
INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the art of writing stories for newspapers and magazines. It is needed because, if the print media are to survive the internet age, they must evolve a distinctive role involving more than the basic skills of news gathering and reporting. Simple news stories can be done more easily and far more quickly via radio, television or the web. The future for print lies increasingly in the quality of writing or the depth of analysis. Newspapers are already moving in this direction. Where ten years ago the majority of features in a quality newspaper would be less than 1,000 words; today features of 2–3,000 words (or more) are not uncommon. Saturday and Sunday magazines proliferate, demanding well-written profiles and features. Balancing the increase in the length of features and profiles, there has been a massive growth in the number of short, personal and opinion pieces, some of them little more than 300 words, but all of them demanding fresh, original writing.

As Mary Hadar, for many years a commissioning editor on the *Washington Post*, says: 'These days so much of what ends up on the front page is a feature. Even when you are covering a war, you want to experience it, the feel of it.' So, although this book concentrates on feature writing, it looks also at reportage and it includes pieces at full length because it is hard to get a sense of the shape and structure of extended features when all you get is a couple of paragraphs. In Part II of the book there are examples of writing that are powerful, memorable, colourful or funny, each with a commentary on structure, style and writing quality, encouraging readers to learn from the best practitioners. It is not meant to provide a blue-print for young journalists so much as a spring board. I hope it will inspire and encourage those who want to make their writing individual and memorable because it is this skill which will really mark out those who are most likely to 'make it' in a world over-crowded with information. To quote Hadar again:

I was always watching other newspapers and magazines for a distinctive voice. Maybe a young writer doesn't recognise their own voice. You have to push them a bit. Push them on to the hire wire without letting them fsall.

But the book isn't only about writing. It is also about how stories are framed and constructed. It challenges the assumption that journalists merely

report, impartially, what they see and hear (perhaps with a few literary techniques thrown in). It recognises that most newspapers and magazines recount events within the context of existing narratives of the world, which necessarily colour, not only what they report, but how they report it. This approach to the news has until recently remained firmly fenced into the section of the world labelled 'media theory'. Practitioners have attacked it for undermining the very values upon which the profession of journalism is founded. It is used here for two reasons. It will help students of journalism to understand how stories are constructed. That will make them better writers. It will also arm them with an understanding of how easy it is to accept a one-sided account as 'the truth'. By understanding how competing cultural narratives work, young journalists will perhaps be a little better equipped to resist pressures to conform, and may in turn help shape new and more inclusive narratives for the future.

Journalists have to be good narrators in order to hold attention in a world in which information streams unceasingly through our daily lives (written, visual, sound, or all three). Their job is to carry messages not just about things that we need to know in order to get on in the world, but also about who we are and how we are changing. The first kind of message, usually referred to as 'hard news', tends to be the subject of most books about the practice of journalism. The second kind of message, about people – the things they do, the things they buy and the way they behave towards one another – are usually dismissed rather derisively as 'soft news'. People who read 'soft news' are thought to be either dumb or female (or both) and the inclusion of more soft news in 'serious newspapers' and TV programmes is often described as 'dumbing' down (Franklyn, 1997) or feminising.

For those who believe that journalism has fallen off its moral perch, the central complaint is always that newspapers are too taken up with 'unworthy' tittle-tattle about celebrities and tragic stories about 'victims' (Bird and Dardenne 1988; Franklyn, 1997; Sparks and Dahlgren, 1992; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000) and that serious news (of governments and wars, political organisations and the economy) is so oversimplified that people cannot make proper use of it. The view seems to be that real news events, like green vegetables, should be digested because they are good for us, and that any attempt to make them palatable is likely to rob them of their value. Even some of those who take 'unworthy news' seriously do so only because they are concerned that these stories are doing 'ideological work' which is aimed at keeping the down-trodden in their place.

This debate isn't new. Simon Jenkins, quoted in the Guardian (Engels, 1996) said: 'there is always a golden age of journalism and it was always when the person discussing the subject came into journalism'. Indeed, the concern about the right way to communicate important information goes right back to Plato, who thought that using representations to demonstrate

ideas or psychological truths (*mimesis*) was dishonest and that more direct forms, in which the author *tells* the audience the story (*diegesis*), were purer and more truthful. The counter-view is that, since all information is always selected, there can be no pure and truthful form. In all cases, writers decide which questions to ask, and who they will speak to. They prioritise information that fits their own view of events. Those who find ways to ‘show’ rather than simply ‘telling’ their readers are merely trying to help them understand. As Wayne C. Booth (1961) suggests in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, all stories are told, *mimesis* is just an illusion created by the story-teller.

If there is a difference between journalists today and journalists in that far-off golden age before we all ‘dumbed down’, it is not so much what we write about, but how we write it. There was a time when the well informed read more than one newspaper. Today the well informed read newspapers, periodicals, books, watch television, listen to the radio and, for instant news, they go online. With all that noise out there to compete with we have to work far harder than we have ever done before just to get a hearing. One way in which we do this is by creating an illusion of intimacy and involvement by using personal stories as metaphors and experiences as examples. Some Writers, such as Colin Sparks (1992: 41), see this as a problem:

They [the popular press] offer the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of social totality. The simple reality is that the nature of the social totality is neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in its terms. ... Critical thought must ... necessarily involve the processes of abstraction even if the critical impulse itself is ultimately grounded in immediate experience.

Sparks’ promotion of abstract thought over personalisation comes up against what Bird and Dardenne (1988: 78) described as the journalist’s paradox: “The more “objective” they are the more unreadable they become; while the better storytellers they are, the more the readers will respond and the more they fear they are betraying their ideals.’

There are certainly journalists who continue to be plagued by this dilemma, but there is also a new generation of journalists who feel less of a conflict (Bird and Dardenne, 1988: 78). They recognise that we no longer live in a deferential world. Our readers don’t want to be talked down to from a lofty height. They want us to talk in terms they understand. They are more likely to find out about a subject if we have caught their interest rather than gabbling away high above their heads. This doesn’t mean that journalism has simply become another form of entertainment. We have only to see how newspaper readership rises in times of crisis to recognise that there is a thirst for knowledge, and understanding, but readers also like to know what people are wearing and who they have fallen in love with.

Journalism is more than a means of bringing news about disasters and changes in government policy. It is also a critical weather-vane for cultural change. Stories about celebrities may irritate but if we understand them as vehicles for cultural myths (Lule, 2001; Silverstone 1988), we can see that they play a part in both change and resistance. We play out our attitudes to race, gender, sexuality, and so on through stories. The people our newspapers chose to feature may be celebrities but the stories they tell are age-old concerns about social norms and values. When a footballer's sexual exploits are splashed across the newspapers, they provide a vehicle for a discussion of social attitudes to fidelity. When the same sportsman is filmed doing a victory lap with his child on his shoulders, he is passing on a message about the changing role of fathers.

Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, in their book *The Art of Fact* (1998: 13g), define journalism as work that is 'animated by the central journalistic commitment to the truth', based on fact-gathering (not just working from memory or sensory observation) and timely. From this definition, they specifically exclude commentary and memoir. I agree that journalism must be based on evidence, but that evidence can also be drawn from our own memories and observations of our own emotions, as well as from the experiences, emotions and memories of others. It should be animated by the quest for truth, but tempered by an understanding of how difficult that quest can be. It should bring us news of how we feel as well as news of what is done in our name. This book is about writing about things that matter (and even those that don't matter much) so that they will be read.