

The Royal Household (ND) Social Media Community Guidelines. [Online] Available at: <https://www.royal.uk/social-media-community-guidelines> [Accessed 4 February 2021]

Wolfe, Claire (2019) Online trolls, journalism and the freedom of speech: Are the bullies taking over? Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics, 16 (1). pp.11-21

Appendix

List of interviewees with in-text reference

Name	Title	Reference
Hannah Storm	Ethical Journalism Network director & CEO	Named
Samantha Harman	<i>Oxford Mail</i> group editor (Newsquest)	Int 1
Jenna Thompson	Hull Live digital editor (Reach plc)	Int 2
Laura Collins	<i>Yorkshire Evening Post</i> editor (JPI Media)	Int 3
Jess Rudkin	BBC Radio Bristol editor	Int 4
Melissa Dzinzi	Reporter at Leeds Live	Int 5
Conor Gogarty	Chief reporter at Bristol Post/Bristol Live	Int 6
Katie Ridley	Journalist at ITV Anglia and formerly <i>Huntingdon Post</i>	Int 7
Anonymous	Female broadcast journalist	Int 8
Kristian Johnson	Investigative reporter at Leeds Live	Int 9
Anonymous	Male reporter at a daily newspaper	Int 10
Susie Beever	Senior reporter at <i>The Yorkshire Post</i>	Int 11
Emma Britton	BBC Radio Bristol breakfast presenter	Int 12

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Making one or two more calls: teaching journalism students the *value* of news

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Abstract

With journalism in a perpetual state of flux, journalism educators are understandably concerned with teaching students about new and emerging technologies, plat-

forms, investigative tools and storytelling techniques. However, while accepting the importance of updating and renewing the curriculum in this way, we ought not lose focus on fundamentals such as the social value of news and of ethical journalism conducted for the public good. This article argues that news is vital for a society's citizens and that we should not feel embarrassed about emphasising this fact to our students. It will also argue that journalists, journalism educators and indeed journalism students have not always been sufficiently questioning about how news is selected, sourced and produced, nor about the concept of "news values". To explore these issues, the article draws on research conducted for the monograph *What's the Point of News? A study in Ethical Journalism* (Harcup, 2020) and considers how different stories and voices can be included in the news, including more perspectives from below. The article emphasises the importance of allowing journalism students to question industry norms as well as encouraging them to challenge us as journalism educators.

Introduction

Journalism education stalwart David Holmes had an innovative way of teaching students the value of asking questions: he would appear before them wearing an upturned saucepan on his head.

"I used the saucepan stunt at the start of the very first lecture with the postgrads each year," recalls David, who worked alongside me at the University of Sheffield. "I used to pop up from behind the lectern and then stand there in silence until one of the students asked me why I was standing there with a saucepan on my head. It was usually well over a minute before one of them plucked up the curiosity and courage to ask why I was doing it." Those were postgraduate students, remember. Probably just as well. Had David tried that trick with timid first-year undergraduates, he might still have been awaiting a question by the end of the session.

Asking questions is central to being a journalist – and to being a journalism student – and is therefore a fundamental part of the many and varied courses taught by members of the AJE. But do our students always ask enough questions about what we seek to teach them? Someone who thinks that students ought to challenge us more is former AJE chair Professor Chris Frost, who recalls another classroom stunt: "I used to have a slide in a lecture about asking questions that said, 'You need to know the simelons of every fedangle an interviewee says'. I was only ever challenged to explain it once - very depressing. I eventually had to ask

who knew what it meant, and I hope my pointing it out to them at least started them on the road to questioning everything."

Challenge as integral to practical teaching

Questioning, that is, not just what they are told by sources, fed by spin doctors or pick up on social media. Students would do better if they also questioned more of what we say to them, more often than they do, rather than taking it at face value. Of course, we are employed for our knowledge and experience, and I certainly don't wish to suggest that students ought to apply a kneejerk rejection of everything we try to teach them. But they might more frequently greet our nuggets of wisdom with the occasional pointed, "Why?" or even a deep and meaningful, "Really?"

