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The ColdType **READER**
EXTRA / 2

**KEEPING
THE MEDIA
SAFE
FOR BIG
BUSINESS**

ESSAYS BY
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& DAVID EDWARDS**
JONATHAN COOK





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ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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INTELLECTUAL CLEANSING / 1

KEEPING THE MEDIA SAFE FOR BIG BUSINESS

DAVID CROMWELL & DAVID EDWARDS

Martin Tierney is one of a tiny number of mainstream journalists willing to review our book, *Guardians of Power*. In June 2006, he published an accurate outline of our argument in the Scottish daily, the *Herald*, commenting: “It stands up to scrutiny.”

He added that we “do not see conscious conspiracy but a ‘filter system maintained by free market forces.’ After all it wouldn’t be appropriate to show the limbs of third world children during Thanksgiving as it would only remind consumers who was really being stuffed.”

Exactly so. But if no conspiracy is involved, how on earth does the market manage to filter dissident views with such consistency? As baffled Channel 4 news reader, Jon Snow, told us:

“Well, I’m sorry to say, it either happens or it doesn’t happen. If it does happen, it’s a conspiracy; if it doesn’t happen, it’s not a conspiracy.” (Interview with David Edwards, January 9, 2001; http://www.medialens.org/articles/interviews/jon_snow.php)



Practitioners of alternative journalism also seek to redress what they consider an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalization (at worst, the demonization) of certain social and cultural groups and movements

In 1996, Noam Chomsky attempted to explain to an equally bemused Andrew Marr (then of the *Independent*):

Marr: “This is what I don’t get, because it suggests – I mean, I’m a journalist – people like me are ‘self-censoring’...”

Chomsky: “No – not self-censoring. There’s a filtering system that starts in kindergarten and goes all the way through and – it doesn’t work a hundred percent, but it’s pretty effective – it selects for obedience and subordination, and especially...”

Marr: “So, stropky people won’t make it to positions of influence...”

Chomsky: “There’ll be ‘behaviour problems’ or... if you read applications to a graduate school, you see that people will tell you ‘he doesn’t get along too well with his colleagues’ – you know how to interpret those things.”

Chomsky’s key point: “I’m sure you believe everything you’re saying. But what I’m saying is, if you believed something different you wouldn’t be sitting where you’re sitting.”

So what happens when a professional journalist does express “something differ-

ent”? Is their office seat just yanked away from them and rolled under a more reliable rear end?

Consider the case of our reviewer, Martin Tierney, who wrote for the *Saturday Herald* for seven years. In August, Tierney reviewed Barbara Ehrenreich’s book *Going To Extremes* (Granta, 2008). With his usual uncompromising vim, he wrote: “It is essentially a tirade against every method used against US citizens to ensure that their wealth is systematically transferred to government and corporate elites.

“This is done, she claims, via abuse of the tax system, scapegoating immigrants; denial of unions and Gestapo tactics used by the likes of... [a large US supermarket] to ensure this and a perennial ‘Warfare State’ where taxpayers’ money merely is used to enrich arms dealers while bludgeoning them into a unnecessary paranoia.”

Notice that Tierney merely *reported* claims made by Ehrenreich in her book regarding the use of “Gestapo tactics”. It seems the *Herald’s* initial response to the review was positive – the piece was excellent, he was told. (Email to Media Lens, September 25, 2008)

But someone else on the *Herald’s* editorial staff informed Tierney that the reference to the supermarket’s “Gestapo tactics” had caused great upset and anger in the office. One senior editor in particular was deeply unamused. This last reaction appears to have been decisive. Indeed, as a result, Tierney was told, he was being asked to relinquish his column. The reasoning? His editor felt she could not feel confident that he would not make similarly extreme comments in future – comments that might slip undetected into the paper. (Email from Tierney to Media Lens, October 1, 2008)

The reference to a lack of confidence immediately recalls the work of journalist and physicist Jeff Schmidt who has studied the filtering of career professionals in some depth. The professional, Schmidt explains, “is an obedient thinker, an intellec-



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tual property whom employers can trust to experiment, theorise, innovate and create safely within the confines of an assigned ideology. The political and intellectual timidity of today’s most highly educated employees is no accident.” (Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p.16)

The question of trust is crucial – employers must be able to rely on their human property to play by the rules. This is why Tierney was fired.

The employer’s reference to Tierney’s extreme comment was ironic indeed given the extreme nature of the horrors exposed in Ehrenreich’s book – titled, after all, *Going To Extremes* – and outlined in Tierney’s review.

Tierney tells us the review was published – with the unamusing mention of the US supermarket, and all references to it, removed – on August 16. (Email from Tierney to Media Lens September 30, 2008)

If you’ve ever wondered why the press finds it so hard to find ‘space’ for the multitude of excellent, radical analyses, this incident gives an idea of the true reasons. The unwritten corporate media rule is that you can say what you like about the powerless – they can be treated with contempt, smeared and slandered without limit. But when the powerless attempt to challenge the powerful, a different rule applies.

By contrast, in May, the mighty Eamonn Butler, Director of the Adam Smith Institute, had no problems attacking the BBC in a *Times* article titled, ‘Watch out, the Gestapo are about.’

