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# A Positive Future requires a positive intervention, or at least the intervention of some positivity

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## 1. Abstract

Reading newspapers is an important part of journalism education. Ten years ago a survey revealed that journalism student did read newspapers and consume TV and radio news broadcasts. Since then major development in the level of technology they have in their hands has led to a significant change in their reading habits. Old media are being subsumed by a mixture of conventional news, blogs PR feeds from celebrities and random jumble distributed by Twitter. The reputation of convention media has been so damaged it is legitimate for the next generation to feel that some of these sources, particularly PR sources, are more legitimate than “old media” with their poor ethics. The Journalism students of tomorrow may still be able to distinguish a good news source from a bad one but the mingling that they experience could lead to the blurring and confusion of lines. For journalism to survive as we know it ways must be found of raising the esteem of real journalism so that it again becomes something to aspire to.

## 2. Introduction

Most teachers of journalism will tell their students to read the newspapers. Reading the newspapers every day is the basic duty of a professional journalist and the best way for students to understand many aspects of journalism, from the news cycle to the language of journalism, from story projection on a page to the way that design is used to make a page more readable.

Students always had an excuse for not reading the papers – the cost. A small daily sum adds up, so much so that even university libraries no longer supply readers with hard copies of the day’s newspapers. Of course they can read the newspapers free online, can’t they?

But then why should they? A student living in the UK has no good reason to trust the print media. A year- long inquiry by Lord Justice Leveson (Inquiry, 2011) has concluded that the behaviour of some print journalists is so bad it is now worth ending centuries of press freedom to control their antics. Would any ethical and principled journalism student want to model their own journalistic practice on such scoundrels? Of course Leveson did conclude that most journalists are ethical and do not engage in practices like phone hacking, but that has been lost in the moral panic.

## 2.1 Do journalism students read the papers (or other news media)?

In 2006 the journal *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator* published an extremely comprehensive and well cited survey of Journalism Students, including their news habits and thoughts on ethical issues. It was compiled by Amanda Ball from Nottingham Trent University and Mark Hanna and Karen Sanders from Sheffield University (Ball et al., 2006). Some 653 British journalism students were surveyed during 2002 and 2003 during the first year of their courses. Journalism degree courses were a relatively recent development in the UK (Mensing, 2010) and those surveyed back then had a reasonable expectation that their degree studies would lead to a career in journalism, which at the time was expanding rapidly (OECD, 2010).

Some 39 % said they read a newspaper every day and 96% said they read at least one a week. 51% of respondents watched TV news daily with 97% watching TV news once a week at least. 37% listened to radio news every day and 83% listened at least once a week. (Ball et al., 2006) page 24.

## 2.2 What has happened since then?

Several important technical and social developments are likely to have changed this situation. Firstly the number of jobs in journalism has declined to level consistent with level in 1998 (OECD, 2010). More importantly the perception of jobs in journalism is dominated by low salaries, declining advertising revenues, unpaid internships and the label "old Media" (O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008).

Facebook was launched in 2004, and by 2012 had one billion active users (Zuckerberg, 2012). Although there were previous incarnations of Social Media, Facebook had the most impact. In 2005 Twitter was launched and is now said to have 500 million users according to Twopcharts.com. For many organisations Twitter is their news distribution platform. The same is true for many celebrities who announce their news directly to fans via Twitter. For many Twitter is a news medium rather than a social website (Kwak et al., 2010).

Since the launch of smart phones and tablet computers it is clear that for younger people the phone and the tablet are their major means of communicating with the world. A generation ago teenagers listened to music on the radio so radio news was part of their lives. They sat down in the evening to watch TV with their family and TV news was part of that

lifestyle. Music and TV shows can be downloaded and heard or watched at any time in the Smartphone and tablet world.

