The Universal Journalist

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What Makes a Good Reporter?

The only qualities for real success in journalism are ratlike cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability.

Nicholas Tomalin

The heroes of journalism are reporters. What they do is find things out. They go in first, amid the chaos of now, battering at closed doors, sometimes taking risks, and capture the beginnings of the truth. And if they do not do that, who will? Editors? Commentators? There is only one alternative to reporters: accepting the authorised version, the one the businesses, bureaucrats and politicians choose to give us. After all, without reporters, what would commentators know?

Reporters are, like almost all heroes, flawed. As a group, they have a more soiled reputation than most; for enough of them routinely exaggerate, simplify and contort the truth to have made parts of the trade a by-word for calculated dishonesty. Not for nothing do screenwriters and dramatists, in search of a booable villain, regularly opt for a tabloid reporter. It saves time. They don't have to spend pages establishing a lack of morals, the mere announcement of the character's line of work is enough for audiences to grasp that this person is going to wheedle and deceive. Then there are the lazy – those who opt for spoonfeeding and the facile, rather than the hard, painstaking, often exposed job of getting it as right as they can. There is, to be sure, a lot of calculated malice and shoddy workmanship in the history of journalism.

But there is a lot that is heroic, and far, far more of it than most media critiques and journalism schools would have the beginner believe. There is John Tyas's exposure for *The Times* of British atrocities against demonstrators in Manchester in 1819; William Howard Russell's accounts of the bungling of the British army in the Crimea; William Leng's exposure in the *Sheffield Telegraph* of corruption and violence in that city (he was threatened so often that he kept a loaded revolver on his desk and had a police escort home every night); Emily Crawford, who incessantly risked her life to report the 1871 Paris Commune for the

Daily News and then scooped the world at the subsequent Versailles Conference; Nellie Bly, who feigned mental illness to get inside an asylum and wrote a series for the *New York World* that described the terrors and cruelties she found and which led to improved conditions; W.T. Stead's exposure in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of child prostitution; and Ida Tarbell's articles in *McClure's* that documented the corruption and intimidation of the Standard Oil Company 1902–1904 and prepared the way for the dissolution of the firm.

Then there is Emilie Marshall, who broke several all-male preserves in becoming the first woman reporter in the House of Commons press gallery and the first woman staff reporter on both the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; John Reed's reporting of the Russian Revolution; the unmasking of the violently racist Ku Klux Klan by Roland Thomas of the *New York World;* the exposure by freelance George Seldes of the links between lung cancer and smoking – a decade before the mainstream press reported it. Ilya Ehrenburg's reporting for *Red Star* first revealed the Nazi extermination camps; John Hersey and Wilfred Burchett's reporting from Hiroshima disproved the official lie that there was no such thing as radiation sickness; and there was the courageous opposition of the *Observer* and *Manchester Guardian* to the Suez invasion of 1956; Alice Dunnigan facing down – and defeating – racial prejudice to report Washington in the 1950s; the relentless pursuit of high-level security breaches by the whole British press in the early 1960s; the uncovering by Seymour Hersch, then a young freelance, of the full horrors of the My Lai massacre in 1968; the *Sunday Times*' campaign for the limbless victims of the drug thalidomide; Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's Watergate investigation in the *Washington Post* that proved a US President a corrupt liar; Randy Shilts's reporting on the emergence of Aids for the *San Francisco Chronicle* that forced health authorities to wake up to the crisis; and Robert Fisk's refusal to swallow the Nato line (or, for that matter, anyone's line) in reporting the Kosovo conflict in the *Independent* in 1999 and the conflicts in the Middle East that still continue.

There are also those whose names are read fleetingly, but rarely remembered; the ones whose efforts to inform their communities are met, not with an obstructive official or evasive answer, but with intimidation or worse. Every year, thousands of reporters are arrested or threatened, hundreds imprisoned, and scores killed. In its most extreme form, this is what Peruvian journalist Sonia Goldenburg has called 'censorship by death'. Every year, scores of journalist die for getting too close to the truth, or being where someone does not

want them to be. In 2014, according to the Committee To Protect Journalists, 61 journalists were killed, no fewer than 17 of them in Syria. Each one of them is a definitive answer to those, both inside and outside the business, who think that journalism is a branch of marketing that organises and exaggerates trivia. After all, no authority would bother obstructing, jailing or murdering people for that.

Finally, there are the tens of thousands of other, often local, journalists whose lot is nothing more glamorous or heroic than discovering the most complete version of what happened in their areas and reporting it. They don't expect gold or glory, and there is no particular reason why they should get it. But they are, nevertheless, an antidote, socially and professionally, to those who have traded in their credibility for a high salary or easy life.

