

P. O'Connor: Introduction to Journalism		Week 3: Press journalism
<p>You cannot hope to bribe or twist, thank God! The British journalist. But, seeing what the man will do unbribed, there's no occasion to.</p> <p><i>~Humbert Wolfe The British Journalist</i></p>	<p>Soul of the world! The Press! The Press! What wonders hast thou wrought? Thou rainbow realm of mental bliss; Thou starry sky of thought!</p> <p>~George Washington Cutter</p>	<p>Why, once Jakes went out to cover a revolution in one of the Balkan capitals. He overslept in his carriage, woke up at the wrong station, didn't know any different, got out, went straight to an hotel, and cabled off a thousand-word story about barricades in the streets, flaming churches, machine-guns answering the rattle of his typewriter as he wrote, a dead child, like a broken doll, spreadeagled in the deserted roadway below his window - you know.</p> <p><i>~Evelyn Waugh, Scoop (1937)</i></p>
<p>Last week we discussed the historical formation of the journalist's mindset. This week we'll look at how most newspapers used to operate in the 1960s and 70s, when most of today's middle-aged journalists received their training, and then look at how it's done now.</p> <p>Most British journalists begin on the provincial press and if they're lucky get a job in London. The example here comes from a memoir of life at <i>The Scotsman</i>, an established provincial newspapers based in Edinburgh (Marr 2004). A young student in his final year at university wants to get into journalism. One of the many begging letters he has written to newspaper editors turns up trumps. He takes the overnight train to Edinburgh from Kings Cross station in London. About 9 hours later, having drunk and smoked most of the night with the other person in his compartment and smelling like a homeless kipper, he makes his way up to <i>The Scotsman</i> North Bridge building set directly above Waverley Station, Edinburgh.</p> <p>Today <i>The Scotsman</i> building has been sold to a hotel chain, but in the 60s it was in its grimy prime. On the roof were the remains of a dovecote for messenger pigeons. Below that, on the principle that the greatest and most abstract intellectual decisions should take place at the top, the 4th floor (Western system) housed the board of directors – thick pile carpets, mahogany board table, original prints, stern, protective secretaries: the inner sanctum. On the 3rd floor were the offices of the editor and the writers of <i>The Scotsman</i> lead editorials (leaders). The 2nd floor was almost entirely given over to the newsroom, a noisy, smoky open space dominated by either a series of tables or one big table at which sat all the journalists with their typewriters, with banks of telephones and tangled cables radiating from the centre. The 1st floor belonged to sub-editors: these were the people to whom a journalist would dictate his copy (unless they had an assistant copy taker to write it all down) over the phone from somewhere in Auchtermuchty or Innerleithen and who would cut and polish it to fit the page, and often think up a headline. The ground floor (1st floor in Japan) was where the paper was produced: here lived the Linotype operators with their newsprint and enormous, overheated, rumbling presses on which the newspaper was produced.</p> <p>Finally, in the basement of the building, the freshly printed, cut and bundled newspapers would be hurled into railway trucks in Waverley Station ~ the line went through the basement. The whole shebang then hurtled off around Scotland, with a few carriagefuls despatched south of the Border, delivering their contents overnight to arrive at the breakfast tables of <i>The Scotsman</i>'s large and discriminating readership.</p>		

2. THE TRADITIONAL NEWSPAPER BUILDING (THE OLD SCOTSMAN NORTH BRIDGE HQ)

ROOF: REMAINS OF A
DOVECOTE FOR MESSENGER
PIGEONS



4TH (TOP) FLOOR: CHAIRMAN AND BOARD OF
DIRECTORS



3RD FLOOR: THE EDITOR AND LEADER WRITERS
[BLACKBOARD WARNING: “ALL REPORTERS WHO
DO NOT MAKE THEIR DEADLINES WILL BE SHOT AT
DAWN”]



2ND FLOOR: THE NEWSROOM



1ST FLOOR: SUBEDITORS
AND COPYTAKERS [VICTORIAN LONDON]