## **2.3 What does consuming news through various media contribute to journalism education**

One of the things about journalism from an educational standpoint is that there are no secrets. Everything about journalism is published and if someone comes up with something new everyone can see it and copy it the next day. This makes the print media in particular the equivalent of a daily or weekly text book giving examples to students and showing how the events of the day have been rendered. Comparing that with TV and radio news gives them ample opportunity to understand different angles and the limitation and opportunities of each medium. Its no wonder so many teachers of journalism recommend reading newspapers.

### **2.3.1 Reading Newspapers**

Research (Adam et al., 2007) has indicted that the way people read a print newspaper is different to reading an online page. The widely cited Poynter Institute study indicates that while online readers are attracted by the words on the screen, newsprint readers are attracted by pictures and headlines, as well as design features of the page and this can shape their experience of the stories as well as their choice.

Journalists put a lot of effort into the design of a news page and the ordering of stories, including the use of artistic headlines and photographs with artistic impact. Much discussion is held in newspaper offices about which story should be the most prominent on the front page (the Splash) even though little or no research has gone into discovering what readers want. Choice of story priorities is regarded as a professional function of journalists and is presented to readers.

Highly regarded newspaper editor Sir Harold Evans discusses the process of a story entering the pages of a newspaper and talks about the Projection Editor (Evans, 1973) who has a role in deciding how the story will be projected to the reader and then the "deskman" who is another journalist who rewrites the story and writes a headline in line with the wishes of the Projection editor. The Projection function is only present in print media as electronic media are published with smaller screens in mind, so the impact of the whole projection process is lessened or even lost (mobile phone screen for example).

Secondly the reader of a large page is likely to notice other stories in their peripheral vision. Studies have indicated that this happens more often than people realise, and includes spotting smaller stories which may not be central to the reader's key interests. This leads to the well known process of "accidental discovery" or serendipity which is certainly part of the value add of a newspaper or magazine.

### **2.3.2 Television and Radio News**

TV and radio news reports are generally shorter and in the case of TV the news values are distorted by the need to have video to go with stories. Many reports are filled with staged interviews to camera as radio interviews are staged. However the style of reporting is similar to newspapers and usually conforms to the standard news style (Christian et al., 2013). TV and radio news broadcasts take place throughout the day with the longest reports early in the morning and late at night. Stories that develop during the day are changed, often on the hour in the case of 24 hour TV and radio news, thus illustrating the News Cycle (Cushion and Lewis, 2010). Students who cannot catch news writing style from newspapers may be able to understand its aural counterpart, if that suits their learning style according to the VARK Model (Fleming, 2001).

TV news is the most regulated and as a result is usually regarded as the most trusted news source (Cushion, 2011)

### **2.3.3 Online News pages**

Clearly reading news from a reputable online source has many advantages, particularly combining the writing style and visual ingredients of a written newspaper with the 24 hour news cycle of Radio and TV. Also web news pages often have links to the "Most Read" or "Most commented on" stories, and being online it is easy to link stories to previous stories, background or primary sources. Online aggregations such as Google News allow the reader to easily read several versions of a major story from different publications. However there are some drawbacks.

Firstly the projection of a story online is totally different. Headlines are dominated by ideas of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) (Davis, 2006) rather than human attention grabbing. Clever headlines do not attract robots. It can also be very hard to match the Accidental discovery aspect of a newspaper page as discussed above.

Not all online publications are linked to large newsgathering operations, such as BBC.co.uk, or high circulation print newspapers such as The Daily

Mail or the Telegraph. Many web pages which claim to be news sites are in fact little more than collections of blogs. Many online news pages are not produced by professional journalists and are less than professional in their approach. It is very difficult for pure online publications to raise revenue in the same way that print publications can so it is unlikely they will have the staff resources to generate much original news. This will make them more dependent on "Public Relations" news.

In addition online news pages of all types have a large element of interactivity where readers are invited to make comments; sometimes contributions from readers are published as if they were journalistic contributions but in fact are totally unmoderated. Apart from the unprofessional presentation such web sites often harbour extreme views as well as presenting massive regulatory risks.

