you know, people were saying, "You're a coward for not putting your name to these things". But also I thought there's no point to it, nothing is any further forward with having my name on there, perhaps it's almost a distraction from the story. What happened was, that it made it increasingly difficult to get decent responses from the authorities when I wrote to them without putting my name on, and that was complicating things, so in the end I just quietly started writing to people in my own name.

Since the first 18 months or so Kean's emails and Freedom of Information requests to local authorities have included both his personal name and the *Leeds Citizen* label. Many of the site's followers now know his "real life" identity although the site itself still appears only in the name of the *Leeds Citizen*. He explains that this is because the content itself is more important, and "most people don't know or don't care" who has written it, "and that's the way it should be – the brand comes from the content and from the fact that nobody else is doing it".

There is also the fact that he wishes to keep his distance from those likely to come under the scrutiny of the *Leeds Citizen*, which means that, although his identity is no longer secret, he still prefers to keep himself in the background. He explains:

> One of the reasons I remained anonymous was because I knew there'd be repercussions in getting to know people, especially those who work in organisations that I might want to write about. Once you meet them, and particularly if you have a social relationship with them, however vague, you are compromised in terms of what you feel you can say. Some sort of "loyalty" thing comes into play, which shields them from being a target. So I have consistently turned down offers to meet people working in organisations that I might want to look at on the blog, even though it might help me keep informed. I feel I have to keep myself apart, and the anonymity is a way of helping to maintain that.

This approach may go against much traditional advice to journalists on the importance of maintaining sources and contacts at all levels, but it is not without precedent: Paul Foot of *Private Eye*, *Socialist Worker* and *Daily Mirror* fame was said by his colleague Richard Ingrams (2005: 95) to have been reluctant "to meet any of his potential victims because he was afraid he might like them too much".

From its first story onwards the *Leeds Citizen* combined the revelation of what can be obscured in the small print of officialdom with an analysis of detailed figures and other evidence, all employed to question the thinking behind a publicly-funded project. It set the pattern for the *Leeds Citizen*'s subsequent output, and other typical devices present from day one include the use of colloquial and rhetorical questioning within the text ("Well, yes…but…", for example, or, "How many empty homes could the council…have brought back into use for 17 million quid?"); the use of a specially created table to detail the figures, linked to the original source; and an analytical approach combining what might be termed book-learning with a personal view from the streets, as with the story's payoff:

> The council admitted recently that there's a "desperate need" for affordable housing in the city. With almost no cash available for new-builds, isn't this the time for them to finally get to grips with the empty housing problem? They've been promising to do it for decades. They've written strategy documents about it, appointed special teams of people to work on it, but somehow it's always turned out to be too difficult.
>
> Why is that? And why is it that today's crop of Leeds councillors – just like the aldermen who ripped Woodhouse and Hunslet apart in the name of progress when I was a teenager – still seem to be in thrall to the bulldozer? (*Leeds Citizen*, 2011a.)

In common with all posts on the site, the story gave readers the opportunity to post comments. That first story attracted three comments by readers which prompted three responses by the *Leeds Citizen* itself.

Five more stories were published in that first month, three of which were about Leeds City Council and two of which were about lobbyists for a highly-contested high-speed-rail link to London. That is largely the pattern

that the site has followed ever since, focussing on the local authority and other significant players in the Leeds political power structure. There have been forays into a few other topics, including local history, plus the occasional experiment with presenting information in different ways. One of these was as a quiz (with spoof prizes) asking a series of pointed questions about who had been involved in a range of publicly-funded projects, the answer to each one being the same private consultancy firm (*Leeds Citizen*, 2011b). However, despite such diversions, the content and style established at the beginning have remained in place.

Not that there seems to have been much of a grand vision about it. "I didn't have a picture in my head of what it might end up being, not a clear one," recalls Kean almost four years later. He continues:

> It's not driven by an ideology of any sort but it's driven by trying to work out how power works, work out how things work, how all the different forces in the city operate. I am interested in ideas-driven journalism, in a way, and always have been. I've always been interested in how non-traditional media have tried to get alternative ideas or new ideas out there to people.

How does he decide what issues to cover?

> It's a mixture, sometimes you just see something and nobody has reported on it. There are a lot of things I don't even bother to report on, but if I was doing something that I find interesting, even if it's not actually giving any clues to the way the city is run, but if nobody else has reported it then I'll report it. I've done stuff for example about Leeds Met[ropilitan University] changing its name - that sort of thing I'll put out because I haven't seen it anywhere else. It's interesting of itself but it also shows how the university is managed.

Each item tends to be in written form, typically somewhere between 500 and 800 words, sometimes also showing data in tabular form, and always including links to original documents. Stories tend to be illustrated with a standard stock photograph and the site has only occasionally featured more multimedia ways of storytelling, as Kean explains:

> I've dabbled. I've done a couple of video interviews with councillors on particular stories. They really didn't work at all, on the council steps, holding the tablet. No, it's just such a faddadle getting it uploaded to YouTube, and it ended up being a bit wonky so the face

> was distorting. "Oh, do I really want to do this?", you know. What is this adding to the story? There's a lot of this "me too" stuff about new journalism. You can do anything you want so people think, "I've got to have video, you've got to have audio, you've got to have a podcast", but I'm not that bothered about it. Does anybody ever look at the videos on the [*Yorkshire*] *Evening Post* website? Mostly if it's a shooting in Hyde Park, for example, they post a video of the back of policemen's helmets, with a taped-off street, pan around and that's it. And you've got to sit through an advert before you get to it. I mean, who possibly wants it?

Items seem to appear on the *Leeds Citizen* site only when they are ready rather than to fit in with pre-planned deadlines or routines, and Kean believes that "people know by now that I'm erratic." This might be seen as an example of what is sometimes called "slow journalism" (Harcup, 2007: 142); a non-hurried form of journalism that "takes its time to find things out, notices stories that others miss, and communicates it all to the highest standards" (Greenberg, 2007). The slow journalism label sounds "very accurate", says Kean with some amusement; he reveals that he was once an aficionado of the slow food movement while living in Spain. But the *Leeds Citizen* is not always quite so unhurried, he points out:

> I think there are different kinds of stories, in a way. For example, when the agenda of the [council] Executive Board meeting comes out every month, I do like to get the stories that I'm going to cover out of it up on the site before the [*Yorkshire*] *Evening Post* gets them up there.

He admits that this may partly be due to the sort of competitive journalistic instinct that risks sacrificing the "completeness" of a story, but he says it is also because "even in a very limited way given the numbers of people that I reach, it can sort of lead the agenda. Because I know pretty much in every case I'll have a different take on what the story's significance is."

So speed is sometimes important even for the *Leeds Citizen*, but more often stories are the result of painstaking research that can take days, weeks or even months before it is ready; slowish journalism, perhaps? At the time of the interviews Kean was working on updating data on the state of education in Leeds. "It's taking ages," he says, "but nobody else is going to do it so there's no rush, and I'd rather get it right and get it as balanced as possible."

