# ethical space

The International Journal of Communication Ethics

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## Aims and scope

The commitment of the academic quarterly, *Ethical Space*, is to examine significant historical and emerging ethical issues in communication. Its guiding principles are:

- internationalism,
- independent integrity,
- respect for difference and diversity,
- interdisciplinarity,
- theoretical rigour,
- practitioner focus.

In an editorial in Vol. 3, Nos 2 and 3 of 2006, the joint editor, Donald Matheson, of Canterbury University, New Zealand, stresses that ethics can be defined narrowly, as a matter of duty or responsibility, or ethics can be defined broadly 'blurring into areas such as politics and social criticism'. *Ethical Space* stands essentially at the blurred end of the definitional range. Dr Matheson observes: 'As many commentators have pointed out, a discussion of ethics that is divorced from politics is immediately unable to talk about some of the most important factors in shaping communication and media practices.'

The journal, then, aims to provide a meeting point for media experts, scholars and practitioners who come from different disciplines. Moreover, one of its major strands is to problematise professionalism (for instance, by focusing on alternative, progressive media) and highlight many of its underlying myths.

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EDITORIAL

**Richard Lance Keeble**

# The seemingly never-ending debate over objectivity

The debate over objectivity in the news is seemingly never-ending – and the headline-grabbing controversy over 'fake news' is yet another extension of it.

The American publisher and journalist, Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911) famously said there were three rules for reporters: 'Accuracy, accuracy and accuracy.' Indeed, the values of accuracy and truthfulness are stressed in journalistic codes of conduct throughout the world. Despite all the pressures facing the media (from proprietors, advertisers, politicians, consumers), the special freedoms allowed by the market economy are said to make these values attainable. According to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, in their influential *The Elements of Journalism*, of 2003, journalism's first obligation is to the truth. They challenge the epistemological scepticism associated with postmodernism which they claim has pervaded every aspect of intellectual life. For them, accuracy is the foundation on which everything else builds: context, interpretation, debate and all of public communication.

It's probably best to locate any study of objectivity in Western media historically. Concepts such as objectivity, impartiality, neutrality and balance were first used by journalists in the latter part of the nineteenth century in the United States and Britain. With the emergence of mass-produced, advertisement-based newspapers, the radical, trade union-based, anti-clerical, sometimes even revolutionary, and often highly popular journals were marginalised. The market effectively served as a controlling mechanism to eliminate progressive, activist journalism. And as the journalism industry became closely integrated into the operations of the bourgeois state, notions of professionalism developed linked to the search for objective truth and the separation of fact from opinion. News became a commodity which acquired its market value on account of its accuracy.

Over time, these concepts were modified to mean not so much the quest for absolute truth, rather more an assertion of the need to strive for truth in the face of subjective anarchy and propagandist bias. Value judgments are avoided – as is any emotional involvement in the news. As veteran Scots journalist Sinclair Dennett commented, the good journalist should be 'interested in everything, cultivate an accurate memory and be able to detach himself [sic] from his prejudices and his passions'. Moreover, most European public broadcasting systems today either legally require or expect news and information to be neutral (non-evaluative and factual) or balanced.

Ben Gibran begins this issue of *Ethical Space*, diving into this highly contested terrain with his fascinating, original, theoretically dense paper arguing that journalistic objectivity should be viewed as a 'virtue imperative' which calls for the cultivation of a particular attitude, one that may be illustrated but not exhaustively defined by rules of conduct. Drawing on virtue ethics theories, Gibran suggests they strike a realistic balance between structural and institutional factors on the one hand and individual autonomy and responsibility on the other. 'Virtue epistemology can inform critiques of the institutions and structures that limit objectivity, for example when they suppress autonomous virtue-based reasoning in favour of rigid rules of conduct. Framing objectivity as a virtue imperative allows journalists to go beyond strategic rituals and simplistic notions of "balance", without falling into either sceptical relativism or rigid dogmatism. By grounding journalistic objectivity in everyday morality, virtue ethics counters the view that the principle is at best discretionary, or at worst, deprecated.'

It is tempting to view American mainstream politics as pantomime, theatre and surreal farce – though behind the spectacle the powerful institutions of the state (military, intelligence, cultural, industrial, economic) maintain their firm grip on power. Next, Kristin Demetrious daringly attempts to bring some rational analysis to the current presidential contest through a study of the website Republican Voters Against Trump (RVAT). Highlighting notions of American exceptionalism, her paper argues that RVAT's political critique is focused largely on President Donald J. Trump as a flawed individual rather than on the elite forces which propelled him into office. At the same time, she suggests that the dissenting intra-party activity 'performs as a values-based awakening, responding to feelings of embarrassment and shame amongst others, generated by the presidential communications and policy directions'. Ultimately, Demetrious's study aims to shed light on the growing appetite for relational ethical approaches and analyses potential impacts and implications for change in the conservative political imagination.

  

The reporting of conflict often becomes a central focus of the debate over objectivity. As Greg McLaughlin writes: 'Amid the propaganda and the censorship, war reporters have had to don their metaphorical helmet and flak jacket and protest their integrity as loudly as possible.' Here, Carmen Jacques highlights an understudied aspect of war reporting – namely the prevalence of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) amongst journalists. Jacques's particular focus is on PTSD as experienced by Nick Way, a TV journalist who was a 'first responder' in the 2002 terrorist attacks in Bali. Nick was able to experience his PTSD for the first time while visiting a WWII veteran (Bill) whom he had interviewed some weeks previously.

Nick's story, used here with his consent and support, is part of a broader research project with five participants, all of whom have first-hand experience of terrorism and which is helping to provide social and anthropological insights into the experience of shared trauma. The research also utilises collaborative ethnography to enable the co-creation of emergent knowledge concerning individuals' experiences of trauma. The paper argues for the concept of 'trauma echoes' that can reverberate between sufferers who have experienced separate traumatic events.

Since its launch in 2003, *Ethical Space* has been concerned to highlight important developments in the teaching of ethics to communication/PR/media/journalism students. Here, Jay Daniel Thompson argues that incorporating sessions about trolling into journalism education is an ethical necessity now that trolling has become such a significant source of risk for journalists. Thompson's argument is informed by Sue Robinson's model of 'journalism as process' which encourages interactivity and participation from readers. He suggests there are many case studies the educator can use as resources when educating students/future journalists about freedom of expression and what constitutes harm. These include John Stuart Mills' celebrated essay *On liberty* (1859), Ginger Gorman's *Troll hunting* (2019) as well as studies of journalists who have been trolled. Thompson concludes: 'Trolling is a major source of risk for journalists, especially female journalists, and takes a profound economic and psychological toll on victims. This paper has argued that there is an ethical necessity for journalism educators to teach journalism students how to identify and manage trolling in their working lives, without risking their safety or the speech of those with whom they may disagree.'

Earlier this year, I stepped down after seven years as chair of the Orwell Society. Over that time, as you might expect, I became thoroughly immersed in the life and writings of the man primarily known as the author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell has always inspired me as a committed, radical, activist and so often witty journalist – yet, as I stress in my latest book, *Journalism Beyond Orwell* (Routledge 2020), his legacy is not without its problematics. For instance, early in his writing career he expressed misogynistic and anti-semitic views but, to his credit, later in life he confronted these prejudices. His death-bed handing over of his 'little list' of crypto-communists to the state's newly created propaganda unit, the Information Research Department, was also a serious mistake. But all this should not prevent us from acknowledging his brilliance as a writer. Indeed, while Orwell never went to a university, yet, in effect, his whole life can be considered an educational project. He had an enormous appetite and curiosity about life – a deep desire to understand himself and the times he was living in. And through his wonderfully original writings he is seeking to encourage us all to join him on his journey.

Here, I focus on one of George Orwell's earliest essays, 'The spike', about his time spent with street beggars and tramps, placing it in the context of the personal, political and journalistic development of Eric Blair (as he then was) and of the tradition of socially concerned journalistic investigations of poverty in the UK from the mid-Victorian period up until Blair's largely overlooked contemporaries in the 1930s. In stressing the importance of identifying the political economy of the media in any analysis of the ethics of literary journalism, it focuses on the *Adelphi*, the journal which carried 'The spike', highlighting its political/ethical stance and the preoccupations of its targeted readership. In examining the literary elements of 'The spike', the paper explores such aspects as narrative flow, the narrator's voice, mixing compassion and disgust, and the descriptions of characters. The conclusion, however, challenges John Rodden's over-literary analysis of Orwell's early writings and argues that his journalism is best seen as one element of his *life as a politically engaged writer*.

- The editors of *Ethical Space* wish to apologise to its readers for the delay in publishing this issue of the journal. We were aiming to produce a special double issue, in book format, guest-edited by John Mair, following our highly successful Zoom conference in May – organised in association with the European Journalism Observatory – on the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the enormous stresses associated with the pandemic, the issue has inevitably been held up. But it should appear before the end of the year. We also hope our readers are keeping well during these strange times.

**Richard Lance Keeble,**
**Professor of Journalism,**
**University of Lincoln**

  

PAPER

**Ben Gibran**

# Virtue epistemology and journalistic objectivity

*The journalistic principle of 'objectivity' is often presented as at best flawed and, at worst, ideological. This paper outlines the various criticisms, and suggests that they stem from a misleadingly reductive view of journalistic objectivity as a fixed set of 'action imperatives' or rules of conduct. The paper goes on to argue that journalistic objectivity should be viewed as a 'virtue imperative' that calls for the cultivation of a particular attitude, one that may be illustrated but not exhaustively defined by rules of conduct. Criticisms of character-based virtue ethics are outlined, and an alternative social model of virtue ethics is defended as the basis for a virtue-based account of objectivity. Such a model offers a fresh and promising approach to common criticisms of standard theories of journalistic objectivity.*

**Keywords: journalistic ethics, objectivity, virtue ethics, virtue epistemology, situationism**

**Introduction**

Journalistic norms of impartiality and objectivity arose in the early 20th century when they were formalised in professional codes of practice such as the 'canons' of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). The ASNE code offered a (still) widely accepted definition of impartiality as 'sound practice [which] makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion', adding that 'news reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind' (Allan 1997: 308). 'Impartiality' is often included in the journalistic conception of 'objectivity'. The latter has the added connotation of focusing on incontrovertible, value-independent and scientifically verifiable facts (Dunlevy 1998). In practice, the terms 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' are often used interchangeably by journalists to refer to notions of balance, fairness, lack of bias, accuracy and neutrality in news production (Dunlevy 1998). In this paper, 'objectivity' is used as a collective term for these notions, unless otherwise stated.

'Objectivity' in the above sense was not always a fundamental value in journalism. The professionalisation of journalism in the late 19th early 20th centuries came to be intertwined with journalists' adoption of objectivity as a professional norm. The reasons for this synergy are still contentious (for a survey, see Schudson and Anderson 2009). Objectivity was espoused as a professional journalistic principle in the United States much earlier than in Europe (Chalaby 1996), pointing to causal factors that arose sooner in the former than in the latter. Likely candidates include the growing independence of journalists from political affiliations, which made possible a shift towards 'balanced' reporting as a professional norm; the emergence of interviewing as a journalistic practice, in which subjects expected their views to be represented accurately and fairly; the influence of positivism and scientism in American culture at the turn of the 20th century, which elevated objectivity as a paradigm of intellectual inquiry; the propaganda campaigns of the First World War and the rise of public and media relations as professions, from which journalists sought to differentiate themselves as an objective source of information; and the growth of journalism schools and societies that disseminated values of objectivity throughout the profession (Schudson 2001).

Despite the espousal of objectivity as a professional norm (especially in Anglo-American journalism), *codification* of it was, and is, patchy at best. Maras (2013: 15) notes that 'the term is infrequently codified into legislation or regulations' and 'is currently not a popular concept in regulatory circles'. The first UK National Union of Journalists code of conduct in 1936 did not mention objectivity (NUJ 2020a), and even by the 1970s, only briefly stated that information should be 'fair and accurate' (NUJ 1997). The latest version (as of writing) merely adds that news reports should differentiate 'between fact and opinion' (NUJ 2020b). The Australian Journalists' Association was founded in 1910 but did not publish a code of ethics until 1944 (Hirst 1997). However, the AJA's 1944 code did include references to aspects of objectivity, that a member should not 'suppress essential facts nor distort the truth by omission or wrong or improper emphasis' and 'Not to allow his personal interests to influence him in the discharge

  

of his duties' (AJA 1944). These principles remain in the AJA code to this day (AJA 1984, MEAA 2020). Given their origins in the United States, principles of journalistic objectivity are more explicitly codified there. The Society of Professional Journalists in the US borrowed the ASNE code in 1926 and drafted their own in 1973 (SPJ 2020), which upheld 'objectivity, accuracy, and fairness', and highlighted objectivity as 'a standard of performance toward which we strive' (IIT 2011). Interestingly, the latest SPJ code (as of writing) does not use the term 'objectivity' but states that information should be 'accurate, fair and thorough' (SPJ 2020). Despite Overholser's (2006: 11) contention that objectivity is 'less secure in the role of ethical touchstone than it has been', the above survey reveals no general trend in either direction, as far as journalistic codes go.

**The conservative-revisionist debate**

Two schools of thought have developed regarding the status of journalistic objectivity. One, which may be called the 'conservative' school, regards objectivity as a legitimate norm (Berry 2005; Boudana 2011; Lichtenberg 1992, 1996), though some members argue that the concept has been mis-applied (Gauthier 1993; Haskell 1990; Martine and De Maeyer 2019), or over-emphasised at the expense of other values such as 'watchdog journalism' (Cunningham 2003). The other, 'revisionist' school contends that objectivity is a myth that inhibits critical inquiry and legitimates existing structures of power (Durham 1998; Friedman 1998; Gandy 1982; Overholser 2004; Rosen 1993).

The conservative-revisionist split stems from a fundamental difference in epistemologies. Codes of journalistic objectivity emerged in the West at the height of the positivist movement in the sciences, and such codes reflected the empiricist ideals of separation between 'fact' and 'value', between the 'objective' realm of value-independent reality and the 'subjective' domain of preferences, prejudices and emotions (Schudson 1978). Revisionists tend to accuse conservatives of holding on to an outdated and misleading positivist epistemology. The argument is summed up by Rosen (1993: 49) in the following terms:

> [W]e must consider the intellectual problem of distinguishing something called information from something called opinion, of distinguishing facts from values. Almost the entire history of 20th century thought in the human sciences has tended to work against these separations. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that journalism is the last refuge of objectivity as an epistemology.