And all these good reporters share something. They may keep it well hidden under the journalists' obligatory, hard-bitten mask, but the immortals, the persecuted and the unsung all share a belief in what the job is about. This is, above all things, to question; and, by so doing, then to:

- Discover and publish information that replaces rumour and speculation.
- Resist or evade government controls.
- Inform, and so empower, voters.
- Subvert those whose authority relies on a lack of public information.
- Scrutinise the action and inaction of governments, elected representatives and public services.
- Scrutinise businesses, their treatment of workers and customers, and the quality of their products.
- Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, providing a voice for those who cannot normally be heard in public.
- Hold up a mirror to society, reflecting its virtues and vices and also debunking its cherished myths.
- Ensure that justice is done, is seen to be done and investigations carried out where this is not so.
- Promote the free exchange of ideas, especially by providing a platform for those with philosophies alternative to the prevailing ones.

If you can read that list without the hairs on the back of your neck beginning to stand up, then maybe journalism is not for you.

Attitudes

To meet the aims listed above on a regular basis is a tough assignment. The idea, common among those outside journalism, that what a reporter needs more than anything is the ability to write well is not even the half of it. Literary ability is only part of the job, and often not the largest part. Neither is good reporting a matter of acquiring a little bag of tricks and tools, out of which the appropriate one is selected according to circumstance. What is needed to succeed as a reporter are the right attitudes and character.

The most important equipment reporters have is that which is carried around between their ears. Some of these attitudes are instinctive, others are learnt quickly, but most are built up through years of experience – by researching and writing, re-researching and re-writing hundreds and hundreds of stories.

Reporting is one of those trades that you learn by making mistakes. In my first week in journalism, for instance, I was working on a small weekly paper in southern England and, by a combination of luck and my determination to make an impact, got on to a good story about river pollution. I went off, did the research and then rushed back to the office dreaming of the accolades that would be coming my way when I turned in the story. 'What the hell is this?' shouted the news editor when he read it, 'Where are all the names?' I had been so thrilled with the story that I had forgotten to ask the names of the people I had interviewed. There were lots of good quotes but all of them were from 'worried resident', 'water engineer', 'safety inspector', etc. I spent the next 24 hours rushing around, getting names, re-interviewing people and repairing most of the damage. And the story led the paper that week. I have since been so grateful for my stupidity, for I learnt two invaluable lessons in my very first week. One was that quotes are not much good without names attached to them. The other, even more important, was that reporting was a very difficult job. Clearly being enthusiastic and having a good degree was not enough; you also needed the right attitudes. The following are the key ones:

Keen news sense

You need this – and for three reasons. First, in the positive sense of knowing what makes a good story and the ability to find the essential news point in a mass of dross. Second, in the negative sense of not wasting time by pursuing stories that will never amount to much. Often

you have to ask yourself: 'What is the best this story can be? What is the strongest news point it will have if I get all the information I need?' And sometimes the answer is that it will not be much of a tale. So drop it. The third reason is that if you don't have a news sense, or have it but don't use it, you will miss things and make a fool of yourself. Take the case of Duncombe Jewell, a reporter for the *Daily Mail* in its early days. He was sent to cover the launch of HMS *Albion* at the Thames Ironworks in London and in due course returned to the office with a piece of purple prose that was, in his own words, 'the nearest thing to a Turner sunset that you could get in manuscript'. As he handed it in, news reached the paper that 30 people had drowned at the launching. His news editor was beside himself with anger. 'Well,' said Jewell, 'I did see some people bobbing about in the water as I came away but...'

Passion for precision

As a news editor, this is the one attribute I valued more than any other in reporters. Could I rely on their work and trust their accuracy? As a reporter you also speedily appreciate that your reputation for accuracy and not exaggerating, either in print or beforehand, is a valuable commodity. Lose it, and it will be very difficult to regain.

Precision means three things. First, the obvious one of recording and writing accurately what people tell you. Second, taking care that however accurate each little part of your story, the whole thing is true to the spirit and atmosphere of the situation or events – which means adding background and context. Third, not falling into the dangerous and widespread habit of saying, 'Well if that happened and the other happened, then this other thing must be true.' You should not wish but report your stories into print. If there are any gaps in a sequence of events that you are reporting, find out precisely what is missing: don't think that if A happened, then something else and then C, then the missing part must be B. It may not be.

