



Scowling at their notebooks

How British journalists understand their writing

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the understanding of newswriting within British print news journalism and, in particular, the practice's management of the role of language in the news. Its material comprises journalists' reflections on their practice in metatexts such as memoirs and textbooks. The article draws on phenomenological sociology and Bourdieu's theorization of the censorship of ways of speaking within the journalistic community to show how writing tends to appear in journalists' discussions of the job in ways that reduce the force of its challenge to journalism's self-understanding. It concludes by suggesting that the habits of thinking about writing in British journalism stand in the way of any substantive reflexivity within British news practice or any reorientation of the practice in response to critiques of the active role of journalism in constructing understanding of society.

KEY WORDS ■ journalism culture ■ journalism ethics ■ journalistic identity
■ news discourse ■ news language

To the individual in this machine [of writing the news] it brings its own dilemmas: the agonising narrow line between sincerity and technique, between the imperative and the glib – so fine and delicate a boundary that one frequently misses it altogether, especially with a tight deadline, a ringing phone, a thirst and an unquiet mind. Accept that, and the game is up. (Cameron, 1978 [1967]: 311)

Introduction

The style of journalism that rose to dominance in the 20th century faces a number of contradictions that are focused at the level of language. News practice aims to present readers with objective and vivid depictions of events,

yet depends on phrasing that, through its formulations and approximations, tends towards sameness. It aims to describe reality but leaves journalists often aware of a huge excess of reality that either does not fit or is not exciting enough to make it onto the page or broadcast. This article explores aspects of how print journalism in the British context has historically managed such problems by analysing the reflections on newswriting of 30 journalists across the second half of the 20th century. It argues that the notion of what it is to be a journalist involves something that, following Bourdieu (1991), we could call a censorship of writing. The article shows how writing tends to appear in journalists' discussions of the job in a host of ways which reduce the force of its challenge to journalism's self-understanding. Language may appear either as an extension of the excitement of the chase or as a mirror of reality and, therefore, not really language at all, or as a special, supplementary quantity, that sits on top of basic news. It may be mentioned as something that has to be gone beyond, either under its surface or through it, to reach 'what really happened', or in terms of a special logic of scarcity, by which tightly constrained aspects of news style are valued because of the difficulty of negotiating them. Lastly, responsibility for news language may be displaced onto the audience for whom it is written. Rarely is it mentioned as an achievement of the journalist and still more rarely is it foregrounded in discussion of what is good about the craft. This article explores how writing is understood within British news practice, in terms of the premise that the bundle of such habits of thought available in the journalistic community reinforces a particular identity by trying to circumscribe language's role in producing the news.

The article concludes with a discussion of the contribution such analysis can make to journalism ethics. It suggests that such rarely stated, commonsensical notions of the craft, which are embedded in newswriting, need to be openly discussed and questioned before we will see the kind of reflection on journalism's role in society that many critics call for in actual news practice. So *The Times* media editor Raymond Snoddy (1993: 33) has talked of a 'moral blindness' within British journalism which hinders the acknowledgement that the news must do more than relate facts (see also Bell, 1998: 18), while the philosopher Andrew Edgar argues (2000) that liberal theory, with its ethical focus upon the individual and upon facticity, has left journalism ill equipped to reflect upon the ways in which it reinforces or reshapes cultural identities and cultural politics in society. British journalism's insulation against frequent criticism along these lines is connected to its defensive buttressing by this bundle of habits of thought about writing. A journalism that reflects upon how its forms represent and construct relations must struggle in the context of these stories that journalists tell themselves about language.

Theoretical preliminaries

The article's central premise is that journalists' statements and stories about journalism set the context within which the practice takes place. Phenomenological sociology proposes that we construct our sense of ourselves partly through constant monitoring or reflection upon our actions in our everyday interactions (see Butler, 1990; Giddens, 1991). This 'reflexivity' is not necessarily conscious but, because we can give reasons for our actions, it can be seen to be discursively constructed (Barker and Galasinski, 2001: 38). In other words, our identity emerges out of our constant monitoring of what we are doing in terms of our knowledge of discourses of how to act properly in a social context. As Deborah Cameron (1999: 444) puts it, we might regard people not so much as talking the way they do because of who they are, but as 'who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk'. What it means to be a journalist, then, can be thought of as constructed in journalists' daily performance in ways that are in accordance with the discursive norms surrounding journalism, where they display their 'journalisticness' and reinforce that discourse.