During the widespread Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, some journalism students in Sheffield (and, I suspect, beyond) seized the moment to ask some sharp questions about issues such as the relatively low proportion of black staff and guest speakers. This was a very welcome example of challenge, and it complemented efforts within the journalism education sector towards what has become known as "decolonising the curriculum" (as at De Montfort and Birmingham City universities, to give just two examples). These are clearly positive developments, but it would be a shame if the asking of awkward questions is seen as of relevance only to students of colour and the preserve of the guest lecture or the more academic seminar.

Challenge ought to be integral to our everyday practical teaching. When it comes to definitions of what counts as news, for example, do we really want journalism students simply to absorb and reproduce the norms of "the industry" – itself something of a problematic phrase – without questioning prevailing news values? Or to accept industry sourcing routines as the best – or only – ways of finding news stories?

Since entering journalism education (Harcup, 2012) I have spent more than two decades engaging with academic explanations of how to define newsworthiness, much of it in collaboration with Deirdre O'Neill (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; 2017; O'Neill and Harcup, 2020), but when it comes to explaining exactly why a particular item is news, there remains an unmistakable element of "because it just is!" about the process (Brighton and Foy, 2007: 147). Having said that, by standing back we can observe patterns and tendencies, meaning that taxonomies of news values will remain a useful way of exploring what does – and what does not – become news. That's why, in many university journalism departments, you are never more than 10 metres away from a lecture slide showing a list of such news values. But how often do our students challenge these, rather than simply copy them down? And how often do we encourage critique of such values during practical sessions on news reporting?

News matters to society and we should never be embarrassed about emphasising to students the vital role news plays for all of us as citizens. It is precisely because it matters so much that we should also encourage future generations of journalists to ask questions about what tends to be regarded as newsworthy and who tend to be the usual suspects appearing as news sources. Such questions are asked and discussed on many of our courses, but perhaps not frequently enough and certainly not always in a way that incorporates the challenge of asking, "Why?" into practical teaching sessions such as newswriting workshops and news-days. As Sally Reardon (2016: 946) found in her study of the ways in which HE sells journalism courses to prospective students, there tends to be a "down-playing of critical engagement" whereas "the practice of journalism itself becomes constructed as immutable". Which raises the question, what value is journalism without critical engagement?

Looking at news from the bottom up

Critical engagement is expected on most of our courses, whatever the slick promotional websites and brochures may say, but do we integrate it into our skills-based sessions as much as we could? That is one of the thoughts that has occurred to me from time to time while teaching journalism students about what we call news values. Another thought has been, where and what are the actual values involved in much of what we call news? Such questioning, which resulted in a research monograph (Harcup, 2020), [reviewed in this issue of *Journalism Education*] has been informed by engagement with the ever-growing literature on journalistic ethics generally and more specifically with the work of feminist scholars such as Linda Steiner

(2018; 2020), Gaye Tuchman (1978) and Meenakshi Gigi Durham (1998; 2015).

Steiner and Durham in particular have written about an approach that has been labelled “feminist standpoint epistemology”, which is a fancy way of saying that we might see things differently if we try to look at something from the point of view of those at the bottom of a power structure than from those at the top. That seems a useful idea to keep in mind when we think about journalism, including our practical teaching about news. If our starting point is that news matters to us as citizens, it is worth asking if we might be able to do it better by more routinely seeking out and listening to the standpoints of those in less privileged positions.

Consider an institution that will be familiar to most readers of this journal: the university. Anybody commissioned to write a story about the workings of a university would not be doing it very well if they spoke only to the Vice Chancellor or to a bunch of professors. Academic staff lower down the food chain might have quite different experiences, so surely it would be worth asking for their views too. But even that would be doing less than half the job, because a university relies on a vast range of administrative, professional services and technical staff who could all tell you a thing or two from very different perspectives. Would that be enough? “No,” we would chorus if presented with such copy, “what about the students?” Any account of the life of a university that excluded the point of view of those regarded by some as “customers” (argh!) would clearly be missing a crucial part of the story; and while we are at it, we might acknowledge that students’ experiences will not all be the same. But even hearing from a range of students and staff might still leave some issues unaddressed. Might we not learn something deeper about how higher education institutions operate today if we sought out the stories of those who see things from the bottom up? The low paid, precariously employed cleaners or security staff, for example; what’s their analysis of what’s really going on?