GROUND FLOOR (STREET LEVEL): THE PRESSES



THE BASEMENT ON WAVERLEY
STATION. THE BUNDLED NEWSPAPERS
ARE PACKED INTO SPECIAL TRAINS
WAITING IN THE BASEMENT AND
DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT SCOTLAND
AND ACROSS THE SOUTHERN BORDER TO
ENLIGHTEN THE SASSENACH



3: THE INTERVIEW

THE YOUNG JOURNALIST HEADED FOR *THE SCOTSMAN* AND HIS INTERVIEW. He first entered the newsroom, where everybody was smoking and paid him no attention whatsoever. Along the walls were communal desks piled high with yellowing newspapers, reaching up to a kind of high table where a row of fat, angry-looking men were barking into telephones.

Eventually someone spotted the young applicant and he was taken upstairs to the third floor to meet the editor. Ushered into the inner sanctum, he found the editor lying flat in his chair, glasses tipped up on his forehead, staring at the ceiling. The editor asked the applicant what on earth he was doing. The trainee said he was there for the traineeship position. The editor explained that what he wanted to know was why the trainee wanted to enter journalism. The trainee muttered something about *The Scotsman* and quality journalism. The editor crashed backwards in his chair then sprang to his feet, yelling, "Quality journalism? Quality journalism? Nobody out there is interested in quality journalism! It's all over. Don't ye see?" Then he sat down again and fell silent. Then he said, "Still..." and again fell silent.

Gathering that the interview was over, the applicant backed out of the room, convinced that he had been rejected. Outside, the managing editor asked him what had happened. He gave his account, and the other staff put their heads together to try and work out whether or not he had been taken on. Eventually a representative was chosen to go in and ask the editor himself. The editor said of course he had got the job. He was then told to report for work the following Monday morning. He was in.

4: HOW IT WORKED

BARTON, THE NEWS EDITOR AT *THE SCOTSMAN*, was the sergeant major of the news gathering operation in the news room, a classic, snarling bully. His habit was to strut up and down behind the rows of reporters as they typed up their copy on cheap East German typewriters. Each story was typed on three thin sheets of paper, with two sheets of carbon paper between them. The top copy went to the news desk, the second to the sub-editors, and the third was kept on a metal spike by the reporter's desk.

Barton's special trick was to stand behind a new reporter's desk, waiting his moment while the young trainee struggled to bring interest to a story about the white fish catch from Peterhead or a missing car in Aberfeldy. Then, without warning, he would suddenly reach over and without saying a word pull the paper from the trainee's typewriter, crumple it into a ball in front of his face, throw it over his shoulder, and resume his patrol. Reporters knew they were getting better when he let them get to the end of their first paragraph before destroying it.

For a young university graduate (just the sort of person Barton most disliked) such experiences, repeated daily over the next two or three years, gradually became part of the job. Part of being sent off to outlying villages and towns and told not to come back until he had half-a-dozen stories suitable for publication. That meant banging on doors, buttonholing local councillors, removing the voice-box from the public telephone so that your rival couldn't phone his story back (mobile phones were still a distant dream) and other tricks of the trade. In any case, if you got lucky, you eventually got taken on by the London press.

5: HOW IT WORKS

Life on provincial papers like *The Scotsman* may seem a far cry from the pacy significance of *All the President's Men*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXkxlgigWo4> – especially the way people look and dress on the set of *The Washington Post* newsroom – no red-faced, angry barking men, no bullies, just square-jawed, loose-necktie 4 o'clock shadow gallantry – but it wasn't such a great step from the 60s to 1976.

WHAT'S NEW?

The biggest technological change came with the adoption of personal computers in the 1980s and 1990s, and with the development of intranets for larger news operations. In the 1990s, the *Guardian* correspondent for the Caribbean Island of Haiti, for example, Greg Chamberlain, who spent most of his time in Paris, benefited by being able to fit his despatches into the newspaper's pages as they were being made up. No more long, expensive faxes or phone calls to the *Guardian* offices in the Gray's Inn Road in London. Greg could do his own subbing, in effect, and edit his copy on his pc screen by logging onto the *Guardian* intranet.