If the identity of the journalist is an achievement of this kind of constant reflection, we could argue that the negotiation of identity will be most strongly apparent in statements such as memoirs, written largely for, and within the context of, the journalistic community. In these metatexts, journalists' negotiation of their position within journalism, their ways of holding themselves with respect to each other and to their material, are to the fore and should, therefore, be able to be observed. Barbie Zelizer (1993: 219) describes such texts as key to maintaining the practice's 'interpretive community'. In the stories told in informal settings, in memoirs, in professional meetings and elsewhere, there exists 'a shared past through which journalists make their professional lives meaningful' and through which they define appropriate practice (see also Good, 1993; Ettema and Glasser, 1998). Zelizer sees the meaning-making work of journalists' stories as particularly important, given the largely untheorized, unprofessionalized and instinctive nature of journalism.

Such a theoretical framework has particular value in exploring how journalists write. As Bourdieu (1991: 14) points out, the way social actors use language plays a significant symbolic role in the struggle for status in a field. Language use is always implicated in power relations, so that language users are always oriented towards a 'system of specific sanctions and censorships' in the linguistic market. He writes:

Discourses are always to some extent *euphemisms* inspired by the concern to 'speak well', to 'speak properly', to produce the products that respond to the demands of a certain market. (Bourdieu, 1991: 78; emphasis in original)

According to Bourdieu's model of discourse, the field of British news journalism will value certain ways of speaking and will devalue others. In order to receive status as journalists and to participate successfully in the field, journalists will be oriented towards a particular disposition or 'habitus'. There will be little symbolic value, for example, in dwelling uneasily on how the conventions of newswriting shape the news, and indeed there will be a substantial cost in such thinking in terms of the journalist's position in the field. We can expect to see discussion of writing and language censored by attitudes of doubt and uncomfortableness towards words, and indeed much of what is discussed here can be understood in such terms.

To illustrate the point, consider Harold Evans' funeral oration for his former colleague David Blundy, killed while reporting in Central America. The tendency of funeral orations towards idealization brings into particularly sharp relief some of the norms and ideals at work in the journalism community:

It is a testament to the integrity of David's endeavour that he hung his long frame over his portable for so long at such ungodly hours, scowling so gloomily at his notebook. 'Do you find a problem,' he said, 'of getting the words in the right order? What's it all about?' Of course! Writing may be hard for everyone, but it's easier to dazzle and shock and entertain than it is to get the words in the right order when you have set yourself, in the rough urgent compressions of journalism, to grapple with truth. Is the story accurate? Is it fair? Is it boring? David, naturally, doubted whether he met the tests he set himself; he did. (Evans, 1990: 311)

This image of the reporter scowling gloomily at his notes captures something basic to the attitudes towards language apparent throughout the meta-texts discussed here. It is not just that good journalism is difficult. There is a sense of inner struggle, a 'grappling with truth', here, that is almost Calvinist in its language. The journalist must hold him or herself in the right way, scowling at the material, distrusting some 'easy' way of writing so as to keep the words in check. The epigraph to this article from the British reporter James Cameron expresses something similar.

Self-doubt and 'grappling with the truth' such as Evans and Cameron describe can be related back to a long tradition in western philosophy. From a social constructivist perspective, Kenneth J. Gergen argues that by doubting one's claim to authority within cultural structures and relationships,

one moves into an alternative discursive space, which is to say into yet another domain of relatedness. Reflexive doubt is . . . a means of recognizing ulterior realities, and thus giving voice to still further relationships. (Gergen, 1994: 48)

But the reflexivity displayed in these and other journalists' writings and statements seems rarely to open up Gergen's 'alternative discursive spaces' from which journalism can be seen afresh but seems to operate predominantly

as the mundane reflexivity that the sociology of everyday life describes, a self-monitoring and reconfirmation of journalistic discourse. Particularly when it comes to writing, journalistic metatexts, by and large, operate as Bourdieu's model predicts, back towards a tradition of ways of understanding news-writing that have power within the community. Among the most critical writers, such as Cameron, this attitude of self-doubt perhaps escapes censorship and is, at times, an attempt to face the contradictions of journalism. But such struggle with language slips almost invariably into struggle against language and a doubting of the journalistic identity is recuperated as a doubting of whether one 'meets the tests', as Evans describes Blundy's self-monitoring, of the standards of journalism available in news discourse. In the majority of these texts, the discomfort that arises in reflecting on newswriting is thus quickly managed. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