Analysis of the *Leeds Citizen*'s entire output for the calendar year 2014 shows a total of 66 written posts, averaging 5.5 stories per month, with no use of audio or video material. The tags that are attached to each item to facilitate online search can be taken as indicating content, and of the 66 stories, 49 were tagged "Leeds" and 40 were tagged "Leeds City Council", far and away the most frequently used tags. The third most common tag during 2014, at six uses, was "Leeds and Partners", referring to a council-funded agency that was paid to attract business to the city, followed by the mainstream "*Yorkshire Evening Post*" newspaper with five tags. Tagged four times apiece were "Yorkshire", the "*Yorkshire Post*" newspaper, "Leeds Met University" and the "Tour de France" cycle race that began in Leeds that year; more than 200 other tags were each used once, twice or thrice. The numbers of readers' comments on items ranged from zero to 20, with between three and nine being the typical range.

Kean describes his *Leeds Citizen* writing style as "a cross between accurate reporting and a conversational tone," adding:

> I think most people want to be entertained, or vaguely entertained. I think people are put off by a lot of straight reporting, and so if you've got even poxy little things to liven it up – asking pointed rhetorical questions, or sighing, a bit like the sort of stuff you sometimes get in *Private Eye* stories, "erm" and "er". They can be very dry topics, a lot of the ones I'm interested in.

If the subject matter itself is "dry", that is nothing compared to the official documentation that he must read to enable him to produce his condensed, more readable accounts of what is happening. He describes the process:

> That's what I spend most of my time doing. I read loads of stuff every week, I read absolutely loads – it never goes below 20 hours. But I read much more than I write. A lot of the stuff I read doesn't go anywhere apart from I make a note of it on my computer and save it for later, because it doesn't feel like it amounts to a story. Every day I get an email, at midnight it comes in, with all the new council meeting agendas, all their latest decisions, I'll look at every single meeting agenda pretty much, on the off chance that there might be a story in it.

He thinks the 17 years he spent at the BBC, monitoring overseas media and the speeches of world leaders for items of interest and significance, was

good preparation for what he now does on a local scale on the *Leeds Citizen*:

> I suppose it taught me you couldn't recognise a story without knowing what was going on. So, before a shift for example, you'd have half an hour to do what we used to call "reading in", where you would keep yourself up to date. Because unless you were up to date you wouldn't be able to find the news story. That's similar to this [ie the *Leeds Citizen*] in that loads of what I read doesn't produce anything but it does give me the context so that when something does happen I can recognise it as being different and new. A 30 page [council] strategy document very often reads like a [Leonid] Brezhnev speech. I think it's almost impossible to come to this stuff cold and read a report in isolation and know what it actually signifies.

He had no formal training for that monitoring task, learning on the job much as he has subsequently learned how to produce a blog - by just doing it.

But one difference from his BBC job – apart from the obvious absence of a boss or salary – is that he can go out and report in person on the local authority meetings that consider the issues contained in many of the documents he monitors. This led to his ultimately successful campaign to be allowed to make audio recordings of those council meetings that were open to the public, as he recalls:

> There were rumblings here and there nationally about people being thrown out for trying to record meetings. But for me, there was the nonsense side of it - that this was an anachronistic thing that I ended up with a bee in my bonnet about - but the other one was terribly practical. I haven't got shorthand, I go to these council meetings and I always want to be as accurate as I possibly can be. I was going to council meetings, trying to get quotes in longhand, not daring to use them because there was no way of going back and checking that they were accurate. So it made my attendance at council meetings, apart from saying they voted this and they voted that, it was seriously limiting.

He wrote to Leeds City Council asking for permission to make an audio recording of a meeting simply for his own purposes, to check quotes and so on. When the council refused he continued to make similar requests, all the time covering the saga on the *Leeds Citizen* site itself. The story was picked up by the mainstream *Guardian*, among others, "which I think caused

embarrassment". Simultaneously, the UK government was making noises about ensuring the public's right to record – even film – council meetings, and after several months Kean himself finally received permission to do so (*Leeds Citizen*, 2014).

This little local difficulty over the right to scrutinise those in power could be seen as the latest in a succession of struggles, including the campaign by the alternative *Leeds Other Paper* in the 1970s to be recognised as a newspaper and supplied with information by the same Leeds City Council (Harcup, 2013: 44). Such battles date back to the National Union of Journalists' 1908 success in establishing for the first time the right of the press to attend local authority meetings (Gopsill and Neale, 2007: 283), and have echoes of the 18th century "Wilkes and liberty" agitation that helped establish the right of the press to report on proceedings in the UK parliament (Harrison, 1974: 14-25).

Since winning the right to make his own audio recordings of council meetings Kean has made use of this freedom several times, but not as often as he would like:

> When there's a story I've trailed I do try to go along to the meeting and see what happens to it. But as anybody knows, it takes a lot of time out of your life, especially if you're doing it for free... 95 times out of 100 you know pretty much what the outcome's going to be, but that's not a good enough excuse not to go.

Apart from his occasional attendance at the meetings themselves, his sources are overwhelmingly online ones in the shape of the data and documents made available by the council or other authorities. However, he often has to dig and delve beneath the surface and behind the more readily accessible agendas and reports to see what is really going on. He cites as an example a series of posts he wrote about council plans to cut library services, for which he compiled disparate pieces of data into reader-friendly tables. That took many hours, as he recalls:

> I wrote the libraries story because nobody knew what was being proposed. It wasn't in the public domain, not generally, about where the cuts were planned to happen. That was an information piece, it

> wasn't a campaigning piece. [It was] information, that might be useful to somebody else, that I find interesting. The first one I did when they announced the consultation, to get a table that had the existing opening hours compared with their options and what that meant for each library, it took ages because you had to go through each page for each individual library on the council's internet thing and log it in. None of that stuff is made easy - ever. By and large they're not bad at publishing information but it's usually impenetrable and you've got to know where to find it.

Another example he points to is the local authority's annual budget, because "there's so much in there that's not said, that it's very difficult to say something sensible about it".

Having persevered, located, compiled and analysed the relevant information on any chosen topic, the *Leeds Citizen* then acts as "a sort of signposting service" to help other citizens find their way to – and through – such dense material. Kean recognises that, because he has the autonomy to choose what, when and how much to cover, he is liberated from some of the time constraints felt by journalists who have to do it for a living (and for a boss). That is not the only difference. Although he questions the council in the quest for further information he does not routinely contact the authority to seek comment on stories he is preparing, as he explains:

> I'm endlessly badgering people in the council to explain things and verify things in the reports. The council officers are really very good in responding, although I'm sure their heart sinks… I've occasionally got quotes from the council about stories but they've got the [*Yorkshire*] *Evening Post* so whenever they want to say anything they can just ring them up and they'll publish it. So I don't want to get into the habit of – I think most of the time the story doesn't actually need a quote from somebody in authority because I could write it myself, I know what it's going to say.

Perhaps a more surprising absence, when compared to alternative press predecessors such as *Leeds Other Paper* (Harcup, 2013), is the voice of the "ordinary people" directly involved in stories, be they residents of Beeston, the people who use libraries, or campaigners against the cuts or on other issues. Why do we not read much input from them? Kean explains:

> I've chosen not to go out and report on most stories. I don't think that's what my blog is about. One, I don't think I'd have time and, I

> don't know, I can't think of a story in which - I don't do many sort of campaigning stories, where you would want the voice of the campaigner. My sources are pretty limited to stuff that I can get on the internet, basically, so stuff that's published by the council, by the hospital, by academic institutions, anybody who's publishing stuff that doesn't normally see the light of day, and I always link to the original documentation.

