

# The Existential Journalist

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**Self-censorship is a greatly under-stated effect in journalism. I should know because years ago I decided to cut loose as a staff reporter and begin writing the way I saw it.**

Two years before Milly Dowler, phone hacking, and Leveson I began writing *Hunting Captain Henley* as my creative PhD at Glasgow University. It's an account of one reporter's investigation into corruption at the heart of his own industry and part of it deals with the narrator's shock when he discovers his editor's extremely close connection to Special Branch, MI5, and the British Israeli Movement. After being ordered to hand over his contacts in relation to an IRA and Ku Klux Klan story, the narrator Billy Queen begins to suspect his editor Auld Nick is more closely involved with agents of the British State than he could ever have imagined. As he tracks Captain Henley (a close associate of his editor) to his work with 'The Foundation' in India Queen becomes what John C Merrill (Professor Emeritus of Journalism at the University of Missouri, Columbia) describes as *The Existential Journalist*. Merrill describes this as someone who is not 'robotized by the pressures of society to conform.' He writes:

Some of us are born, and in some kind of statistical, materialistic way slip into old age and death without any meaningful guiding principles for a meaningful life. For such people existence means a kind of passive being, connected only by birthdays, weddings, illnesses, and catastrophes. For existentialists, on the other hand, existence means a more active and involved immersion in life experiences that largely are determined by our willingness to take chances. The existentialist refuses to be a robotized citizen who sees life as no more than a period of time where the person touches most of the laid-out bases but knows little or nothing about what is in the outfield. (Merrill, 2011)

## News Androids

Merrill's 'robotized' reference is a timely one given today's multiskilling culture of media convergence that arguably mold journalists into smooth functioning androids and, in the case of Milly Dowler, unethical spies. But if we truly believe that changing the culture in newsrooms is one of the most important ways to initiate new ethical standards then there are still some hurdles to be overcome. We firstly should accept that censorship is largely self-censorship (the most corrosive and insidious form of all) by reporters who construct their news values in accordance with the scandal and hype of the commercially driven workplace and that it is therefore equally plausible to assume that student journalists will also adjust to the environment of the student newsroom in a similar vein. As we set-about developing progressive student news values Merrill spells out a stark warning - he points to something called communitarianism to describe the ethos that operates at the heart of some journalism training institutions where democratic political life is based on pre-rational moral commitments to shared concerns and opinions. He may be right. Journalists brave enough to revoke the internalization of market-driven news values could now be faced with well-meaning codes of conduct that restrict creativity. To use a crude Orwellian analogy, in some quarters the pigs may have moved into the farmer's lodgings. It may therefore be time to broaden our ethical definitions. Nietzsche, for example, did not endorse the communitarian perspective comparing it to the instinctive behaviour of herd animals. In another context let's not forget the great American journalist John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook The World* and the only American to be buried in the Kremlin, who once told his Russian Communist colleagues in the propaganda bureau to 'never change what I write.' The point is that self-censorship isn't always just the product of market driven news values, damaging though that is. Throughout the 1950's for example,

journalist and philosopher Albert Camus denounced the restrictions on freedom of speech inherent in the totalitarianism of both right and left, from Spain to Hungary. Merrill argues that journalists and journalism educators who hold communitarian ideas for society wish to quell individualism in the newsroom in favour of group thinking. And some intend to use the new post-Leveson codes to achieve it. Not only that, it is group thinking that today often places little emphasis on content and maximum focus on digital platforms. ‘It is my belief,’ he writes ‘that journalists must rebel against this growing conformism, must push back the encroaching bonds of institutionalization and professionalism, and determine to exercise maximum freedom in their endeavours,’ (Merrill, 1996, p.5). It is of course an over simplification to assume that communitarianism and existentialism have to stand in opposition to one another when it comes to creating a healthy editorial environment in which our students can flourish. Media Ethicists Clifford Christians, Mark Fackler and John Ferr argue that their brand of communitarianism, committed to civic transformation, “aims to liberate the citizenry, inspire acts of conscience, pierce the political fog, and enable the consciousness raising that is essential for constructing a social order through dialogue, mutually, in concert with our universal humanity,” – classic existentialism exemplified (1993, p.14).