Determination to find out

There is no surer sign of a bad reporter than the one who keeps wimpishly going back to the news desk to say: 'I can't find out.' A determination not to be defeated by a few unanswered telephone calls or stonewalling sources is a hallmark of the decent reporter. What makes them a good one is the determination to go that little bit further (or longer) to get the story. In 1996, for instance, a man suspected of

being the notorious Unabomber (whose campaign of letter bombs to universities and on planes killed three and wounded 29) was arrested in remote Lincoln, Montana. A stringer for *People* magazine called Cathy Free made a name for herself by asking a school secretary to fax her the Lincoln phone directory (fortunately only four pages long) and then rang everyone in it to collect information on the suspect. If it means, as George Esper of the Associated Press once discovered, that you have to call the father of a suicide victim seven days in a row before he will agree to talk, then that is what you have to do. Extraordinary reporters will go a lot further than that. In 1917, Floyd Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* booked himself onto a ship likely to be sunk by the Germans so he could report its torpedoing. It was and he did. And then there was Evelyn Shuler of the *Philadelphia Ledger*, who knew she would beat the opposition on a murder case if she could witness the exhumation of a victim's body. So she stayed up for three days and nights keeping watch in a cemetery, and, early on the fourth morning, got her story.

Never make assumptions

This applies to all assumptions – either of logic, identity, fact or motives. The great problem with assumptions is that most of them turn out to be correct; that is what makes them so dangerous and tempting. Play safe, report only what you know, not what you think you know. That way you will avoid being inaccurate, dishonest and misleading – or sacked.

There was a famous occasion when a freelance photographer gave a British mass-market newspaper a picture of Prince Charles putting his arms around a lady who was not his wife at a time when he was known to be unhappily married. The paper published the picture under a headline that suggested a romantic relationship, because the editors assumed that was what was taking place. They were wrong. Unknown to them, the picture was taken at the funeral of the woman's child, who had died of leukaemia at the age of four. The Prince was doing what any of us might have done in a similar situation – he was comforting the distressed mother.

Never be afraid to look stupid

However rudimentary you may imagine your ignorance to be, if you don't know, ask; if you don't understand, request an explanation. Don't

worry if anyone laughs at you. The really stupid reporters are the ones who pretend to know, who sit there nodding throughout an interview they only partly understand and who then try to write the story – and find that they can't. The place to show your ignorance is when questioning people, not on paper in your subsequent story.

Be suspicious of all sources

An essential general attitude for reporters, indeed all journalists, is to be suspicious of all sources. Why is this person telling me this? What is their motive? And are they really in a position to know what they claim to know? This complex issue is dealt with in Chapter 6.

Being resourceful

Using your wits and charm to overcome obstacles is part of the fun of reporting. Sometimes that means pushing your luck in asking for a phone number of an important potential source, or, maybe, blagging your way into where you are not really allowed. Many is the reporter who has done something similar to Margueritte Higgins, who, in order to get a story on a 1940s society wedding, borrowed a hotel housekeeper's uniform and so slipped unnoticed into the back of the reception. In 1989, *Daily Mail* reporter Ann Leslie was so disgusted at how far from the main action the press had been placed at Emperor Hirohito's funeral that she wore a luxuriant fur coat and marched imperiously past the security checks and found herself sitting by President George H. Bush. And then there was the technique of Floyd Gibbons, when he needed to impress Polish border guards that he was someone important. He found a military-looking uniform, and hung on his chest a line of gaudy medals (a couple of which were actually awarded at dog shows). The guards saluted him through. On another occasion, during the Great War, he was about to write a story about the arrival of US general John J. Pershing, when he was told British censors would not permit reporters to say where Pershing landed. So Gibbons cabled his office: 'Pershing landed at British port today and was greeted by Lord Mayor of Liverpool'. Smart.

Leave your prejudices at home

You cannot be expected to shed all your cherished beliefs, but you should never allow them consciously to affect your work. Reporters

should accurately relate what happened, not strain everything through the sieve of their own prejudices, cultured and intelligent though they imagine these to be.

This invocation applies to newly minted prejudices as well as old ones. Don't let the opinions you form early on in the research prematurely colour your judgement of the story. A great sin of some reporters, particularly those often asked to write colour and atmosphere pieces, is that they will write the intro in their heads on the way to an interview. Their intro may be smart, it may be a beautiful piece of writing, but the chances are that it will say more about them than their subject.

Realise you are part of a process

Reporters are subject to what editors want. By all means argue with them, shout at them and try to sweet-talk them, but, in the end, you have to accept their decision – or go and work elsewhere. That is professionalism. So, too, is the acceptance of the discipline of the schedule of your paper. A lot of reporters think it is somehow a mark of a literary talent in full flower to be late and over length. It is not. It is the sign of an unreliable amateur. So too is the reporter who, when out on a story, fails to call into the office regularly. You can often, however, use the paper's needs to your advantage, getting prominence for your stories by calculating when in your paper's production cycle they are most in need of early stories or ones illustrated by pictures, graphics, sidebars, etc. – and delivering them.