He says that some local campaign groups sometimes seem to expect the *Leeds Citizen* to become a mouthpiece for them, whereas he sees the site as being very much an independent voice.

Hits on the blog range from around 400 on an average day up to 5,000 on the highest day ever, attracted by a 2014 story about arts funding that was shared more than 1,000 times on Facebook (and tweeted a further 165 times). Kean estimates that roughly 60% of his readers arrive via online searching for particular topics, with the remainder being people following links or shares via Twitter or Facebook. "Some stories are very Twitterish," he says. "Stories about arts funding go down well on Twitter because that's who's on Twitter." Every story on the *Leeds Citizen* site is tweeted by his *@leedscitizen* Twitter account which has more than 3,000 followers and, in addition to promoting the blog, offers a more frequent yet similarly questioning commentary on local goings-on. He recognises the potential of such social media but clearly also has some misgivings:

> One of the reasons I get a lot of followers on Twitter is because if you work at it, you're not just posting stories, you're posting links to other stuff you've found interesting and you end up having conversations with people about stuff. But that all takes time, and half the time I think, "What am I doing reading this nonsense?" They suck you in, these social media things, and Twitter is a complete and utter wind-up most of the time. There's an audience for the blog and another for me on Twitter and they aren't necessarily the same thing although one does help to advertise the other. Initially the stories were only promoted through Twitter, I took ages to take Facebook really seriously. Part of the Twitter thing is that you develop an online personality, so the stories may be the anchor but there's lots of chat inbetween - useless nonsense that goes on.

He is aware that among those reading the *Leeds Citizen* site are quite a few journalists from mainstream media as well as people who work for the local authority, plus some elected councillors.

Having established the site and maintained it for several years, what now? Kean's self-deprecation returns as he ponders the future and even whether or not the *Leeds Citizen* could be described as useful:

> I'll bumble along. In sort of darker moments I think, "What the fuck are you doing, why don't you just ditch it and do something sensible with your life?" Which I may do. I may pull the plug on it. It's got its own momentum now. I wouldn't go so far as to say useful. I'm the last person to know whether it's useful or not, I'm too close, but my guess is probably not. I think it annoys some of the people in the council, some of the stuff I do, and I think it sometimes informs people. I think the main thing it achieves is that it gets them sometimes to think twice about how they go about their business. Really, I think there should be somebody nipping at the heels of these people who've got so much power. Even if it's just in a minor way, it's for them to know that somebody's reading the stuff.

Conclusion

Nipping at the heels of those in power might simply be a less polite way of describing what Moss and Coleman (2014: 416) had in mind when referring to the potential of online "monitorial citizenship" sites to inform people and also, to some extent, empower them as active citizens. Either way, such monitoring could arguably be seen as both precursor and outcome of what is known as public engagement or democratic citizenship. Public or civic engagement may be "highly contested" concepts that mean different things to different people, according to researchers who studied relations between citizens and the local authority in Leeds, but - contested or not - they hold out the hope that online local media could play a facilitating and enabling role in creating "a more dialogical democracy" (Coleman and Firmstone, 2014: 840-842).

At a time when local mainstream news media are far from healthy, to what extent can alternative, independent, non-commercial and non-professionalised forms of digital journalism make up for a perceived democratic deficit? On the basis of their own study of the role of media in Leeds in enabling civic participation in the digital age, Firmstone and Coleman (2014: 603-604) conclude that, although "we are in a period of transition, characterised by role instability and new notions of democratic

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citizenship," non-traditional media such as hyperlocal blogs are not yet capable of "filling the gap" (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 603-604). The bloggers and "citizen journalists" featured in their study "all recognised that in their current form they are only able to make a very limited contribution to widespread and ongoing relationships of public engagement" (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014: 602).

Limited, perhaps, but history suggests we ought not dismiss the potential significance of what might appear small and amateurish, nor assume that critical voices are automatically rendered insignificant if they are heard by relatively few at first. Creating a more dialogical democracy is certainly a bigger claim than Quentin Kean would ever make himself about the *Leeds Citizen* blog, but the evidence suggests his site is contributing (albeit in a limited way) to monitoring the local power structures, asking some of the questions that tend to be ignored by mainstream media and circulating alternative ideas.

This study has recorded and discussed some of the ways in which an alternative form of journalism, in this case the *Leeds Citizen*, can create some kind of space of accountability within which to subject the actions of the powerful to public scrutiny. Notwithstanding a lack of financial resources, the *Leeds Citizen* can be seen as a form of monitorial citizenship in action. Its reach is limited but even an outlet with a relatively small readership may still help inform and even empower those members of civil society it serves, because small does not have to mean totally insignificant (Harcup, 2013: 52).

Four years of the site's existence have demonstrated over a sustained period what even a lone but motivated individual citizen can achieve: critical yet evidence-based reporting that scrutinises the actions of the powerful in a specific locality. And all for the investment of little more than time, a questioning approach and a willingness to engage in sustained "reading in" before writing about a topic. However, there is an important caveat, which is that Kean is not an entirely random citizen; not only did he once spend 17 years at the BBC monitoring service but he was also a keen reader of the

earlier alternative press. This suggests that a mixture of an alternative viewpoint with some form of journalistic skill may in fact still be necessary if non-professional journalists are to become investigators into or monitors of the powerful and not merely either shouty propagandists or bloggers about cupcakes.

Acknowledging the journalistic contribution that an unpaid individual can make by engaging in some slowish journalism because he has the time and the inclination does nothing to help mend what increasingly looks as if it is a broken economic model in mainstream news media, at least in the commercial sector at a local and regional level. Given that it is produced by somebody who is semi-retired and is not seeking to make a living out of it, studying the motivations and methods behind the *Leeds Citizen* may not help save an endangered journalism industry. But then journalism was not always an industry. Journalism as a practice did not begin as part of a commercial media industry (Forde, 2011; Harrison, 1974), and even the decline of much commercial mainstream news media need not mean the death of local journalism itself, except perhaps as something resembling a career.

Further research is needed into the range of what are sometimes referred to as alternative journalism, citizen journalism, hyperlocal journalism, local political blogging and so on, including in "non-Western political and social settings" where experiences and expectations might be quite different (Wall, 2015: 8). But even in one western country such as the UK, such labels can cover numerous different forms and practices. They do not form a uniform "sector" any more than mainstream media are all the same, and it is only by exploring specific examples in-depth that we can hope to dig beneath the labels to see what we can discover about the possibilities and potential of such journalisms. This study is offered as a modest contribution towards that end, as is the related audience study of what readers of the *Leeds Citizen* make of its contribution towards local journalism and monitorial citizenship (Harcup, forthcoming).

