

Peter O'Connor	Introduction to Journalism
WEEK 12	THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM
<p>LAST WEEK we looked at journalists and publications operating on the fringes of the Fourth Estate. We saw how some magazines and websites rely on journalists for their tips and scoops, but maintain a distance from the mainstream media ~ holding it as open to scrutiny as government itself ~ and how the people who ran these magazines were not journalists in the mainstream sense. In this class, we'll look into our crystal ball and both continue our examination of net-based journalism and take a look at this 'new new' journalism and try to work out if this could be the wave of the future.</p>	

1. INDEPENDENCE AND PARTY TIES: One common characteristic of the people running last week's examples of 'outsider' journalism ~ *The Week*, *The Drudge Report*, and *Private Eye* ~ was their independence. Cockburn and Drudge especially were and are one-man bands. The people at *Private Eye* are mostly journalists who can't say what they want to say in the mainstream press.

But beyond their independence, do these journalists, sites and publications have a common political outlook? Cockburn was a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist but distrusted by Stalinist Russia. Drudge helped the Republicans undermine the Clinton administration, but he wasn't part of a 'right-wing conspiracy'. Nor did he buy into the liberal consensus. In a nation polarised between two fairly similar parties, keeping clear of party ties isn't easy. Giuliano Ferrara, who runs *Il Foglio* in Italy, is the son of well-known Marxists and yet became Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's right-hand man in the media. Some see him as a spokesman for one-nation neoconservatives inspired by the philosopher Leo Strauss.¹ *Private Eye* is run by former public-school boys, members of the British elite who, like Cockburn, appear to have turned against their own class. The *Eye* is accused of being anti-semitic, homophobic, xenophobic and elitist. Like *The Sun* and Matt Drudge, it rejects 'political correctness'.

These new media groups are independent and they share an ability to make enemies across the political spectrum. Are they doing something new? Last week, we thought that if a journalist was under attack from all sides, he or she might well be doing a good job. But is it that simple and are journalists the only people doing journalism?

2. RED FACES IN PENNSYLVANIA *The China Syndrome* (1979) starring Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon was released 12 days before a partial core meltdown incident on March 28 1979 occurred at the nuclear power generating plant at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. The producers couldn't have dreamed of better timing or publicity, even though the movie is in many ways an attack on the PR industry. Watch the plant spokesman putting a cheerful gloss on the situation for TV journalist Jane Fonda, who is visiting the plant with her cameraman when the incident occurs: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_oDvtV6iio.

3. 'News is something somebody somewhere doesn't want printed. All the rest is advertising.' Really?

LORD NORTHCLIFFE, one of Britain most powerful press lords opined: 'News is something somebody somewhere doesn't want printed. All the rest is advertising'. Like Claud Cockburn's witty 'Never believe anything until it is officially denied' this sentiment goes down well with crusading journalists like Paul Foot of *Private Eye*, Matt Drudge, Jon Pilger, George Monbiot, Seymour Hersh (and the late Veronica Guerin) but it's an oversimplification (a) because not all journalists worked or work as hard as Cockburn, Foot, Guerin (who was killed for what she reported) and especially Pilger but primarily (b) because 'all the rest is not just 'advertising'. There's also a lot of what is known as 'flak' out there, and there's just as much of it in the 'blogosphere' as elsewhere.

FLAK was originally a WW2 term for the anti-aircraft shells aiming for and bursting around bomber aircraft as they moved towards their target, as in 'The flak was bursting all around us over Dresden'. It then became a term for criticism: Tony Blair got 'a lot of flak' over the Iraq war. But flak also refers to information coming from the Public Relations (PR) industry: as in the 'Japan bashing' campaign discussed in Week 8:



PR gets planted in the news because there are a lot more flaks (PR men) than hacks (journalists), not just because the flaks have bigger budgets and better techniques but because journalists are naive and idealistic, inexperienced, almost always in a hurry and often plain lazy. Even the PR men sometimes complain that it's too easy to outsmart today's journalists who are only too ready to take their news from any source. Of course, journalists want to talk to the top people, but CEO's of top companies don't have the time or inclination to open up to a journalist who has never worked in business and never had to take tough commercial decisions but whose word could cause the company's stock to lose value. So the top people have a press office and journalists usually talk to the people in the front office: the flaks head off the hacks.