Butler was not merely reporting an accusation of “Gestapo tactics”, as Tierney did; he was himself protesting a BBC advert that sought to scare viewers into paying their licence fees. Butler commented:

“Nor are these Gestapo tactics new. Years ago, similar advertisements showed a family laughing at some comedy programme on TV. Comes the voice-over: ‘If you have a TV licence, you’re laughing.’ In the dimly-lit street, a van draws up. Black

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leather boots crunch up the path, the family still oblivious. The voice continues: 'If not...' A gloved hand presses the bell. Suddenly, the family stops laughing, their faces gripped by sheer dread."

You can bet there was no great upset in the Times' offices.

In July 2007, Ned Temko and Nicholas Watt of the *Observer* reported that the wife of Downing Street's former chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, had "lifted the lid on the private fury felt by Tony Blair's inner circle over the cash-for-peerages inquiry, accusing the police of 'Gestapo tactics.'" Imagine the shock if Temko and Watt had been sacked for *reporting* the accusation.

In September 2006, Dominic Lawson wrote an article titled, 'Gestapo tactics in freedom's name.' Protesting the US-UK use of torture in fighting "the war on terror", Lawson wrote: "America is inevitably tainted – and Britain by association – with the unanswerable charge that it has used the tactics of the Gestapo in the name of freedom."

Samantha's Christmas Cards – And Other Scandals

All around us, unseen, our media are being continuously cleansed, pore-deep, of important rational comments for the simple, crude reason that they threaten profits.

Last month, Nick Clayton, a columnist at the *Scotsman* for 12 years and formerly its technology editor, reported that advertisers were leaving the paper in favour of online media. He wrote: "Whether you're looking for work or a home, the web's the place to go."

Clayton was fired for writing this. He commented on his sacking: "I really don't understand why I've been fired... I was merely reporting what estate agents had said to me about advertising in newspapers."

Freelancers aren't fired, just waved away. Last month, Greg Philo of the prestigious Glasgow University Media Group submitted a powerful article, *More News Less*



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Views, to the Guardian's Comment is Free (CiF) website. Philo wrote:

"News is a procession of the powerful. Watch it on TV, listen to the Today programme and marvel at the orthodoxy of views and the lack of critical voices. When the credit crunch hit, we were given a succession of bankers, stockbrokers and even hedge-fund managers to explain and say what should be done. But these were the people who had caused the problem, thinking nothing of taking £20 billion a year in city bonuses. The solution these free market wizards agreed to, was that tax payers should stump up £50 billion (and rising) to fill up the black holes in the banking system. Where were the critical voices to say it would be a better idea to take the bonuses back?"

"Mainstream news has sometimes a social-democratic edge. There are complaints aired about fuel poverty and the state of inner cities. But there are precious few voices making the point that the reason why there are so many poor people is because the rich have taken the bulk of the disposable wealth. The notion that the people should own the nation's resources is close to derided on orthodox news." [Read the full article in the November issue of the *ColdType Reader* at www.coldtype.net]

He added: "At the start of the Iraq war we had the normal parade of generals and military experts, but in fact, a consistent body of opinion then and since has been completely opposed to it. We asked our sample [of TV viewers] whether people such as Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Naomi Klein and Michael Moore should be featured routinely on the news as part of a normal range of opinion. Seventy three per cent opted for this rather than wanting them on just occasionally, as at present."

Matt Seaton, the CiF editor, rejected the article on the grounds that "it would be read as a piece of old lefty whingeing about bias". (Email from Greg Philo, September 30, 2008)

This from the same website that has

just published Anne Perkins's analysis of the merits of different leaders' wives. Sarah Brown, wife of prime minister Gordon, and Samantha Cameron, wife of Tory leader David, are doing so much better than "that awful Cherie" Blair, it seems:

"Brown is unflashy and sincere. Cameron is cool and elegant. The joke is they could be sisters, with pretty but unacademic Samantha and the older, not quite as pretty but dead brainy Sarah."

Samantha "keeps her mouth shut and looks cool and stylish", although there have been gaffes: "no one mentions those packs of Smythson's Christmas cards (£5.70 each, £57 for 10)". And so on . . .

We found this within seconds of visiting the site – there are limitless comparable examples. At time of writing, Perkins's article has garnered 15 uninspired comments, including: "It is a very silly *Daily Mail* sort of article as others say, but this is the way the *Guardian* is going, alas."

As we ourselves know, where dissidents can't be sacked, patronised or ignored, legal action is always an option.

CanWest, one of Canada's largest media companies, is the owner of newspapers, radio and television stations, and online properties. CanWest founder, Israel (Izzy) Asper, a strong supporter of Israel's right-wing Likud party, reportedly told the *Jerusalem Post*: "In all our newspapers, including the *National Post*, we have a very pro-Israel position... we are the strongest supporter of Israel in Canada."

The *Guardian* noted that Asper "was highly critical of any perceived anti-Israeli position in the media, particularly the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's coverage of the Middle East, which he suggested had anti-Semitic overtones".

Responding to this consistent pro-Israeli stance, the Palestine Media Collective produced a satirised version of CanWest's *Vancouver Sun* newspaper on the theme of the 40th anniversary of the Israeli Occupation in 2007. This included stories such as:



The Palestine Media Collective produced a satirised version of CanWest's *Vancouver Sun* newspaper on the theme of the 40th anniversary of the Israeli Occupation in 2007. This included stories such as: "Study Shows Truth Biased against Israel, By CYN SORSHEEP." In response, CanWest hit the media collective with a SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) claiming a violation of trademark law

"Study Shows Truth Biased against Israel, By CYN SORSHEEP."