### **2.3.4 Social media**

Social media, for example Facebook.com or Twitter.com represent another paradigm of new coverage. People publish their own news, either to their friends or to "followers". Followers can number millions of people. Twitter can be seen as a source of legitimate news because the validity of celebrity tweets is indicated by a tick next to the feed, this indicates that the celebrity's, or football club's or whatever, management have signed off on the Tweet (FAQ, 2013). You are not intruding into anyone's privacy by reading such information and so can be seen as ethically sound.

While it is certainly true that these media offer the opportunity for new voices to be more widely heard there is no system for factual verification or any other moderation other than the use of foul language. In particular the practice of "retweeting" on Twitter raises considerable regulatory risks as stories which are totally untrue can be circulated widely before correction or moderation can be applied. In the UK last year there was a case involving false allegations against Lord McAlpine, former Treasurer of the UK Conservative Political party, which resulted in legal action for defamation against those who retweeted the allegation (Bernal, 2013).

The kind of news that is published through social media is a mix of personal news shared with friends, celebrity and other PR-based news and comment. It is seen as an advantage to users that they can choose the news they receive, for example by following favourite celebrities or football clubs. By implication more news which might be deemed "important" in the Old Media world can be excluded. For example how

many people are going to follow tweets from local and national government, tax authorities, public health organisations and utilities. They might need to communicate with the public for the general public good. Politicians also need to explain their actions and policies to communicate with a wider public than their core supporters in order for the political process to function. Accidental discovery is lost, however friends can point towards stories which interest them.

A survey by the Pew Research Center of coverage in social media of the 2012 US Presidential election found that while conventional Old Media was roughly 50% positive and 50% negative about both candidates social media coverage was generally 70% negative against both candidates equally (Pew, 2012). This may reflect the lack of professional standards and moderation applied to social media.

It can be expected that with ever increasing regulatory constraint being applied to "Old Media" the behaviour complained of which resulted in the Leveson inquiry (Inquiry, 2011) is likely to move online where there is little or no regulation, or any clear roadmap as to technically how online publishing would be regulated.

## **2.4 Summary of Implications for Journalism Education**

Students will learn from the media they consume. While it is clear that a slightly earlier generation of students took this on board and used Newspapers TV and Radio both as a source of news information and an example of good journalism practice, this may not still be the case. If the influence on journalism students of "Old Media" is waning and the influence of "New Media" is growing it may well become increasingly difficult to convince future students of the value of traditional journalistic methods and standards.

## **3. Research Project**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In order to discover the impact of new media on the news consumption of journalism students a survey was conducted amongst a cohort of second year undergraduates at a UK University. The programme of the University does not include a "Major" in Journalism but students can select journalism as a minor module of a Humanities degree. The course emphasises skills but should not be confused with an accredited or vocational course. The students are widely varied in terms of ethnic

background and ability. Some are International students for whom English may not be their first language – but a high standard of English is a pre-requisite. Second year students will already have studied journalism in the first year. Typically the top students will aspire to a career in the media but other students have a variety of reasons for choosing this module. It could be reasonable inferred that students taking the Journalism module in the second year have an interest in, if not a passion for, journalism.

The objective of the research was to answer these questions: Where do journalism students get their news? Does where they get their news, or does the amount they consume, affect their performance in coursework?

### **3.2 Research Methodology**

This research project was conducted roughly in line with the Grounded Theory first proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and much discussed since (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). Data will be gathered and systematically analysed and hopefully a theory will emerge. Data was gathered in the form of a weekly survey of Level 5 undergraduate Journalism students (for whom Journalism was not a major). Students were told that the object of the project was to discover if the amount of news they read or consumed had any influence on their performance in this module, which was the starting hypothesis of the research co-ordinator who was tutor and module leader.

Ethical considerations required that the survey be completed anonymously. The research co-ordinator was also the class teacher and module leader. Students may have felt pressured to take part or that what they write in the survey may influence their grade. To avoid this in week 1 each student chose a code number and a list of names against code numbers was sealed in an envelope with students signing over the seal. The seals were broken after the Board of Examiners meeting when grades were final. An Ethics Committee member commented that this project might result in students reading more newspapers, but this was not regarded as harmful.