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'Asking the readers: audience research into alternative journalism'

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Abstract: Alternative forms of journalism are said to challenge the passive role of audience members as receivers (Atton and Hamilton, 2008) and to foster active citizenship among alternative journalists and audiences (Harcup, 2013). Yet the scholarly literature on alternative journalism contains more assertions *about* than evidence *from* the audience. Downing (2003) has described the audience for alternative media as "the virtually unknown", prompting him to urge journalism scholars to undertake more audience research to help increase our understanding of this allegedly active and civic-minded public. This exploratory study of the people who regularly read a contemporary example of alternative journalism – an investigative local blog covering one UK city - is intended to contribute towards filling the gap identified by Downing. Audience views are explored by means of questionnaires and focus groups, providing some evidence that individuals are attracted to alternative journalism by their dissatisfaction with mainstream media; that they see alternative media as helping them make sense of the world; and that, to an extent, engaging with such media is both a prompt to, and a reflection of, readers' democratic engagement as citizens. Recognising the limitations of this small study, the article concludes by reiterating Downing's call for further research.

Alternative forms of media in general, and alternative journalism in particular, act as a democratising influence on society in part because they foster a sense of "active citizenship" (Harcup, 2013: 130) among producers and audience alike, who interact as active participants in what has been called the "alternative public sphere" (Atton, 2002: 35). That is typical of the claims often made for alternative journalism by scholars of the field. Yet we rarely hear from members of this audience themselves. John Downing (2003), long one of the leading international figures in the study of

alternative media, has urged researchers to pay attention to people on the receiving end of alternative journalism, describing the audience for such media as "the virtually unknown".

More than a decade after his call we have seen relatively few additions to the audience research literature as far as alternative journalism is concerned (see Ewart et al, 2005; Rauch, 2015), and the audience voice has once again been described as "the missing element in virtually all of the discussion around journalism" (Meadows, 2013: 49). This dearth is all the more noteworthy for the fact that members of this audience tend to be written about as being a particularly discerning and socially aware collection of individuals who, when they gather within the conceptual spaces of an alternative or counter public sphere, have the potential to transcend individual consumerism and become something approaching a public, an active citizenry. At a time when rhetoric about an active and empowered audience is being used even in relation to mainstream media in the digital age (Rosen, 2006), this lack of attention to what might be thought of as the original active audience is all the more remarkable.

It is not so much that the audience for alternative journalism is ignored entirely within the scholarly literature, it is that audiences tend to be more often written about than heard from in their own words. This state of affairs may have something to do with the fact that audience research can be time-consuming and labour-intensive compared to analysing published content. But could it also have something to do with scholars perhaps sharing the tendency of many journalists to make one or other of two common assumptions: that, somehow, we already *know* what members of the audience think; or perhaps we even assume that what they think is of little importance?

Yet we know that even the most likely-looking assumptions about media use may still turn out to be wrong or overly simplistic (Curran 2010; 2012). In that light, it is indeed surprising that so few scholars of alternative journalism have felt the need to test some of our own assumptions by seeking the views of the citizens who make up the audience for the projects

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that are the subjects of our paeans. Downing (2003: 640) warns us against making assumptions about the "complex terrain" of an audience that remains "in urgent need of careful, sensitive exploration by communication researchers". This article, based on an exploratory qualitative study of the audience of an alternative website, is but one small attempt to help meet this need.

Research questions and methodology

This study is an attempt to begin answering the research question:

> What prompts some people to become members of the audience for alternative forms of journalism?

A second, related research question is intended to help explore one of the recurring assertions made in the literature on alternative journalism:

> To what extent can an engagement with alternative journalism foster active citizenship?

The process of exploring these questions will of necessity require in-depth consideration of the intersection between journalism and ideas of active audiences and active citizenship; it is consideration of this intersection in the example of one alternative media outlet that is the major contribution of this study. This focus on a single case study and a small group of readers is designed to make up in depth what it may lack in breadth, meaning that the findings should contribute to our understanding of journalism in general and alternative journalism in particular. After all, without an audience there can be no journalism.

Alongside the main research questions, this study has also been designed in the explicit hope that it may be of utility to those engaged in producing alternative journalism "in the real world" as well as those studying it in academe. In this sense, at least, the research ethos behind this study echoes the ethos of much alternative journalism itself, which is to provide

information that may be *useful* in informing social practice, as Brian Whitaker once put it in the context of the *Liverpool Free Press*:

> We said: "We want the *Free Press* to be useful to people struggling for control over their own lives – as well as providing information about the sort of people who actually do have control over them". In this way we arrived at a new and simple definition of news: useful information. Our test, then, for measuring newsworthiness was to ask: "In what ways is this story useful?" (Whitaker, 1981: 105.)

As with useful news, so with useful research. That means resisting what Susan Forde calls the "disengaged" nature of scholarly inquiry that is too often rendered "inaccessible to many who could benefit from it" (Forde, 2011: viii). For her, research into alternative journalism ought to be "useable in a range of contexts" only some of which will be academic ones (Forde, 2011: viii). And for Clemencia Rodriguez, such scholarship "should be at the service of praxis", meaning that "academic output is secondary to the production of knowledge useable by the projects themselves" (Rodriguez, 2010: 133).

With the words of Forde and Rodriguez in mind from the outset, this research project has been designed to be of some practical use to the alternative media project whose audience is at the heart of the study. The selected project is a non-commercial local political blog published in a UK city since 2011, the *Leeds Citizen*, and the audience research has been designed in part in consultation with the site's creator. Preliminary findings based on audience insights and suggestions have been reported directly to the *Leeds Citizen* for consideration and, in some cases, action. This audience research forms part of a larger study that also includes an analysis of the site's content and journalistic approach (Harcup, forthcoming). Such elements of "co-production" in this study have prompted two further research questions that may be of particular potential benefit to the alternative journalism project under consideration. Specifically:

What is it about the *Leeds Citizen* site that makes its readers read it?

And:

> What suggestions, if any, do members of the audience have for improving the *Leeds Citizen*?

By the "co-production" of research is generally meant involving those who might ultimately make use of the research – and even those who might themselves be being studied – in the planning stages of the research (Jung et al, 2012: 3; Pahl, 2014: 8; 27). Such an approach has been hailed as potentially "transformative not solely in research terms but in social terms", because "the engagement of citizens and social groups nourishes the renewal of democracy" (Flinders et al, 2014: 1). However, because those involved may have different needs, agendas and approaches, co-production can also be "high-risk, time consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, subject to competing demands and expectations and other scholars may not even recognise its outputs as representing 'real' research… This is what makes co-production so fresh and innovative." (Flinders et al, 2014: 6.)

In the case of this study the researcher has not handed decision-making over to the alternative media project but has engaged in extensive consultation and careful planning with the project to enable a qualitative exploration of the audience to be conducted in a relatively unobtrusive manner with a view to obtaining insights that might inform practice and scholarship alike. On the basis of such discussions a reader questionnaire was devised and an appeal was made on the *Leeds Citizen* blog itself and associated Twitter and Facebook accounts for readers to contact the researcher directly if they might be willing to answer some questions. In addition to completing brief questionnaires about their reading of the *Leeds Citizen*, respondents were then invited to participate in focus group discussions to explore in more depth readers' attitudes towards journalism and media in general and this site in particular. The numbers involved were small - with 15 readers getting in touch, 12 of whom completed questionnaires and eight of whom took part in focus groups – but as this was a qualititative exploration of the motivations and attitudes of readers rather than a quantitative survey, the absence of large numbers did not diminish the value of the evidence.