The article is based on an examination of 30 memoirs, textbooks, journalists' columns in trade journals and newspapers and similar texts, from roughly the latter half of the 20th century, when journalists who had spent all their working lives in what Dahlgren calls the 'high modernist' period of journalism (1996: 61–2) were writing memoirs and related texts. The sample is not scientific but selected to draw on the thoughts of journalists from a range of print journalism backgrounds, from tabloid to broadsheet, editor to reporter. The study assumes that, when these texts are discussing journalism (rather than politics or fishing or their love lives), the texts can be studied as roughly contemporary, as drawing from the same discursive field. This approach perhaps runs the risk of missing changes within that time span but it also emphasizes continuities, which both journalists and academics, concerned with justifying the now as new and different to the past, have tended to neglect. As the reprinting of both Harris and Spark's (1966, 1993, 1997) and Evans' (1972, 2000) textbooks suggests, something basic to the discourse of British news journalism is slow to change.

Censoring the writer

The first point to make about these texts' treatment of writing is that language is mentioned rarely if at all. Don Whyte's *On the Lonely Shore* (1977) spends most of its time in the lonely parts of Scotland of its title and out on the news beat. At one level, this is hardly surprising. The excitement of chasing Princess Margaret's lover, Mark Townsend, along the lanes of England (Draper, 1989) or the tension in the streets of Berlin in the early 1930s (Delmer, 1961) are of course compelling material beside the phrasing used in the reporter's copy to describe these scenes. *The Sunday Times* editor Frank Giles says he writes in his

memoir about the experiences which exert 'the strongest call' (1986: 184), and it is understandable that writing does not figure highly. But there is something noteworthy in the comprehensive neglect in many of journalism's metatexts of the writing half of the job.

More significantly still, the news text and its writing are frequently mentioned in contexts where there is a certain uneasiness or discomfort or, in a distancing manoeuvre, a wryness or sarcasm about how reporters have misled readers. In the opening chapter of his textbook, David Randall (1996: 9) discusses the writing of the news primarily in terms of the 'sleight of hands with the facts' that inevitably results from journalistic conventions, the need to simplify messy reality and the desire to make the news exciting. In his memoirs, Derek Lambert (1980: 27) describes his horror as a young reporter at having to write weather stories about '[j]am-packed roads, bumper-to-bumper traffic, sizzling beaches – the formula which generations of journalists had tried in vain to change'. It was 'the nadir of journalistic endeavour', he writes (if somewhat tongue-in-cheek). The task was so invidious partly, as discussed later, because it is a desk-bound task but also because in it the formulations and set phrases of the news confront the journalist in all their materiality, preceding and outlasting the events of any one heat wave. Style, as the act of choosing the appropriate words to fit what the journalist has found out about the world, is diminished, reduced to a formula. These positions are typical of the material studied here. The medium of the newspaper and the 'machine' of newswriting, as Cameron (1978[1967]) describes it, are problems for the reporter seeking to tell it 'the way it is'. They tend to diminish the material.

In all these memoirs and discussions of newswork across the past 50 years, there are very few comments from a journalist who feels comfortable with or confident in the effect of the language and medium of the news. We have to go back further to the inter-war years, when the press was still making 'a conscious effort . . . to discard the old, familiar journalese' of the Victorian years in favour of the plain style of modern news (Mansfield, 1944 [1935]: 237), to come across straightforward enthusiasm for the 'honest, human writing' of 'this modern age of realism' (Milne, 1931: 310). Since then, there appears to have been little cultural capital attached to language in British news journalism. When the event 'behind' the writing is obscured, there is no interest or value in the story for the reporter any more, only Lambert's mock horror. Indeed, there does not seem to be a well-developed set of ideas in the discourse of journalism to describe what is good about newswriting, what good writing would be or about how to go about producing it. Certainly, none of the journalists discussed here discusses ways of addressing their perception of inadequate writing.

