

**Lecture given by David Leigh, Anthony Sampson Professor of Reporting,  
at City University London on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007**

Newspapers used to be a basic part of British life. But they aren't any longer.

When I was a small boy in the Midlands in the 1950s, our neighbour was a newspaperman. He was called Albert Stapleton. He lived three doors along in our street, which was in a pit village.

(Do you remember coal-miners? We used to have them then...)

Albert Stapleton was bald and rather shabby. We would see him setting off wearing a belted mackintosh and cycle-clips, and then every Saturday would then appear "Albert Stapleton's Searchlight on Sport" in the *Nottingham Evening Post*. Not then, much of a celebrity. But he was an apparently unchangeable feature of the British landscape – like John Major's vision of old maids cycling to communion.

I admit that no-one in our street took the *Evening Post* very seriously. Its quality wasn't that high. But everyone in Nottingham had the local paper delivered. It was in the fabric of our lives. It had the weather, the football and the small ads. Its pages were mainly devoted to lengthy accounts of council meetings.

These could be quite exciting actually. Nottingham then was a by-word for corruption. The ruling Labour councillors were put under investigation by the then chief constable. He had a heroic name - Captain Athelstan Popkess. He was a former soldier in the Black and Tans, the paramilitaries who fought the Irish rebels in the 1920s. Captain Popkess was sacked by the councillors and there was a tremendous row. It was all fought out in the newspapers.

When I later emerged from university in the 1960s, it was *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh which finally offered me a job as a trainee reporter. The editor was named Eric Beattie Mackay and he came straight out of Central Casting. He was a granite-faced Aberdonian of sound principles. He scowled at the sight of my wardrobe of sixties-style flower-patterned see-through shirts. But he knew what his job was.

Newspapers like his were completely a product of the age of steam. The *Scotsman* building was a most impressive battlemented construction perched high above Waverley station. You walked in off the North Bridge pavement to a grand public office. It was built like the headquarters of a major bank. It had mahogany panelling and marble staircases. There were heavy counters where you could place your classified ads.

To reach the actual workings of the paper itself, a visitor had to descend. A bit like Dante's journey through the circles of hell. Down below was the newsroom. The corridors were dank. They were tiled like grim Victorian lavatories. There we sat in rows, and we worked at our traditional craft methods. We banged out our copy on typewriters (do you remember typewriters?) on sheets of triple carbon-paper (do you remember carbon paper?). The top sheet was white, the middle one was pink, and the bottom one, I think, was green.

The sheets went to the back bench. There, they were scribbled on by hard-drinking men and passed to the subs. These were elderly – and even more hard-drinking – types who scribbled some more, before the sheets were sent downstairs to the printers. As often as not, what we wrote ended up jammed on the Spike (which was just what it sounds like) to be thrown away. Down towards the basement, the grubby bits of paper that survived this editorial process descended yet further to the linotype operators. They had pots of bubbling lead and played like organists on huge Terry Gilliam-style contraptions.

These men – they were, of course, all men – propped the paper in front of them and cast our words into rows of hot metal type. These were hammered flat into formes; printers embossed the words back to front on to papier-mache flongs. (Do any of you remember flongs?)

They were cast on to semi-circular plates. Down to the very bottom floor the plates descended, and were bolted on to the big rotary cylinders. The floor of the basement shook as the presses ran.

Huge rolls of dead trees were thus turned into piles of printed copies of the *Scotsman*. They were tipped out of the basement and straight on to the railway wagons below. I guess the trains then rumbled across the Forth Bridge and our words clattered off to Fife.

This primitive process of heavy engineering was romantic and dirty. None of us realised at the time just how absolutely doomed it was, from top to bottom.

It was the Sixties communications theorist and prankster Marshall McLuhan who said "obsolete technology becomes the next generation's art form", and he may have been right. The overbearing mahogany-panelled editor's office of the *Scotsman* has been transformed nowadays into a sort of art-work. It has become the "Linklater Suite", named after a past editor. It has a tartan motif.

For the Barclay brothers, a pair of property developers, saw the real estate possibilities in those fine old *Scotsman* premises. They chucked all the journalists out of the building and in 1998 it was turned into a themed hotel.

That dingy newsroom where I used to knock out copy has become a row of executive beds at £300 a night – all of them I would guess provided with high-speed wireless internet access. The thundering basement presses are gone. They've been turned into a swimming pool. Gone too is that hall of clattering linotype machines. It's now a posh restaurant serving seared scallops and tempura.