Revisionists argue that the conservative school views reality as constituted by empirically verifiable 'facts' and ignores the role of less tangible social phenomena (such as ideologies or political-economic structures) in shaping 'facts'. The conservative-revisionist divide is illustrated by Lichtenberg's discussion of differences in British, American and Belgian coverage of elections in Ireland. Arguing from a conservative perspective, Lichtenberg contends that the issues raised by such differences 'go *beyond* the question of objectivity, but they do not subvert objectivity' because the differences are of interpretation rather than 'facts' (1996: 235). Revisionists would argue that interpretations are constitutive of 'facts', and under the influence of positivism, Lichtenberg draws too sharp a distinction between the two. To the revisionist, the primary carrier of meaning is the 'message' as a whole, with all its implications and connotations, including what it leaves out, not merely (as the positivist would have it) the empirically verifiable elements of the message.

The revisionist regards the positivist fact/value, denotation/connotation and objective/subjective divisions as, at best, highly misleading and, at worse, ideological. Such divisions may be viewed as ideological because they support a façade of 'objective truth' constructed of empirically verifiable 'facts', while concealing the shaping of 'facts' via the malleable concepts used to describe them, to convey certain connotations and promote certain values at the expense of other equally valid perspectives (Reese 1990; Shoemaker and Reese 2013). 'Objectivity' is deemed ideological because in seeking out 'verifiable facts' and 'reliable sources', journalism ends up favouring the powerful and privileged, who have the material, intellectual and cultural capital to legitimate their views as 'reality' or 'mainstream' and, thereby, protect news workers from charges of bias (Cunningham 2003; Gandy 1982; Rosen 1993; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1972). For example, it has been argued that such factors led journalists to replicate rather than question the Bush administration's narrative on the reasons for the US invasion of Iraq of 2003 (Overholser 2004; Lewis and Reese 2009). Revisionists also contend that journalists' attempts at 'balance' may lead them to give equal coverage to opposing views, even if it means giving undue prominence to a fringe minority at the expense of the broad middle ground (Burnham 1991), or neglecting

to analyse the ambiguities that lie between the extremes (Cunningham 2003; Rosen 1993). Revisionists would argue that journalists should look beyond the 'facts' to the message and consider if it perpetuates a stereotype or retards social, economic or political progress. Rosen (2000) suggests that journalists should promote democracy rather than objectivity, while Overholser (2004) contends that journalists should jettison objectivity in favour of transparency and accountability.

Conservatives would reply that sceptical and critical reporting, and an awareness of the 'bigger picture', are fundamental principles of objectivity. Hence, Ryan (2006) argues that, contrary to the claims of Overholser (2004) and Lewis and Reese (2009), biased reporting on the Iraq invasion of 2003 was not the result of applying standard principles of objectivity but, instead, of rejecting objectivity as a journalistic norm, a move he attributes to the widespread acceptance of revisionism. Indeed, the failings that Ryan noted — such as a lack of scepticism and critical thinking, reluctance to interrogate sources and consider alternative interpretations, the pursuit of political agendas and not seeking out alternative and marginalised views — were blatant violations of the basic principles of journalistic objectivity. Against attempts to invalidate the fact-value distinction, conservatives would argue that values and facts are mutually constitutive, that 'disagreements about … matters of "interpretation" will in turn depend partly on … facts' (Lichtenberg 1996). Without the presumption of an accessible objective reality of facts, interpretive disagreements could not be resolved through rational dialogue alone. Disputing parties could only resolve their differences by non-rational means such as intimidation, force or appeals to emotion. Revisionism would be a slippery slope towards a radical relativism that undermines the value of news media as an authoritative counterpoint to the 'free-for-all' of social media. Conservatives would argue that in adhering to principles of objectivity, journalism creates a valuable space for rational dialogue, offering opportunities for the non-coercive and democratic resolution of differences.

**Objectivity and the public sphere**

Principles of journalistic objectivity can play an important role in sustaining progress towards the kind of democratic and transparent 'public sphere' that revisionists claim to be seeking, while a 'free market of ideas' that neglects objectivity may retard such progress. Habermas (1989) conceives of the public sphere as a space between the state, with its top-down apparatus of control and domination, and the private lives of individuals pursuing their narrow social and economic interests. The public sphere consists of arenas for political debate among ordinary citizens, such as associations and clubs, as well as the media that contribute to these debates, primarily newspapers, magazines, talk radio, television and the internet. The internet in particular has raised the prospect of a global public sphere that could potentially counterbalance the domination of transnational economic and political elites (Volkmer 2014). The public sphere distils the private interests of citizens into expressions of 'public opinion' which tend to oppose the authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies of the state, thereby helping to protect and enhance democratic freedoms. For Habermas, the public sphere was not only a medium for the preservation of individual liberties, but also a site of emancipation and enlightenment. He posits that only through an 'ideal speech situation' free from psychological and physical coercion could participants evaluate each other's ideas solely based on reason and evidence, and thus arrive at what he considered truly rational decisions (Habermas 1990). Habermas argues that since the late 19th century, there has been a 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere as it came to be increasingly dominated by powerful state and corporate interests, to the detriment of democratic citizen participation. It may be argued that values of journalistic objectivity help to mitigate the effects of refeudalisation, because such values preserve the editorial freedom of journalists against the increasing concentration of media ownership, provided such values are shared by news consumers.

However, consumers will only care about preserving the editorial freedom of the press if it is seen as an authoritative source of information. Otherwise, the independence of a news outlet from its owner would be of no more interest to the public than the independence of a political party blog or YouTube channel from the party that owns it. McNair (2013: 81) stresses the importance of objectivity by highlighting the 'cultural value' of the professional journalist:

> [O]n its own, user-generated content is limited in its ability to enable our understanding of complex events. If it is to help global news audiences in that task — and by extension to develop what might be characterised as a kind of global citizenship or deliberative global democratisation — the decentralisation of information, the diversification of public speech, has to be man-

  

> aged, given structure and meaning. Which is where, and why, the professional journalist retains his or her cultural value.

Having said that, the 'public sphere' argument for journalistic objectivity raises difficulties as soon as its practical aspects are considered. Habermas has been criticised for idealising the public sphere as a forum for free and democratic discussion when it has always been a domain of competing interests in which many voices are marginalised (Fraser 1990; Ingram and Bar-Tura 2014; Kellner 2004). Media consumption today tends to be politically polarised, contrary to the portrayal of the public sphere as a forum for informed and balanced debate. There is a question mark over whether audiences value objectivity all that much, even if it was on offer. For example, an American audience survey in 2019 found that Republicans have less trust in mainstream news sources since a similar survey in 2014, with the exception of right-wing channels such as Fox News, and the Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh radio shows, which are less trusted by Democrats (Pew 2020). Kaldor (2020) points out that even in the global public sphere, mediating algorithms have a polarising effect, as they tend to select information that the user is likely to prefer based on their past choices. Having said that, the existence of multiple, separate and even incommensurable 'public spheres' is not necessarily a negative (provided they are able to co-exist and accommodate one another), since they offer a variety of spaces for individuals to articulate and live out their own versions of 'freedom' (Eley 1999; Fraser 1990).

Some may contend that in a 'public sphere' of competing interests and partisan audiences, objectivity is an overrated virtue. Given the divisions in the public sphere, who will enforce the rules of objectivity, and whose rules will prevail? Revisionists are also concerned about the subtle and often subconscious framing of news, a practice that Gans (2004: 201) claims easily bypasses, and often subverts, attempts at enforcing objectivity:

> Journalists cannot exercise news judgment … without a composite of nation, society, and national and social institutions in their collective heads, and this picture is an aggregate of reality judgments. ... In doing so, they cannot leave room for the reality judgments that, for example, poor people have about America; nor do they ask, or even think of asking, the kinds of questions about the country that radicals, ultraconservatives, the religiously orthodox, or social scientists ask as a result of their reality judgments.

In one study of subconscious and institutional bias, Gilens (1999) observes that 62 per cent of pictures of the poor in American news magazines and 65 per cent on American television news are of African-Americans, although they make up only 29 per cent of the American poor. Gilens's study was corroborated recently by Dixon (2017), who found that 'News and opinion media overrepresent poor families as being Black and underrepresented poor families as being White'. Dixon (2017) also documented other systemic biases in the media that disadvantaged African-Americans. It is difficult to envisage how such biases could be filtered out by any code of journalistic objectivity and how the interpretation of such codes could itself be free from charges of bias. Conservatives would reply that accusations of bias presuppose standards of objectivity, with corresponding methods to mitigate such biases (Lichtenberg 1996). Gilens's and Dixon's own studies are a practical example of how such biases can be exposed and, thereby, potentially rectified. Ideals of objectivity, however vaguely, tentatively or provisionally understood, are important touchstones for guiding democratic decision-making. Conservatives would argue that even if the public does not value objectivity greatly, it ought to be educated to do so because the value of objectivity is not dependent on personal preferences for or against it.



**Virtue ethics and objectivity**

Vague concepts are not always devoid of meaning or utility (Wittgenstein 1968), and it is often easier to build consensus around a vague principle than a precise one. It may be argued that the unattainability (or even logical impossibility) of a 'perfectly objective' point of view does not rule out the desirability of principles of journalistic objectivity. 'Perfect democracy' is a tenuous concept and a practically unattainable goal, but democratic principles play a key role in guiding political discourse and processes. Some recent work in ethics may help to demonstrate how vague ideals can play a concrete and instrumental role in regulating public life. The 'virtue ethics' approach argues that detailed codes of conduct can often be distilled into relatively vague 'virtue imperatives'. Annas (2006: 516) defines a virtue in the classical sense as a stable personal trait that is deliberative and not merely habitual (a distinction that will be crucial later in this paper):

> A virtue, unlike a mere habit, is a disposition to act for reasons, and so a disposition that is exercised through the agent's practical reasoning; it is built up by making choices and exercised in the making of further choices. When an honest person decides not to take something to which he is not entitled, this is not the upshot of a causal build-up from previous actions but a decision, a choice that endorses his disposition to be honest. The exercise of the agent's practical reasoning is thus essential to the way a virtue is both built-up and exercised.

A virtue imperative calls for the exercise of broad virtues rather than the performance of specific acts (Annas 2006; Athanassoulis 2000; Hursthouse 1999). For example, the action imperative 'Always report every side' is extrapolated from the more general virtue imperative 'Be fair-minded'. But there may be circumstances in which giving equal coverage to clearly mendacious views alongside more sincere ones would be unfair to the latter. In such a scenario, it would be necessary to return to the touchstones of virtue imperatives, weighing between different relevant virtues implicated in fair-mindedness, such as scepticism and sincerity, if one seeks to truly exercise fair-mindedness. Disinterestedly surveying different action imperatives will not result in action; an imperative can only elicit deliberate obedience from someone who cares about following it, be it from emotions, desires and-or virtues (which deliberatively regulate emotions and desires, and direct them into virtuous action).

**Flaws of character-based virtue ethics**

'Objectivity' can be understood as an epistemic virtue imperative that calls for the exercise of personal traits such as intellectual humility, courage, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, curiosity, critical thinking, scepticism, conscientiousness and perseverance, among others (Howes 2015). The literature on virtue ethics often calls such attitudes 'character traits', where 'character' refers to a stable psychological disposition in a person. This characterisation of virtue is problematic and has come into question (Doris 1998, 2002; Harman 1999, 2009; Ross and Nisbett 2011; Slote 1994; Upton 2009). The term 'character' connotes habits of mind largely implanted through childhood training, and is ostensibly partly grounded in innate dispositions (though the case for any substantial grounding of personality traits is methodologically and empirically contentious, apart from obvious pathologies such as genetic mutations causing mental illness. For a survey of the debate, see Feldman and Ramachandran 2018). However, we are not responsible for our genes or how we are brought up, and we cannot be held morally accountable for what we had no control over. Therefore, if we are to be held culpable for our moral vices (rather than, say, viewed as being afflicted by them as with a congenital disorder), they cannot be wholly attributable to upbringing or genetic make-up without raising a paradox of blameworthiness versus helplessness, known as the 'moral luck' problem (Athanassoulis 2005; Slote 1994).

A further difficulty for character-based virtue ethics is that situational factors appear to influence whether a person acts virtuously or otherwise in some contexts (Doris 1998, 2002; Harman 1999, 2009; Ross and Nisbett 2011; Upton 2009), though the strengths of these influences, and which contexts they operate in, are a matter of controversy. For example, in the Milgram (1963) experiments, people appeared willing to inflict pain on others as part of what they were told is a psychology experiment, when asked to do so by someone playing the role of a scientist. Although the Milgram study has been replicated with comparable results (for example, Burger 2009, Doliński, et al 2017), the interpretations of these results remain contentious (Miller 1986; Perry 2013). Nevertheless, if the empirical case for widespread and major situational influences becomes incontrovertible, this would undermine character-based explanations for human actions. In reviewing the socio-psychological research on situational influences, Harman (1999: 316) concurs with many others (such as Doris 1998, 2002; Ross and Nisbett 2011; Upton 2009) that 'Empirical studies designed to test whether people behave differently in ways that might reflect their having different character traits have failed to find relevant differences.' He adds that our tendency to attribute actions to the actor's putative internal traits rather than external factors is possibly a result of cognitive bias:

> Are there any character traits of the sort that people ordinarily attribute to others, involving broad and counterfactually stable dispositions of the relevant sorts? While it seems obvious at first that there are, this obviousness may simply be due to our regularly making a 'fundamental attribution error'. That is, we attribute an action to supposed features of the agent's character, overlooking the relevance of subtle aspects of the agent's perceived situation.

Despite the current controversy over the role of situational factors, it would be highly implau-

  

sible to deny them some influence over behaviour in some contexts. Such influences point to social aspects of virtue imperatives, arguably so much so that the term 'character trait' and its equivalents (such as 'personality trait') risk over-concentrating the locus of responsibility for moral vices and virtues solely in the individual whose actions they purportedly explain. Ross and Nisbett (2011: 19) note that people often 'choose the situations to which they are exposed' and that 'people sometimes feel obliged, even committed to act consistently … because of their social roles, because of the real-world incentives'. Rather than people being entirely helpless victims of situations, Ross and Nisbett's observation indicates a synergy between conscious, deliberate choices on the one hand and situations on the other, in which people choose to place themselves, or others, in situations that, in turn, influence behaviour in consistent ways. Through these synergies, the accountability for a virtuous or vicious act is almost always, to some extent, collective, shared in varying (and contested) degrees between the individual, family, friends, community, religious leaders, schools, employers, local and national governments and, indeed, the media. All this operates through various mediating structures such as habits, customs, conventions, rules and laws (all with accompanying systems to incentivise compliance).