In response, CanWest hit the media collective with a SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) claiming a violation of trademark law. Because the writers were initially anonymous, CanWest sued the printer and another activist, Mordecai Briemberg, who had passed out copies. Robert Jensen, professor of journalism at the University of Texas, takes up the story: "Such a suit is legitimate only when the plaintiff can show there's a reasonable likelihood that people will confuse the fake with the real and that some harm will result. In this case, there clearly is no confusion and no harm, and hence no serious claim. But CanWest presses on.

"Calling the [Palestine Media] Collective's paper 'a counterfeit version' that amounts to 'identity theft,' CanWest seems to want to frame this as a kind of intellectual-property terrorism: 'This piece was not satirical. It was not a clever spoof. It was a deliberate act to mislead and misinform thousands of people by using the actual *Vancouver Sun* masthead, logo and layout," reads a company statement on the case." (Jensen, (<http://www.zcommunications.org/znet/viewArticle/18899>))

Briemberg initially sought coverage of his plight from the Canadian press without success. He then approached the international press, including the *Guardian*, with an opinion piece. The *Guardian* directed him to their Comment is Free website, which has ignored him.

The Index on Censorship has run an edited version of his op-ed here: www.indexoncensorship.org/?p=560

A Seriously Free Speech Committee has also been formed to help with honorary members such as Naomi Klein, John Pilger, Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman, and many others:

www.seriouslyfreespeech.wordpress.com/

There has so far been no mention of this story in any UK newspaper.

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IT'S ALL ABOUT THE MONEY

JONATHAN COOK

In response to the previous essay, former Guardian and Observer journalist, Jonathan Cook, who is now based in Nazareth, Israel, reporting on Israel-Palestine issues, emailed us: "I woke up after four hours sleep, my head buzzing with recollections of my early years in journalism. I've been sitting and writing ever since, trying to make sense of it all. It's quite therapeutic and more revealing about how the media work than I had appreciated before. Your essay really has set off processes in my head." He also wrote this 6,500-word piece which had the effect of "reframing my career in a way that finally makes sense to me"

Lesson 1: It's all about money

In many ways, my introduction to journalism was far from typical. In the mid-1980s, after university, I was casting around for a career and decided to "try" journalism. I called the local free newspaper in the city in which I had graduated, Southampton, and offered my services.

Free newspapers were a new and rapidly growing form of print media. Cheap production had been made possible by the new technologies about to revolutionise the working practices of all papers, including those in Fleet Street. I was using a small Macintosh computer, writing stories and designing the pages, at a time when the nationals were still laboriously typesetting. At the *Southampton Advertiser*, we produced a weekly newspaper with just four editorial staff: an editor, two reporters and a pho-



When they first emerged, some of the independently owned ones were not as dire as they uniformly are today – for reasons we will come to

tographer. The advertising staff was more than twice that size.

By definition, free newspapers are advertising platforms – since they have no other way of raising revenue. But when they first emerged, some of the independently owned ones were not as dire as they uniformly are today – for reasons we will come to. The *Southampton Advertiser* was one of a small chain of free newspapers on the south coast owned by a local businessman. He made no effort to conceal the fact that he saw his newspapers simply as vehicles for making money.

Most ambitious journalists start out on a daily local newspaper (I would soon end up on one), owned by one of a handful of large media groups. There, as I would learn, one quickly feels all sorts of institutional constraints on one's reporting. As a young journalist, if you know no better, you sim-

ply come to accept that journalism is done in a certain kind of way, that certain stories are suitable and others unsuitable, that arbitrary rules have to be followed. These seem like laws of nature, unquestionable and self-evident to your more experienced colleagues. Being a better journalist requires that these work practices become second nature.

The *Advertiser*, however, offered a far more enlightening and free-wheeling environment for a young journalist. Larger newspapers structure their offices in such a way as to ensure that editorial and advertising staff keep an ostentatious distance from each other, usually on separate floors – as if underscoring to everyone that editorial judgments are free of commercial concerns. At the *Advertiser* we dispensed with such niceties. The advertising staff were next door and we freely mingled and socialised.

Nonetheless, on the *Advertiser* the official motto was that we were there to satisfy the readers. I remember in my first week being given a slide show by the advertising manager, whose various independently audited surveys revealed that the *Advertiser* was better liked and more read in the city than the paid-for local evening newspaper – including, he added proudly, by the ABs, professionals with money to spend on consumer goods.

I doubt he was lying. Invariably when I went out on a story, local people welcomed me into their homes telling me how much they admired the paper and often asking why the evening paper could not be more like ours. People seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of being included in our coverage.

It seems almost paradoxical to me now. How could a newspaper entirely dependent on advertising outperform a newspaper part of whose revenues came from a reading public who had to pay for it? Surely the evening newspaper had far more incentive to come up with reports that appealed to its readers than the free sheet? We will



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come to a full explanation soon, but here I will highlight a major part of the answer.

An important concern of the *Advertiser*'s owner was getting his paper better read than the evening paper so that he could attract advertising away from it and charge more per page to the advertisers. It was a form of genuine – and short-lived – competition between local newspapers. Independently owned free sheets like the *Advertiser* created a real battle for readers with the paid-for evenings, a situation that had been unknown for many decades in almost all Britain's cities.

It also meant that free sheets like the *Advertiser* that were not part of a media corporation had a real motivation to write stories that were popular with readers and dispense with the fusty, deferential reporting that had typified the monopolistic evening papers for decades. The *Advertiser* preferred to risk upsetting officials if it meant gaining readers.