The chase

The textual product of the news becomes visible in journalists' metatexts most often as an extension of the excitement of ferreting out and gathering the news. There is, for example, a long tradition of stories about getting the news through in the face of huge obstacles that tends to bracket the writing under the romance of the chase. The news is thought of less as a result of the writing process than as a nugget of information that is brought back against the odds; and the focus of interest is the steamer or special trains which reporters chartered (Knightley, 1975: 6) or the navy speedboat they commandeered (Draper, 1989: 82) to get the story to the office. Mansfield's textbook quotes the following excerpt from Charles Dickens' reminiscences on his days as a reporter, so marking it out as relevant to the novice journalist:

I have often transcribed for the printer, from my shorthand notes, important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been to a young man severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern, in a post chaise and four, galloping through a wild country and through the dead of the night, at the then surprising rate of fifteen miles an hour. (Quoted in Mansfield, 1944 [1935]: 73)

What Dickens actually wrote is not the point of the anecdote, it is rather the skill and excitement of transmitting the story in adverse circumstances. The point of interest is typical. Writing is often visible in journalists' recollections only to the extent that it partakes in that drama.

Foreign correspondents' memoirs are full of such stories, many about convincing telegraph operators in corrupt or hostile regimes to transmit messages, and others about the hazards of communicating with the office over such distances. Leitch (1973: 73), for example, tells of the time 'a desk-bound ignoramus in London had "hardened", as the saying goes, "spiritual legacy", so the story had eventually read as if the late Pope had left a will, which included a condition that Paul should set off for Jerusalem post haste'. There is an ironic kind of spice to these stories, in which words act as a fickle counterpoint to the reporter's fearless pursuit of truth under fire or in the absence of safe drinking water. Even in foreign correspondents' reports, which belong to a more writerly tradition than other news, any value in the actual words transmitted is generally a second-hand value that belongs really in the chase.

These anecdotes are, no doubt, good entertaining material for memoirs but they abound partly because they fit so well within a particular understanding of the job. A story emerges in which journalism is an adventure in the world, much more than it is the craft of telling stories. Reporters' memoirs make occasional asides about the newsroom but these mentions are either

quickly recuperated to the pursuit of the news or devalued as boring and less than optimum journalism. Leitch's 'desk-bound ignoramus' quickly disappears again. The 'most interesting job in journalism', Mansfield writes, is going out of the office and making contact with life. Deskbound colleagues can only live this life vicariously and in his description of the newsroom they pounce avariciously on copy that exudes the excitement of the chase or the thrill of danger (Mansfield, 1944[1935]: 72). The adrenaline of getting the paper out on deadline only flows, he implies, because of what is happening outside the office, and there is no sense of excitement about writing. This attitude is common. Phillip Knightley remembers sitting in the London office of the *Sydney Daily Mirror* and *Truth*, swapping the first and second sentences of British news stories around and sending the 'original' copy back to Australia. It was boring and demeaning: 'It did not take me long to find out that everyone else in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Truth's* London office was as bored as I was' (Knightley, 1996: 38). Francis Wheen (1999: 3) complains of News International's move of its titles to Wapping partly in terms of the retreat of journalists into 'joyless' and 'hermetically sealed office blocks', where they sit in front of computers and meet the world only over the telephone. In nearly all such mentions, newsroom work is boring, it is mentioned in the context of poor journalism and it has value to the extent that it can be brought back to talk of the chase.

There appears to be an underlying logic at work here that writing risks detaching journalism from the world. Reporters are, therefore, more comfortable with the idea of newsgathering. Each anecdotal point on its own may have a good deal of validity but what is striking is the way they are bundled together in a commonsensical uneasiness that the writing is not the best thing about journalism. The story lies in the event and the event happens again in the story, an idea of interdependence, bordering on the elision of both terms, that the intrusion of the idea of writing damages. But this is not explicitly addressed in these anecdotes. Instead the chase tends to eclipse and absorb the writing in journalists' recollection of the job.

The right words

A related strategy to control the intrusion of writing onto the story/event complex is to understand good style as a mirror of the 'real'. As many critics have pointed out (e.g. Glasser, 1996), journalists' writings describe a faith in the possibility of achieving a one-to-one correspondence between words and reality, so that once reporters have properly found the story, they have also found the words to describe it. This is evident in casual turns of phrase. Mansfield writes, for example, of boring books 'containing' interesting news,

rather than journalists rewriting boring material to make it interesting. Versatile writers 'extract' human interest stories from ordinary news, rather than rewrite them (Mansfield (1944[1935]: 57). Anthony Holden describes David Blundy as struggling with the 'eternal problem' of finding those 'right words':

He of all journalists was the one who would tease and worry his copy through his typewriter, pouring an excess of agony into the eternal problem – never as simple as it might seem – of getting the *right words* in the right order. (Holden, 1990: 7; italics added)

Whether or not Blundy achieves this goal – and it is interesting that references to finding the right words have the status of an ideal to be aspired towards more than a commonplace achievement by the later years of the 20th century – it provides a term with which to understand what the act of writing should do.