## The 21st century student newsroom

If we accept the above short hypothesis then maybe it is now time to consider the development of the existential journalist as a key to transforming the culture of both student and industry newsrooms. At accreditation visits across the UK journalism lecturers are being encouraged to get the students out and about more. In *The Journalist*, Pete Lazenby (2012) explains, ‘My advice to any young and enthusiastic reporter is: put yourself about a bit. Go for a pint in the pubs in the communities you serve. So enjoy a pint, and good hunting.’ What Lazenby is (perhaps sub-consciously) describing is the beginnings of the existentialist process at work. He recalls with fondness how his newsdesk used to leave him to wander through Leeds’ wonderful Kirkgate market. What he is in essence doing is stepping out of context, a key existentialist characteristic. But it should be about more than merely love of freedom and a sense of commitment to some goal or cause (in his case obtaining exclusives for the newsdesk). It also calls for an urge to action, a dedication to creative individualism. In *Hunting Captain Henley*, for example, the existentialist narrator chooses to walk away from the electronic newsroom, mobile phones and Twitter to physically pursue the elusive Henley. Importantly though, the narrator chooses to describe the whole process, including the editorial politics that lead to the beginnings of his journey.

With all of these qualities in place it is then possible to envisage at least the possibility of challenging the powerful forces that exist both within the journalism industry and inside its related institutions. In the following extract the narrator gets in training and goes to work by planning his own DIY project that acts as the pre-cursor to his own internal investigation into Scottish journalism:

He often dreaded re-entering the rarefied atmosphere of the office. Tuesday afternoons are notoriously routine. Most of the reporters are static, still waiting on conference suggestions winging their way back from the editor’s office. They’d do as they were told, they always did. No matter the spin, the angle, the twist, they knew they had to toe the line, come up with the goods - do the business. Fingers to Auld Nick and his motley crew.

Billy is staring at the plain white bedroom wall now. It’s as white as a pan loaf. Looking closely now at the whiteness. Feeling its aesthetic smoothness from here.

Its simplicity is awesome.

Triangular.

Vertex.

He’d pop into B&Q tonight. Get the paints to start this handywork, a bit of painting and decorating was needed. He was going to paint the wall. Except he doesn’t actually want to do it. He

merely wants to think about doing it. The actual act itself would be an anti-climax. There was something else. This thought would be his, and his alone. It widnae belong tae naebedy right. Not the state nor the authorities. Nobody at all. No point in rushing in. Do it all properly Billy. First of all get the poster with all the different colours, neon pink, mid-morning blue, yellow dreamspout.

Sit down with a big mug of tea and choose maybe your top five colours.

1. Rose White
2. Natural Saffron
3. Dreamy Peach
4. Apricot Crush
5. Tuscan Terracotta

(<http://www.mylivebook.co.uk/MyLiveBook/HuntingCaptainHenley/index.html>).

It is once this creative project is in place the narrator is then able to begin thinking about the shortcomings he witnesses among some of his colleagues on the editorial floor, a nightmarish vision where journalism ethics are nonchalantly abused as journalists routinely work alongside corrupt police and government authorities to camouflage the truth. The narrator is then able to write freely what he sees:

Uncle John knew Auld Nick when he was in Special Branch. Nicolson was a passer-on of information. You caught it from him like a virus. Yet he was immune. He had the pock-scarred face and a nose like a strawberry, the master of misinformation. Auld Nick man, what's he like? The pin-stripe troosers - like a broken doon banker! (ibid.)