To this end, the *Advertiser*'s owner had recruited an award-winning former investigative reporter from the Daily Mirror. Our paper was full of hard-hitting news reports and investigations. I remember being sent out to take on shotgun-wielding “cowboy clampers”, conmen who at that time had the freedom to clamp cars and then demand money with menaces; we exposed council corruption; and I was put in charge of running a campaign to bully the city into beginning recycling projects.

Soon council officials were refusing to speak to me. It felt like we were in a low-budget remake of *All the President's Men*. Our efforts were amply rewarded too. That year we won the Free Newspaper of the Year Award.

Incredibly, this was the most exciting time I would ever experience in newspapers. Most of the time it felt like we were free to write anything. On the rare occasions we did make a “mistake”, however, it was clear that it was because we had upset an advertiser rather than the readers. It was a lesson not lost on me.

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Today, free newspapers are derided. And there is good reason. The *Advertiser's* rapid fate has been shared by all the other free sheets that tried to compete with a local established daily paper.

The *Advertiser* became a genuine threat to the commercial interests of the local *Evening Echo* (as it was then known). Even with a tiny staff, the *Advertiser* had far more interesting stories than the evening paper. Humiliatingly, the *Echo* was forced to run follow-ups of our stories when our exclusive reports raised questions in the city council chamber. Readers started abandoning the evening paper: why pay for your news when you can get it better written and delivered through your door for free?

Shortly after I had been poached by the *Echo*, the *Advertiser* was bought out by the evening paper's owners. The staff of the free sheet were relocated to the *Echo's* building and my former paper was eviscerated.

Within a short time a new editor was appointed and the paper's hard-hitting reports were ditched. Life-style features and syndicated material dominated instead. One of my former colleagues would confide in the pub that his job was now to rewrite press releases. The *Advertiser* stopped being a rival to the *Echo*; it became simply an advertising supplement to it.

Lesson 2: Forget about Woodward and Bernstein

It is, of course, no surprise that a large newspaper would want to devour a threatening smaller one. That is the nature of the free market. But, given journalists' assumptions about the workings of a free press, should the *Echo* not have had every interest, after destroying the *Advertiser*, in learning from the latter's success? Even given the restoration of its monopoly, would it not have a commercial interest in seeking to win back for itself the loyalty of local readers?

At first it looked as if that was going to happen: both I and the *Advertiser's* former editor were taken on by the *Echo*. But it



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soon emerged that we were to be stymied every time we tried to write the kind of stories we covered for the *Advertiser*.

Here is a typical experience I had early on with the *Echo*. I had been approached by a group of residents concerned that the Church of Scientology was intending to use a local health clinic to promote their work. The residents felt this was a misuse of public space and that the clinic's reputation might confer some legitimacy on the Scientologists' claims. When I told the news editor about the story, he looked mortified. "We never run stories about the Scientologists," he said. Why, I asked. "Because they have money and sue every time we mention them in the paper."

I am not even sure whether his excuse was genuine. Had I written the story for the *Advertiser*, I doubt we would have been sued. But, looking back, I think his comment concealed some bigger truths about the difference between the *Echo* and the *Advertiser*.

Unlike most media owners, the *Advertiser's* original proprietor was not a corporate player; he was a local businessman who had spotted an opening in the media market created by new technology. This created a conflict of interest for him that for a time favoured the readers of his newspapers.

Against the might of the evening paper, the *Advertiser* was a minnow. Because it depended entirely on advertising revenues, it had to steal readers from the *Echo* if it was to push up its rates. But to make the paper interesting to readers we needed to upset the local centres of power like the council, even though that could in the longer term potentially harm the owner's business interests.

It may also be that this was a short-term strategy by the proprietor. He knew that if he could take away readers from the *Echo*, the evening paper would be forced to buy him out. Interestingly, the *Echo* set up a rival free sheet to try to kill the *Advertiser* but it never made a dent in its rival's popularity.

Also, the *Advertiser's* ability to cause harm to powerful interests in the city was limited. We published maybe half a dozen high-profile news stories each week in the paper. We easily found enough material of community interest to fill our weekly newspaper. We concentrated on corrupt council officials, bad planning decisions, conmen, and shoplifting local celebrities.

The *Echo* was a very different kind of operation. It published a hundred or so stories each day on all aspects of local life. If it had allowed its journalists the freedom to use their critical faculties about stories that were of no concern to the city's powerful elites, how would it have been able to stop them using the same skills when handling stories that did concern such elites?

And just as importantly, how would the newspaper have been able to maintain the pretence of demanding "balanced" and "objective" reporting from its journalists if it so conspicuously applied double standards, depending on whether a story concerned powerful interest groups or not? It would have been clear to even the most blinkered editorial staff member that the paper's professional standards – the freedom to write without interference – had been compromised.

So instead the *Echo's* reporters learnt to write in a bland and deadening style that made most stories seem either of little or no importance or left the reader terminally confused with a ping-pong of he said-she said. Official sources of information and confirmation were always preferred because they were more "reliable" and "trustworthy". Council officials were always ready and glad to speak to an *Echo* journalist.

To many of the *Echo's* staff, this had all become second nature. Promotion meant moving on from the lowly beat reporter, covering community issues, to other posts: the city or county council correspondent, who depended on council officials and councillors for information; the court reporter, who loyally regurgitated court proceedings; the business staff, who tried



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to liven up advertisers' press releases; and the crime correspondent, who spent all day hanging out with policemen.