Again, it is the journalist's struggle, his or her attitude, that is significant in the discourse. Only rarely discussed is what the right words in a particular story might be. In fact, at times the writing is discussed as almost unmotivated. If the journalist holds her or himself properly in relation to the task – behaves properly, as Bourdieu would put it – the right words will emerge, the story will tell itself. 'Facts are stated and allowed to speak for themselves', as Leslie Sellers (1975: 245) puts it. Alfred Draper (1989: 171) defends a controversial story about British military incompetence in Aden in such terms, emphasizing that his quotations and statements are not his but independently verifiable. The code of objectivity is implicit here but more prominent as a defensive posture that the finished story has little to do with the writer (see Tuchman, 1972). Draper expresses no concern about the way he put the articles together but comments that it was 'a story that I knew I *had* to write, but one which I honestly wished I had never got' (Draper, 1989: 171). There is an imperative from events to be written, so that even the choice of the right words fades from view. At moments of vulnerability to outside pressure, there is often unwillingness from journalists to accept that they choose words. It is as if this implies a creative, almost literary act, which would foreground the writer at the expense of the event and would involve the journalist in an uncomfortable amount of responsibility for the text.

Artists of another order

Yet journalism also values what it calls 'skilled writers and good writing' (Gaziano and Coulson, 1988: 873) or 'stylish and well-constructed articles' (Lambert, 1998: x). There is a disjunction here between writing as basic reporting, about which journalists are less comfortable, and another kind of

writing, writing as a supplementary quality on top of reporting, which is accorded a special place.

The metatexts looked at here value first a pared down, transparent language. Harris and Spark (1966: 107) tell novice journalists to aim for 'easy to follow, accurate, direct and unambiguous' writing. Evans (1972: 35) talks of the importance of sub-editors being able to read *through* officialese or abstract language to some reality beyond them, rather than *into* such language, and to rewrite in clear, concrete and concise language. He writes also of a 'purity' of language that, in its ideal state, simply denotes things rather than obfuscates them. As Deborah Cameron (1996: 325) points out, this way of thinking probably owes much to Orwell's essay, 'Politics and the English Language', and the related criticism of the language of totalitarianism in his novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four* (Orwell, 1968[1946], 1949). The best style is characterized by transparency and immediacy, which allow the reader simply to look through the words to the news event beyond. It also belongs to the wider tradition of a plain style, with its class overtones of preserving good language from petit-bourgeois affectation and ornamentation (Ross, 1991). But it functions in news discourse to allow, as we have seen, the story and the event to drift into each other, each term eliding away the other.

The idea of the plain style, while it reinforces the understanding of such an elision of story and event, is, when it is discussed in these metatexts, talked of in almost abstract terms, as something independent from the telling of particular news stories. Writing emerges as a supplement to the 'naturally occurring' story, just as bureaucratic writing obscures the story.

Discussion of writing in terms of such a disjunction of the basic story and supplementary writing is common. A story, Mansfield writes in a revealing analogy, is like a rough diamond that is improved by cutting. And good writers are 'artists of another order' to those who find the diamonds:

Many of the most successful [reporters] are news-gatherers, news-presenters and organizers . . . He who knows what is of interest to the public, the subjects that appeal at a particular moment, is a journalist in a very real sense, even though he is unable to write the acceptable articles required by his intuition and discernment. The perceptive mind, though not equipped with writing ability, has its ready rewards. (Mansfield, 1944[1935]: 221)

Evans (1972: 17) writes similarly that '[S]ome of the best at ferreting out facts are not pithy writers and never will be'. Derek Lambert writes, although with typical exaggeration, of a segregation between writers and news reporters in the *Daily Mirror* newsroom:

During my time at the *Mirror* we had some outstanding features writers . . . The trouble was they were all *writers*. They inhabited distant quarters at the end of a corridor, they were all rumoured to be temperamental and they could take up to

a couple of hours to write a story. We hard newsmen had to be protected from the decadent influence of this Bloomsbury Group inside our portals. (Lambert, 1980: 60, emphasis in original)

Derek Lambert's namesake, *The Financial Times* editor Richard Lambert, describes his title's strategy to secure its market in similar terms. The *FT* will not simply report, because financial news services such as Bloomberg and Reuters do that more quickly and comprehensively, but will aim to 'add value' to its reporting both with commentary that will 'shed light' on the news and with good writing (Lambert, 1998, pp.x–xii). Whether the image is of cutting diamonds to cause them to shine or of shedding light or adding value, newswriting and editing are seen as something extra to reporting.