If that all sounds like an awful lot of work, then it does not necessarily have to be. Take Andrew Cline’s (2011) study of news coverage in one US city, for example, which showed how news media tend to ignore the perspectives of poorer people even when the subject matter of news stories – such as jobs, investment, prices and fares – impacts directly on local working-class communities. Cline points out that sometimes it can be relatively straightforward and not massively time-consuming to consult a small number of extra sources. “What I am suggesting here is rather simple,” he writes: “Reporters and editors should look for opportunities to add actionable information for the poor and working class to regular news coverage,” for example by making “one or two more phone calls to sources that can speak to the interests of the poor in a given news situation” (Cline, 2011: 8).

What’s good for economics stories – or stories about higher education – can also be applied to a wide range of news reporting. Not to every story, every time, but more often than it tends to be. That means, for example, not always treating council meetings and agenda papers as potential tales about party politics or processes, as stories in themselves, but as a starting point for stories about the people on the receiving end of such policies. Covering a housing committee? Find out what people living on the relevant housing estate have to say about things. Writing about homelessness? Find out what homeless people are saying, as well as those who work alongside them. This is basic reporting that is produced by some of our students some of the time. But it does not always happen, either in student newsrooms or industry ones. Shouldn’t we be showing our impressionable students that we – and they – should expect better?

Journalism is not about amplifying misinformation

By advocating taking the time to make one or two more calls to those at the bottom looking up, I am certainly not arguing that whatever such people say should then automatically be reported as news. Journalism is not about amplifying misinformation just because it might come from a member of an oppressed or marginalised section of the population; normal standards of questioning and seeking verification must still apply. It’s just that, by seeking out such voices, journalists have a better chance of gaining a more nuanced view of events, of hearing different stories, of asking “more questions, new questions”, as Steiner and Okrusch (2006: 114) put it.

Asking more and better questions might lead to more and better answers, some of which may, in turn, help reveal significant social trends and issues. For example, some of the best reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic has managed to expose structural inequalities within society at the same time as telling compelling human interest stories. Similarly, it is now more common to see extreme weather events reported within the context of the planet’s climate emergency rather than as isolated local incidents. Is there scope for other issues to be tackled like this? How many instances of gendered violence by men against women can we cover as entirely

isolated incidents before occasionally wondering if there might be a bigger story and “acknowledge sexual violence against women to be a worldwide epidemic”, as Durham (2015: 185) puts it? Or a pandemic, even? Again, not every story, not every time, not at the expense of getting the specific details of the latest incident, and always taking care to remember that correlation is not the same as causation. But wouldn’t it be good to see the news, sometimes at least, reported in a more holistic way with a bit of context, nuance and analysis?

Part of the value of news is that it can be variously entertaining and shocking as it tells us something we didn’t know about our fellow people, and long may it continue to be so. News can be funny as well as serious, uplifting as well as gloomy, and there is much of value in that. But that’s not all there is to it, for those of us who believe that news plays a vital role in informing us as citizens. If journalism students don’t learn about this social value of news while they are learning the basics, can we assume they will necessarily pick it up when they enter the workplace?

To help journalism students – and perhaps the rest of us too – understand the value of news more deeply, we could usefully incorporate a more questioning approach to the stories they work on during newdays as well as those they may discuss in seminars. For a start, we might ask the following questions, and encourage our students to do the same while working on stories.

Twenty questions that are always worth asking

What’s the point of this story?

Why this angle?

What might we be missing?

What assumptions have we made?

Who is directly affected by this event or situation?

What do those most directly affected have to say about it?