In other words, success at the newspaper was gauged in terms of obedience to figures of authority, and the ability not to alienate powerful groups within the community. Ambitious journalists learnt to whom they must turn for a comment or a quote, and where "suitable" stories could be found. It was a skill that presumably stayed with them for the rest of their careers.

Those who struggled to cope with these strictures were soon found out. They either failed their probationary periods and were forced to move on, or stayed on in the lowliest positions where they could do little harm.

I followed the professional guidelines as laid down by my bosses but found myself deeply dissatisfied with the *Echo* and its institutional constraints. My overwhelming impression was of the *Echo's* failure as a newspaper – though at that time I attributed it simplistically to cowardice on the part of the paper's editors.

Possibly my eyes were more open to this failure than some of my colleagues because I had enjoyed relative freedom to report at the *Advertiser*. At the *Echo*, unlike the free sheet, reporters were rarely allowed to write reports based on readers who phoned in with their stories – tip-offs that had been the bread and butter of my earlier work. Investigations too were out. Sources for stories were always official sources.

It is interesting that investigative journalism, always a rare form of the reporter's craft, has all but died out – and is nowadays largely restricted to the internet.

Most young journalists, myself included, were raised on the idea that we had joined a profession that aspired to Woodward and Bernstein-type exposes. We understood, and our profession's own mythologising encouraged such an understanding, that investigative reporting was the purest form of the journalist's craft. In many ways it was the ideal.

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It is therefore instructive to consider how newspapers treated investigative reporting in its heyday.

Of note is the fact that such investigations, when they occurred, were carried out almost exclusively by a national media desperate for accolades; investigative teams were numerically tiny in comparison with the main editorial staff; the investigative reporters were restricted to their own discrete teams with almost no contact with other editorial departments; and their choice of subjects was closely “supervised” by senior editorial staff.

In other words, the investigative reporter is the exception in journalism rather than the model. He or she is the loose cannon whose reports can bring the paper great acclaim but only if the reporter is kept on a tight leash. The honour they bring the paper can equally turn disastrous if the wrong subjects are pursued or the story leads in unpredictable directions that threaten powerful interests. This is why investigative reporters have always been a small and threatened breed and have always been closely scrutinised.

Lesson 3: Professional means servile

Most journalists learn their trade by working on local media with periods of study spent at one of dozens of journalism colleges around the country. Typically, the young journalist is taken on by a newspaper for up to two years on probation (indentures) at very low pay, and the study periods are paid for by the newspaper.

During this period, when they are both financially and professionally vulnerable, journalists are taught the main skills: how to structure and write news stories, master shorthand, navigate through the system of local government, and abide by the laws of libel. The newcomer is offered proper employment if he or she passes the exams, shows competency and is considered to have absorbed satisfactorily the constraints



If that sounds difficult to believe today, my experience living in Nazareth – the largest Arab city inside Israel – may be helpful. Here journalists are essentially party political functionaries, working for newspapers established by and closely allied to those parties

described above.

I travelled a slightly different route. After working at the *Advertiser*, I went off to get myself trained and won a scholarship to Cardiff University’s journalism post-graduate course, one of only two such programmes in the country then. Of the 50 or so idealistic trainees alongside me, all hoped to leapfrog the local papers and TV and arrive in a plum job in the national media.

The course spent a lot of time reminding us that we were following in the footsteps of the country’s leading journalists, many of whom had attended Cardiff. Instead of two years of probation on a local newspaper, we had an intensive year-long period of study to groom us for our probable rapid ascent through the ranks of the media.

Cardiff therefore spent a great deal of time persuading us that we were professionals: that is, members of a profession with rules and ethics just like our counterparts in the law and medicine.

That is actually a departure from the historic view of journalists, which was that they belonged to a trade and that they learnt their craft on the job through what were effectively apprenticeships. Journalists in the nineteenth century understood that they were little different from cabinet-makers: you learnt the rules of the craft from your elders and then applied them.

If that sounds difficult to believe today, my experience living in Nazareth – the largest Arab city inside Israel – may be helpful. Here journalists are essentially party political functionaries, working for newspapers established by and closely allied to those parties. Most journalists write little more than press releases for their party and then publish this propaganda as news reports in the party’s newspaper. Unsurprisingly, journalists are generally held in low esteem.

Until the twentieth century that was pretty much the situation in Britain and the United States. A journalist worked for a proprietor with a clear political agenda and produced copy in keeping with that

agenda. Such journalists were sometimes derogatively referred to as “hacks”. According to Wikipedia, “hack” in this context derives from “hackney”, “a horse that was easy to ride and available for hire”. The proprietor was, of course, the rider.

The press earned its reputation as the Fourth Estate largely because the interests of these newspapers, representing different elite groups, sometimes clashed. In such circumstances a journalist was briefly able to shine a light on corruption or intrigues in the corridors of power. (Much the same could be said of the judiciary, yet few would suggest that nineteenth-century judges represented interests any more varied than those of the ruling classes from which they were drawn).

A change in the media’s view of its role began in the early stages of the twentieth century, provoked by several parallel developments, among them: universal suffrage, the emergence of large corporations, the establishment of psychology as a field of study, and the consolidation of the PR industry.

Media Lens have described the process of the “professionalising” of journalism in detail in a previous essay (www.medialens.org/alerts/04/040728_Bias_Balanced_Journalism.HTM) so I will not dwell on it again. But several points should be highlighted.