Several negative consequences resulted from this. Firstly not all students attended the first session, and were therefore unable to take part even if they attended all the rest. Secondly some students forgot their code number; the number record was sealed and unavailable so they could not take part. In total about 50 students took part out of a year cohort of 70.

Further problems emerged due to mishaps and illness so some class week forms were not completed. As a result of all these factors confidence should not be held in the exact numerical values. The most useful figures are the weekly averages, which remain fairly consistent and the ratio of 3:1 for online to print news sources. Missing figures did not count, only declarations of "0" are noted and contribute to averages.

The survey continued for 11 weeks and asked students to say how many instances of various news media they had read during the previous week. The results were collated into a 3D spreadsheet and conditional formatting used to highlight patterns. The final spreadsheet, representing the totals over 11 weeks was appended to a list of the percentage grades of the corresponding students. Several students were followed up with detailed personal questioning or by emails. By this process it was ascertained that many considered social media to be an online news source as much as online editions of newspapers.

### 3.3 Flaws and systematic errors in methodology

Clearly the term "session" and what is meant by "online news" were not specified so are left to the student subjects to interpret for themselves and state in follow up interviews. This is largely because the researcher had no idea at the outset that students would equate an online news source, such as BBC Online, with news in the form of Twitter feeds.

## 4. Results

### 4.1: Results of numerical survey

Figure 1 below is the spreadsheet representing the aggregate of responses over 11 weeks with the mark attained by the corresponding student in the final column. A simple numerical analysis shows that respondents read approximately three times as much news online as they do in print newspapers. This can clearly be explained by the fact that newspapers are bought and online news sites are free.

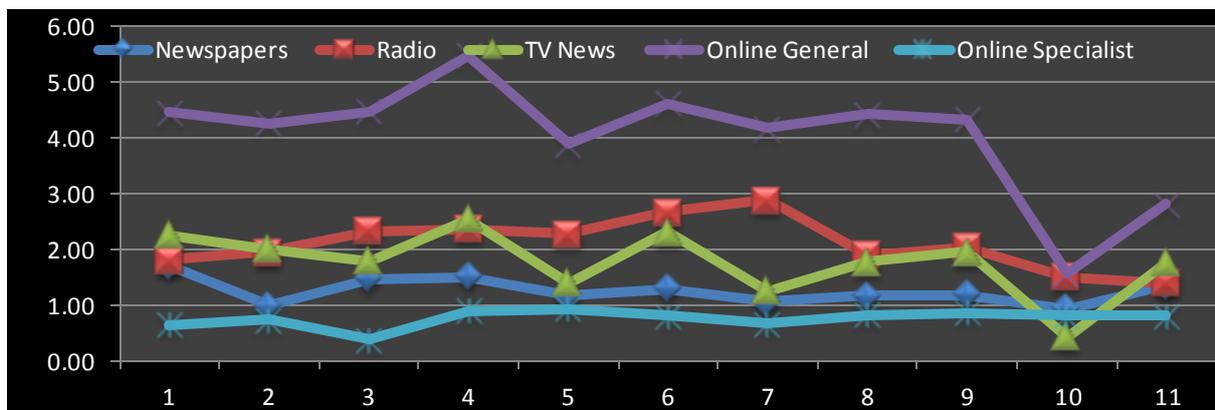
*Figure 1. Survey aggregate over 11 weeks (number of instances of each medium declared)*

Code	Newspaper	Radio	tv news	online general	online specialist	Total	mark
3191	6	7	2	12	6	33	71
2583	15	12	11	29	3	70	71
3626	1	2	2	12	1	18	70
1117	60	29	15	77	8	189	70
1969	14	0	7	84	63	168	68