The focus group in its various forms is now a long-established method of research where the prime objective is not the collection of large quantities of statistically quantifiable forms of data (Krueger and Casey, 2009) but the quest for what have been described as more "insightful findings" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 79). If questionnaires and other forms of survey generally provide a better fit for quantitative research, and if one-to-one interviews are more suited for researching individuals' biographies, focus groups can be "ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns" in a social context (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 5). Such social interaction and collective activity are seen as integral to the methodology rather than incidental, especially when studying audiences:

> Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data. Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view. At the very least, research participants create an audience for one another. (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 4.)

In this way the use of the focus group in the social sciences generally, and in the fields of media and communication more specifically, can help researchers "discover the processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk", according to Lunt and Livingstone (1996: 85).

This emphasis on the social and the collective arguably makes the focus group ideally suited to qualitative study of the audience for alternative forms of media that are themselves defined in part in relation to ideas of the social and the collective. There is at least the possibility of a focus group shifting the balance of power within research relationships away from the researcher and towards the participants – that is, towards those being studied – and by doing so to diffuse the researcher's influence (Wilkinson, 1999: 70) and even to challenge or disrupt the researcher's own assumptions (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 18). Arguably, such a possibility again renders the method particularly appropriate for research into communities that might be defined

not by passive consumption but by active citizenship (Harcup, 2011). For Sue Wilkinson (1999: 67), who argues that the focus group can be a particularly appropriate methodology for feminist research, such encounters can be seen as a form of "collective sense-making". She writes: "A focus group participant is not an individual acting in isolation. Rather, participants are members of a social group, all of whom interact with each other. In other words, the focus group itself is a social context" (Wilkinson, 1999: 67).

As Lunt and Livingstone put it, the use of focus groups "emphasises the social nature of communication" and as such can be seen as a useful method for research that concerns itself with "redefining media processes and the conception of the audience" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 90). And redefining media processes and audiences surely lies at the heart of most, if not all, forms of alternative journalism, as will be seen in the review of relevant literature that follows.

Literature review: 'a huge gap in our research knowledge'

The label alternative journalism is typically applied to elements of alternative media practices that involve reporting and/or commenting on factual and/or topical events, as opposed to wider cultural or artistic forms of alternative media (Harcup, 2014: 11). It is nonetheless a fairly wide definition that would include those newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, broadcast stations, blogs and social networking sites, among other media spaces, that "are primarily informed by a critique of existing ways (the dominant practices) of doing journalism" (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1). Such journalism is said to stem from dissatisfaction with mainstream journalism, to which it offers a critique in practice:

> Its critique emphasises alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of news sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalised economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver. (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 1.)

The subordinate role of the audience as passive receiver may be challenged in practice within alternative journalism but, as noted above, within the academic literature this audience still seems to be more written *about* than heard *from*.

It is not only with journalism that this tends to be the case. Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts have observed – in their case in relation to live music performance - that the current state of audience research is still "relatively exploratory" (Burland and Pitts, 2014: 3). If that is the case for such a long-established form of cultural expression as music, then how much more does it apply to newer cultural phenomena such as online alternative news media? Very much so, it seems. Yet, as with Sherlock Holmes and the dog that didn't bark, the absence of something does not mean it is not significant.

Alternative media themselves are "both an under-researched topic and an under-represented topic in the social sciences", as Fuchs (2010: 173) puts it, or "under-researched and under-theorised" in the opinion of Downey and Fenton (2003: 185). That being the case, then research into the alternative media audience can be found only in the margins of the margin. In lamenting the "huge gap in our research knowledge" arising from this relative lack of insight into the audience for alternative media, Downing drew attention to the "urgent need of careful, sensitive exploration" of how and why people use such media (Downing, 2003: 626 and 641). One of the few examples of such research he could point to was the small survey of readers of *SchNews* carried out in 1999 by Chris Atton (2002: 128-131). "It is a paradox," wrote Downing (2003: 625), "that so little attention has been dedicated to the user dimension, given that alternative-media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called 'active audience'."

Despite his call, the alternative media audience has tended to remain notable by its absence in comparison with studies of the content, methods and producers of such media. In what they describe as the first scholarly book specifically on alternative journalism, Chris Atton and James Hamilton

(2008: 94) note that "there has been little detailed research into audiences of alternative media", and they briefly discuss just one example. That was a study by Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan (2007) of readers of blogs about the war in Iraq, which found that readers tended to trust the blogs not because they considered them to represent the absolute truth but because the bloggers were open about being subjective (cited in Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 95).

Another of the comparatively few audience studies that have been carried out is a major project involving interviews and focus groups with members of the audience for the community broadcasting sector in Australia, which found that listeners to community radio felt "empowered", especially when the stations provided listeners with "information that helps them with their daily lives" (Ewart et al, 2005: 7-8). Commenting on this same study, Susan Forde (2011: 90) highlighted how audience members told researchers that the non-professional nature of community radio was endearing, and the fact that they regarded those on air as "one of us" was one of their key motivations for listening. Another member of the research team, Michael Meadows (2013: 56), drew from the Australian audience study the conclusion that, by engaging in "a form of public conversation" with audiences, community media projects were attempting to redress what has been described as society's "democratic deficit". For Meadows (2013: 50), it is the "community-based volunteer news workers who put the *citizen* back into journalism…because they come from and remain part of their local communities" (my emphasis).

Two sizeable audience studies conducted in the United States also shed some light on how the output of alternative media is received. Michael Boyle and Mike Schmierbach (2009) carried out more than 400 telephone interviews with a random sample of citizens in the state of Kansas, asking about individuals' media consumption (mainstream and/or alternative) and levels of political participation. They found that those most heavily involved in participating in political activity, ranging from attending town hall meetings to organising protest rallies, "were more prone to rely on

alternative media" than on mainstream media (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009: 13).

More recently, Jennifer Rauch (2015) conducted a survey of more than 200 people who identified themselves as being "alternative media users". Interestingly, those completing her questionnaire included some who considered *Fox News*, the *Huffington Post* and *National Public Radio* to be alternative, alongside more commonly accepted outlets such as *The Nation*, *Alternet* and *Mother Jones* (Rauch, 2015: 131). Notwithstanding such multiple meanings of the term "alternative", her study prompted her to conclude that: "In many ways, using alternative media contributes to how people make sense of the world and relate themselves to the larger cultural order" (Rauch, 2015: 139). She echoed Downing's plea for further audience research, including deeper, more qualitative studies, to explore "what alternative media means in the minds or lives of users…who exercise agency in their daily lives by routinely choosing alternative media over dominant ones" (Rauch, 2015: 128).

If people become an audience partly to help make sense of the world, as Rauch suggests above, then how can we hope to make sense of this audience without actually hearing from them? Abstract theorising about social activities without some direct engagement with the people directly involved is of only limited value, argue Roberta Pearson and Maire Messenger Davies (2005). Within the context of studying a theatre audience, but with wider resonance, they write:

> We believe that directly engaging with the public is a way of addressing theoretical questions about culture, taste and class that cannot be substituted by speculation… Our research with live audiences and with some of those who provide entertainment for them proceeds from a conviction that research with cultural participants, whether producers or consumers, is needed to inform public policy as well as to test some of the hypotheses about public versus private tastes presently circulating in academic discourses. (Pearson and Davis, 2005: 148.)