## Using Literary Reportage

Writing *Hunting Captain Henley* gave me the opportunity to stand back from the journalism industry and use my literary skills to interrogate its weaknesses. I experimented with the idea of not only turning my journalistic curiosity inward but conveying what I saw using my own language or literary style, as recently demonstrated (Pratt, 2013). While existentialism therefore offers us firm alternatives (provided it is used in a measured way, affiliated to practical journalism) it could conceivably be further enhanced when combined with emerging forms of literary reportage. As Arnon Grunberg states in his summing up of the problematic relationship between journalism and truth, knowledge and reality: 'Dominant contemporary journalistic practice is neither the only nor the naturally privileged way to represent reality' (in Harbers, 2010, p.74). In the UK very understated attempts have already been made to highlight the necessity of understanding individual creativity and the emergence of a new literary journalism in which to express it. Jenny McKay points to a growing awareness that reportage is a critically neglected form. However, as UK journalism moves forward it may now be possible to begin to harness the energy generated by such creativity to offer a new way to change newsroom culture. Rob Alexander demonstrates the *bildungs* process as he describes it in which a protagonist finds his place in relation to the dominant social order of mainstream journalism. This is only possible, Alexander explains, because he is ultimately confident of his authority to stand outside of that order, a crucial dimension for the growth of grass roots alternative media. It first of all demands 'the articulation of a vision critical of the ethos of journalistic professionalism and the alienating effects of what Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao have called "the regime of objectivity" that sustains it' (Alexander, 2012, p.19). The term *bildung* refers to the German tradition of self-cultivation wherein philosophy and education are linked in a manner that refers to a process of both personal and cultural maturation. It is particularly relevant in the context of social media and citizen journalism where a wealth of projects are developed outwith the mainstream of British journalism anyway. There are three conceivable steps interested hackademics can consider to begin the *bildung* process among journalism

students. Firstly, personalize the type of story material students want to cover. Secondly, point to alternatives to the self-censorship generated by communitarianism and market driven news values – this can be done with reference to great examples of literary reportage: Kapuscinski, Hersey, Hemingway. Thirdly, create a basic introduction to the theory of the existential journalist. While I'm not suggesting in depth lessons on Nietzsche, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, it might be time to at least consider the journalism of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. In *Nausea* for example Sartre tells the story of an academic who becomes aware of the intense singularity of his own existence. Objects and even other people are completely outside of his experience. This leads to complete freedom but also complete isolation. The lessons we may learn from Camus in terms of post-Leveson journalism ethics and regulation are topical, maybe even controversial. It all begins with the principle that existence (our being) precedes essence (our purpose). If we exist before we are endowed with meaning, then that means we choose our own fates as we go through life. If we choose our own fate then there is no absolute code of ethics or principles. The idea is that we, as individuals (and individual journalists) are capable of living a pleasant, moral existence even if there is no higher being commanding it. If press freedom is not absolute then can we claim the reverse for its code of ethics? Far from creating statute in our framework we may even consider for a second the possibility of a form of de-regulation in the best interests of free thinking, coupled with a common sense approach to regulation that calls for more democratic accountability – call it regulation light, a system intelligent enough not to throw the creative baby out with the scummy bathwater. But it would be de-regulation that still acknowledges (yet isn't constrained by) what the Italian political analyst Norberto Bobbio refers to as 'the suppression of mediating bodies' (in Loudon, 2010, p.274). Of course this, hypothetically, would only be possible for The Existential Journalist who is capable of considering news values and editorial hierarchies as being 'outside of his or her experience.' In practical terms, to get to that stage, it may be preferable for the new ethical existential journalist to firstly familiarize himself or herself with the arguments of the likes of Herman and Chomsky for example whose top news 'filter' is 'the profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms,' (1994, p.2). In other words, the post-Leveson journalist should not only be someone who is able to run the third eye over his own editorial colleagues (and an incestuous regulatory system controlled by a handful of proprietors and their appointed editors does not help this cause) but is also able to stand outside the demands of commerce which dictate news values, and express their perspectives in their own language, perhaps even challenging the stylistic and structural conventions of traditional news and feature writing. At UWS (University of the West of Scotland) for example we are in the process of creating the new copyrighted WORKING website <http://workinglivesblog.wordpress.com/> which is an experiment in de-stylizing interviews with ordinary working people across the country. The project was inspired by the work of the late American journalist Studs Terkel (1912-2008) who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for *The Good War* and whose book *Working* was described by critics as a work of art. Our approach is to capture in prose the poetry of real voices, the starkness of true life. The people we meet are not the result of a robotic survey. Their talk is fresh and straight, face-to-face, sometimes gritty, sometimes aspirational – it is both a form of literary reportage and oral history and is of note to this discussion for three reasons. Firstly, students who participate do not follow a conventional set of news values – there are no taut intros, no news leads and no spin – an interesting development given some of the discussions around Leveson. Secondly, the detached style of the interviews encourages students to think existentially about their interviewee and to balance that thinking with a form of progressive communitarianism. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the interviews are recorded (with interviewees permission) and transcribed to a painfully accurate level where every nuance of both dialect and content is minutely conveyed. In terms of Terkel we are, in effect, going back to the future to generate a partly new set of journalism ethics for our students that place the highest possible value on the interviewee, allowing them complete freedom of expression. The required house-style also circumvents any potential legal problems, always a consideration when dealing with outward facing student journalism websites. Working also creates an environment that encourages debate at the broadest level of engagement with participants (from bin-men to farmers) free to express their own ideas in their own words and dialect and one that, as Mick Tem-