A third difficulty with the characterisation of virtues in terms of 'character' is that it downplays the role of reasoning in the exercise of virtues and vices. The fact that a person has an empathetic, optimistic, cunning, or aggressive personality does not explain when, why, how, to what extent and to whom they exhibit those traits. Such explanations, if they are to be satisfactory, usually include the actors' reasons for behaving that specific way, not simply their disposition to generally do so. Athanassoulis (2013: 94) points out that unlike other species, our deliberate actions are always open to the question 'Why did you do that?':

> The more sophisticated animals can be evaluated with respect to four ends: individual survival, the continuance of the species, characteristic pleasure/freedom from pain and the good functioning of a social group. Exactly the same can be said of human beings, since we are part of the natural world as much as other animals; however, a significant addition in the human case is that our characteristic way of being is the rational way. Humans are not merely pawns of nature, entirely determined by their natural constraints, but rather we are rational creatures, a fact which allows us to make choices and be held accountable for them.

Again, this points to a social model of virtue, because the kinds of reasons we give (to ourselves as well as to others) to account for our actions depend on the kinds of reasons we believe our peers would find rational. For example, a child soon learns not to say: 'I hit him because I felt like hitting someone,' but rather something like: 'I hit him because he tripped me,' since the latter excuse sounds more reasonable. Even if the former was closer to the truth (say, because the tripping was clearly accidental), the child may even convince herself of the latter, so as to better align her self-image to the social norms she has internalised. Again, this points to deliberate choices made by people as to which virtues they (and others) ought to instantiate as a social norm — and when, why and how — rather than unthinkingly acting out an innate or ingrained disposition as non-human species do.



**A social model of virtue epistemology**

Given these three weaknesses in character-based models of virtue, this paper does not frame objectivity as a virtuous 'character trait' but, instead, as a 'virtue imperative', 'personal trait' or simply 'virtue', based on a social model of virtue ethics. On such a model, choosing one's situations wisely (where possible) to minimise temptations to vice and maximise incentives for virtue, as well as trying to redesign structures accordingly, are integral to living a virtuous life (Merritt 2000; Samuels and Casebeer 2005). One advantage of this paradigm is that it side-steps the debate on the professional or political value of objectivity by arguing that, given the social dimension of virtue and the ensuing responsibility of the media, journalistic objectivity is an extension of everyday morality. The virtues that constitute objectivity are generally conducive to group survival and flourishing, in contrast to countervailing vices such as credulousness, intellectual pride, lack of curiosity, self-will, laziness, deceitfulness, duplicity and 'groupthink' (a term coined by Janis, 1972, for internal dynamics in an insular group that lead it to dismiss the views of outsiders, and shift to an increasingly extreme and less-than-objective position).

Virtue theorists such as Athanassoulis (2013), MacIntyre (1985) and Thomson (1997) concur with Foot's (1978: 2-3) observation that virtues arise from, and are sustained by, synergies between the individual and the collective in pursuit of goods natural to the human species:

> First of all it seems clear that virtues are, in some general way, beneficial. Human beings do not get on well without them. Nobody can get on well if he lacks courage, and does not have some measure of temperance and wisdom, while communities where justice and charity are lacking are apt to be wretched places to live, as Russia was under the Stalinist terror, or Sicily under the Mafia.

As parties in the collective pursuit of these natural goods, journalists are expected to exercise objectivity by default. Objectivity can only be suspended in limited circumstances that are clearly delineated, such as works of fiction or art. Otherwise, individuals could exempt themselves at will from the demands of objectivity, thereby contaminating the collective information pool by sowing falsehoods, one-sided accounts and conspiracy theories. From a virtue ethics perspective, the various failings of 'objectivity' cited by revisionists (such as the hollowness of strategic rituals, the tendency to legitimate the status quo and distortions caused by attempts at 'balanced reporting') stem from a reductive view of objectivity as a fixed set of action imperatives rather than the more fundamental virtue. It follows that revisionists are not criticising objectivity per se, but as Lichtenberg (1996: 239) characterises it, as a 'too mechanical' impoverished stereotype of objectivity that stems from 'a confusion between objectivity and the appearance of objectivity'.

A further advantage of the virtue ethics approach is that it allows conservatives to defend objectivity without defending positivism. Virtue-based epistemology is able to accommodate the revisionist claim that what we construe as 'reality' is, in some ways and to some extent, socially mediated. In the foregoing general sense, the claim is hardly contentious (Lichtenberg 1996). However, virtue epistemologists would argue that the social mediation of knowledge is not an entirely arbitrary process but is governed by virtue imperatives such as objectivity. Indeed, as Daston and Galison (2007: 39) point out, if knowledge of reality was indifferent to the moral values of observers, then virtue epistemology would lose its point:

> Why does an epistemology need an ethics? But if objectivity and other epistemic virtues were intertwined with the historically conditioned person of the inquirer, shaped by scientific practices that blurred into techniques of the self, moralized epistemology was just what one would expect.

The practice of objectivity is conducive to group success in mediating 'knowledge' for the purpose of negotiating collective goals, attaining them and distributing the rewards among members. Vices that detract from objectivity, such as those mentioned above, tend to have the opposite effect. A social virtue epistemology is correspondingly more focused on objectivity as a social good than on the abstract question of whether it faithfully reproduces a 'value-independent' reality, thereby obviating a point of contention with revisionists. As a result, a virtue ethics perspective allows for a wide range of mutually conflicting but equally 'objective' (qua virtue) voices in the media.

From the virtue ethics perspective, in attacking the fact/value, denotation/connotation and objective/subjective distinctions as untenable, the revisionist is fighting a straw man in the form of an over-simplistic positivism. The virtue epistemologist agrees with the revisionist that these divisions are too sharply drawn by the positivist. However, virtue epistemology does not throw the baby (the distinctions) out with the bathwater (positivism). Instead, it views both sides of the division as inter-penetrating, such that one side informs and supports the other, rather than opposing, as the positivist would have them. This inter-penetration is facilitated by the epistemic virtues, which operate on both sides of the divide, and bridge and balance the two. For example, intellectual humility, courage, open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, curiosity, critical thinking, scepticism, conscientiousness and perseverance are not merely virtues of objectivity, they are also virtues of subjectivity. When the epistemic virtues are lacking on the objective side, there is too much subjectivity. Conversely, when epistemic vices reign in the subjective realm, objectivity is impaired. Both the fact/value and denotation/connotation distinctions turn on this balance between objective and subjective, which in turn rests on the balance of epistemic virtues. Facts are deemed too value-laden when the subjective realm is dominant (for example, in the insistence that 'race' is a 'fact', ignoring the arbitrary, subjective elements in race categorisations), and facts alone cannot motivate action or determine its course without the contribution of 'subjective' value judgements and emotions. On the other hand, one can dwell too much on the subjective connotations of a statement, resulting in misunderstanding and/or misattribution of the communicator's intent (for instance, when too much is 'read into' an utterance).

  

Virtue theorists would agree with revisionists that objectivity, like any virtue, cannot be exhaustively defined or enforced through codes of conduct. Alongside such codes, virtues are also fostered through mentoring, practice, the study of examples and through the creation of conditions in which they can flourish (Athanassoulis 2013; Merritt 2000; Samuels and Casebeer 2005). Sherman and White (2003: 39) argue that intellectual virtues such as objectivity are no exception:

> Intellectual virtue will itself involve the example following and habituation of moral virtue: inspiration by role models will be important as will be learning through critical practice the habits of careful reasoning, methodological argument, and assessment of data. We study modes of reasoning and research, but we also practise them and model them.

The virtue ethics perspective shifts the emphasis away from rule-based, top-down bureaucratic models of journalistic objectivity (with the attendant problems of bias) towards a broad-based approach that includes familiarising journalism students with the ideals of objectivity through examples and case studies, fostering diversity in media ownership and access, and legislating to curb the worst abuses such as hidden advertising. Disagreements are bound to arise on what constitutes objective reporting in particular cases, but the virtue epistemologist would argue that such disagreements are more judiciously settled by referring to broad virtues and vices than to a rigid formula which cannot capture the full sense of 'objectivity'. In many cases, these disagreements are over degrees of objectivity rather than the absence or presence of it, and even if such disputes are never (or cannot possibly be) incontrovertibly settled, lessons can often be drawn on how objectivity could be better exercised.

**Conclusion**

The virtue-based approach to journalistic ethics is in early stages of development, but already has its detractors. Christians, Ferrâe and Fackler (1993) argue that virtue ethics places too much emphasis on agency and ignores the structural constraints on journalists. They point out that 'institutions and systemic structures reduce the choices of virtuous people and therefore limit their impact' (1993: 79). The same criticism is made by Levy (2004), in the light of Harman's (1999) survey of psychological findings on situational influences upon behaviour:

> Rather than focus on the character of the journalist, we would do better to concentrate on institutional constraints on unethical conduct. I urge this position in the light of the critique of virtue ethics advanced, especially, by Gilbert Harman (1999). Harman believed that the empirical findings of psychologists show that character-based approaches to ethics are useless. I suspect that this rather overstates the case. Nevertheless, special features of journalism make virtue-centered approaches especially inappropriate, and we had best turn to alternatives.

However, these are criticisms of character-based virtue ethics, particularly as a theory of moral motivation rather than of a social model of virtues which acknowledges the synergy between personal values and the structures that shape and sustain them, or distort and weaken them. A virtue ethics approach need not rule out an essential role for structural factors in fostering personal traits, positive or negative, but would argue that institutional constraints cannot be effectively identified, critiqued and overcome without recourse to the moral vocabulary of virtue imperatives. For example, institutional structures are often criticised as 'tempting vice' or having a 'corrupting effect'. Institutional reform is often successfully carried out through the replacement of key leaders within the organisation (Shaw 2019), a method that recognises the symbiotic relationship between structure and agency.

Virtue ethics strikes a realistic balance between structural and institutional factors on the one hand and individual autonomy and responsibility on the other. Virtue epistemology can inform critiques of the institutions and structures that limit objectivity, for example when they suppress autonomous virtue-based reasoning in favour of rigid rules of conduct. Framing objectivity as a virtue imperative allows journalists to go beyond strategic rituals and simplistic notions of 'balance', without falling into either sceptical relativism or rigid dogmatism. By grounding journalistic objectivity in everyday morality, virtue ethics counters the view that the principle is at best discretionary, or at worst, deprecated. Even if media consumers do not seek objectivity as much as they should (thereby contributing to a weak and fragmented public sphere), the value of objectivity as a moral and epistemic good still stands. Although the implications of a social virtue epistemology for journalistic ethics have yet to be fully explored, it represents a potentially fruitful departure from the standard arguments in the conservative-revisionist debate on journalistic objectivity. In

particular, the virtue ethics perspective allows both sides to bury the straw man of positivism — which the conservatives had been defending unsuccessfully against revisionist attacks — and reorientate the discussion around a synergistic third way that draws on constructive elements of both conservatism and revisionism, whilst avoiding the pitfalls that both sides have signposted.

This paper is a revised and extended version of the author's blog post at https://whyphilosophyfails.com/2020/05/15/virtue_epistemology_and_journalistic_objectivity/

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PAPER

**Kristin Demetrious**

# Loss, awakening and American exceptionalism: A moment in contemporary US political communication

*This paper analyses the website* Republican Voters Against Trump *(*RVAT*) before the 2020 US presidential election through the lens of a guiding visionary narrative: American exceptionalism. It argues that* RVAT*'s political critique is focused largely on President Donald J. Trump as a flawed individual rather than on the elite forces which propelled him into office. The dissenting intra-party activity performs as a values-based awakening, responding to feelings of embarrassment and shame amongst others, generated by the presidential communications and policy directions. The testimonials provoke the Republican Party to commit to interdependent ethical approaches and policies that reclaim a sense of decency. This study of contemporary US political communication sheds light on the growing appetite for relational ethical approaches and analyses potential impacts and implications for change in the conservative political imagination.*

**Keywords: American exceptionalism, emotion, political communication, Republican Party**

**The road to political incivility and polarisation**

Over the last four years, more and more Americans, indeed some who voted for Trump, have rejected the current presidential policy approaches with a pledge to vote for his political rival, Democratic nominee, Joe Biden. Public websites like *Republican Voters Against Trump* (*RVAT*) and their content, mainly short independent video testimonials, can be broadly interpreted as reflecting Republican Party internal divisions and promoting reason and respect in political discourse. However, hopes that this dissenting activity within the GOP[1] may translate more broadly into a change, may not be well founded as issues raised, such as the rise of intolerance and populism, is greater than any individual candidate or Republican Party managers. Over several decades in the party there has been a steady drift towards the extreme right. While these forces may share some positions, they disagree in their support for Trump. Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez attribute the spawning of this movement to the massive Koch political network[2] which 'coordinates big money funders, idea producers, issue advocates, and innovative constituency-building efforts' (2016: 681). Campaigning for a far right agenda are self-proclaimed 'grassroots activation' groups such as Americans For Prosperity (AFP):

> Americans for Prosperity is centrally directed yet federated; it impacts both elections and policymaking; it combines insider lobbying with public campaigns and grassroots activation; and – perhaps most important of all – AFP enforces its own highly disciplined policy agenda but at the same time is thoroughly intertwined with the Republican Party (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016: 688).

The harnessing of grassroots politics to target marginalised and disaffected voters has the potential to be a powerful 'disruptive force' that will 'respond with concentrated vehemence at the polls' (Autor et al. 2017: 44).