Empathy with readers

Unless people read your story, you might as well be muttering it to yourself in a darkened room. They will read it if you consider them – when you write, but especially when you research. What will readers want to know? What do they need explained? And what will bring this story home to them? Find anecdotes, show how the events will impact on readers' lives, or impact on other lives; use examples that will be relevant to their own experience; above all, where possible, tell the story in terms of real people.

The will to win

Sooner or later the new reporter experiences the dawning realisation that the rest of the world is not run for the convenience of newspapers.

Stories happen at bad times and in awkward places, telephones are not always available or working; and, if you are out of the city or country, you can be running out of money, time, food, drink and energy. You need a strong desire to beat whatever circumstances are strewn in your path, get to the story and then file as fast as possible. To be like Ed Cody of the *Washington Post*. Mort Rosenblum's excellent book *Who Stole the News?* tells the story of how Cody was in Paris one night in December 1988 when word reached him that a Pan Am jumbo jet had crashed on Lockerbie, a little town in Scotland. It was 8.20 p.m. and the last flight to Britain that evening had already left. Cody found a charter operator, persuaded his foreign editor in the United States to authorise the cost and, a few hours later, the reporter was in Glasgow. Lockerbie was 60 miles south and by that time had been sealed off by police roadblocks. Miraculously, Cody found a cab driver who was from the town and, with his local knowledge and contacts, Cody made it to the scene. The driver even had a friend who owned a pub, which he opened up so that the reporter could call Washington to file his story.

The crash, in which all 259 passengers and 11 people on the ground died, was one of the biggest stories of the 1980s. Cody's excellent job on it was possible because he had the will to win. He may also have had a paper prepared to pay $6,000 for a charter aircraft, but, on most occasions, a reporter's desire to get to the story will not cost as much and it will always bring rewards.

Sense of urgency

Newspapers want their reporters to file the earliest and fullest account of a story that they can get. A little healthy, or even unhealthy, competition to be first is part of the reality – and fun – of the job. And it serves readers well, just so long as not too many corners are cut.

Beating the rival agency, for instance, was uppermost in the minds of the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) photographers who were assigned to take pictures of the Dalai Lama as he fled Tibet in 1959. Both chartered planes and organised relays of motorcyclists so that they could get their pictures from the Chinese borders to the nearest transmitter in India. When the Dalai Lama emerged from his aircraft, the photographers leapt forward, took their pictures and ran to their already-revving planes. After a break-neck race in the air and on the ground, UPI won.

The AP man was devastated. He went back to his hotel room and sat there, full of recrimination about what might have been and the shame

of being beaten. Then he received a cable from his office: 'Opposition's Dalai Lama has long shaggy hair. Yours bald. How please?' The AP man cabled back: 'Because my Dalai right Dalai.' In his desperation to be first, the UPI man had photographed the interpreter.

Taking pleasure in beating the opposition

Using your wits and charm to overcome obstacles is part of the fun of the job, as is beating the opposition to be first with the story. But acceptable rivalry has its limits, and they were surely reached – and considerably exceeded – by the former *New York Post* reporter Steve Dunleavy when he was a young man on a paper in opposition to his father's one. Both were assigned the same story, and Steve was so keen to be first to the scene that he immobilised his father's car by slashing its tyres. (The shocking thing here is not the sabotage, but the crudity of the method. In Britain, a matchstick thrust into a tyre valve was the rather more dainty technique.)

But discovering that your rivals were already up and running in their vehicle called for other measures. On the kinds of newspapers I have worked for, the sight of rivals in your wing mirror would provoke no more than a sigh of regret, but to intensely competitive tabloid reporters it was a cue to guerrilla action. Wensley Clarkson of the London *Sunday Mirror* once persuaded a sex-change couple to tell their complicated story to him and him alone. Rivals swarmed outside. So he threw a blanket over the transsexual pair's heads (to stop other papers taking their photograph), bundled them into his car, and sped off towards a hotel where he could interview them at his uninterrupted leisure. His competitors naturally set off in pursuit. What to do? Well, Clarkson waited for the next set of traffic lights showing red, got out of his car, ran back to that of his pursuers, and tapped on the driver's window. It opened. 'Give me a break, guys,' he said. 'No,' they replied, whereupon Clarkson reached inside, grabbed the car keys, and threw them down a nearby drain. End of problem.

Being professional

This is the opposite of taking the attitude 'that will do', and it means learning to be as efficient, thorough, and fast as your talents will allow.