Nowadays, it's an even more sophisticated operation with correspondents doing podcasts and writing blogs. Journalists, especially foreign correspondents, have had to become far more technologically sophisticated, and the demands made on their time have increased hugely. The Gulf War of 1995 made CNN the station to watch, but it kick-started the 24-hour news stream we all seem to live in now, and that has been a mixed blessing for journalism.

BUT IS THE NEWS ANY DIFFERENT?

The technology has changed and that has affected the working life of most journalists, especially foreign correspondents, but news *values* are pretty much the same. Hard news is still up there at the top: that's what journalists are after. The events that transform our lives are as unpredictable as ever, but they are still the key element, and we still want them delivered in the same essential way: we want to be told what happened, without rhetoric or windy description – we want it lean and mean.

Thus there's not that much difference between the way *The Times* of London reported Nelson's great victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 – sailing straight into the middle of the French fleet and tackling them at close quarters with the chanciest of winds behind him – and the way *The Times* and other papers reported the battle to take Baghdad in 2003. So newspapers change shape and change readerships but the hard news remains the essential function of the newspaper.

What is the scope of hard news? Besides obvious world shakers such as the attacks on the US on September 11th 2001 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPkdrXPhZK0&mode=related&search=>, the UN debates on Iraq in 2002-3, the London bombings of 7th July 2006, ("7/7") – the staple hard news diet hasn't changed in centuries: bloody murder, tragic suicides, shootouts, lunatics with guns, disasters, survivors – all varieties of extreme but fascinating/newsworthy behaviour.

Hard news often includes major items that seem to be no than gossip: when someone with a scanning device recorded Prince Charles's mobile phone conversations with his then girlfriend (in her 40s) now wife, Camilla, the unique yearnings of the frustrated heir to the British throne convinced the public that this was the real thing. Then the tragic death in 1997 of Charles's ex-wife, Diana, in a car crash in Paris showed the dark side of Royal trivia, since *paparazzi* had

been chasing her car on motorbikes just before the crash. More recently, TV trivia suddenly seemed headline material when the ‘reality’ show Big Brother turned a minor difference of opinion over chicken stock cubes [HERE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAQMhifXKQ) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAQMhifXKQ> then [HERE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsRNQUqAEMQ&mode=related&search=): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsRNQUqAEMQ&mode=related&search=> into what threatened to become an international incident.

At the time, it all seemed important. Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, was on a visit to India at the time and had to move fast to avoid the row threatening Anglo-Indian relations. The boss of the TV station involved, Channel 4, failed to remedy the situation, but then why should he? Big Brother was getting its best ratings in years. Suddenly, television itself became the news and the newspapers struggled to stay on top of the story. In this situation, their internet editions coped with developments faster than the traditional newspaper ever could. So perhaps the real story, the really hard news, was about the transfer of hard news power from newsprint to the net, though journalists may not have seen it that way.

There isn’t much to be said for empires, but the British Empire did make the British news media more outward-looking than it might have been, which in turn gave it a greater focus on the political realities at home. Newspapers in the 1930s, like newspapers in the 1970s, were far more about political life than they are today. Today the press seems far more willing to let the politicians take charge while it focuses on celebrity journalism – showing the good, bad and the ugly sides of celebrity life – scandal, and cute animal stories. The Sun will probably always be the leader in the field, as its legendary editor Kelvin Mackenzie put it, appealing to:

~ the bloke you see in the pub – a right old fascist, wants to send the wogs back, buy his poxy council house. He’s afraid of the unions, afraid of the Russians, hates the queers and weirdos and drug-dealers...

This isn’t that far removed from the *Daily Mail* approach which targets middle-aged housewives from middle-England with unerring accuracy. At all the big newspapers marketing teams have developed a copy platform – the newspaper’s media profile – based on what their readers expect of them, and today most journalists write more or less to order.

At the same time, since the move out of Fleet Street, journalists these days spend more and more time stuck in their offices, relying increasingly on PR men and media fixers who bring them ready-packed news nuggets. The result is dull and lazy journalism. Taken too far, it could bring newsprint journalism to an end as people tune into their own private networks. But then something big will happen – it always does – to bring us back to the national picture.