In the Trump presidency, a range of elements has played a role in enabling his incivility and polarising style to be constantly redeployed, despite ridicule, public outcry and admonishment. The toleration may be partly attributed to journalists who underestimated its impacts in public culture by expecting voters to censure. To illustrate, Kathleen Bartzen Culver discusses Trump's presidential campaign announcement speech in June 2015 which included claims that Mexican immigrants were 'bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists' (2018). She argues that highly respected political publications such as the *Washington Post* wrongly surmised that the offensive words would sour his relationship with voters and spell the end of his presidential candidacy. For Rubenstein et al. polarisation is entrenched by Trump's market economy-inflected messaging style, combined with 'name-brand populism' (Rubenstein et al. 2018: 334). Parks, moreover (2020: 5), argues that in the US *per se* there is an 'aura of supreme significance that surrounds the president'. This has led to an acceptance of Trump's dominance

  

and unwitting consent for his seemingly deliberate strategy to propagate, sow and broadcast division. While it may seem counterintuitive, these 'longstanding discursive rules of performance' that underpin the relationship between the press and president and 'help orient and constrain reporters' and editors' approaches to presidential figures through hegemonic construct' (ibid: 2).

The presidential opacity has significant implications for the press and public scrutiny. Bartzen Culver (2018: 292), argues that, in the US, the press is the central institution to protect equality and freedom and democracy:

> This interaction certainly means consumption of content, including refusing to stay only in an echo chamber of alleged 'news' that aligns only with your world view – be that on the left or the right. But it also means responsibly responding to content on social channels, creating content that adheres to principles of truth, and reacting to others in the digital and in-person public sphere with respect.

Hence polarisation of voters may be aided from Trump's fractious relationship to the news journalists, as the presidential aura serves to obscure their analysis. Another dynamic blunting critique and buttressing Republican Party extremism is the rise of right-leaning news media since the early 2000s. Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez write that conservative politics 'benefit greatly from openly-partisan commercial media outlets, including the Fox television network and right-wing talk radio' (2016: 683). The fixation on Trump, his vivid language and simplistic messages about entitlement that call up the nostalgia for the past when the world was better (for some), bolstered by right wing news, obscures other examinations of power and, indeed, feeds the Trump narrative about a divided America so that it becomes more real, not less real.

A far-right dynamic was also present in the run-up to the Trump presidential election as journalists and political analysts overlooked the full significance of a slow but growing political backlash based on racial divides[3] from Barak Obama's[4] presidency in 2008. Obscuring the situation further, the voter trending polls emphatically showed that Trump would not out-poll his Democratic Party presidential rival Hillary Clinton.[5] Therefore, his seemingly improbable victory was greeted by political commentators and voters with shock and bewilderment. Robert E. Gutsche (2018: 1) describes the moment:

> Newspaper headlines from the United States on November 9, 2016, reflected more than just who won the presidential election. 'STUNNER,' yelled the banner headline of the *Record*, in Stockton, California. 'BELIEVE IT,' the *Montgomery Advertiser* headline in Montgomery, Alabama, read below a subhead, 'Donald J. Trump becomes 45th President of the United States.' On *The New York Times*, 'New media again misreads complex pulse of the nation.'

The inaccuracy of 2016 US presidential opinion polls and the subsequent misread of voter intention by the press was confounding, but equally, posed critically important questions. The nub of the matter for Norman Smith (2019: 210) was: 'Why did nearly 63 million people vote for Donald Trump in the first place? Why do 53 million people follow him on Twitter? And why, after long years of insults, intolerance, and misconduct have so few of his voters deserted him?'[6] In response to these questions, the notion of Trump voters as a self-contradictory phenomenon gained prominence.[7] 'Trump's base' connoted an unwavering loyalty – often male, older, white, married, less educated casualties of contemporary US society who were overlooked or disaffected with mainstream political approaches. According to Martinez, they were 'suffering the victim complex of lost entitlements calls for articulating moral limits to the right of individuals to pursue their happiness' (2018: 14).

In order to reach and grow Trump's base, the social media platform Twitter, in particular, has been used by the president to make divisive personal and political public comments. It is in these social media forums that Trump's deviation from statesmanlike, diplomatic norms is brought out in sharp relief. However, for Brian Ott (2016: 64) there are significant consequences of these communiques: 'Trump's simple, impulsive, and uncivil Tweets do more than merely reflect sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia; they spread those ideologies like a social cancer.'

This paper explores the specific ways that people who identify as 'Republican' respond to two key questions posed by the website producers in the run-up to the 2020 November presidential election. I conducted a content analysis on a representative sample of *RVAT* testimonials, and documented overlapping and elaborated comments to establish relationships and themes. Three emerged: the first was Trump's personal character failures with reference to selfishness, dishonesty and cowardice. The second was the

  

GOP and its betrayals as the guardian of the party's conservative values and in its historic role as a powerful US political institution (Mair, Rusch and Hornik 2014). Lastly, the signification of ethical political communication standards and in the validation of civility, responsibility, honesty and clear rejection of hyperbole, lies and manipulation. To support the *RVAT* content analysis, I interpreted feelings expressed to shed light on their social construction and how it may be shaped by culture (Plamper 2015). Plamper argues that the social aggregation and investigation of emotion 'includes dimensions of appraisal, signification, object-directedness, and consciousness' (Plamper 2017: 455). Hence, another lens on the dissenting GOP activity identifies what is lost or broken and why. In particular, embarrassment, pride and guilt expressed in the *RVAT* testimonials are discussed in relation to a nuanced, critical reading of the national and visionary narrative, American exceptionalism (Hongju Koh et al. 2004).

An analytical focus on 'feelings' and their role, offers insight into how ideologically invested scripts are produced, distributed and shared; and why they have been so effective in shaping broader political communication. Moreover, it shows that in US political communication – at this moment – there is an appetite to elevate ethical standards that contribute to a fair and just society and that uphold human dignity, truth-telling and a commitment to living together peacefully (Christians and Traber 1997). The *RVAT* site is rich with cultural meaning, but a limitation in the study was a single focus on the testimonials as a source of GOP dissent. Another, was a focus on Joe Biden as a political compromise, rather than a distinctive presidential candidate, with a chequered history and particular policy agenda.[8] Future research of Trump's base, the Obama presidency, and Biden's candidacy, may yield further understanding of social and cultural complexities and tensions working in this context.

**American exceptionalism: Vision, ideal or narrative?**

'American Exceptionalism' is belief that as a nation state the US is conferred a higher level of morality than others, and in that sense it is unique. While loosely moored as an academic theory, American exceptionalism speaks strongly to the US constituency as a visionary narrative. The power of this nationhood story was harnessed by the GOP to feature prominently on the political stage that brought Donald J Trump to the presidency. Hence the 2016 Republican Party platform set the keynote with three opening statements:

> We believe in American exceptionalism. We believe the United States of America is unlike any other nation on earth. We believe America is exceptional because of our historic role — first as refuge, then as defender, and now as exemplar of liberty for the world to see.[9]

The idea of 'American exceptionalism' is attributed to French lawyer and political writer Alexis de Tocqueville who undertook a study tour of the nation in 1831 and wrote: 'The position of the Americans is quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people wi ll ever be placed in a similar one' (2019 [1831]: 30). Harold Hongju Koh argues American exceptionalism 'has historically referred to the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions' (2003: 1482). However, the language of American exceptionalism which is based around liberty, power and place, reveals divergent ethical emphases in public culture. According to Daly (1994: 2): 'Traditional American culture has had two sharply divided ethics, that of liberty in the public sphere of business and politics and of community in the private sphere of family and friends. This division between the public sphere and the private sphere has often been gender based.' The gendered fault lines running through American exceptionalism are historic and embedded. Daly (1994), quoting Robert Fowler (1991: 36), writes:

> De Tocqueville's model was highly gender specific, of course. For him, the second language of community was spoken by women, the first language of liberty by men. Women were essential, then, in the American story, for they measured the restraints; they built the communities. At the same time they were clearly the voice of the second language, second in the obvious senses of place and power.

Competing conceptions of American exceptionalism may shed light on approaches to ethical political communication. For Virginia Held (2005: 24), ethical theories such as those based on justice or on utility have gendered predispositions and language 'modeled on the experience of men in public life and in the marketplace'. On the other hand, the ethics of care 'usually works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories' (ibid: 13). Hence the language of men in American exceptionalism, stressing the patriotism, liberty and freedom rather than caring

and interdependence reflective of women's experiences, is poised in contemporary conditions as a site of hegemonic struggle linked to gendered relations that could have wider implications for ethical approaches to political communication.

As a term, American exceptionalism is subject to various interpretations and definitions. To clarify, Hongju Koh (2003: 1482-1486) defines five types to understand the US as *nonpareil*. The first is human-rights narcissism, in reference to the First Amendment and 'its non-embrace of certain rights – such as economic, social, and cultural rights – that are widely accepted throughout the rest of the world'. A second is 'judicial exceptionalism, which weight normative US standards as the benchmark – overriding relativist concerns'. The third is oriented to 'ways in which the United States actually exempts itself from certain international law rules and agreements, even ones that it may have played a critical role in framing'. The fourth involves 'double standards' and presents 'the most dangerous and destructive form of American exceptionalism'. Hongju Koh elaborates on this type: 'When the United States proposes that a different rule should apply to itself than applies to the rest of the world.' He argues this break in logic strains coherence, power and belief in America's 'exceptional' status. An example of double standards followed the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks with 'America's attitudes toward the global justice system, holding Taliban detainees on Guantanamo without Geneva Convention hearings, and asserting a right to use force in preemptive self-defense' (Hongju Koh 2003: 1482-1486). Rojecki's (2004) study points to the profound implications arguing that post-11 September, notions of American exceptionalism set the country on the path to 'wars in Afghanistan and Iraq' (Rojecki 2004: 67). However, the fifth and last type of American exceptionalism promotes the notion of the US as an active global citizen. For Hongju Koh, this is because the US actually does engage and take an interest in the world that is quite different to other nations. He says: 'Without question, no other country takes a comparable interest or has comparable influence worldwide. Both America's global interest and its global influence are genuinely exceptional' (Hongju Koh 2003: 1489).

While notions of American exceptionalism are often applied in US international relations, the webs of connection to contemporary national political contexts are also valuable (Rojecki 2008; Hongju Koh 2004). In particular, the dominant media frames news according to the 'resonant theme in American political culture that strengthens support of … US primacy' (Rojecki 2004: 68). In the aftermath of the 11 September events, Kimberly A. Powell (2011: 90) argues: 'Terrorism moved from a minor concern to a "War on Terror"' while a political climate emerged, amplified repeatedly in the news media, supportive of the invasion of Iraq.

Following the 11 September events, the ultra-right media adopted a more pugnacious and nationalistic tone. For Bartlett (2015: 1), the launch of the 24-hour *Fox News* in 1996 was hugely significant. He argues that with a growing Republican appeal and right-wing bias, *Fox News* has become an important cultural site in framing voter division, so much so that a specific '*Fox News* Effect' can be identified (Bartlett 2015: 8). Over the ensuing decade, Poletta and Callaghan (2017) argue, *Fox News* was vital in framing public opinion and building a collective political identity for Trump supporters.

That American exceptionalism is a dated, flawed and even dangerous patriotic idea, has been long canvassed (Carter 1997; Gerber 1997; Kammen 1993). However, examining the 2016 Republican Party platform suggests it has ongoing currency by an emphasis on the USA's history of struggle and of being 'other'. For this reason, it is a useful starting point to understand the powerful *RAVT* critique of the current administration from within its own ranks. *RVAT*'s emergent self-reflexive critique has potential to strengthen and shape media framing of the matters under discussion. These nuances provide context for an analysis of the *RVAT* activity as an awakening for contemporary ethical standards in US political discourse.

### 'Watch the stories': *Republican Voters Against Trump*

*Republican Voters Against Trump* is a project of umbrella group Defending Democracy Together (DDT) which, in May 2020, launched a $10 million advertisement campaign seeking 'to encourage Republicans voters to support Democratic candidate Joe Biden over President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election'.[10] Formed in 2018, the Washington DC-based DDT is led by notable conservatives with strong professional backgrounds in developing Republican political strategy and communications, such as co-founder William (Bill) Kristolm, together with Directors Sarah Longwell and Mona Charen, among others. DDT also encompasses *Republicans for the Rule of Law* and *Republicans Against Putin* and promotes

  

*Becoming American Initiative* which aims to 'counter popular misconceptions about immigrants, especially Hispanic immigrants, providing evidence of their upward economic mobility, educational achievement, language and social assimilation, and civic participation'. Another anti-Trump group is The Lincoln Project.[11] Its eight co-founders and members are similarly disaffected Republicans who are a seasoned mix of political communication strategists, analysists, media commentators, authors, columnists, public affairs and marketing professionals, many of whom worked on George W. Bush and John McCain's presidential campaigns. Current anti-Trump activity is pre-dated by the Never-Trump[12] movement which stirred within Republican ranks in 2016 to thwart Trump's chances of GOP presidential nomination against Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.

In *RVAT*, disaffected Republican Party members are thanked by the producers for 'letting us share your story!' and advised to deliver a presentation in an authentic, uncontrived style: 'Your story is actually better when NOT scripted. Simply look at the camera – and start talking politics!' (2020). It also tells them to use five questions to form a structure: 'Say your first name and where you live; tell us the story of how your politics have changed in recent years; did you vote for Trump in 2016?; why or why not?; who are you supporting in the 2020 presidential election? why?' (*RVAT* 2020). Following a content analysis of the testimonials, three themes emerged that point to internal party fault lines: Trump, as a flawed and dangerous individual; the GOP as a broken and compromised institution that poses a risk to America; and the signification of ethics in political communication.

***Trump, flawed and dangerous***

Testimonials repeatedly denounced Trump for abusing the power afforded to him in the office of president when responding to: 'Who are you supporting in the 2020 presidential election and why?' They admonished Trump for his lack of character and leadership and for refusing to take responsibly for his own failures. It rankled many that he shirks his official obligations and duties and vilifies those who do not agree with him. This attribute was linked to his overall character which was assessed as poor. He was strongly censured for a fixation on his own image, self-aggrandisment and personal gain, over public service. There was a significant group that went further and gave specific examples. Some recalled his denigration of John McCain, his mocking of people with disabilities, his mean-spirited intolerance to immigrants, his disrespect of US allies and historical relationships, and kow-towing to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and the Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, over American interests. Trump's private life before his presidency was also cited as evidence of his moral deficiencies and character failings including his disrespect of women, infidelity, multiple bankruptcies and his unethical business dealings. These character flaws were sometimes compared to Joe Biden's 'decency' and capacity to provide leadership that could unify and heal America.