The implication is not just of different kinds of journalism – features and commentary versus hard news – but of two independent parts of journalism held apart within the discourse. Nor is it just a distinction between 'legmen' and 'write-up men', as they were once called in US journalism (Smith, 1979: 150). It is an aspect of journalistic epistemology, which we can perhaps trace back to an Enlightenment distinction between form and content and between style and substance (see, for example, Romano, 1986; Thomas, 2001: 2). The eulogy to David Blundy is an interesting case because it represents the journalist as exemplary both as a newsgatherer and writer. Blundy was an adventurer and a spontaneous, romantic figure, who held off writing until the last possible moment before deadline, concerned more about truth than about the penpushers in the office demanding his copy (Holden, 1990: 7). And yet, while a rebel against the diminution of the truth that office procedures seem to imply, he was also a meticulous writer, as we have already seen:

David's perennially dishevelled appearance, his unpredictability, his apparently chaotic working methods – he would often have to borrow pencil and paper from interviewees – all concealed one of the most conscientious and dedicated reporters of his time. He of all journalists was the one who would tease and worry his copy through his typewriter, pouring an excess of agony into the eternal problem – never as simple as it might seem – of getting the right words in the right order. (Holden, 1990: 5)

The ideal journalist who is too preoccupied with events in the world to remember that he needs a pencil is also the ideal journalist who spends hours hunched over the typewriter. The discourse allows the journalist to throw him or herself into one aspect and then the other while holding them distinct.

'Under the surface'

If writing can be thought of as sitting on top of reporting, it also makes sense for the journalist to think of the 'real meaning' of a text as lying beneath the

words, rather than in them. The journalist need, therefore, place less value in the details of language in which something is written, yet again displacing meaning away from the act of writing the news. Particularly with source documents, where journalists learn to distrust surface meaning, words are something to get beyond. The ideal story seems to be a subversive one, finding out what others do not want the public to know or telling what others suppress. Journalists frequently quote the dictum, usually attributed to William Randolph Hearst, that news 'is something which somebody wants repressed. All the rest is advertising' (quoted here in Harris and Spark, 1966: 4). It becomes a discursive principle governing modern journalism that the reporter should go against the grain and under the surface of language. Michael Schudson (1986: 91) writes that the journalistic instinct that there is always another story behind the story is a structural principle of the news.

At the simplest level, the discourse allows journalists to question sources in order to find out more than they have volunteered. 'Interviewing', write Harris and Spark (1966: 65), 'is the lever that pries [stories] loose' from the surface of social life. It also gives reporters a hermeneutic tool in using people's statements. Knightley mentions as a key incident in learning the job an aphoristic piece of advice from Nicholas Tomalin at *The Sunday Times*:

I walked around to Cudlipp's office repeating, 'In journalism, no no is ever final', a piece of advice from a master journalist that was later to have a resounding effect on my career. (Knightley, 1997: 101)

An interviewee's refutation, denial or refusal to talk should never be taken at face value. The emphasis which Knightley puts on this episode suggests that the idea goes to the heart of how he understands the job. The real meaning tends to lie one step beyond what is said.

Taken further, the same rule of meaning allows Derek Lambert, in mock cynicism, to state that:

I came to know some of the more hackneyed ploys of the political speakers:

Let us not delude ourselves . . . Total delusion lies just around the corner.

We will never concede . . . Humiliating capitulation in the offing.

We are united . . . the party is in utter disarray. (Lambert, 1980: 75)

It is a common joke not unique to journalism (Swales [1990] finds something similar pinned to a scientist's wall) but it is common there (see also Holman, 1998: 135–9) and accords with its practices. Rather than reproduce the texts of the powerful, the journalist is able to see her or his job in quoting from other texts and editing them down to a story as being to find something in them that their textual form covers up, whether that is the key announcement at the end of the speech, the phrase which reveals a change of policy or the

obfuscation of rhetoric. News discourse provides a powerful tool in making available the thinking that things are not what they seem in language.