What remains of the *Scotsman* is now produced away down at the bottom of the hill, in a glass rabbit-hutch with a bank of computer screens, by two men and a dog. It is dying quietly.

The *Scotsman's* fate tells a story of the transience of newspapers which is the biggest story of my own professional times.

We all know that the ecology of mass communication has now irreversibly altered. In the past, cinema, radio and TV all managed to find their place in a crowded new information landscape without actually ousting the daily paper. It mutated – sometimes into repellent forms, like the celebrity-heavy, news-lite British tabloids – but it survived.

Not any more, however. The internet is changing all that for ever, and this dizzy revolution continues to fragment our media universe in ways that we journalists are struggling to cope with.

Yes, the global village is here! (That's another prescient phrase from Marshall McLuhan.)

Blogs, podcasts, vodcasts, citizen journalists, camera-phones, webcams, social networks, chatrooms – every human a self-publisher with his or her own website, surfing (that's another McLuhanism!) buying, selling, Googling, posting, Facebooking, Youtubing, relating, dating, emailing, viral marketing, price-comparing, people self-assembling their own encyclopaedias for heavens sake! You know this picture.

Everything anyone could ever want to say or do or hear is apparently already out there in cyber-space, only a few mouse-clicks away. What's the weather like in Taipei? What's my auntie getting up to in Auchtermuchtie? What's an economist saying about the Budget? How deep is the Home Secretary's cleavage today? You can count the limbless corpses in the latest Pakistan suicide bombing. Hear Princess Diana's dying words in the Paris tunnel – AS THEY ACTUALLY HAPPEN! (Yes, I sort of made up the last bit – it's fiction – for now...)

But actually, McLuhan didn't like the idea of the global village – a place of terrors, he said, where everything affects everybody. I suspect stressed-out western youngsters feel this existential alarm already.

McLuhan's unfashionable now. But he said this in his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

"Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library, the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence."

He said terror is the normal state of any [such] society, "for in it everything affects everything all the time."

As a reporter, I'm not sure I altogether like the global village either.

To come down rather more to earth, I was dismayed to read my fellow-professor and gifted ex-editor Roy Greenslade blogging away the other day. He said:

"The so-called profession of journalism has to adapt to vastly changed circumstances. In effect, every citizen is now a journalist.

"Journalistic skills are not entirely wiped out in an online world, but they are eroded and, most importantly, they cannot be confined any longer to an exclusive élite group.

"Online media outlets will require fewer staff... relatively small 'core' staffs will process material from freelancers and/or citizen journalists, bloggers, whatever (and there are many who think this business of 'processing' will itself gradually disappear too in an era of what we might call an unmediated media)."

He went on – and this is the most scary part:

"It is also clear that media outlets will never generate the kind of income enjoyed by printed newspapers: circulation revenue will vanish and advertising revenue will be much smaller than today. There just won't be the money to afford a large staff."

I'm afraid Roy is right, that the journalistic future will be a future with less money around. That won't be good. Too much competition leads to a race to the bottom. And you can't report if you can't afford to eat.

But I guess Roy just means to tease with his vision of "unmediated media". There's no such thing. I noticed Sir Martin Sorrell of the giant advertising agency WPP boasting the other day that they were doing very well by smuggling PR messages into social networking sites. He said there was an appetite among web users for ideas and knowledge from apparently "independent" sources. And he added: "Using a PR company to generate more coverage also helps get around social networkers' typical aversion to adverts."

We're not talking "unmediated media" here. We're talking about corrupted media. And the on-line world, with its don't-pay, something-for-nothing mentality, is very vulnerable to lies and propaganda.

Yet the old media are clearly on the way out. So are we reaching the end of the era of conventional reporting?

Certainly, we must soon imagine a world without (at least) weekday printed papers. It is an open secret in the business that average circulation figures are misleading. Saturday papers sell pretty well, but daily sales in the week are collapsing. So are ads. The business model is disappearing.

I expect we're going to see a completely new model of newspaper production in all British nationals within the next year. The future is for a newsroom to put out a series of themed websites, one for each traditional department. Environment, Science, Education, Defence, Investigations, etc. Then, working in multi-media nodes or clusters, we will range up and down the new journalistic spectrum, sometimes conversing back and forth with our own nerdy on-line specialist audience, sometimes breaking news quickly on the main website, sometimes doing it in the daily print version, sometimes at length for, say, a Sunday outlet at the weekend. And there's a whole new global on-line outlet we've developed in the English language in – for instance – *Guardian America*. People can select from our news output whatever works for them in their busy, fragmented, international lives.