FLAKS are good at what they do (PR pays a lot better than journalism). The hack gets invited to a party at a swanky address in Washington where he/she meets some heavy hitters and big issues 'come up' in conversation. The hack thinks "At last! The inside track!" but just when he/she should be at their most distrustful, when millions of readers depend on their independent judgement for their worldview, the journalist isn't even writing his/her own report. And sometimes there isn't even a journalist on the story. Most newspapers can't afford enough editorial staff. Free newspapers ('rēesheets') and small radio stations operate with few or no reporters, publishing whatever gets sent in or relying on syndicated radio shows. In the 1950s, nearly half of US newspaper column inches were taken up with information supplied by PR agencies.² Since then the PR industry has grown hugely and editorial resources have shrunk. So where's the crusading journalist, holding truth to power? And then the flaks behind the story organise an 'official denial' to give it credibility.

Flaks or 'spin' became a major issue during the Blair's era in the UK. Here's ex-Conservative leader Michael Howard attacking Alastair Campbell, Blair's chief 'spin doctor' <http://youtube.com/watch?v=3H-HdizCnh8>

And here's Mr. Howard again, holding off an even younger and keener Jeremy Paxman. Who needs spin doctors? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfYJwOuxbpA>

4. SO WHAT IS JOURNALISM GOING TO BE LIKE IN THE FUTURE?

WHAT IS SO FUTURISTIC ABOUT ONLINE NEWS SITES SUCH AS RAW NEWS, THE ONION AND IL FOGLIO? Aren't they just doing what older, equally if not more independent, paper-based magazines such as *Private Eye* and *Le Canard Enchaîné* have been doing in 'old' media? New media sites like *Drudge* and *The Smoking Gun* looked new and shiny in the 1990s because the net was new then, but even the dreariest newspaper has an online presence these days, so being online isn't in itself that daring or new. Matt Drudge himself makes no great claims for his journalism because it's online. He maintains that it's content that matters and he compares his style of journalism to the muckraking 'yellow' press of the 1920 and 30. Are new media news sites different or are they just the old journalism dressed up in new media, old wine in new bottles? Media history shows that the press also began as Matt Drudge's 'din of small voices', then became corporations facing libel laws and funded by advertising. Historically, TV has had a closer, more complex relationship with the state than the press but online journalism – in some ways the child of both press and TV – is repeating a pattern in media history: starting out small and noisy, getting corporate and powerful, pulling in advertising.

ONLINE ETHICS As we saw last week, interviewed at the National Press Club in Washington in July 1978, Matt Drudge said 'I follow my conscience' in deciding what to publish online. But that wasn't good enough for his interlocutor Doug Harbrecht, who asked Drudge if he foresaw 'a separation of media practices, where future journalists accept more your style and methods, or accept the methods of appropriate journalism'. Note the disapproving use of the word **appropriate**: Clearly, as far as Harbrecht is concerned, Drudge's journalism is *inappropriate*.

Drudge agreed that there could be a problem if there were thousands of online voices like his clamouring for attention because the media din (of small voices) could 'start to look like an insane asylum'. But if that happened, 'I think the people will grow disinterested. But again, they'll rally around something else. So I leave this to the free marketplace.' Harbrecht was still uncomfortable: "Where does this leave the professional *ethics* of journalism?" he asks. Drudge comes back at him: "Professional. You see, the thing is you are throwing these words at me that I can't defend, because I am not a professional journalist. I am not paid by anyone."

The word he avoids is *ethics*. Drudge is being disingenuous here. He can't say he's not paid by anyone because subscribers to his report paid him at the time (1998) and advertisers pay for space on his site. He is a journalist: he's collecting and disseminating news and he makes money from this activity because he's very good at it. Drudge wants the benefits but not the responsibilities or the ethics of 'professional' or 'appropriate' journalism. His critics might be staid, they may well be irritated by the way he bypassed their forums, but they still have a point. The fact is, because the Net is harder to control, Matt Drudge can come to the news from a different moral hinterland.

The issues raised by Drudge and his fellow dealers in the hard-hitting online news market have all been raised on this course. In the US at least, the Western democratic tradition of free expression through an unfettered press and a free market in information means not only upholding the ideals of Tom Paine and Matt Drudge but also the rights of Rupert Murdoch and Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine. In framing the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson decided that the freedom of newspapers was a greater democratic priority than the survival of government, but even he regretted 'the putrid state into which the newspapers have passed' .

5. THE NEW NEW JOURNALISM or ‘long-form journalism’ is more intense than regular reporting. A typical new, new journalist will be assigned a story which turns into a near-obsession. He or she may pursue this story for years. Quite often the story grows into a book that opens up an undiscovered life or lifestyle. The American journalist-turned-academic Robert Boynton coined the phrase ‘new new journalism’ because the journalism Tom Wolfe came up with ‘the new journalism’ in the 1970s, referring to his own work and that of ‘gonzo’ journalist Hunter S. Thompson, author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.



