

A Timely look at Journalism through Theatre: A Review of the “Enquirer”



As we wait for the results of the Leveson Inquiry, LSE's *Marina Gerner* reviews the play *Enquirer*, which lays bare some of the current ethical and existential dilemmas of modern journalism.

“The motive of all journalists is very similar: all we want is for people to pick up the newspaper in the morning and choke on their marmalade,” explains one of the protagonists in *Enquirer*.

The play was co-created by Andrew O’Hagan of the London Review of Books and directors Vicky Featherstone and John Tiffany for the National Theatre of Scotland. After a run in Scotland earlier this year it moved to the Barbican in London. Using the main journalistic technique – the interview – against its perpetrators, the play’s creators asked three journalists (Paul Flynn, Deborah Orr and Ruth Wishart) to interview their colleagues.

The result: over 43 interviews, adding up to 50 hours of material, which were condensed into a script providing a wide range of personal opinions, anecdotes and journalistic experiences. While the newspaper industry undergoes enormous transformations and facing possibly fatal challenges, the audience is invited to hear journalists expressing how they got into the profession, what they make of the stories of the day and their take on moral aspects of journalism.

In one of the interviews, Deborah Orr asks why reporters choose to turn a blind eye to each other’s shady business, while extensively covering celebrities’ indiscretions. Executive editor of *The Times* and former editor of *The Observer* Roger Alton replies: “as far as I am aware no newspaper editor has ever had an affair.” In a similarly evasive fashion he avoids answering any question in a genuine manner, leading to a particularly tense interview

In another interview, former Scottish Sun editor Jack Irvine asks in surprise: “Is it illegal to pay cops?”, before adding that it was common practice for police officers, social workers and royal staff to accept money for providing stories. For this purpose, the editor kept a black book of names and payments. He also touches upon involvement in breaking the MP’s expenses scandal, how he first offered the story to Rebecca Brooks, and consequently witnessed Rupert Murdoch shrugging it off as a missed opportunity at a dinner party. The most emotional interview is that of writer and war correspondent Ros Wynne-Jones. After having witnessed a massacre, she describes how her report was neither published straight away nor on the front page, as she had hoped, due to a Royal wedding which was covered at the same time. However, her Sudan campaign which raised £1m from readers of the *Express* is also mentioned, showing how newspapers can become powerful tools to mobilize empathy and solidarity.

When words spoken by people interviewed on a particular topic are used to form a script, the genre becomes verbatim, a form of documentary theatre. The play, staged in a warehouse turned newspaper headquarters, takes the actors from one area to another, through the newsroom, where news desks are covered in litter, to conference rooms and into the cafeteria where crisps are handed out to the audience. Meanwhile, the audience gets to sit on bundles of newspapers, rather than chairs for most of the play.

Overall what emerges is an aspiration for dramatic tragedy, as the death of journalism is relentlessly proclaimed. Instead of showing some of the more mundane issues of everyday work, the play depicts the newspaper industry’s downfall and its flaws, creating a catharsis of pity and fear. Not unlike a classical Greek tragedy, it follows the downfall of a tragic hero – the journalism

industry. All this is accompanied by a soundtrack which might be the backdrop to a thriller combined with the Pink Panther tune. The lighting creates a shady vibe, while the audience follows the actors around in an uneasy and uncomfortable atmosphere of suspicion that makes you hold onto your belongings tightly.

German film maker Ernest Lubitsch once said that it was the job of the artist to suggest "2+2" and let the audience say "four." While the directors claim to act in this vein, I am not sure how far this play goes to offer solutions beyond sensationalist headlines and personal anecdotes.

Enquirer can be praised for offering real, behind-the-scenes insights to the print sector. However it does so in accordance with a theatre-logic of sensationalism and dramatization. Crude language and platitudes flourish in every scene, with exclamations such as "journalists are scumbags" and "the readers are never wrong, they may be repulsive, but they're never wrong."

The Leveson inquiry is drawn on a few times, with one journalist exclaiming "We have opened Pandora's box haven't we. We don't know where the f*** it's gonna go. how the f*** did we get here, how did we lose our f***ing moral compass so badly? Because we rely on people, people have to be able to trust us – they have to tell us stories." "Is Leveson our last chance?" asks one of the journalists, another replies that "after all these investigations, after all the horror stories, the criminality and the corruption, it all comes to nothing – because at the end of the day, it is a political decision and the politicians are going to take it."

The internet and social media frequently feature as themes in interviews "What's the value of still being in print?" asks one journalist. "Every day they say we now got four million people looking at us. We got thirty million hits this month. On the paper side the only discussion is about quality – did we get it right, did we get it wrong – did the Times do better? On the internet, the only discussion, the deepest it ever gets, is: This story did really well, because we got x-thousand people looking at it. You know what really really, really pisses me off about the web? They hired kids with no experience what so ever. They sit in the office like battery farm chicken. I said to them 'I don't want you quoting Twitter, I want you to call people. It is a shame that the interview excerpts chosen by the directors, display journalists as arrogant and dismissive of technological change, rather than understanding of societal transformations and new ways of communication. But these opinions mirror the pessimism and the 'media panic' that has followed every introduction of a new medium, be that the telephone or the television. Coming out of *Enquirer* leaves a bitter aftertaste and makes you feel like having walking through a haunted house. In a way this play does not only make the viewer question and reconsider the role of journalism, but also the role of theatre.

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