And we hope by doing that, we'll keep afloat.

I hope we do. Yet my fear is that today everybody is rather too obsessed with new platforms. But not enough people are talking about values.

The internet is an incredibly rich information resource. And a great tool for worldwide sharing. But it soaks up a lot of people's time, just messing about.

As well as overloading us with instantaneous terrors, it also degrades valuable things – the idea of discrimination, that some voices are more credible than others, that a named source is better than an anonymous pamphleteer. (That's what they used to call bloggers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when they published, for example, the politically dangerous Letters of Junius.) The notion of authoritativeness is derided as a sort of 'top-down' fascism.

I fear that these developments will endanger the role of the reporter. Of course, there'll always be room for News Bunnies – to dash in front of a camera and breathlessly describe a lorry crash, or to bash out a press-release in 10 minutes. There'll probably be a lot more News Bunnies in the future – high-speed, short-legged creatures of the Internet Age. There will probably also be hyper-local sites – postcode journalism fuelled cheaply by neighbourhood bloggers.

But not proper reporters.

Where does our present notion of the reporter come from?

Along with the rise of the mass-circulation daily paper in the 19<sup>th</sup> century came the rise of the individual reporter – at first anonymous, more like stenographers than celebs, but then eventually each with his or her own by-line. These named reporters have become important social actors. Just as 19<sup>th</sup>-century papers evolved from mere business intelligence sheets and partisan pamphlets into something wider, so the individual reporter, with his or her fearless gaze, became seen as the eyes and ears of democracy. This is such a widely-accepted idea that even Her Majesty's judges talk like that about reporters nowadays.

It became possible to make a reasonable living by going about the world and applying your mind to what you saw. And telling people what was actually going on.

There's a modern pantheon now of such valuable writers and reporters. Anthony Sampson, after whom this City University chair is named. My early hero James Cameron. Neal Ascherson. Bob Woodward of Watergate fame. Lowell Bergman. Sy Hersh. Reporters found themselves depicted as romantic heroes in the movies – tubby or scrawny in their real lives, they've been transformed into glamorous characters played by Dustin Hoffmann, Robert Redford, Al Pacino.

My own career has been very much one of tiptoeing behind the large footsteps of such famous people – not only Anthony, but the late Larry Stern of the *Washington Post*. His colleagues endowed a fellowship in his name that enabled me to go work there in the US. And Paul Foot, unquenchable campaigner at the old *Mirror*, the *Guardian* and *Private Eye*. His former colleagues very kindly gave me and my partner Rob Evans an award in his name last month, for our work documenting bribery at the BAE arms company.

It's a long journey, from the humble shorthand writers of the days of Dickens to such celebrity heroes. But are these godlike figures now on the way out?

I've just got back from Berkeley in California, where I was talking to Lowell Bergman at the investigative journalism school there. I found him in a glum frame of mind – reporting staffs are being cut all over the US, he said. Virtually no investigative journalism goes on. Millionaire donors are now having to be canvassed to set up little voluntary on-line reporting operations which will do what the likes of Rupert Murdoch's newly-taken-over Wall St Journal will abandon.

Back here, some of you might have heard a few of the old war-horses on 'Start the Week' last month. Andrew Marr asked if all news organisations weren't cutting back. "Yes, indeed," said veteran BBC international correspondent John Simpson. "Reporters are under real threat. More than ever before. They say 'You're not needed – we just want people's opinions about what's happened, not the facts. I'm becoming an endangered species and people are less and less interested in the wider world". Max Hastings, ex-editor of the *Telegraph* chimed in "It's even more true in newspapers. All sorts of areas of the world are now thought to be too boring to keep a correspondent there. The commentariat has taken over."

There are several reasons for this. The mass media can shine a light. Or they can reflect back light. The *Daily Mail*, for example, or Fox News, deliberately make a highly-profitable business out of telling people what they think they know already. They reflect back their existing beliefs. They reassure their target audience by hammering the world into a shape that suits their prejudices. This is less an information service than a form of cheap massage.

Too much interactivity, commentating and blogging can end up inadvertently doing the same thing elsewhere in the respectable media. It's cheaper and excitingly faster, but it's not always a source of light. People shout past each other. They enjoy the sound of their own voices and confirm their own prejudices by the delicious experience of self-publishing. Paradoxically, more becomes less. (As in the US, where 200 TV channels all show virtually the same programmes.)

High speed means of communication certainly make it easier to book a plane ticket or pay a gas bill.