The virtue of difficulty

A fifth thread to journalism's censorship of language which is evident in these metatexts is a set of statements about good writing in terms of the constraints placed upon the production of news language. By this I mean that, to an extent, the harder the writing is to achieve the more it is valued. The skills of producing news stories in an instant to dictate over the telephone or managing the huge flows of information that come into the newsroom or negotiating the stipulations of despotic editors and proprietors are transmuted by a certain logic into virtues, so that good newswriting is, at times, characterized by its difficulty. The dictum, 'Easy writing makes hard reading' (Milne, 1931: 32), is extended so that easy writing conditions are thought of as also likely to lead to poor journalism. The school or air force motto, *per ardua ad astra*, comes also to mind. Dickens' handwriting in the jiggling coach is a high point of journalism. Just as a story is more newsworthy, more of a scoop, the harder or more dramatic a task it was for the reporter, so too the harder the writing the more of an achievement it is.

It is easy to see how the value attached to the skill of dictating off-the-cuff copy down a telephone line would be extended so that the skill was still valued when there was no time pressure. The skill carries with it a suggestion that the events are dictating a 'natural' story, as well as that a reporter so accomplished at the fundamental techniques will be excellent in other respects. But again we can see a technique by which writing and language are narrowly circumscribed in journalists' value system. It becomes a general formulation, just like the subsuming of writing within the drama of the chase and the narrow focus upon the 'right words', that writing made difficult by external limits will be good journalism.

This seems to be what John Pilger remembers when he looks back wistfully on the strict stylistic constraints of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*:

It had a unique and slightly manic style created by its wartime editor, Brian Penton, who decreed that everything had to be written in the active voice, and there could be no exceptions. One good reason for this was to ensure that the source of an item was included in the story. The passive 'It is understood' and 'It is believed' were never used because they were judged guilty of fudging the origins of a statement and therefore, ran Penton's argument, its truthfulness. Paragraphs were limited to sixteen words and clichés and 'words of unnecessary length' were banned; 'during', for example, became 'in'.

Although the *Telegraph* was a tabloid, it was then a very serious newspaper, and in the hands of a skilled practitioner the staccato style had a fluency and force of its

own, and could be sustained for any length of story. And although it imposed some truly ridiculous constraints ('It rained' became 'The rain fell'), it encouraged in young reporters disciplines of speed and economy of description . . . When I first saw Fleet Street, festooned with clichés, mixed metaphors and, horror of horrors, the passive voice, I felt like a Trappist monk in Gomorrah. (Pilger, 1989[1986]: 42–3)

Pilger is aware of the ridiculousness of the news style he learnt but he still defends it as a good discipline. Carol Sarler similarly writes of the difference between tabloid and broadsheet writing in terms of the 'virtue' of the former:

Because you are writing to shorter lengths, you lose the luxury of an on-the-one-hand and an on-the-other – which as we know is a marvellous escape clause. (Sarler, 1998: 8)

We can perhaps detect a similar idea in Evans' image of words that 'have been fished expertly from the erratic torrent, weighed, assessed, revalued in the light of later catches, and finally prepared for public display in a setting which, hopefully, will exactly reflect their significance' (Evans, 1972: 2).

All these writers discuss skills required by the exigencies of the reporting process but they seem to be saying something more. While Evans includes in his celebration of textual practice a proviso that the process should, 'hopefully, exactly reflect' the significance of source material, there is a perceptible drift away from the achievement of such writing towards the difficulty. The good journalist thrives on the limitations imposed on newswriting and good writing can to an extent be defined as writing in this context. For Sarler, brevity is not just a necessity but a virtue. For Pilger, more explicitly still, the discipline is good in itself; corsets of a linguistic variety are morally good for the journalist. The logic can be expressed in terms of Bourdieu's economic metaphor. These aspects of style will be rarely attained because they are difficult, and so will rise in value within the journalistic field, as commodities rise in price with their scarcity (Bourdieu, 1991, 1998).