ple explains, ‘therefore helps to promote a less elite driven news agenda, one that recognizes the importance of the emotional and the apparently trivial and, in so doing, offers wider opportunities for political engagement to all sections of society’ (2006, p. 257). In this respect the Working project also explores the concept of citizen witnessing (the world of work) and offers a platform to the contributions of ordinary people in a way that can hopefully help to reinvigorate journalism’s responsibility within democratic culture. In the following extract from Liam’s story (charity fundraiser) for example the existentialist approach of the journalist allows us to gain valuable insights into the interviewee’s working experiences that other conventional structures may not. His apparently trivial observations are revealed as existential wonder, uttered by the most everyday of philosophers.

Fundraising is about annoying people (laughs). You chap doors, door to door, trying to get people to sign up to charity. They say it’s not really using sales tactics but I reckon it is. But yeah you just pitch people all day, that’s it really, objection handle, if they give you any objections, but aye, it’s just walking for miles. Peebles yesterday, Dumbarton today – you just meet up at the office, go get the train to where you’re working or whatever – they’ll give you the map. And then they’ll go over the map with you but then its kinda pretty self-explanatory.

You get a break at half past-five for half an hour but you never really get to have a break because you’re walking to the shop and then back to where you just left off again and then that’s you until 9 o’clock and then that’s you until finishing time, get the train back, whatever time it takes you can end up back at the house at 12 o’clock, 10 o’clock, just depends.

Sometimes I feel as if I’m guilt tripping people but I’m not really. You get different reactions. There’s the instant slam, not interested. Some of them say ‘I give to other charities,’ or ‘I don’t like giving out my bank details.’ 60% of the time you get invited in. 22,000 kids are dying every day, would you miss £2 per week you ask them? You’re just trying to guilt trip me some people say. I reckon it’s down to luck.

Our team leader sends us texts to stop us negging out (becoming negative). They’ll say things like ‘let’s smash it,’ or ‘by 7.30 I want this target, or that target.’ Sometimes if we do bad the team leader will sit quietly on the way back on the bus. I’ve spent time on the dole so I know what it’s like. People do have a perception of you depending on what job you do. If you’re not working you don’t have a place in society, you’re out the loop. If you’re not working what are you going to do? You just need to do it. It keeps everyone off your back.

Regardless of literary or journalistic style and regardless of whether we are today in the presence of new statutory control of the press or not, changing the culture in newsrooms is, as Chris Frost underlined in his witness statement to The Leveson Inquiry (June 2012), ‘one of the most important ways to improve standards.’ That can only be achieved from the bottom up. To do so we must take bold steps: acknowledge the perils of communitarianism, contemplate the potential of the bildungs process, harness the creativity of literary reportage. Frost further argues that empowering journalists to make their own decisions in line with company, NUJ and PSC codes and guidelines would bring the ethics back to the individual, a defining characteristic of the 21st century existential journalist.

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