But they don't necessarily have an enlightening influence, just because people can relate to each other more quickly. Matthew Arnold famously had something to say about this in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of exploding physical communication links, brought about in those days by the then newly-invented steam train.

"Your middle-class man thinks it the highest pitch of development and civilization when . . . railway trains run to and fro... every quarter of an hour. He thinks it is nothing that the trains only carry him from an illiberal, dismal life at Islington to an illiberal, dismal life at Camberwell."

We might apply the same gloomy thought to a world in which young Muslims in Leeds don't read old-fashioned newspapers. Instead, they share instant internet videos of Al Qaeda beheadings in Iraq.

Those steam trains of course are a useful metaphor for the world we're in today. When Matthew Arnold's steam train came in, it utterly destroyed the canals. But when cars were invented, they did not in turn destroy the train as a means of mass transport. The train took a huge hit (and was practically wiped out in the US). But it found its niche, found a new business model, and it survived. Are we reporters canals or are we trains? I wish I knew.

Now I'm in favour of the future, of course. We all have to be. It's coming to get us, like it or not. We have to come to terms with what's going on. More than come to terms – we have to embrace it. Yes, yes, as the politicians say: "The future lies ahead of us".

But in a world in which old-fashioned reporting models are going out of the window, there are even deeper problems than those cheeseparer cuts in international coverage that John Simpson was on about.

I do wish we could spend less time fretting about platforms and more about the loss of honesty in our trade. There is yet to be a proper accounting for the disgraceful loss of journalistic integrity on both sides of the Atlantic that cheer-led us into the Iraq war on a false prospectus. I hope my colleague Nick Davies' book *Flat Earth Society* – already causing a stir before it comes out next year – will start a proper debate about that. Wrong to name names? Such as Judith Miller on the *New York Times*, or David Rose in *Vanity Fair* and elsewhere, who publicly put up his hands to it only a few weeks ago. He wrote:

"To my everlasting regret, I strongly supported the Iraq invasion, in person and in print. I had become a recipient of what we now know to have been sheer disinformation about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his purported "links" with al-Qaeda."

I don't want to see a journalistic future made up of hyper-active News Bunnies and narcissistic bloggers. And I don't want to see half-starved newspapers presided over by executives who slavishly support a war and read out their news-lists to Number Ten, either, in return for a cheap headline.

You can get junk food on every high street. And you can get junk journalism nowadays in every outlet there is. But just as there is now a movement for Slow Cooking, I should also like to see more of a demand for Slow Journalism.

Slow Journalism would show greater respect for the craft of the reporter – a patient assembler of facts. A skilled tradesman who is independent and professionally reputable. And who can get paid the rate for the job. A disentangler of lies and weasel words. Don't you think such people are useful operatives to probe the dodgy mechanisms of our imperfect democracy, and our very imperfect world? I do.

But the power of the reporter does not lie entirely – or even mostly – in the nobility of soul of its practitioners, or their professional skills. Or their celebrity status. It also lies in the preservation of media outlets that are themselves powerful.

Let me explain what I mean. I was quite surprised the other day, when totting up the stuff I personally do in newspapers, to realise that the reporter does have a bit of an influence. We wrote about the way that tax-dodgers with private jets can pretend to live in Monaco, but still work four days a week in a London office. (The trick was that, when it's totting up residence days, the Inland Revenue doesn't count the day of travel out or the day of travel back. That made sense in the days of steam – but not when you can commute to London in 90 minutes.) The government now says it will stop up the loophole.

We wrote some rather savage articles about plans to restrict use of the Freedom of Information Act. They dropped the plans. We explained how NHS patient records were going to be put on a national database with no right to opt out. The scheme was reformed. And of course, Rob Evans and I wrote literally scores of articles detailing the corrupt influence of the defence ministry's arms sales department on bribery overseas. The government now says it will shut the department down.

There's only one reason why these stories have an effect. I like to think, of course, it's down to our own extreme personal brilliance. But it's not. It's because a story on the front page of the *Guardian* carries clout. So do reports on the BBC, for example – that's why Andrew Gilligan's sexed-up dossier stories caused such panic and rage in Downing Street.

And that's perhaps one of the biggest dangers of the media revolution. When the media fragment – as they will – and splinter into a thousand websites, a thousand digital channels, all weak financially, then we'll see a severe reduction in the power of each individual media outlet. The reporter's voice will struggle to be heard over the cacophony of a thousand other voices.

And politicians will no longer fear us.

And if that day comes, I'm afraid it really will be the end of the reporter.