***GOP: Brokenness***

Reverberating throughout this theme was real fear for America's future, and pain emanating from a series of betrayals by the GOP as a once trusted political institution endorsed by voters to uphold party traditions and values. Criticism of the party leaders and management was infused throughout the testimonials as they told the story of 'how their politics had changed in recent years'. On a day-to-day political level, the GOP was accused of being silent in relation to, or aiding and abetting, Trump's irregularities such as nepotistic appointments of daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner as White House Office and Senior Advisors to the President. It was also frequently argued that the GOP, a foremost American democratic institution, had failed to use its considerable power and authority to control Trump. Instead, it shielded his incompetence and ignored and covered up his flaws, and in doing so undermined its very purpose in protecting and upholding democratic and American values both domestically and as leader of the free world. A persistent concern was expressed over America's diminished standing in the international community, and the risk – both now and in the future – to domestic health and prosperity posed by current administration's policy failure and incompetence. Trump and the GOP's management of the Covid-19 response drew the most and often fiercest criticisms. Other concerns about the GOP's role in the Trump presidency were aligned with record deficits, poor fiscal management and cronyism, the betrayal of American values and the checks and balances that underpin the rule of law. The term 'Republican enabler' emerged to describe those who support and/or facilitate the pro-Trump political agenda, for example, Attorney General William Barr and Senators Lindsey Graham, (South Carolina), Mitch McConnnell (Kentucky) and Mike Lee (Utah). It was remarked by several that the GOP-dominated Senate would need to be dismissed in order for

the party to rebuild and that 'true' Republicans needed to take back the party that had lost its way. An interplay of ideas referred to the GOP as paying lip-service to pro-life matters (such as anti-abortion) but disrespecting the sanctity of life in the way people were treated in both the pandemic and the neglect of children in immigration detention, as well as the vilification of minorities. Hence the GOP's implicit promotion of cruel and unjust policies emerged as an issue. The incompetence of the current leadership was compared to the competence of previous leaders such as Ronald Regan, George H. W. Bush. The participants did not question their core beliefs, faith and values but did question whether they 'should give up' on the GOP.

***The signification of ethics of political communication***

Overwhelmingly, the *RVAT* testimonials discuss Trump's divisive communicative style and the GOP's lack of restraint as points of departure. Trump's incivility in public language was frequently cited. Also strongly condemned was presidential lying, obfuscating, manipulating, bragging, chicanery, cheating, deliberately creating confusion, petty fights, the repetition of misinformation and the promotion of conspiracy theories that spawn division and extremism. For some, these tactics 'preyed' on 'Trump's base' and their ignorance and fear to incite hatred. That Trump has a childish penchant for yelling and calling names was frequently cited. The president's tweets were criticised many times as well as his speeches and press conferences. The testimonials overwhelmingly show that GOP members want to reclaim belief in the party's commitment to its traditional values and return a sense of decency associated with the past. This yearning was noticeable especially when Trump's personal incivility and the weakness of the GOP to uphold American democratic ideas were raised.

**Animating ethical ideas in American political communication**

*RVAT* testimonials evidence that a belief in America as a force for good in the world because it has unique history and a strong moral compass remains deeply felt. But so too is the misgiving that the Trump presidency, enabled by the GOP, abrogates the right to exercise this privilege and presents a real risk to the country's primary status and power. *RVAT* testimonials point to ways that the GOP narrative of American exceptionalism is inflected by race baiting, lying, exaggeration and the rejection of rationality, reason and science and compromising public policies such as over the Covid-19 response and international agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership and NATO. In buttressing the Trump administration, GOP has used its exceptional political power (Parks 2020) as well as its access to financial resources from wealthy conservative donors and supporters and vast media networks to promote double standards (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016). The *RAVT* testimonials further show a shift in the emotional loyalty to the GOP and the American narrative from pride to disappointment. This may go some way to provoke Republicans more broadly to question the role of ethical political communication and its relationship to America's status, authority and power both at home and abroad (Daly 1994).

*RVAT* testimonials highlight the malaise in American political life and to a greater or lesser extent they each wrestle painfully with questions of ethics and public culture. Nonetheless, they are generally marked by an absence of focus on social systems such as the influence of the Koch Network in the Republican Party, or any other large political donors or influence. [13] For Rubenstein et al. (2018), the continuous onslaught of divisive words from the president is a precise, albeit unethical, political strategy that reinforces deep capitalist themes running through US society. Thus Trump is merely the visible face of a much deeper and more complex set of power relations steering the Republican Party towards the ultra-free-market extremism which emerged long before the Obama presidential era and the idea of a voter backlash based on racial divides (Gutsche 2018; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Despite the constant references in the *RVAT* testimonials to Trump's public performances of dishonesty and manipulation, the news media was seldom implicated. Nonetheless, *Fox News* as a GOP co-enabler was singled out and accused of promoting division and not having American interests at heart. The failure of the *RVAT* critiques to examine the Republican Party's relationship to *Fox News* more broadly reflects Bartlett's (2015) concerns about the lack of importance attributed to its critical historical and political role which, in turn, fosters support for Trump's candidacy (see also Polettta and Callaghan 2017). Hence the media was rarely critiqued in the testimonials and public relations was not mentioned at all, despite concerns Trump's targeted media performances and far-right pandering, have incendiary potential to incite his 'base' into extremist action. On the whole this failure to focus on the potential of communication and media industries to

  

protect principles of truth (Bartzen Culver 2018) is noteworthy. The public relations industry is thickly networked with the GOP and its affiliations and directly influences the tenor and approach of political communication. For example, Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez point out that 'grassroots activation' group *Americans for Prosperity* states directors typically move into a range of 'top posts' in the conservative world such as 'ownerships of political consulting or public-relations firms that work especially for GOP clients' (2016: 691). Twitter as a social media platform occasionally came under fire in *RVAT* testimonials, but usually only in describing Trump's performance, not in terms of its potential for ideological contagion in society (Ott 2016) or polarising attitudes within the US (Rojecki 2004; Powell 2011). Therefore, while concerns raised circled the news media and its part in shaping the 'hateful' tenor of Trump's presidency in manipulating his base on the whole there is an acceptance of its status and relationship to society.

Feelings organised on the *RVAT* site that emphasise neutrality and self-abnegation suggest that emotional control and civility are important for some Republicans. Exaggeration and hype were explicitly rejected whereas authenticity and humility were embraced. 'Disgust' was another powerful emotional response to Trump and the support of sections of the GOP. However, while the word was spoken, it was with restraint. Disgust, according to Rozin et al., is a complex emotion associated in North America with a range of dehumanising trends (2008: 757). Criticising Trump's 'disgusting insults' may point to ways that *RVAT* members believe he degrades and mocks minorities and and people with disabilities, in ways that embolden his base to exhibit a lack of humanity, and even brutality. Tellingly, a source of pride for *RVAT* participants were the high standards set by President Ronald Regan; whereas a source of shame were the low standards associated with Trump's ascension to presidential power. Participants also expressed guilt for being partly responsible, either by directly voting or supporting the GOP (see Lewis 2008: 754).

While many *RVAT* stories elicit powerful feelings, most have a distinctly neutral tone and style. Other emotional states to surface in tandem with this neutrality are despair, sadness, disappointment, fearfulness, abhorrence, unhappiness, disturbance and questioning. The emotional distance from Trump and the Republican Party is undeniable and indicates a loss of trust and mutual purpose, but it may also deflect from other considerations. In the *RVAT* testimonials, a discussion of Democratic Party policy detail is absent, despite repeated statements of the intention to vote for Biden as president. This suggests that for dissenting Republicans, the priority is to make Trump 'a one-term President', and ridding the party of 'enablers' like Senator Lindsey Graham, rather than commit to Biden's more progressive political agenda, for example in tackling climate change or providing affordable health care.[14] The emotional inflection in the stories may also serve to cast an illusionary and glorifying glow over past GOP leaders and their standards. This is particularly germane in respect to President George W. Bush whose polarising words demonised 'people of Arab/Middle Eastern descent' following the 11 September 2001 attacks (Merskin 2004: 157) and, in 2003, spread 'disinformation, propaganda, and lies masquerading as facts' concerning the existence of Weapons of Mass destruction in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq (Hartnett and Stengrim 2004: 181).

Nonetheless, perhaps the very participation in the *RVAT* testimonials may help the Republican Party to build cooperation across the political aisle. The positioning of the testimonials towards the 'other', such as minorities, immigrants, children in detention and Muslims may provoke the reinterpretation of the American exceptionalism narrative as relational, leading to bipartisanship, rather than autonomous righteousness (Held 2005; Daly 1994; Christians and Traber 1997).

**Conclusion**

The *RVAT* site is a rich mosaic of individual observations, interpretations and ideas about the values and practices of conduct and leadership in political life. This study of disaffected and dissenting Republicans provides insight into the appetite for ethical communication and leadership but may also reveal idealistic renderings of the past and the belief that somehow a Biden presidential victory will mend GOP brokenness. Factional disunity within the Republican Party is entrenched, and prevailing extremist coalitions will vigorously oppose *RVAT*, DDT and the Lincoln Project, no matter what the 2020 presidential outcome. Hence, the ongoing lobbying and organised advocacy activities of far-right networks, now working in diverse ways, present significant challenges in resolving the GOP's internal political and communicative contradictions. As Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez make clear: 'The Kochs and their cadre have pushed political change for decades. At least since the 1990s, moreover, they have taken

ever more extensive steps to reorient and leverage the Republican Party' (2016: 687). Despite this, the *RVAT* testimonials show how powerful emotions such as pride, disgust, embarrassment, guilt and shame can animate discussion and engagement with varying interpretative positions about political identity, public culture and communicative approaches, and may be a step towards a less internally divided Republican Party that is more receptive to reform.

## Notes

[1] GOP stands for 'Grand Old Party' and refers to the Republican Party and its traditional values. These 'reflect, among others, endorsement of traditional morality, law and order, patriotism, free enterprise, and foreign military intervention' (Mair, Rusch and Hornik 2014: 2)

[2] The Koch network has been the subject of much investigation as it wields colossal influence in the US politics. Hertel-Fernandez, Tervo and Skocpol (2018) write: 'The two brothers have vast resources to invest in politics, commanding over $50bn each from their ownership of Koch Industries. That company, which the brothers inherited from their father, has grown under their leadership to become one of the largest privately held conglomerates in the United States, with activities spread across dozens of industries, including chemical manufacturing, energy production, paper production, and ranching'

[3] Barack Obama's win over Republican Party candidate John McCain in 2008 was notable for strong voter participation and 'Of course, Obama inspired the highest African American voter turnout ever' (Bobo and Dawson 2009: 3)

[4] Robert E. Gutsche (2018: 1) writes that the Trump's election to the office of president was, in part, powered by festering resentment over the course of the Obama presidential years that was 'fueled by white citizens who felt an ultimate threat to their power. To them, their power was back'

[5] The extent to which the 2016 presidential polls were inaccurate is staggering. Harry Crane and Ryan Martin write: 'On the morning of November 8, 2016, the day of the United States presidential election, Nate Silver's *FiveThirtyEight* website estimated Hillary Clinton's chance of being elected president at 72 per cent, *The New York Times* estimated Clinton at 91 per cent … and the *Princeton Election Consortium* 99 per cent' (2017: 1-2)

[6] Emily Ekin's study (2017) found five key points relating to Trump supporters: American Preservationists (20 per cent), Staunch Conservatives (31 per cent), Anti-Elites (19 per cent), Free Marketeers (25 per cent), and the Disengaged (5 per cent)

[7] David Smith sheds light on Trump's base writing: 'Different groups voted for Trump at varying rates – less educated voters more often than college-educated voters, married voters more often than single voters, men more often than women, older voters more often than younger voters, and so on' (2019: 212). He continues: 'Trump's base consists of five largely distinct clusters — and these clusters, viewed in the light of the categories, above, divide nearly equally between populists and anti-populists, conservatives and pseudo-conservatives' (ibid: 219)

[8] Joe Biden's honesty was questioned when he claimed to oppose 'the Iraq War from the "moment it started"', despite his 2002 Senate vote 'that gave President George W. Bush the authority to launch the war'. See Kessler 2019

[9] Republican Party (2016)

[10] Influence Watch (2020)

[11] The Lincoln Project (2020)

[12] Never-Trump (2020)

[13] The web of Republican Party donor relations and their factional divisions was brought to light in the 'Paradise Papers' which revealed tax havens of seven GOP 'super-donors' (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/nov/07/us-republican-donors-offshore-paradise-papers)

[14] See Joe Biden (2020) for more about policy frameworks

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PAPER

**Carmen Jacques**

# Trauma seeks trauma: One journalist's experience of terror echoes back to WWII

*This paper explores the first instance of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) experienced by Nick Way, a TV journalist who was a 'first responder' in the 2002 terrorist attacks in Bali. Nick was able to experience his PTSD for the first time while visiting a WWII veteran (Bill) whom he had interviewed some weeks previously. Nick's PTSD story echoes across time, places, events and people. This paper argues that Nick's first experience of PTSD illuminates a moment when Nick did not speak, and yet he was able to simultaneously experience and share his pain and trauma. Nick's story, used here with his consent and support, is part of a broader research project which has been conducted with five participants, all of whom have first-hand experience of terrorism. The research provides social and anthropological insights into the experience of shared trauma. Collaborative ethnography enables the co-creation of emergent knowledge concerning individuals' experiences of trauma. The paper argues for the concept of 'trauma echoes' that can reverberate between sufferers who have experienced separate traumatic events.*

**Keywords: anthropology, first-responder, PTSD, terrorism, trauma**

## Introduction

This paper explores the PTSD story of a journalist, Nick Way,[1] who first responded to the Bali terror attack in 2002. The discussion is focused on Nick's PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)[2] story as it echoes through time, places, events and people. Nick's trauma reverberates through the loss of a close colleague and mentee, back to Bali and through to a World War II veteran from whom Nick sought comfort and solace. I use the words 'echo' and 'reverberate' as they capture and reflect the way Nick described his PTSD. Nick's first PTSD experience occurred during a physical embrace with Bill [name changed], a WWII veteran. While in Bill's arms, Nick did not speak about what he was experiencing, rather Bill spoke of his own traumas. Nick's experience of PTSD elucidates a moment when pain and trauma were shared – when trauma sought trauma. In this paper, I argue for a concept of 'trauma echoes' that can reverberate between sufferers who have experienced separate traumatic events. Nick and Bill's shared experience of trauma during a single moment demonstrates how the repercussions of an overwhelming event – or events – can intermingle, leading to a shared understanding of each other's suffering. Bill may not have directly experienced the events that Nick did, and vice versa, but when they embraced, the experience of trauma was common to both, the echoes present and re-presented. Nick and Bill shared one another's pain despite the distance (years and events) between their traumatic experiences.