Who might be indirectly affected?

Who has the least power here and what are their experiences, their analyses?

Who has the most power, and what might they be up to?

How does this story relate to long-term trends?

What structural forces are involved that might not be immediately apparent?

Where are the women in this story?

The working class people?

The black people?

People with disabilities?

What about younger or older people or others whose perspectives might be missing?

Have we stereotyped anyone?

Can we show anyone doing something positive in this situation?

Have we checked exactly what is meant by simelons, fedangles or anything else that we might not be sure about?

And, should I make one or two more calls?

If questions along the lines of some of those suggested above were to be asked during the newsgathering process – more often than they are – then news could be made even more valuable than it already is. Some might say that such a questioning approach is unrealistic, that nothing would ever get done if we all sat around contemplating our navels, and that in any case there is no point because journalists would have neither the time nor space to operate like this in a “real” newsroom. Yet, if we don’t require the best, most ethical forms of practice from students on our courses, when exactly are they going to get the message? Cutting corners to reflect the “real world” ought not be our default position. In any event, even in the real world, not all news is of the instant variety. Some stories and packages are worked on over longer periods of time, and these in particular offer scope for making more calls and bringing in a wider range of perspectives.

Even with breaking news on newdays, we might sometimes remember that we have the luxury of being able to pause proceedings to ask some of the above questions. Yes, we want our students to work on real

journalism in real time under real pressures akin to those found in real newsrooms – but we know that it's not *real* real. We have the power to halt a workshop session or newscast occasionally, to challenge the students on the value or depth of a story's content – not just its presentation – and encourage them to challenge us too. Hopefully, they will take some of this approach with them wherever they go on to work in the future, incorporating it into their practice alongside a knowledge of the law and ethics (including, but not restricted to, issues covered by industry codes).

Calls can be made in more ways than one

There is scope for the journalism education curriculum to be both broadened and deepened, for efforts at decolonising the curriculum to encompass practice as well as theory, and for us to encourage journalism students to make one or two more calls. That includes seeking out and listening to those whose voices may not be very loud but who may be at the sharp end of policies or issues. Such calls can be made in more ways than one. For those of a certain generation that might mean reaching for a bulging contacts book and making an actual phone call, or even visiting a location and knocking on doors, all of which remain valid methods. But other calls are available, as demonstrated by Yorkshire Post reporter Susie Beever, who explains:

We got sent a story on the PA wire a few weeks ago about the rising cost of rent, and the cities in the UK that have the biggest rises in rent, and two of them were Leeds and York, perfect for the Yorkshire Post, so we did that. All the quotes in that PA story were from corporations, businesses, ministers, and I just thought – this is affecting human beings, all the people quoted are not actually affected by this, so I did a bit of digging around just on Facebook and found a single mum with two children who was basically having to take money from her kids' food budget every week to meet the rent, which is just horribly unfair, and I thought that was more evocative than a quote from the Chamber of Commerce. (Quoted in Harcup, 2021.)

Making an extra call might therefore include putting a call-out on Facebook, whereby, with a bit of luck and without delaying matters too long, a policy story can become a human interest story that has the perspective of somebody directly involved, at the target end of the policy in question. That's just good journalism, isn't it? Encouraging our students to make one or two more calls to people at the bottom of the pile - plus maybe a wider range of experts - can produce better stories at the same time as reinforcing the idea that news has value to society.

And it all starts with curiosity and having a questioning approach. Speaking of which, how is David Holmes getting on with that saucepan on his head? "Over the years, I developed it into a bit of discussion that didn't end until one of the students asked what I was going to do to remove it," he recalls. "I'd tell them that my attempts to ease it off had failed, and that the fire service wanted to use specialist cutting equipment to remove it. The students' ordeal didn't end until one of them had done the reporter's job and asked if they could go along with me to record the process."

Asking questions remains at the heart of journalism, and if news is as valuable to society as many of us think it is, then it is worth going out of our comfort zones to ask some awkward ones. If in doubt, make that call and ask that question.

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