JON KRAKAUER is one proponent of this new, new journalism. Krakauer published *Into the Wild* in 1996, the story of a young man called Chris McCandless whose decomposing body was found by a party of moose hunters in the Alaskan wilderness. When Chris McCandless died of starvation in August 1992, he was 20 miles off the Parks Highway. As Krakauer saw it:

In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map – not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma. He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*.

ACCORDING TO his Wikipedia entry, McCandless grew up in a middle class family in Annandale, Virginia. From early childhood, his teachers noticed that he was unusually strong-willed. As he grew older, he coupled this with an intense idealism and physical endurance. In high school, he served as captain of the cross-country team, where he urged his teammates to treat running as a spiritual exercise. McCandless graduated from high school in 1986 and from Emory University in 1990. By now he had a growing contempt for what he saw as the empty materialism of American society. He dreamed about leaving society for a Thoreau-like period of solitary contemplation. After graduating from Emory, he gave his \$24,000 life savings to the charity Oxfam and began traveling across the USA, using the name ‘Alexander Supertramp’, making numerous friends on the road, alternating between settled periods of work and time spent living with no money and little or no human contact, sometimes foraging successfully for food in the wild. In April 1992, McCandless hitchhiked to Alaska, then settled in an abandoned bus and began his attempt to live off the land. He had carried to the bus a 10 pound bag of rice, a hunting rifle, plenty of ammunition, a book of local plant life, several other books, and some camping equipment. McCandless caught small game, birds, and a moose. During these months he kept a journal covering a total of 113 separate days, with entries ranging from ecstatic to grim. After living successfully in the bush for several months, he decided to leave, but found the trail back blocked by a river. On September 6, 1992, two hikers and a group of moose hunters

found this note on the door of the bus:

s.o.s. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August?

WHEN McCANDLESS'S body was found in his sleeping bag inside the bus, he had been dead for more than two weeks. Coroners gave the cause of death as starvation, but in *Into the Wild* Jon Krakauer put forward the theory that McCandless died from eating wild potato seeds. In his book, Krakauer drew on his own love of outdoor sports, particular mountaineering, and a particular freedom he himself had found in the wild: he could identify with McCandless. Krakauer first published a short article about McCandless in *Outside* magazine in 1992, but as he told Boynton:, even after he had published the article ~

I found that I just couldn't get this kid out of my mind. I was obsessed with his story and wanted to know more about his last days. Everyone told me there was no book in the saga of a misguided kid who died in the Alaskan wilderness, and that I was wasting my time. I didn't get a big advance – in the low five figures. Then, a year after I delivered a sixty-five thousand word manuscript, my editor was fired. An eminent editor at Random House – an editor widely regarded as a demigod – sent my agent a letter explaining the manuscript was deeply flawed, and perhaps even unpublishable. That was a huge blow. Fortunately, another editor at Villard convinced her boss to take a flyer on it. This is a cold and capricious business. To make a living at long-form journalism you have to possess at least a modicum of talent, but perhaps it's even more important to be stubborn and, above all, lucky.

WHAT IS HIS TECHNIQUE? 'Essentially, I grab a shovel and start digging hard, for a long time... I always begin by combing library card catalogues, bookstores, rare-book dealers, the Internet, and newspaper archives. A sense of place is important to me, so I buy lots of maps. Since publishing *Into the Wild*, Krakauer has written *Into Thin Air* (1997) and *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003): a grizzly tale of Mormonism and ritual murder. His abiding themes are the delicate balance between faith and reason seen through individuals who are drawn to extremes: youthful idealists, mountain climbers or religious fanatics (Boynton 2005: 155).³

Maybe this is one direction journalists will take in the future: long, obsessive investigations into oddly-lived lives. 'Long-form journalism' may be the future of journalism, or at least of independent-minded journalists who feel that the biggest stories are all out there, outside the mainstream ~ not inside the loop.

¹ “Il dibattito culturale sul Foglio spesso è finalizzato a far conoscere al pubblico italiano le posizioni dei neoconservatori statunitensi. Per questo Giuliano Ferrara viene spesso citato come il principale esponente italiano di questo movimento. Questa identificazione tra l'ideologia del Foglio [e del suo direttore] e l'ideologia dei neoconservatori statunitensi è giustificata dal fatto che Giuliano Ferrara è stato uno dei primi studiosi italiani del filosofo della politica Leo Strauss, noto negli Stati Uniti come ideologo del movimento neoconservatore” *Wikipedia* Italy on Ferrara and his political orientation.

² See Cutlip, Scott M., and Center (1971) *Effective Public Relations* (US: Prentice Hall)

³ Boynton, Robert S. (2005) *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America's best Nonfiction Writers on their Craft* (New York: Vintage Books).