## Key concepts

### *Trauma*

I view trauma, as Tumarkin (2005: 13) suggests, as 'an individual and collective response to loss and suffering' which is 'ongoing and affects people to their very core' rather than a medical condition. Tumarkin (2005: 11) describes a traumatised person as someone who has been overwhelmed by an event in such a way that their sense of the world and themselves is shattered. Additionally, Tumarkin layers within that 'overwhelmedness' the traumatised person's inability to experience time as linear. Instead, they experience time in a 'memory loop, or at best a memory zigzag' (ibid). The nature of these overwhelming experiences often means that those involved cannot comprehend the trauma experience until years later. Tumarkin argues that the remembering of an event can be more traumatic than surviving the event itself as the 'act of memory calls for a partial reliving of an unassimilated past' (ibid). Nick's first experience of PTSD fits here, as a part of his unassimilated past. It emerged years after the precipitating traumatic events, and Nick's comprehension of the complexity of experiencing PTSD is an ongoing process.

I concur with Langer (2007) that all studies of trauma and atrocity must start with the individual narratives of continuously experienced durational time. Langer (ibid) argues that trauma freezes the traumatic moment permanently

  

in memory and time when it is invulnerable to temporal vagaries. Langer separates the survivor's existence into chronological time (ordinary life experience) and durational time (continuously experienced atrocity for which there is no closure).

By contrast, Das (2007: 210-211) asks 'whether a different picture of victims and survivors is possible in which time is not frozen but is allowed to do its work'. In other words, how does traumatic experience change over time? In this way, Das argues for a conception of trauma as it plays out in everyday lives. She believes that suffering is a 'concern with life and not with either the given and ready-made ideas of culture or a matter of law or norms alone' (ibid). Moreover, the making of the self is contextually located in the processes of making the 'everyday inhabitable' rather than 'in the shadow of some ghostly past' (ibid: 215-216). This paper has a focus on Das's concept of trauma playing out in the everyday over time but does not, and cannot, ignore Langer's concept of frozen time.

***Sharing trauma***

Theoretically, trauma is often thought of as an intrapsychic affair, one which is not shareable, which, like extreme pain, isolates a person (Arendt 1998: 50-51; Scarry 1987). Laub (1996: 63) contends that all trauma sufferers are compelled to tell their stories despite the impossibility of sharing one's pain. Against this notion, I suggest that trauma-telling seeks to find common ground with others who understand and have also experienced trauma.[3] The sharing of trauma has been discussed at length by psychologists as to the relationship between therapist and patient who have experienced the same traumatic event such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, and the 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand (see Boasso, Overstreet and Ruscher 2015; Boulanger 2013; Laub and Auerhahn 1989; Sampson 2016; Tosone 2011). While some practitioners recorded a heightened sense of connectivity to their patients, an emotional register that had not existed before the common trauma (Sampson 2016), others reported that they found themselves at a loss to help others while simultaneously attempting to sort through their own experiences (Boulanger 2013).

Greenberg (1998) suggests that traumatic stories are rarely told in their entirety and appear as 'fragmentary and belated echoes', and yet survivors and witnesses *must* find listeners, nonetheless. As such, trauma creates a fragmented identity which, in turn, creates a mirrored, fragmented narrative of trauma. As Greenberg (ibid) notes, when PTSD returns after a gap in time it possesses its victim and, as a result, another gap in time emerges before an attempt can be made to narrate the traumatic experience.

**Methodology**

I use a collaborative ethnographic research strategy which allows for a conversational mode of interaction rather than formal interviewing.[4] Rather than the researcher simply analysing data, researcher and participant collect evidence together and co-create knowledge. The collaborative process includes sending the transcribed interviews back to each participant to review and edit as they see fit. I also invite them to provide feedback on my analysis, including this paper. This allows for each participant to engage with the research in a productive way and to the extent that they wish.[5]



**Nick's story**

Before responding to the 2002 Bali terror attacks as a journalist for Channel 10 in Australia, Nick was involved in fundraising and organising a trip to Australia for some New York firefighters. All of the firefighters had been at Ground Zero on 11 September 2001. After hearing an Australian firefighter, Andrew Wallace, talk on the radio about his desire to bring some of the firefighters he had met in New York to Australia for a holiday, Nick rang the radio station and asked for Andrew's contact details, so he and his wife could help. Nick became heavily involved in the project. His wife, a travel agent, booked flights and accommodation; Nick organised a onetime-only press conference so that the men and their families could spend the rest of their trip on holiday. Nick spent a lot of time with the men during their stay; he showed me many photographs and cried several times as he recounted different people and aspects of their visit.

On the night of the 2002 Bali bombing, after a wonderful reunion dinner with fellow fundraisers, Nick and his wife returned home around 2am. They had had a few drinks and were deeply asleep when, around 4 am, Nick was woken by a call from his line manager, the Channel 10 news director:

> He [Nick's news director] said: 'Oh there's been some sort of explosion in Bali – word is that up to 26 people have been killed so I think we need to go over there and I've got Frank, the cameraman, organised ready to go and he's at the airport,' and that was it, so off I went.

Nick went to the airport imagining a much smaller story than the one he was confronted with upon his arrival in Bali. There were 202 people killed in the attack, with charred bodies and body parts piled up at the Sari club and at the hospital. Survivors were frantically trying to find friends, family members and teammates. People became desperate to get home and started pleading with Nick to help. Nick told me that this was the first time he had reported on a tragedy that broke his 'third person wall' as he knew (or his wife knew) some of the victims and their families. Nick received a phone call from his wife during his time reporting on the bombings in which she told him one of her friends, who had been injured in the bombing and airlifted back to Australia, had died. Nick had to rush his wife off the phone, pretending that he had an important meeting to get to. He nearly broke down at that point in his professional coverage of the story but steeled himself to continue and tried to remain somewhat detached from the events unfolding around him.

Nick told me that Channel 10 provided effective counselling after he reported on the Bali bombing and that afterwards he felt as though everything was 'solved' and that he had recovered from the personal impact of the event. Effective counselling, combined with the elation of winning awards for his reporting on and in Bali, a pay rise and overall career progression gave Nick a sense of agency over his trauma and suffering.

**Nick's PTSD**

Nick's PTSD was triggered by the death of a young colleague and mentee, Sarah [name changed]. Nick described himself as old enough to be Sarah's father and that she was in awe of him and everything he had done so far as a journalist. Nick saw Sarah as a fantastic journalist with the world at her feet – and he cared for her deeply. Nick's wife had organised a trip for her and her fiancé to revisit the homeland of Sarah's grandparents. Their relationship was more than professional: they were friends, too. Yet Nick now admits there was a part of Sarah he never really knew. Tragically, Sarah lost her long-standing battle with depression and took her own life. She had never notified her employer of her struggles with mental health and none of her workmates or work-friends knew about this aspect of her life.

Nick was in Adelaide when he heard the devastating news of Sarah's death. He rushed back to Perth to be with a 'distressed and shocked' news crew. The responsibility for arranging Sarah's memorial fell to Nick, both as her mentor and as the senior reporter on the news crew. Nick went to see her parents on the Sunday, the day before the funeral.

> Yeah so basically – okay so we went – Karen [Nick's wife] and I went 'round to see Sarah's parents and – on the Sunday before the funeral and yeah, I knew I had to do the service on her life and it was the penultimate thing because her farewell story had to be the lead story on the news that day. It was only thing that mattered for us that day and all the viewers, so I did this story – I worked on it all day and went to the service – went to the church before the service and got all this in and the story was nearly eight minutes long and it was the entire first segment of news. This funeral was quite late in the afternoon and then there was another service at Pinnaroo Cemetery so, basically, we got the last stuff in by about quarter past 4. I went to the service; then I came back to the studio, but all the other staff were at the service and even the news was put to air that night by Channel 9; actual staff came over and technically put the news to air.

Nick then went straight to the wake and returned home around 1 am. He arose the next morning and went to work as normal. Nick later said he 'felt bad all day'. At the end of the day as he walked in through the front door, he saw the photographs he had been given by a WWII veteran, Bill, whom he had interviewed weeks earlier and, as if on autopilot, decided he should return them immediately. He told his wife he was going to Bentley to return the photographs and left to see Bill.

Nick still cannot say exactly why he went to see Bill that afternoon. He suggests that perhaps it was a natural pull, as Nick knew Bill had gone through incredible trauma. On arriving at Bill's house, Bill's wife offered Nick a cup of tea and he accepted. Nick burst into tears, both at the time, and while telling his story. Bill asked: 'What's wrong?'

> And I said I've just buried a young lady … and this is when I understood post-traumatic stress disorder – and so Bill just grabbed hold of me and he just hugged me, and he was 88, he was still like a Karri tree. And he just – he knew everything – he just knew everything what had happened to me mentally so … I was standing there with Bill and he was just hugging me, and I was just crying, and he said well everything what was in my mind 'cause I was talking about Sa-

  

rah's death but what was in my mind was the Bali bodies and everything, that was all. And it was just like I'd never had such a clear memory of that time as at that minute, at that instant.

The senseless death of a young woman in her prime, the senseless deaths of the 202 victims of the Bali terror attack and the senseless deaths of countless soldiers in WWII: a shared trauma, a shared pain.

**Discussion**

Nick's story illuminates not only how trauma can be shared but also that, in Nick's case, by sharing his trauma with Bill, he gave himself permission to experience his own trauma through that sharing. The sharing and the experiencing happened simultaneously and without words from Nick. Instead, the person he chose to share the moment with, the one person whom he knew would understand, was the person (Bill) who held Nick and told him what he was feeling and going through. This, as Das (1997: 70) would argue, is a moment in which the expression of 'I am in pain' makes a claim, asking for acknowledgement. For Das, pain is not inexpressible and does not necessarily destroy communication. Not only was Nick's pain expressible, but he was able to share it. For Nick, Bill understood and expressed everything he was feeling, allowing Nick to experience his own PTSD for the first time, and express it himself. In this Nick/Bill instant, the sharing and the experiencing happened in the same moment.

I suggest Nick may have subconsciously gone to Bill's house to have his pain recognised and acknowledged. Nick considered his issues post Bali 'solved'. Sarah's death triggered an unexpected PTSD event which reanimated a part of Nick's past that was unassimilated. His visit to Bill was somewhat robotic, and he was unable to explain what pulled him there in the first place. Yet, it was in that moment with Bill that Nick's pain was shared; simultaneously, it was felt and understood by Bill. Bill could tell Nick what was going on, through his touch and through his words. Providing the stability and stillness of a 'Karri tree', Bill's body, in contact with Nick's body, released Nick's PTSD and allowed him to experience it for the first time. Here, we can see that Nick's PTSD was not a completely intra-psychic experience. Instead, the senseless death of another young person triggered the traumatic memory of the senseless deaths of so many other young people – their bodies and body parts piled up in a meaningless mess. Nick was pulled to Bill. Returning the photographs was not a necessary task that evening after work. He was pulled to a man who had similarly experienced great trauma. Although the events experienced by Bill may have been different, they could each recognise and share the feeling, the pain and the trauma.

Nick's story of PTSD echoed through time, people and separate experiences as he sought a WWII war veteran with whom to share his pain. Although both Bill and Nick had experienced trauma, the traumatic events were decades apart. And yet the 'echoes' of those traumas reverberated powerfully between Bill and Nick as shared or mutual acknowledgement and understanding of one another's suffering. There is an apparent contradiction here – the suggestion that Nick and Bill can share their decades-apart trauma seems paradoxical. But then, PTSD arguably exists in a contradictory temporality, the coexistence of past and present, duration and chronology. In Nick's case, it was not so much a matter of experiencing the durational outside of the chronological; rather it was a simultaneous moment where both distinctive time series met.



**Conclusion**

The recognition of Nick's trauma becomes part of his process of recovery. It becomes part of his attempt to weave his durational trauma into his chronological daily life so that it is no longer unassimilated. Nick told me he needed to 'write all of this stuff down' during our interview. Nick's experiences have not been the focus of any of his journalism stories about Bali. He has interviewed many of the survivors and victims' family members, however, and he is involved in the Bali Peace Park Association (a group trying to build a peace park on the Sari Club site). Even so, when Nick writes or speaks of the Bali bombings, it is not about him, or what he learned or, indeed, what he has experienced and knows now: it is always about others.

Kleinman et al. (1997: x) suggest a need to 'collapse old dichotomies' such as 'health from social problems' and 'representation from experience'. Furthermore, they argue these dichotomies serve to shield us from '… understanding how the forms of human suffering' can be simultaneously singular and shared, and 'how the modes of experiencing pain and trauma can be both local and global'. In other words, suffering is shaped both internally (psychologically) and socially (sociologically). Jackson (2013: 80) contends that intersubjective relationships are never entirely passive or static: tending to be continuously contested, they

are often unstable. Jackson chooses to understand this precariousness existentially. By this he means human life is an enduring struggle to achieve a balance between one's own world, or sense of self (where we have a voice and experience agency), and the worlds of others, in which we must negotiate our position in relation to others and, at times, cede our sense of agency (2013: 80). Yet, as Jackson (2013: 72-73) argues:

> Re-presenting traumatic events as a story is a kind of redemption, for one both subverts the power of the original events to determine one's experience of them, and one moves beyond the self … opening oneself up to the stories of others and thereby seeing that one is not alone in one's pain. In comparing notes, exchanging views and sharing stories, the sufferer is no longer condemned to singularity and silence.

Once this burden is lifted, so too is the doorway to transformation opened.

As a part of my collaborative approach I sent this article to Nick for his opinion, commentary and approval. Nick responded:

> You have captured the flow of trauma across generations. Bill understood what was happening – he remembered being machine-gunned at close range on the Kokoda Track [in Papua New Guinea] and surviving. I actually met his son, Fred, last year. Bill passed away about two years ago. Also, I had to recount my life story a couple of months ago to obtain a government security clearance – it took five hours and everything came back again.