3114	6	16	14	11	4	51	67
3333	4	17	9	7	2	39	67
2174	10	19	7	11	4	51	67
1101	6	14	6	15	1	42	67
3229	4	13	1	15	3	36	66
2212	10	3	17	2	9	41	66
1727	18	57	56	70	1	202	66
4201	3	15	7	28	4	57	66
3222	6	12	6	3	1	28	65
2603	5	2	3	27	1	38	65
1703	11	7	3	42	15	78	65
4264	2	0	7	7	0	16	65
4239	2	0	7	25	0	34	65
4888	10	19	1	22	5	57	65
4111	5	23	3	12	4	47	65
3123	22	9	2	24	0	57	64
2527	3	3	5	13	0	24	64
1308	14	58	56	53	0	181	64
3992	7	1	16	7	27	58	63
1282	4	51	4	18	4	81	63
1626	21	37	129	211	1	399	63
4574	2	0	0	31	20	53	63
2333	13	24	11	23	2	73	62
1010	7	72	7	151	0	237	62
1259	4	42	9	34	0	89	62
1888	13	37	43	70	0	163	62
4917	7	4	0	7	0	18	62
2090	0	0	2	25	1	28	61
4456	2	1	3	8	3	17	61
3462	1	3	5	16	5	30	60
2294	6	1	9	21	2	39	60
1420	22	0	28	28	28	106	60
3217	10	25	5	16	7	63	59
3241	3	19	3	21	3	49	59
3110	8	5	5	14	1	33	59
3393	7	2	8	5	1	23	59
2343	8	7	13	35	3	66	59
1001	22	98	56	63	0	239	59
4269	3	3	1	7	0	14	59
4811	2	0	5	10	0	17	59
3261	4	4	4	8	1	21	57
2009	7	1	20	16	1	45	57
4123	12	10	17	25	8	72	57
2726	0	0	2	41	16	59	56
1763	13	17	12	9	0	51	56
4021	0	9	2	16	4	31	56

3020	1	0	1	2	0	4	55
2919	2	1	1	40	0	44	55
1612	6	29	9	25	0	69	55
2106	9	1	12	13	1	36	51
1416	14	1	3	7	1	26	
1110	24	2	35	35	21	117	
Average	8.794486216	14.801	12.7599	29.09824561	5.189473684		60

*Figure 2 represents the weekly averages for each form of media. The consistence of the weekly averages serves to validate the aggregate data to some extent.*



The survey revealed a large number of students who declared to reading no conventional news media or at least very little. Of those who did declare that they read online news media, for many this included social media of the Twitter and Facebook variety as was revealed by the interviews. Several students, including those who received high grades declared that they did not read newspapers but got all the news they needed from Social Media, thus explaining their low level of declared reading.

Radio and TV news consumption was low, this was to be expected but the extent to which it had dropped from the previously cited 2002-3 survey was surprising. In that 51 % said they saw a TV news broadcast every day(Ball et al., 2006) It is easy enough to believe that journalism students read less than one newspaper a week on average but it is more astonishing that they watch one TV news broadcast per week and about 1.5 radio news broadcasts.

Looking at the pattern of the data there is little to suggest that the students gaining higher marks are more avid consumers of news media, although the nil response was slightly more prevalent in the students achieving lower marks. But there were students reading a lot at both

ends of the scale and students declaring that they read very little at both ends of the scale.

## 4.2: Results of interviews

Interviews were conducted with individuals and groups of student to establish what was meant by online news and what particular sites they went to for news. In group discussion the names of sites put forward were BBC, CNN, Sky News, Yahoo News and Huffington Post. Mostly the students named sites associated with well known print titles. When groups were asked about Twitter and Social media they said that quite often they got the news delivered through a Twitter feed. One said: "I didn't used to use Twitter but now a lot of people are putting things out directly so Twitter is becoming more important".