The most urgent battleground for the press barons, and the financial interests that lay behind them, was the winning of a popular mandate for the corporations to accrete even greater power. The chief tool for sanctioning this agenda would be the media. As part of this concentration of power, the proprietors waged a relentless war against the radical and socialist presses, gradually starving them of advertising until their demise was inevitable. (The free sheets of the 1980s would pose a similar threat and be dealt with in much the same way by the established local newspapers.)

But there was a catch: once only a few rich individuals exclusively owned the



Journalists were no longer to be seen as tradesmen; they were professionals. Their Hippocratic oath was balance, objectivity, neutrality. Unlike their predecessors, they would be trained in academic institutions and could then be trusted to offer only facts in news reports. Opinion would be restricted to the comment pages to give a newspaper “character”

country’s media, the propagandistic nature of their papers’ journalism would be even more evident. After all, the public understood only too well that newspapers were there to serve the interests of their proprietors. This impression needed to be changed if the public was to be successfully pacified in the face of the corporations’ agenda.

And so dawned the era of the “professional” media. Journalists were no longer to be seen as tradesmen; they were professionals. Their Hippocratic oath was balance, objectivity, neutrality. Unlike their predecessors, they would be trained in academic institutions and could then be trusted to offer only facts in news reports. Opinion would be restricted to the comment pages to give a newspaper “character”. That conveniently explained why there was so little differentiation in the various papers’ coverage or in their selection of news stories.

Be sure: the product was the same as it had always been. But now the media became much better at packaging itself. While reporters on the red tops continued to be characterised as “hacks”, journalists on “quality papers” started to be trusted as reliable and impartial conduits of information.

The campaign of “professionalising” the media was so successful that, after their training, even the journalists believed they were disinterested parties in reporting the news. The selection of certain stories as newsworthy and the further selection of certain facts as relevant to the story had once been understood to be dependent on the biases of the organisation a journalist worked for. Now reporters were made to believe that these arbitrary criteria were inherent in a category of information called “news”. And that only through their training could journalists recognise these criteria.

The success of this campaign can be seen in the huge rise in the popularity of journalism as a career among middle-class children. The rate at which this “profes-

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sionalisation” of the media has accelerated can be judged by the fact that 20 years ago when I was training there were only two post-graduate courses in the UK. Today, there are more than a dozen. There are also numerous undergraduate programmes teaching journalism.

By making journalism appear so attractive as a profession, the corporate media have gained an additional benefit, familiar to anyone who understands the laws of supply and demand.

When I was at Cardiff, our teachers used to warn us of the difficulties of finding employment as a journalist. There were just far too many people interested in working in the media, and not enough vacancies. The competition today must be far fiercer than it was then.

Journalism has always been a precarious career. By having too many journalists chasing too few vacancies, the media's owners retain the whip hand. Any individual journalist who questions the framework within which he or she works will be sure to find someone ready to take their place. In this way a craven workforce can be maintained.

Lesson 4: There is no home of the brave

Like many British journalists, my ambition was to reach the national media. I had been working for several years at the *Echo*, learning my craft, proving I was a professional, slowly moving up the hierarchy in terms of promotion but not much in terms of responsibility. I seemed to have a hit a glass ceiling, and I had a vague sense of why.

A damning criticism I have often heard in newsrooms was that someone is not a “team player”. Nobody said this to my face at the *Echo* but I had no doubt that it was a suspicion held by the senior staff. I thought of them as cowardly, failing in their role as watchdogs of power. Maybe my contempt showed a little.



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In those days, my experiences at the *Echo* did nothing to shake my faith in the profession. I assumed that these failings were restricted to the paper and its lily-livered editors. Were new editors to be appointed, or were I to move to another paper, I would find things were different. The national newspapers, I had no doubt, were braver.

Working on a national is seen as the pinnacle of a professional journalist's career. Very few make it that far. The competition is fierce, and acceptance is slow. As we have seen, there are many stages in the early career of journalists designed to handicap and weed out those who do not conform or who question the framework within which they work. Noam Chomsky refers to this as part of a “filtering” process. Are the nationals different?

It worth examining how a journalist who works for the *Guardian*, *Independent*, BBC or any other major media institution gets a job. There are several stages on the way to a secure position in the national media.

The most common requirement is to have completed several years in the local media. As we have noted, the turnover of staff at the local level is high, with most “non-team players” identified very quickly. Those who survive tend to share the professional values of the editors they serve. If there is any doubt in the case of a particular individual, the national media can always check his or her track record of published articles.

A tiny number of privileged individuals manage to avoid this route and come direct from university. At the *Guardian*, where I worked for several years, it was seen as a mild amusing idiosyncrasy that the newspaper recruited the odd trainee direct from Oxbridge, and more usually from Cambridge. It was generally assumed that this was a legacy of the fact that the paper's editors had traditionally been Cambridge graduates. These journalists invariably worked their way up the paper's hierarchy rapidly.

This preference for untested Oxbridge graduates can probably be explained by the filtering process too. The selected graduates always came from the same predictable backgrounds, and were the product of lengthy filtering processes endured in the country's education system. The *Guardian* appeared to be more confident that such types could be relied on without the kind of "quality control" needed with other applicants.

For a journalist like myself who was well trained and had spent several years in the local media, getting a foot in the door of the nationals was relatively easy. Keeping my feet under the desk was far harder. Few recruits are given a job or allowed to write for a paper until they have completed yet another lengthy probationary period.