Audience

Responsibility for the words on the page, when it is not controlled by the habits of thought we have looked at earlier, is often displaced onto the reader. On occasions when the text is thought of, it is frequently in this way *for* a reader, and to an extent *because of* that reader. There is almost always only one reader, not a range of interests to be satisfied. 'The reader wants a brief, one sentence description of what happened' (Harris and Spark, 1966: 88). 'The newspaper reader above all does not want to be told what is not' (Evans, 1972: 25). 'Every great problem facing us . . . will only be understood by the common man busy with his daily tasks if he is hit hard and hit often with the facts (Cudlipp,

1953: 251). This powerful figure of the reader who requires to be hit hard, or whose trust in the news must be nurtured, is invoked to justify practice. Indeed, at times the image of the reader is transparently a construct of news discourse. Cockburn recalls *The Times'* Washington correspondent Wilmott Lewis advising him:

to remember that when writing for the newspapers, we are writing for an elderly lady in Hastings who has two cats of which she is passionately fond. Unless our stuff can successfully compete for her interest with these cats, it is no good. (Cockburn, 1956: 189)

The elderly lady and her cats remind Cockburn that he should avoid jargon and instead use terms this reader would relate to; he should write to grab her attention in the first paragraph and not write too much, because she is easily distracted; he should write about issues that are of interest to the more parochial reader, or at least write in a way that relates issues to her interests; he should not expect any response from his reader; and he should not fall into the trap of writing for his sources or his peers. We can perhaps infer too that, as a social conservative, this reader will be a lover of the English language who will be sensitive to issues of 'correctness'. We can perhaps trace the roots of this way of thinking in the historic uneasiness of journalism about the mass audiences which surrounded the huge expansion of press and broadcast audiences from the turn of the 20th century (LeMahieu, 1988: 21; Williams, 1998: 2). But the point here is that, yet again, the writing is not valued as a communicative act but as a site of many of journalism's problems which the discourse needs to displace in order to defuse.

Conclusion

Journalism practice has, in recent decades, been challenged to engage in deeper reflection on its practices of representation. Its response has tended to remain on the level of avoiding vocabulary that could be accused of being sexist or racist (e.g. Yorke, 1990: 52–3; Press Complaints Commission, 1999), and much about British journalism's approach to writing remains wedded to the kinds of statements described above. This article has sought to demonstrate that this is partly because of the work that the strategies of news discourse described earlier do in British news practice. They are concerned much more with managing language as a problem than, as Gergen (1994) puts it, with opening up an 'outside' from which the 'inside' of the practice may be seen afresh and renegotiated. We can follow James W. Carey in identifying a narrow and conservative identity constructed within the untheorized and unhistoricized practices of news journalism:

Because the culture of a group is as recalcitrant to change as the psychology of individuals, these self-understandings – these stories journalists tell themselves about themselves – hang on long after the originating conditions that gave rise to them have disappeared. Shorn from their historical origins, these practices seem to be preternatural, and to abandon them seems like an invitation to abandon the craft entirely. (Carey, 1999: 53)

The point holds most particularly in relation to newswriting. There seem to be quite substantial sanctions on discussing newswriting in terms other than ones which quickly assimilate it to a conventional self-understanding or which severely limit its scope.

Moreover, this neglect – or even censorship – of writing lies at the heart of British journalism's identity and the situated knowledge of how to do news-work. Key dimensions of the self-understanding that journalists perform in daily newswriting, such as the urge to dig under source material, the conception of the consumption of news texts by a singular imagined reader or the very high valuation placed upon newsgathering, are implicated in journalism's management of its textual dimension.

Where does such investigation of journalistic identity take us? There are implications for journalism education or study of representation in the news but this article will end with reference to journalism ethics. The strength of the censorship of writing within journalistic self-understanding, it can be argued, reveals significant hurdles for any calls for a reorientation of journalism's practices and ethical frameworks around recognition of its role in cultural politics. Edgar (2000), for example, argues that for the liberal ideal of journalism as a fourth estate to be rescued it needs a hermeneutic dimension, in which journalism accepts a moral responsibility to maintain the vitality of debate over cultural identity by expanding the 'hermeneutic horizon' (Gadamer, 1979) of readers or viewers. Within a hermeneutic framework, journalistic conscience can be seen less as subjective intuition about appropriate newsgathering techniques and more as reflection on the communicative action involved in the news, 'a concern over the nature and meaning of journalism' (Edgar, 2000: 86). Others have discussed the role of Habermasian discourse ethics within journalism (Glasser and Bowers, 1999) or called for a civic journalism concerned less with 'truth-telling' than 'problem-solving' (e.g. Campbell, 1999: xv). Such challenges to journalistic practice meet considerable resistance and at least part of that resistance is to do with the threat which writing poses to aspects of the identity and value system available to British journalists. An understanding of the work which journalism – certainly within the British context – does to manage the textual dimension of the news provides a way of conceptualizing the conservatism of journalism practice in relation to such ideas.

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