## Notes

[1] At the time of the Bali bombings in 2002, Nick Way worked for Channel 10 (Australia). I first met Nick in 2013 in Bali during the 11th anniversary of the Bali bombings. He was there as chair of the Bali Peace Park Association Inc (BPPAI) who were launching a new design concept for the proposed peace park, to be built on the site of the Sari club (where the second bomb was detonated) and simultaneously attempting to gain more local support for the park. I was in Bali as a research assistant, conducting surveys and fieldwork, exploring the proposed park as a possible site of civil resistance to terrorism. Nick has since left employment as a journalist and has spent the last eight to ten years as media adviser to state and federal politicians

[2] 'Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common consequence of trauma that, with or without treatment, can persist for decades. The clinical hallmarks of PTSD include recurrent, intrusive recollections or reexperiencing of a traumatic event, avoidance of external or internal trauma reminders, negative changes in cognitions and mood, and changes in arousal and reactivity' (Kearney, Martinez, and Simpson 2018: 86)

[3] Intergenerational trauma is an area of shared trauma that I do not have the scope to address in this paper. See Injejikian and Moses (2016), for example. While Nick and Bill share their traumas across generations it is dissimilar to intergenerational trauma as Nick and Bill are not related. I refer to therapist/patient-shared trauma as it is more evocative of Nick's and Bill's relationship as journalist and interviewee

[4] In the broader research project, 'The impacts of terrorism', I have interviewed five people (two in a pair) all of whom have differing experiences of various terrorist attacks. Andrew is a West Australian firefighter who went to Ground Zero in New York to help with the clean-up following the 9/11 attacks. Gill lost both legs below the knees in the 2005 London terror attacks; her husband, Karl, forms an integral part of her everyday life and support network. Kev lost his son, Corey, in the 2002 Bali terror attack on the Sari Club, in Kuta. Nick, a journalist, first responded to the same terror attack in Bali

[5] For a deeper understanding of my methods refer to the following texts (to name a few): Benson and Nagar (2006); Lassiter (2005); Mosher (2013); Narayan (2015); Rappaport (2008); Rouse, Lederman and Borneman (2012)

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## Note on the contributor

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PAPER

**Jay Daniel Thompson**

# Can trolling be taught? Educating journalism students to identify and manage trolling – an ethical necessity

*This paper argues that incorporating education about trolling into journalism education is an ethical necessity for journalism educators. This is because trolling has become a significant source of risk for journalists. The paper begins by reviewing existing scholarship on the trolling of journalists, before suggesting ways in which journalism students can be taught to identify and manage trolling in their professional lives. The overall argument is informed by Sue Robinson's model of 'journalism as process' which encourages interactivity and participation from readers. The paper also draws on Ulrich Beck's influential work on risk and Denis Muller's scholarship on journalistic ethics.*

**Keywords: trolling, journalism education, risk society, media ethics, 'journalism as process'**

In February 2014, the Australian television personality, Charlotte Dawson, committed suicide. Her reasons for doing so remain unknown; the trolling she endured could not have helped. In 2013, the British journalist Caroline Criado-Perez publicly described the Twitter trolling that she received following her success in securing a woman's image placed back on English banknotes. Criado-Perez reported receiving threats such as 'I've just got out of prison and would happily do more time to see you berried [sic] #10 feet under' (cited in Nycyk 2019: 584).

These are two examples of how trolling has become a key source of risk for journalists, especially female journalists. This paper contends that because of that risk, there is an ethical necessity for journalism educators to incorporate education about trolling into the journalism classroom. The paper begins with a review of scholarship on the trolling of journalists, in order to contextualise the study at hand. It moves on to describe its engagement with what Sue Robinson (2013) calls 'journalism as process'. Robinson's model usefully conceives of journalism not as a 'finite entity' but as an ongoing process, one that encourages interactivity and participation from readers (Robinson 2013: 8). This model is suitable for journalism education in the digital media era. The paper concludes with suggestions on how students can be taught to identify and manage trolling in their professional lives.

This study appears to be the first to theorise the important role that journalism education can play in equipping future journalists to deal with trolling. Throughout, the term 'trolling' is understood as constituting material that is posted online with the specific purpose of generating a heightened and adverse reaction. This definition is in keeping with the ones provided in other studies (e.g. Jane 2018; Nycyk 2019). This study is conceptual in nature. Conceptual research is useful in that it enables the researcher to identify an area for enquiry *and* clarify the importance of such an enquiry (Dreher 2000: 4). The study lays the ground for more empirical research on the incorporation of education about trolling into journalism curricula. That research is, in turn, part of a broader project on the fraught relationship between trolling, free speech and democracy.

The trolling of journalists has been chosen for two reasons. Firstly, at least in a Western context, journalists have historically played a crucial role in the construction and enforcement of democracy via their 'watchdog role' (Josephi 2016: 16). Secondly, and as suggested by the literature considered in this section, journalists are profoundly vulnerable to trolling. This vulnerability arises from the publicness of a journalist's work activities and their dependence on digital technology to undertake those activities. As Claire J. B. Wolfe points out: 'Being visible online for those working in the media, and particularly for those starting jobs, has become critical for career development' (2019: 11). Journalists establish a social media presence to promote their work, attract future work and interact with followers. Those interactions have been encouraged by the below-the-line comments sections of online publications. Such interactions can be understood as working to de-

  

mocratise journalism and the news reportage process, at least to a small extent. As Beate Josephi points out, 'participation' in news reportage 'is a core value of democracy' (2016: 19).

**Trolling as a source of risk for journalists: A literature review**

There exists a large body of scholarship on online trolling, as well as the trolling of journalists. This literature illustrates some of the ways in which trolling activity can harm its victims. Harms can include trauma and psychological distress (Jane 2018: 588). Emma A. Jane uses the term 'economic vandalism' 'to encapsulate a range of professional and economic harms that result from the receipt of gendered cyberhate and that do not occur in contexts that can neatly be captured by the term "workplace harassment"' (2018: 576-577). Jane has undertaken extensive research into the harms wrought by online hostility. According to Jane, this hostility can result in 'lost income or productivity; harm to professional reputation, and/or an inability to remain in a particular profession, maintain a professional online presence, engage in business-related networking, or crowdsource/crowdfund for professional reasons' (ibid: 580). Trolling can thus endanger not only the target, but also their employer.

Further, as Catherine Adams points out, trolling demonstrates that 'the much-trumpeted new democracy of the web is failing' (2018: 851). Or, put simply: anyone with internet access can potentially have their voices heard in the digital public sphere, but these voices can just as easily be shut down by other voices. Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan (2016: 927) elaborate on that point when they describe the tactics deployed by trolls as 'silencing strategies'. Lumsden and Morgan's point is buttressed by the following quote from Emma Barnett (a former women's editor at Britain's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper and currently a BBC broadcaster): 'More people don't want to provoke others, so they start to self-censor what they say if they are trolled. But if you're a journalist, your job is to provoke' (cited in Wolfe 2019: 14). Censorship has traditionally been regarded as antithetical to democracy, whether it is enacted by the self or the state (Bradshaw 2019).

In the literature surveyed for this article, there is considerable emphasis placed on the trolling of female journalists (e.g. Gudipaty 2017; Löfgren Nilsson and Ornebring 2016; Lumsden and Morgan 2016). That is unsurprising. As Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan (2016: 928) write: 'Trolling is situated within the wider social and cultural context of the rise of "lad culture" where sexist and misogynistic language and treatment of women is lauded and admired by peers.' For these authors trolling must be viewed 'within this context, as a means of silencing women's voices online and their participation in virtual public space(s)' (ibid). This is true across the journalism spectrum, and particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields such as sports (Antunovic 2019) and technology (Adams 2018) journalism.

In short, trolling is a major source of risk for journalists, especially female journalists. Conceptualising trolling as risk is useful because it demonstrates how this phenomenon does not simply comprise unrelated, isolated online incidents; it stems from a broader risk society, one in which all journalists work. The term 'risk society' was coined by the late sociologist Ulrich Beck, who famously defined the term 'risk' as 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (1986: 21):

> In advanced modernity the social production of wealth is accompanied by the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to the distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risks (Beck 1986: 19).

Trolling can certainly be classified as a 'techno-scientifically produced risk'; it could not exist without the internet, social media platforms or online publications. Interestingly, Beck did not mention online hostility in his work. In a 2013 interview, he acknowledged that in a digital mediascape, 'individual freedom and privacy' have become casualties. Beck supported this point by referring to data leakages such as those made by the NSA whistleblower, Edward Snowden, in 2013. Similarly, trolling has gone unmentioned in other studies of digital risk (e.g. Lupton 2016).

Beck argues that 'risks open the opportunity to document statistically consequences that were at first always personalized and shifted onto individuals' (1992: 99). This is an important point when critically examining journalistic reportage on trolling. The shifting of risks onto individuals can take the form of blaming victims (explicitly or implicitly) for being trolled. This victim-blaming is suggested by Lumsden and Morgan: 'The advice to women which is propagated in

media and popular discourses: "Do not feed the trolls" is a form of "symbolic violence" promoting victim complicity with online abuse' (2016: 927). The Australian journalist, Ginger Gorman, describes the assumption underpinning media coverage of women who are trolled: 'She wouldn't shut up. She was asking for it' (2019: 78). This assumption has been evident historically in media coverage of violence against women (Morgan 2006).

Interestingly, while there have been numerous studies on the trolling of journalists, there seems to be very little research about the incorporation of education about trolling into journalism education. A possible exception is Claire J. B. Wolfe's 2019 study of trolling as an impediment to online discourse. Wolfe interviewed journalism graduates working in the mediascape about whether they had experience online hostility. Wolfe also interviewed undergraduate journalism students 'about their experiences and what they felt would be helpful to them in [working online]' (Wolfe 2019: 11).

Wolfe's study usefully outlines the support (legal, institutional) that media workers require when they are targeted by trolling activity. Wolfe acknowledges that online hostility is a significant challenge facing journalists, as well as media professionals more generally. She concedes that 'there is little guidance for those entering the media professions to help them navigate their way through the legal and ethical pitfalls of engaging with hostile commentators online' (ibid). Yet, Wolfe does not focus *specifically* on journalism education. This is not so much a criticism of her study as it is an acknowledgement of an area that requires further research. This article lays the ground for such research when it investigates how and why journalism education can equip future journalists to identify and manage trolling as an inherently ethical endeavour.

**Conceptual framework: 'Journalism as process'**

This article's conceptual framework is based on Sue Robinson's model of 'journalism as process'. Robinson borrows that concept from a 2009 blog post by Jeff Jarvis (Jarvis 2009; Robinson 2013: 1). Conceptualising 'journalism as process' is useful because it shifts 'the focus from the journalist as producer to journalist as facilitator, conversationalist, connector, networker and producer' (Robinson 2013: 2). Robinson's model understands the reader as playing an active role in journalism's production and consumption. This audience interactivity is encouraged by digital media outlets, as mentioned, and has facilitated or at least enabled trolling activity (though Robinson does not mention trolling). Simultaneously, the model moves away from the 'sender-receiver model of content production' that has traditionally characterised journalism education (ibid: 3). The term 'process' is crucial; in Robinson's model, the production and consumption of journalism is understood as ongoing, and not something that finishes when the journalist finishes writing an article. Trolling can be part of that process, whether it appears in below-the-line comments or in a journalist's email inbox following the publication of a story.

Robinson frames her 'journalism as process' model as a contribution to research into transforming journalism curricula to equip graduates to work in a digitised workforce. This research has been broad in scope. Studies have examined the benefits of educating journalism students to use blogs (Mulrennan 2017: 328) and social media platforms in researching, producing and/or distributing journalistic content (Kothari and Hickerson, 2016; Larrondon Ureta and Fernandez 2018: 882-886). Bradford Gyori and Matthew Charles (2018) have investigated the use of web design programs in the journalism classroom. The teaching of data journalism has been the subject of several studies (Burns and Matthews 2018; Treadwell et al. 2016).

This paper suggests that teaching journalism students to identify and manage trolling is just as important as teaching them to use social media in their working lives or to produce data journalism. Indeed, the paper contends that incorporating education about trolling into journalism curricula is an ethical necessity for journalism educators. In journalism studies, ethics have commonly been conceived of in terms of the social contract that journalists enter into. Denis Muller describes that social contract:

> By engaging in journalism, a person enters into that contract. The contract says that journalism will provide reliable and relevant information that empowers people to participate in political, economic, and social life. In return, society recognises that practitioners of journalism need certain privileges so they can fulfil that role (2014: 224).

Journalistic ethics include honesty, truth-telling, transparency and care for oneself and one's colleagues (ibid: 226-230). They include a commitment to defending free speech, 'while at the same time recognising that there are

  

times when it yields to other values' (ibid: 230). The question of what constitutes free speech, and the notoriously porous boundary between 'free speech' and 'censorship', are important for journalists and content moderators. That point will be elaborated on in the paper's final section which suggests how those concepts can be integrated into the journalism classroom within the context of educating students about trolling.

Also, journalistic ethics entails a commitment to mitigating harm to oneself and others. This can take the form of anticipating what material is in the 'public interest' (and should, therefore, be reported on) and what might be reasonably cause injury to the reporter and/or readers (and, therefore, should not be reported on, or reported on with great sensitivity) (ibid: 75). In the journalism classroom, educators can demonstrate ethical behaviour by equipping students to avoid (re)traumatising themselves and their interviewees. The provision of teaching about trauma in journalism education has itself been the topic of several studies (see Amend, Kay and Reilly 2012; Dworznik and Garvey 2019). Those studies have recognised the role that the journalism classroom can play in creating future journalists who can effectively manage trauma in their working lives. These studies are important in that they conceive of journalism education as serving an ethical as well as a utilitarian function; indeed, they suggest how a commitment to ethics can *enhance* the utilitarian function. Those studies tend, however, to focus on potentially traumatic areas of journalist enquiry (e.g. violence and murder). They do not mention the abuse that journalists can face in doing their jobs, nor do they mention trolling or online hostility.

The following section suggests ways in which educators can teach students to identify and manage trolling in their working lives. The suggestions encompass learning activities and classroom resources. The latter include academic studies and government reports about trolling, all of which can be obtained via the internet or university library catalogues. Theoretically, the section is animated by Beck's warning that managing risks can have unintended consequences, including the production of further risks (Beck 2001: 271).

The section attempts to illustrate how journalism education can help students avoid risks inherent in addressing trolling, whether as its victim or as a journalist reporting on it.