That's entertainment. Engaging with the audience for journalism will arguably be of even greater relevance to discussions of active citizenship

and democratic engagement in society, because people who comprise news audiences have been identified as potential participants within the public sphere. Because, as Dahlgren puts it:

> Ultimately, democracy resides with citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds. Further, interaction is activity and it has its sites and spaces, discursive practices, contextual aspects… The public sphere does not begin and end when media content reaches an audience; this is but one step in larger communication and cultural chains that include how the media output is received, made sense of and utilised by citizens… Audiences that coalesce into publics who talk about political issues – and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic competencies – move from the private realm into the public one, making use of and further developing their cultures of citizenship. (Dahlgren, 2006: 274-275.)

Sonia Livingstone (2005) warns scholars to guard against any temptation to disparage an audience as passive whilst lauding an entity called "the public" as an active agent of democracy. "In a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people," she writes (Livingstone, 2005: 17). In any event, an audience is not a monolithic entity and can be "as polysemic as any media text" (Livingstone, 2005: 35). It's complicated, in other words, because:

> Audiences are, generally, neither so passive and accepting as traditionally supposed by those who denigrate them nor generally so organised and effective as to meet the high standards of those defining public participation. Rather, they sustain a modest and often ambivalent level of critical interpretation, drawing upon – and thereby reproducing – a somewhat ill-specified, at times inchoate or even contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards but does not wholly enable the kinds of collective and direct action expected of a public. (Livingstone, 2005: 31.)

Kirsten Drotner (2005: 205) argues that, because "most people occupy positions as both audiences and publics at various times", researchers who focus on one or the other – audience or public - may "miss the interlacing of both". Writing about mobile telecommunications technologies but with resonance for advocates of the democratising possibilities of alternative journalism, especially online, she adds: "Perhaps their greatest potential lies

in the ways in which they widen the subjective conditions for democratic engagement...to partake in shifting the boundaries between public and private domains, between the modes of talk and the means of action" (Drotner, 2005: 205-206). However, as Borger et al (2013: 130) observe, sometimes "the audience turns out to be less active and civic than scholars hoped for".

A richer perspective: the readers speak

The *Leeds Citizen* is a local political blog, largely a one-person operation, that has been running since July 2011 in the UK city of Leeds, in the county of Yorkshire in the north of England. The open access site, which uses Wordpress blogging software, is run by a semi-retired local man called Quentin Kean. Many years previously he worked for the BBC at its overseas monitoring service. His motivation for devoting between 20 and 40 unpaid hours to the *Leeds Citizen* each week is, he says, because, "I think there should be somebody nipping at the heels of these people who've got so much power" (Interview). His style of alternative journalism is based on close reading and informed analysis of numerous official documents and data; it is critical and conversational yet evidence-based reporting that scrutinises the actions of the powerful on a local and regional basis, primarily the local authority, Leeds City Council. In a sample year, 2014, the blog featured 66 stories, 40 of which were tagged "Leeds City Council" (Harcup, forthcoming). Such public scrutiny of the official information that is now made available online has been described as a form of "monitorial citizenship" (Moss and Coleman, 2014: 416).

The *Leeds Citizen* has been cited as an example of online "hyperlocal" media (Williams et al, 2014) despite the fact that it covers an area too large to be considered truly hyperlocal (Harcup, forthcoming). Hyperlocal blogs have recently been hailed, even by the UK's media and communications regulator, for providing albeit limited audiences with "important citizenship benefits" (Ofcom, 2014: 56). Yet, in common with much writing about other forms of "citizen journalism", it is striking how rarely the growing literature on hyperlocal online media makes any reference to earlier,

analogue forms of alternative media and alternative journalism, such as the local alternative press of the 1970s (Harcup, 2013).

It has been suggested that as a result of a digital divide, in the UK at least, readers of such blogs are disproportionately likely to come from the middle or higher economic groups than from the poorer sections of the population (Ofcom, 2014: 57-58). These are perhaps the people Quentin Kean has in mind when he refers to that section of his readership who come across the *Leeds Citizen* site via Twitter as "the sort of chattering, youngish things" who tend to populate Twitter, which he describes as "a sort of bubble, I think" (Interview). The *Leeds Citizen* blog attracts anywhere between 400 visits a day up to 5,000 on the highest day ever, for a 2014 story about arts funding that was shared more than 1,000 times on Facebook (and tweeted a further 165 times). The story with most longevity has been a 2012 item on education that has continued to rank on the first page of Google results for people searching for Leeds' best secondary schools. "How it got to on to that first page is more of a mystery," admits Kean. He estimates that roughly 60% of the site's traffic is a result of online searching for particular topics, with the rest mostly people following shares or links via Facebook or Twitter, on which he has more than 3,000 followers (Harcup, forthcoming).

Figures tell us only so much whereas qualitative audience research may provide "richer perspectives" on the value of sites such as the *Leeds Citizen* (Williams et al, 2014). The audience research for this study was conducted via questionnaires and focus group discussions with readers of the *Leeds Citizen* who responded to appeals to get in touch; as such, they might perhaps be seen as committed members of the site's core audience. None of the participants' names are being published in this research. Two-thirds were male and one third female, they were aged from their 20s to their 50s but were mostly in the 30s to 40s range, and those who answered the ethnicity question were all white. They had been readers for periods of time ranging from one year to since the site's inception in 2011. The frequency with which they look at the site ranges from once or twice a month to three or four times a week and many follow tweets, items on Facebook, email

links or an RSS feed to look at pretty much everything posted on it. Those who could remember how they first encountered the *Leeds Citizen* mostly cited seeing it mentioned on Twitter and then following the link, or as a result of searching for a particular topic via Google.

Some participants said they were aware that the site was effectively a one-person band and indeed knew who that person was; some had a vague idea that it might be an individual effort; some had no idea who was behind it and wondered if there was a group or collective involved. Despite differing levels of knowledge about the site's authorship, there was a sense that the site could be trusted and that it was honest about what it knew, where its information came from, and also if there was anything it did not know. Its very name, the *Leeds Citizen*, was seen by some as a clear statement of identity, with the local element as integral as the commitment to citizenship. In general terms, participants appeared to be attracted to what Atton and Hamilton (2008: 1) identified as alternative media's "critique" of journalism's dominant conventions.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the audience members who were surveyed displayed a mixture of appreciation, admiration and affection towards the *Leeds Citizen*, both for the quality of its journalism and because it appeared to emanate from what Forde (2011: 90) called "one of us". Words and phrases used unprompted during focus group discussions on the site's qualities included:

> "A record. Accountability. Analysis. Careful. Citizens' interests. Citizenship. Civic participation. Civic society. Constructive. Conversation. Courage. Critical. Detail. Facts. Holding people to account. Honest. Independent. Information. Intelligent. Interesting. Investigative. Irreverent. Mischief. Non-reverential. Not clickbait. Not cynical. Not deferential. Not hectoring. Not shouting. Perseverance. Prick the bubble. Prodding. Questions. Research. Respectful. Ripples. Scrutinising. Skilled. Speaking truth to power. Straight. Tone. Trust. Useful."

Participants had been asked in the questionnaires to describe the *Leeds Citizen* in a single sentence to somebody unfamiliar with it. Their written responses included the following:

"The *Leeds Citizen* is a useful source for investigative reporting on Leeds; it covers issues and perspectives neglected by the mainstream press, with a particular focus on the activities of public bodies and their 'partners' in the private sector."