**One high performing student said:** "I get all of my news from social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Usually if a story just breaks or if it's really exciting/controversial someone somewhere is talking about it and then that leads me to a Google search that leads me to the hard news channels. Particularly as I've only been in the UK for a short while I don't have a particular 'favourite' or 'go-to' source. Social media's not endemic to one region, it's universal, so I get a wide span of news this way."

**Another student from the middle of the class said:** "I get all my news from Twitter really, all the celebrities that I'm interested and things my friends send me"

They were then asked how they actually read the online news. Those who owned tablets usually went to the tablet version of their favourite site, but they were a minority. A significant proportion pulled out their mobile phone and showed the Twitter stream they were receiving. News from celebrities directly was mixed in with news feeds from well known branded sources together with messages from friends and significantly retweets from other people, sometimes third or fourth hand. These retweets often contained links to breaking stories and other times links to bizarre, spoof, or other extremely unreliable sources. The students were aware of the difference between the quality of different sources but admitted that sometimes they were confused and certainly =knew of friends who were more confused.

Anyone who observes younger people will have noticed that there is a tendency for many to be buried in their mobile phone reading the tiny screen with the intensity of a news editor reading the wire services on a major news desk, even while walking down the street

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This research does not claim to have produced results that will alter our perceptions of journalism students, however it is hoped that there is something of interest to the journalism educator. Firstly it shows that journalism students need to understand more clearly the difference between what might be described as conventional "Old Media" journalism and the kind of journalism, and indeed news distribution, which occurs on Social Media. Secondly it suggests that performance in a journalism course is probably more determined by general intellectual capability than the amount of news media the students consume. As skills-based subject this should enhance the usefulness of a journalism element to a degree as its outcomes demonstrate a very desirable intellectual skill of mass communication in terms of employability.

Thirdly maybe it demonstrates in some way how disengaged the next generation have become with the conventional news media and the style of journalism associated with it, with the accompanying news values.

What is most worrying is that those who have a constant a mixed news/twitter feed may be losing the distinction between news and unmoderated messages of uncertain provenance. While education enables them to know about the distinction between sources and the concept of provenance any educator who has marked any essays will know that the war to promote proper academic sources for essays instead of Wikipedia and uncertain web sources is not being won by the Academy

### 5.1 Call to Action

The implications of the next generation being unable to tell real journalism from social media, blogging and polemic tweets are rather worrying. The journalist not only gathers information rather than waiting for someone to offer it, they act as a moderator testing its validity. The Citizen Journalist (Allan and Thorsen, 2009) has not signed up to any Code of Practice and does not have to declare any vested interests or worry about accuracy or taste. The Citizen journalist will not spend a long time researching a story to get it right, they will concentrate on the Low Hanging Fruit. The Citizen Journalist will not sit through a five hour long council meeting in order to find out what local politicians are doing in the community's name.

This humble teacher was part of a generation of journalist who were inspired by the Watergate Investigation of Woodstein (Bernstein and Woodward, 1974) where journalists became the people who uncovered

wrong-doing at the highest level. The Sunday Times Insight Team typically spent years researching stories about DC10 crashes, Thalidomide and Kim Philby amongst many other great stories (Evans, 1984).

The challenge for journalism educators is to regain the moral high ground for journalism. This could be done by teaching History of Journalism as an important module of any journalism course. But this history of journalism needs to be about the journalism and the journalists who did it. It needs to forget about the emergence of the public open discourse in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and focus more on what journalists actually did to get their stories. This will involve looking at the bad as well as the good, the failures as much as the success, the "mob rule" approach of tabloid journalism as well as the significance of newspaper propaganda and jingoism at time of war. At least if student are studying journalism history and doing historical research they will have to read newspapers in the process and understand how the skills of the newspaper-maker contributed to the communication process. Hopefully they will see why journalists in a previous generation were regarded as positive agents of change. While politicians have always distrusted journalists just look at how many Hollywood films feature journalists as their heroes (Ghiglione and Saltzman, 2005).

Without this, or even with it probably, news journalism will be dragged down into the grey goo (Drexler, 1996) of unmoderated chatter.

ends

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