On national newspapers, this usually means spending considerable time as a sub-editor, as I did, a role in which the journalist is slowly acclimatised to the newspaper's "values". The sub sits at the bottom of the newspaper's editorial hierarchy, editing and styling reports as they come in for publication. Above him or her are the section editors (home, foreign etc), a chief sub-editor (usually an old hand), and a revise sub to check their work. Subs invariably spend years as freelancers or on short-term contracts.

The subs' primary task is to stop errors of fact and judgment getting into the newspaper. But their own judgment is constantly under scrutiny from editors higher up the hierarchy. If they fail to understand the paper's "values", their career is likely to stall on this bottom rung or their contract will not be renewed.

Reporters who avoid a period of sub-editing are in an equally insecure position. They are usually taken on as a freelance writer before getting a series of short contracts. During this period news reporters are mainly restricted to the night shift, when their job is to update for the later editions stories that have already been filed by senior reporters during the day. Writers



Hollywood films may perpetuate the idea of reporters, even junior ones, regularly initiating new stories for their papers, but actually it is relatively rare. In truth, reporters are more usually directed by senior editors on which stories to cover and how to cover them

offering material from abroad fare little better. The best they can usually aspire to is being taken on as a stringer, retained by the paper for an agreed period.

Hollywood films may perpetuate the idea of reporters, even junior ones, regularly initiating new stories for their papers, but actually it is relatively rare. In truth, reporters are more usually directed by senior editors on which stories to cover and how to cover them. Unless they are senior writers, usually specialist correspondents, they have little input into the way they cover events.

If they are to survive long, writers must quickly learn what the news desk expects of them. Newcomers are given a small amount of leeway to adopt angles that are "not suitable". But they are also expected to learn quickly why such articles are unsuitable and not to propose similar reports again.

The advantage of this system is that high-profile sackings are a great rarity. Editors hardly ever need to bare their teeth against an established journalist because few make it to senior positions unless they have already learnt how to toe the line.

The media's lengthy filtering system means that it is many years before the great majority of journalists get the chance to write with any degree of freedom for a national newspaper, and they must first have proved their "good judgment" many times over to a variety of senior editors. Most have been let go long before they would ever be in a position to influence the paper's coverage.

Journalists, of course, see this lengthy process of recruitment as necessary to filter for "quality" rather than to remove those who fail to conform or whose reporting threatens powerful elites. The media are supposedly applying professional standards to find those deserving enough to reach the highest ranks of journalism.

But, of course, these goals – finding the best, and weeding out the non-team players – are not contradictory. The system

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does promote outstanding “professional” journalists, but it ensures that they also subscribe to orthodox views of what journalism is there to do. The effect is that the media identify the best propagandists to promote their corporate values.

It is notable that there is not a single large media institution dedicated to providing a platform to those who dissent or express non-conformist views, however talented they are as journalists. Only at the very margins of what are considered to be left-wing publications such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent* can such voices very occasionally be heard, and even then only in the comment pages.

Surprisingly, most national newspapers talk a great deal about their “values” and the special character that marks them out from their rivals. And yet when I was seeking a job on the national newspapers, it was striking how interchangeable the staff were. I spent periods working freelance for the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Telegraph*, and kept meeting the same aspiring journalists trying to get work at these apparently very different newspapers.

As freelancers we quickly became aware of what each newspaper expected from us in terms of story presentation, and the differences were not great – it was more about nuance (that favourite term of professional journalists). Similarly, the nationals regularly poached senior staff from each other.

Journalists like to argue that this is not surprising in a “professional” environment. After all, the point of “professional” standards is that all newspapers should apply the same principles of supposed neutrality and objectivity.

Where, then, is this difference of character to be located in our media? According to most journalists it is to be found in the commentary pages and in the selection of news stories. This is where a paper reveals its true values. (We will gloss over the problematic fact that the need for stories to be selected – by whom and according to what criteria? – in itself undermines the idea of



What I discovered, however, was that, when I rung up the news desk back in London, the editor would always start by asking me where else the story had been published. Paradoxically, when I said it was an exclusive, I could hear his interest wilt. Even though he knew I had a great deal of experience, he did not want to take a chance on a story that no one else had reported

impartiality.)

In fact, despite their claims to having distinctive characters, newspapers closely follow the same news agendas, trying to mirror each other’s story lists. One of the jobs I once had on the foreign desk was to scan the pages of the first editions of rival papers to see if they had any stories we had missed. All national papers do this compulsively.

Lesson 5: Success comes with the herd

The mirroring by newspapers of each other’s news agendas is often attributed to human nature, in the form of the herd instinct or the tendency to follow the pack. In truth, this is the way most reporters work out in the field. They attend press conferences, they chase after celebrities together, they speak to the same official spokespeople.

I learnt this myself the hard way when I moved to Israel to report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Naively, I assumed that, in line with my vision of the ideal journalist as an investigative reporter, a Woodward or a Bernstein, that I should be trying to find exclusives, stories no other reporter knew about. After all, most newspapers still include as their motto some variation on the claim to be “First with the news”.

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On run-of-the-mill stories too, the demand from the news desk was the same: could I get an official source to confirm the story? It happened even when I had seen something with my own eyes. And an official source meant an Israeli source. It felt almost as if the Israeli government and

army had to give their seal of approval before a story could be published.