"A fair view of Leeds from an intelligent, knowledgeable, and reasonable man who loves the city."

"Questions how decisions are taken and for whose benefit."

"An intelligent and amusing local citizen who takes the time we all wish we had to delve more deeply into the shenanigans going on in Leeds 'politics' (in all its varieties)."

"Meticulously accurate local journalism and a thorn in the side of power."

"A *Guido Fawkes* 'light' style political blog about Leeds."

"Leeds' *Private Eye*."

"Intelligent and independent analysis of Leeds politics and the way regional, national and international politics affects Leeds."

"Shining a light on the murky depths of the council and public bodies - with *attitude!*"

"A source of interesting stories on life in Leeds – particularly in relation to how the city is run and how it works."

Such positive attitudes towards the *Leeds Citizen* contrasted markedly with many readers' disappointment or even disdain towards much mainstream media. Some national media were praised for scrutinising the powerful to some extent, but there was also criticism of them for being "London obsessed" and, at a political level, focused far too much on Westminster. The way the *Leeds Citizen* routinely and systematically references and links to documents and other evidence was also highlighted as a positive that compared favourably with even the best of the national media online. More local media were an even bigger disappointment, and typical comments about local and regional mainstream journalism were:

"Much of local journalism is cut and paste from PR companies' spiel or (when online) obviously intended to be clickbait… Genuine investigative stories seem a rarity nowadays, and where they do happen there's no follow-up and the journalists don't seem to see how one story links to another they've already run. The *Citizen* joins

> the dots… He does what the local media should be doing (I realise why they're not and I do sympathise with their difficult situation)."

> "…a conservative local/regional media that is slow to respond to new or different thinking."

> "Unlike the mainstream media, it is not beholden to advertisers or corporate owners, and it is not concerned with maintaining a good relationship with the council for the sake of its business… The local mainstream media in Leeds appears to be poorly resourced and publishes stories containing very little independent research."

> "It delves into council papers and reports that no *YEP* [*Yorkshire Evening Post*] journo has time or interest to do… It follows its own news agenda, not one set by a press office. Our existing mainstream media in Leeds, most notably *YEP*, is moribund."

> "Whereas the *YEP* may have a short article on something, the *Citizen* will look behind it a bit."

> "The *YP* [*Yorkshire Post*] and the *YEP* can't run a story that says, 'We don't know anything', whereas the *Citizen* can."

> "What really gets my goat about mainstream media is they are colluding with those that treat us as though we're stupid."

The evidence provided by such comments reinforces long-standing arguments that dissatisfaction with mainstream media is what lies behind the creation and consumption of alternative forms of media (Atton, 2002; Harcup, 2013; Whitaker, 1981). Participants also criticised mainstream media for failing to grasp that society might suffer from what Meadows (2013: 50) described as a "democratic deficit" or gap. If democracy entails citizens interacting with each other as well as with those in power, as Dahlgren (2006: 274) asserts, then readers have identified a role in this for the *Leeds Citizen*, as indicated in the following comments around possible devolution of power in the north of England:

> "The whole issue of devolution generally brings up issues about how we're going to scrutinise power… If more decisions are being taken locally we need media people to do it properly, and to me it feels as though at the moment the *Leeds Citizen* is the closest thing we've got that might be able to do that... I think part of it is that the mainstream media are covering it in a way which sees it entirely from the interests of the existing power holders within the locality and the region. The *Yorkshire Post* generally speaking is quite business-centric, and that obviously is an important part of the issue

> but actually it doesn't seem to me to have captured any of the spirit from Scotland…"

> "In the *YEP* they don't go into the minutiae of negotiations, it's more about celebrating negotiating a great deal for Leeds. There's no real research or investigation in the mainstream."

Many participants spoke of a need for more media scrutiny of those in power – private sector power as well as the public sector ("Follow the money," as one reader put it) – and for more voices to be heard. But there was recognition that the *Leeds Citizen* was not setting itself up to be *the* alternative outlet and that it would be better if there were many more independent voices and a media scene that more accurately reflected the diversity of the city. More people just need to "get out and do it" in their different ways, said one reader.

In general, then, readers valued the fact that the *Leeds Citizen* provided something they perceived to be lacking in mainstream media (particularly at a local and regional level), which was to ask questions about and of those in power, to go into issues in detail and in-depth and to link to original documentation. Its relatively narrow range of subject matter was not seen as a weakness but, if anything, as a strength. Its local focus was crucial but the fact that the locality (Leeds) is fairly large was also recognised, meaning that the site could to an extent bring people together for city-wide discussions beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. Readers spoke of items on the site prompting such encounters on both a personal and more organised basis. One commented that it prompted her to "have conversations and talk to people, 'What did you think of that?', that sort of thing". Another said that, without the *Leeds Citizen*, his own conversations might be more restricted:

> "Politically in Leeds the kind of involvement I would have is a council estate meeting group, on a tiny scale – your street – and I'm more interested in the scale of something the size of Leeds. The *Leeds Citizen* is bigger than a sort of local community thing but not big like the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, so to have somewhere in between those two levels – for me that was interesting. It's having that conversation on a city-wide scale, and at times the *Citizen* has allowed that."

This just might be the sort of conversation identified by Dahlgren (2006: 275) as signifying s shift from "the private realm into the public one" and thereby integral to ideas of citizenship.

Participants seemed to be genuinely appreciative of the amount of time (and care) taken to research some *Citizen* stories, with persistence being mentioned repeatedly. Recalling the site's coverage of a particular housing issue in the area of the city in which she lived, one reader said:

> "It kept coming back to it, which I really like. He just didn't let it go. You know, 'What's happening now? Oh, it's been put back again and again', and so on."

Readers also valued the way the site's questioning and critical tone was expressed in what they saw as a constructive and reasonable way rather than hectoring; they liked the way it did not attack people for the sake of it or push a particular ideological line. This was apparent in the following focus group exchange between three members of the audience:

> "It's not cynical, is it? I think it would be very easy to become quite cynical when you're looking at civic life, but it doesn't. It's very critical and it'll hold people to account and stuff, but it's not like, 'Look at this bunch of…'. It's more constructive."

> "It would feel more ranty if it was that. I don't think it ever reads like a rant. It's just, like, 'Ooh, this is a bit peculiar'."

> "It's holding people to account. It's not shouting at people but it will challenge people and persevere and say, 'What's going on? It's now three months and you said in three months' time you'd have done such-and-such.' You can't write him off."

The questionnaires contained one or two calls for more, and/or more frequent, posts but in the focus group discussions there was an acceptance (especially among those aware that the site is the work of one individual) that posts were erratic and that was fine. Several participants said they had no expectations of the site as being a *news* site that would provide either a frequent or a general news service. Some said that, in any event, the large volume of output on some blogs could be overwhelming, whereas they did not feel that with the *Leeds Citizen*. One reader said that although he read

everything posted on the site at the moment, if there were more posts he would no doubt read fewer.

With one exception, these readers enjoyed the writing style and the tone in which items were written. Several mentioned the site's sense of humour (and "character") in a positive light, and one highlighted as a particularly effective idiosyncratic style one story that began: "Phew! That was quick work!" Nobody seemed to feel it necessary for the *Leeds Citizen* to add video and/or audio, and a number of readers praised the fact that the site eschewed "clickbait" and did not try to attract traffic for the sake of it by producing items that go "viral".

The fact that the site did not give the name of the author did not seem to be an issue for those taking part in the research, although those who had been readers from the start said the initial air of mystery had perhaps increased the ripples created particularly within the council back then. One commented: "Lots of folk don't know who he is. Many have asked if I am him, which is deeply flattering."

Most of those in the focus groups said they made a point of always reading the comments posted on the *Leeds Citizen* site although fewer actually posted comments themselves, perhaps suggesting that even members of an active audience are not necessarily equally active. They valued the way the comments could offer new information or fresh insights and also because there were not so many of them as to be off-putting. The fact that people could post comments anonymously did not seem to exercise most although one was very critical of the cowardice of those posting abuse without identifying themselves. Another felt that posting definitive comments on such sites seemed to be more of a male phenomenon when compared to the more conversational tone she felt was more likely to be found on Facebook.

Participants in the study mostly said they saw themselves in one way or another as being active citizens – as people who participated in society in some way, whether in the cultural or political spheres – and to an extent their reading of the *Leeds Citizen* could be seen as one expression of such

citizenship. Echoing the way that listeners to community radio can feel more "empowered" to act (Ewart et al, 2005: 7), reading the *Leeds Citizen* has inspired some specific actions, ranging from one reader who organised a public debate after being prompted by something he read on the site to others reading the linked council documents and sending comments to council officers or councillors. "I've definitely read obscure council papers on certain things because he's linked to them," said one reader, who added: "I now engage more with that stuff than I did before." There was a sense that reading the site could help "demystify the way decisions are made" and provide a better understanding of the workings of the city, which in turn could better equip people for democratic engagement. As one reader put it:

> "I think in a sense what *Leeds Citizen* is doing at the moment for me as an individual citizen of Leeds is giving me a much better understanding of my city and helping me to think about actually whether there are things I can do as an individual to make things better."

Another reader explained:

> "I read what's written there and that sort of sits alongside some of the knowledge I have, or lack of knowledge, so maybe between the two I get an explanation of what might be going on… It's just an alternative view, an alternative explanation."

However, there was also recognition that it might be people already inclined towards being active who read the site in the first place:

> "It's about civic participation, really. That's what it comes down to. And I think if you're already minded to be interested in that then it will appeal to you, and if you're not in the slightest bit interested you'll probably go, 'Nothing much here for me, really'."

Those participating in the audience research suspected that some of those in positions of power within the city of Leeds had to keep in mind that their actions were being monitored in a way that did not happen before Quentin Kean created the *Leeds Citizen*. As one put it:

> "Because it's well researched and it does ask questions, it'll be in their head. *Leeds Citizen* occupies that bit of space. They'll know there's a person out there watching."

Research 'at the service of praxis'

As indicated above, the intention of this study was not just to inform scholarly analysis of alternative journalism but also to be useful for people practising alternative journalism. In addition to the comments of audience members reported and discussed above, which have been communicated to the *Leeds Citizen* directly, participants in the research were also asked what suggestions they might have for improving the site. A number of practical suggestions were made, ranging from sharing out research for some stories among volunteers and holding open readers' meetings to making it easier for users to share or say they had read an item without having to post a specific comment online. A total of 10 specific suggestions were sent to the *Leeds Citizen* which is giving detailed consideration to the desirability and feasibility of each.

"I'm going to follow them all up," said Quentin Kean. He continued:

> Sharing out the research on occasions? Definitely, I think that's a great idea because there are lots of people out there, particularly on something like housing, who are actually doing it on the ground. It would make for a better story in any case, being able to link all of this stuff - this paperwork - to reality. So yes, I'm going to pursue that…

As for these readers' opinions as a whole, it is interesting how strongly they reflect Kean's own aspirations for the *Leeds Citizen* as a site to monitor power locally. This is something that struck him on reading the (anonymised) comments: "That thing about trying to look at how power works in Leeds - yes, I was really pleased." To that extent this study may perhaps have helped answer the question about whether or not what he is doing is useful – something Kean says he sometimes doubts (Harcup, forthcoming). Those committed members of his audience who volunteered to participate in this study have few if any such doubts, it seems.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore in depth what prompts people to read alternative journalism, and to use such an exploration as a basis for

considering the extent to which engagement with such forms of media output can be seen as fostering a sense of active citizenship, even as prompting increased forms of democratic participation. The study was also designed to provide some useful information directly to the project at the heart of it. These aims have been achieved. Numbers may have been small, conclusions must necessarily be tentative and scholars must of course always guard against over-claiming when it comes to generalizable conclusions. But, such caveats notwithstanding, the voices of the audience members taking part in this study *do* now provide us with empirical evidence to support many of the conceptual arguments found within the literature on alternative journalism and *do* reinforce the findings of the limited number of earlier audience studies.

Members of the audience in this study do indeed seem to be prompted to read the *Leeds Citizen* because of their dissatisfaction with much mainstream media and because the site's alternative approach to journalism helps them make sense of the world and provides them with useful information, as Rauch (2015) and Ewart et al (2005) found in the US and Australian contexts respectively. This study has also found evidence to support arguments that engagement with alternative journalism can be seen as facilitating forms of "public conversation" (Meadows, 2013) and as simultaneously prompting, reinforcing and reflecting readers' active democratic engagement as citizens (Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009).

Up to a point, at least. But Livingstone (2005) reminds us that audiences are polysemic rather than uniform in nature. The parting comment of one reader at a focus group raises the possibility that, for some members of the audience, consuming alternative journalism might act not as a spur to civic participation but as a substitute for it:

> "I think reading it is a bit good for my conscience. I know I *should* read these council documents, I *should* go to this council meeting. It just makes me feel slightly happier, that he'll catch it."

Taken in conjunction with evidence that most members even of this active audience rarely actually take up the invitation to comment on stories online,

this point seems to warrant further investigation. Could it be that some people choose to consume alternative journalism not as an integral part of their civic activism but as an *alternative* to engaging in civic activism at all? If so, that might be an uncomfortable finding for alternative media producers and scholars alike, but the possibility of discomfort ought not put us off asking such questions if a deeper level of understanding might be achieved as a result.

The research project discussed in this article may have been based on a single case study of audience responses to what is essentially a one-person blog with an alternative outlook, but such a focus has allowed for a concentrated examination of the intersection between journalism and ideas of active audiences and active citizenship. By facilitating members of the audience to speak at length, in ways in which they are rarely heard, this study might be seen as playing a similar role to that claimed by alternative journalism itself: to give voice to the voiceless. But that is a slogan. Real people – journalists, audiences and scholars alike – are always more complex and more interesting than can ever be expressed in a slogan, and in that sense the insights from the participants in this audience research may help deepen our understanding of why and how people engage with alternative media in general and alternative journalism in particular. In the process, this audience's critique of mainstream journalism may also be seen as furthering our understanding of journalism itself.

Further audience research is undoubtedly needed, including in a range of different cultures and contexts (Wall, 2015: 8). If we are living in what Downing (2003: 642) describes as a "corporate-media-saturated world", then exploring the potential of alternative forms of journalism remains as vital as ever. How can we hope to do that effectively if we don't ask the audience?

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