In fact, more than 95 per cent of the reports filed by Britain's distinguished correspondents in Jerusalem originate in stories they have seen published either by the world's two main news agencies, Reuters and Associated Press, or in the local Israeli media. Exclusives are almost unheard of. The correspondent's main job is to rewrite the agency copy by adding his own "angle" – usually a minor matter of emphasis in the first paragraphs or an addition of a few quotes from an official contact.

This reliance on the wires is in itself a very effective way of filtering out news that challenges dominant interests. The agencies, dependent for survival on funding from the large media groups, are extremely deferential to the main Western power elites and their allies. This is for two chief reasons: first, large media owners like the Murdoch empire might pull out of the arrangement, or even set up their own rival agency, were Reuters or AP regularly to run stories damaging to their business interests; and second, the agencies, needing to provide reams of copy each day, rely primarily on official sources for their information.

The minnow in the battle between the agencies is AFP, the French news agency. And much like the *Advertiser* in its golden days, AFP needs to beat the Reuters-AP cartel by finding other readers / buyers for its wire service. It does this by trying to provide a limited supply of alternative news, especially of what are called "human interest" stories.

In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict this sometimes translates into sympathetic reports of Palestinian suffering at the hands of the Israeli army or the Jewish settlers, stories hard to find in Reuters or AP. Not surprisingly, the media in countries that do not subscribe to the Western corporate view of world affairs are the main subscribers to AFP.

The main other source of information, the Israeli media, reinforces the coverage



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trends of the big agencies. Israeli newspapers are subject to all the usual institutional constraints we have considered in the case of the evening paper in Southampton. But they also reflect the dominant values of a highly ideological and mobilised society. The British media's reliance on partisan Israeli news gatherers for information severely undermines their own claims to objectivity and neutrality.

Being a foreign correspondent in Israel, it should be underlined, is no different from being one anywhere else in the world. The same issues apply.

The inadmissibility of many important details of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – especially when they concern the weaker, Palestinian side – is not confined to news reports. Even the opinion pages of newspapers are closed off to the full spectrum of human, mainly Palestinian, experience and relevant political context, as I have repeatedly discovered.

Through personal contacts and fortuitous circumstances, I managed in the early stages of the second intifada to publish several commentaries in the *International Herald Tribune*. All were critical of Israel's behaviour in a way that is rarely seen in any American media.

After a short time, Israel's powerful lobby, realising that I had evaded the normal safeguards, moved into action. After one of my commentaries, the lobby organised the largest postbag of complaints the IHT had received in its history, as a sympathetic editor confided in me. I was forced to submit a lengthy defence of my article to counter the campaign of pressure from the lobby groups, with the IHT eventually accepting that there were no errors in my piece and refusing to publish an apology. However, they severed all links with me – another triumph for the lobby.

Subsequent efforts by the main Palestinian media organisation in the US to get my commentaries published in American papers and journals have failed dismally. Even publications regarded as progressive

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by American standards refuse to consider my pieces.

The use of institutional power to silence dissident voices is more savage and ugly in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than elsewhere, but similar obstacles face any journalist anywhere in the world who tries to break out of the narrow confines of mainstream reporting, analysis and commentary.

Lesson 6: It's not really about readers

How is it then, if this thesis is right, that there are dissenting voices like John Pilger, Robert Fisk, George Monbiot and Seumas Milne who write in the British media while refusing to toe the line?

Note that the above list pretty much exhausts the examples of writers who genuinely and consistently oppose the normal frameworks of journalistic thinking and refuse to join the herd. That means that in Britain's supposedly leftwing media we can find one writer working for the *Independent* (Fisk), one for the *New Statesman* (Pilger) and two for the *Guardian* (Milne and Monbiot). Only Fisk, we should further note, writes regular news reports. The rest are given at best weekly columns in which to express their opinions.

However grateful we should be to these dissident writers, their relegation to the margins of the commentary pages of Britain's "leftwing" media serves a useful purpose for corporate interests. It helps define the "character" of the British media as provocative, pluralistic and free-thinking – when in truth they are anything but. It is a vital component in maintaining the fiction that a professional media is a diverse media.

Also, by presenting these exceptional writers as straining at the very limits of the thinkable, their host newspapers subtly encourage a view of them as crackpots, armchair revolutionaries and whingers – as they often are described in the paper's



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feedback columns.

The case of Fisk is instructive. All the evidence is that the *Independent* might have folded were it not for his inclusion in the news and comment pages. Fisk appears to be one of the main reasons people buy the *Independent*. When, for example, the editors realised that most of the hits on the paper's website were for Fisk's articles, they made his pieces accessible only by paying a subscription fee. In response people simply stopped visiting the site, forcing the *Independent* to restore free access to his stories.

It is also probable that the other writers cited above are among the chief reasons readers choose the publications that host them. It is at least possible that, were more such writers allowed on their pages, these papers would grow in popularity. We are never likely to see the hypothesis tested because the so-called leftwing media appear to be in no hurry to take on more dissenting voices.

Finally, it should also be noted that none of these admirable writers – with the exception of Pilger – choose or are allowed to write seriously about the dire state of the mainstream media they serve. Sadly, it seems self-evident that were they to do so they would quickly find their employment terminated.

We are fortunate to have their incisive analyses of some of the most important events of our era. Nonetheless it is vital to acknowledge that even they cannot speak out on an issue that is fundamental to the health of our democracy.

How then do I dare write as I have done here? Simply because I have little to lose. The mainstream media spat me out some time ago. Were it otherwise, I would probably be keeping my silence too.

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