A disclaimer is needed here concerning the timing of this article. The piece was completed in March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was forcing education institutions globally to shift to online teaching spaces at a rate, and to a degree, that could not previously have been anticipated. The pandemic will have a panoply of technological and economic ramifications for higher education institutions, many of which are yet to become evident. Thus, the activities suggested below are amenable to online and physical classroom spaces. They are cost-efficient, which is particularly crucial for institutions that have been facing tighter teaching budgets, and will doubtless continue to do so in the wake of Covid-19. The suggestions are broad enough that they can be adapted and modified according to the individual needs of educators and journalism programs.



**Yes, trolling can be taught! Incorporating trolling into the journalism classroom**

There are several classroom activities that could be used to help students identify trolling activity. These include providing students with real life scenarios involving online hostility, and asking students to identify why or why not this hostility might be regarded as 'trolling'. They can include scanning below-the-line comments sections to identify comments that might be classified as 'trolling' and asking students to explain why this might be so. Activities can also entail online quizzes (e.g. run through Moodle or Kahoot). Online quizzes are useful because they 'allow students to actively participate in their learning processes by self-assessing their progress instantaneously on computers, tablets and/or mobile phones' (Di Meo and Marti-Ballester 2020: 121). These quizzes can alert the student and the educator to the knowledge that the student is retaining, as well as knowledge that they may not yet be fully grasping or may need to revise.

Once trolling has been identified, the following question arises: how does the journalist respond? This is a question that could energise classroom discussions. In Wolfe's study, several undergraduate journalism students reported that 'they did not know where to seek guidance' (2019: 18). The adage 'Don't feed the trolls' is popular in online culture, and correct to the extent that the troll 'wins' when 'discussions descend into virtual shouting matches' (MacKinnon and Zuckerman 2012: 14). Engaging with trolls can compound the distress experienced by victims. Nonetheless, ignoring trolling activity may be futile, and may itself benefit the troll, who is free to continue their abuse.

In other words, not responding to trolls in any manner can mean enabling their activities.

Thus, students should be exposed to the policies of international media outlets regarding online hostility, including trolling. These resources could be set as required readings for students, discussed in seminars, and form the basis of assessment tasks. There are many examples to choose from. For example, the 'Editorial Ethics & Guidelines' tab of the Vox Media website states: 'Our editorial guidelines leave no room for indulging harassment on social media. If any Vox Media employee is the recipient of harassment on social media, they should access and review our protocol for reporting online abuse.' Students should also be educated about the various legal and institutional channels to which they have recourse should they be subject to online hostility while working as journalists. The Law Library of Congress's report, *Laws protecting journalists from online harassment* (2019), documents laws from numerous countries and could serve as a useful resource for journalism educators and students. Another useful resource is Australia, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and Gender Equity Victoria's *Don't Read the Comments* (2019). This policy document suggests 'strategies for media organisations to prevent and respond to gender-based abuse on their platforms' (MEAA and Gender Equity Institute 2019: 4).[1]

Educating students to *report on* trolling in an ethical and nuanced manner is crucial. This is firstly because of the victim-blaming entrenched in some media coverage of trolling, especially when the victims are women (e.g. Lumsden and Morgan 2017: 933). Secondly, the word 'trolling' is itself widely misused. For example, in her book *Troll hunting* (2019), Ginger Gorman cites as an example a column published in an Australian newspaper in which the reporter describes the pairing of a 'seemingly unsuited couple' on a television programme thus: 'Now [the programme] is in its fifth season, it's just trolling' (cited in Gorman 2019: 14). The example provided in no way attempts to unsettle or distress the reader; it seems to be a relatively inoffensive ploy for television ratings. The reporter's use of the term 'trolling' may appear merely lazy. Nonetheless, it obscures that term's actual definition, and thus how trolling can be identified and managed.

There are numerous resources that an educator could set as readings for students. For example, organisations such as Our Watch (2019) and the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma have produced literature regarding the media reporting of violence against women.[2] The Our Watch guidelines specifically recommend that reporters 'name' men's violence against women and girls; 'use evidence-based language' when describing this violence; and be aware that 'that there are certain legal parameters that outline what you can and can't report regarding certain sexual offences, where protection orders have been issued, or where there are children involved' (ibid: 3-4). Drawing on resources such as these, students can be encouraged to write news stories about real-life cases of trolling and online hostility that names this abuse as abuse; that provides facts about online hostility and the damages it causes victims; that does not provide information that may incriminate the journalist or the media outlet for which they are employed; that avoids portraying the victim as deserving/inviting their abuse, and that does not blame the abuse on personal struggles experienced by the abuser (ibid: 4).

In learning to write ethically about trolling, students can be encouraged to develop a range of important skills that can be used in all areas of journalism. These include skills in researching stories and drawing on appropriate sources. In the context of trolling, 'appropriate sources' could include government reports and academic studies on trolling. Students can develop skills in locating interviewees via Google and social media searches. Students can also be encouraged to develop skills when interviewing those who have experienced trolling. Gretchen Dworznik and Adrienne Garvey point out that an absence of trauma training in journalism curricula 'heightens the possibility [of journalists] doing harm to interview subjects … and often results in insensitive and intrusive behaviors on the part of the reporter' (2019: 370). A 2012 study suggests the use of simulations in the journalism classroom to educate students about ethical trauma reporting practices (Amend and Reilly 2012: 243). Simulations could be useful in teaching techniques in interviewing trolling victims, as well as dealing with potential scenarios in which students (as journalists) are trolled. The specific forms in which such simulations may take warrant further investigation.

Another crucial aspect of reporting ethically on trolling concerns the representation of trolls themselves. Those responsible for trolling activity are commonly stereotyped as 'ignorant, uneducated and alone' (Gorman 2019: 41). As Ginger Gorman suggests, this stereotype 'serves to diffuse the hate, making us less afraid' of

  

the trolls (2019: 41). Relatedly, that stereotype helps cultivate a comforting distinction/difference between 'them' and 'us' (with 'us' being educated, sensitive to the feelings of others, and not at all prone to trolling activity). The 'ignorant, uneducated and alone' stereotype is, however, inaccurate. This stereotype should be discouraged in the journalism classroom, as it prevents an understanding of the trolls' motives, why they behave the way they do online.

Further to the last point, understanding trolls is a part of developing empathy with them. As Antje Gluck points out: 'Empathy is present in telling the [news] story, in creating authenticity, and in relating to the news source as a human being' (2016: 894). Empathy is thus, crucial to the teaching and production of ethical journalism. In *Troll hunting*, Gorman writes:

> I know with my heart more than my head that we can't leave kids alone in echo chambers of online hate and then wonder why they emerge as socially isolated individuals full of rage. Why they believe the world is an inhospitable place. Why they want to hurt, isolate, damage and enrage other people and laugh at them the way that they've been hurt (2019: 264; and see also Joseph 2019).

Gorman's words are borne out in her book, in which she interviews a number of trolls. This was not an easy endeavour for the author, herself a victim of trolling, who describes the writing of *Troll hunting* as 'harrowing and dark' (2019: 262). That response is unsurprising; as Gluck reminds us, cultivating empathy is an act of 'emotional labour' (2016, 84). Emotional labour can take a psychological toll on journalists. Nonetheless, teaching students to demonstrate empathy when reporting on and/or interviewing trolls is infinitely more ethical than encouraging them to reproduce dehumanising and inaccurate stereotypes of those individuals.

As journalism educators know, many journalism students do not go on to work as journalists. These students may find employment elsewhere in the mediascape, including in content moderation. The latter has been chosen as a case study because of its alignment with the 'journalism as process' model. Robinson argues that in the digital mediascape, readers are 'collaborators with individual members of the public' (2013: 3). This 'collaboration' can take a number of forms, including interactions between journalists and readers on social media and in below-the-line comments sections. Content moderation plays a crucial role in regulating this journalist-reader collaboration. Tarleton Gillespie expands on that point when he writes: 'Platforms must, in some form or another, moderate: both to protect one user from another, or one group from its antagonists, and to remove the offensive, vile, or illegal'. This is in addition to protecting the company's public reputation (Gillespie 2018: 5).

Also, using content moderation as a case study is useful inasmuch as it highlights some of the tensions between 'free speech' and 'online hostility'. Gillespie notes: 'Disgruntled users who have had content removed [from a platform] sometimes cry "censorship"' (ibid: 176). Gillespie rightly suggests that such cries are 'not entirely accurate' (ibid). There is a tradition in libertarian circles of framing all speech as worth defending, even (or perhaps particularly) if it is likely to cause offence (Graefer 2019: 7). In fact, the 'offensive, vile or illegal' material posted online by trolls *encourages* journalists to self-censor. Lumsden and Morgan's study supports that point. Self-censorship 'inhibits the spread of ideas and inhibits diverse opinion' (Bradshaw 2017: 19) and is thus antithetical to democracy.

Nevertheless, Gillespie points to a question that journalists and moderators face, and that journalism students should be encouraged to interrogate in their studies: where is the line between freedom of speech and censorship? This question has been the source of productive debate in the journalism classes run by this paper's author. A hypothetical scenario provided by the author in his seminars is this: a reader announces their opposition to same-sex marriage in the comments section of a pro-same sex marriage article. This reader is articulating an opinion that many readers and, indeed, the journalist who wrote said article may find objectionable. Perhaps the commenter may *want* to distress the author and other readers. Yet, should the expression of this opinion be regarded as trolling (and, therefore, deleted by the moderator) or as free speech (and, therefore, protected)? In considering the scenario, students have been faced with other questions, including: how to balance the offence and distress caused to a journalist with the democratic right of their readers to voice their views, unpopular though such views may be? Will readers be less likely to comment in a below-the-line comments section, or even read the publication hosting that section, if they know that their views may be regarded as 'contentious' and thus deleted? How will this impact on the economic livelihood of the journalist and/or the publication for which they are writing?

The importance of free speech to a democracy was most famously theorised by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On liberty* (1859). This essay is still invoked in critical analyses of free speech (e.g. Bradshaw 2019; Muller 2019), and could be useful as a class reading, if only to introduce students to theories of harm and/in speech. Importantly, Mill does not uncritically celebrate all speech as being inherently valid. A crucial component of his analysis is the Harm Principle:

> … a deceptively simple ethical proposition which has generated much debate regarding its practical application. The principle states that 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others' (Mill 1989 [1859]: 13; Bradshaw 2017: 20).

Thus, according to Mill, speech becomes problematic when it threatens to cause harm. Thus, journalism educators could encourage classroom discussions about how harm can be defined and measured, and the extent it can be avoided while undertaking work as a journalist or content moderator. Trauma, loss of employment and loss of life would clearly be categorised as 'harm'; the question of whether offence constitutes harm (and if so, how) has been another topic of lively debate in the journalism classes run by this article's author, with a consensus on the question seldom reached. Potential questions for students to consider within such a debate include: if harm is established, then does reporting the troll to police or deleting their comments from a social media platform constitute 'censorship'? Is harmful speech free speech?

There are many case studies that the educator could use as teaching resources when educating students/future journalists about what constitutes harm. These include Mills' essay and Gorman's *Troll hunting*. They also include studies of journalists who have been trolled (e.g. Adams 2018; Antunovic 2019). Teaching resources could also include academic literature on free speech and censorship in the media.

## Conclusion

Trolling is a major source of risk for journalists, especially female journalists, and takes a profound economic and psychological toll on victims. This paper has argued that there is an ethical necessity for journalism educators to teach journalism students how to identify and manage trolling in their working lives, without risking their safety or the speech of those with whom they may disagree. The argument for this education has been informed by Sue Robinson's model of 'journalism as process'. That model understands journalism as a process that requires skills in using digital technology, and one in which the reader plays an active role. This is, thus, an appropriate model through which to understand journalism education in the digital era and, specifically, how this education can be enhanced to prepare students for the workforce. Empirical research is required to determine how the suggestions advanced throughout this paper play out in journalism classrooms.

## Notes

[1] The MEAA is the peak union for Australia's creative professionals. Gender Equity Victoria is an organisation dedicated to gender equity and the elimination of violence against women, and is based in Victoria, Australia

[2] Our Watch is a non-profit Australian organisation dedicated to preventing violence against women and their children. The Dart Center focuses on journalistic reportage of trauma and is a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism

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## Note on the contributor

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PAPER

**Richard Lance Keeble**

# Down but not out: 'The spike' – and Orwell as (an always ambivalent) radical campaigner for social justice

*This paper examines 'The spike', one of George Orwell's earliest essays – about his time spent with street beggars and tramps. It places the essay in the context of the personal, political and journalistic development of Eric Blair (as he then was) and of the tradition of socially concerned journalistic investigations of poverty in the UK from the mid-Victorian period up until Blair's largely overlooked contemporaries in the 1930s. In stressing the importance of identifying the political economy of the media in any analysis of the ethics of literary journalism, it focuses on the* Adelphi*, the journal which carried 'The spike' highlighting its political/ethical stance and the preoccupations of its targeted readership. In examining the literary elements of 'The spike', the paper explores such aspects as narrative flow, the narrator's voice, mixing compassion and disgust, and the descriptions of characters. The conclusion, however, challenges John Rodden's over-literary analysis of Orwell's early writings and argues that his journalism is best seen as one element of his* life as a politically engaged writer.

**Biographical background**

Journalism persisted as an activity for Orwell from the start of his writing career until ill-health forced him to stop in 1949 – while newspapers, censorship, freedom of speech, propaganda and language were subjects for constant study and critique. Resigning after five years as an Imperial Policeman in Burma in 1927, Eric Blair (as he then was) returns to England and (much to the horror of his family) determines to make his way as a journalist and writer. So he decides to spend months on end with the tramps in London's East End, with the hop pickers of Kent and as a *plongeur* in an up-market hotel in Paris. All this is part of his efforts (as he points out in the autobiographical, second section of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, of 1937) to exorcise his guilt for having been part of an illegitimate system of imperial oppression – but at the same time he is fully aware that his experiences could form the basis for journalistic copy. 'The spike' is one of a series of works based on his time spent with tramps – the most substantial being *Down and out in Paris and London* (1933), to which he attaches for the first time the pseudonym George Orwell.

The essay appears at a time of deep economic and political crisis for Britain. Following the Wall Street crash in 1929 and the consequent global depression, Britain's trade slumps so that by 1932 registered unemployed number 3.5 million with many more reduced to part-time employment. A minority Labour government takes office in May 1929 but Big Business panics and withdraws capital from the country. In response, Labour leader Ramsay Macdonald is forced to form a National Government with Conservative and Liberal support. One dissatisfied Labour government minister, Oswald Mosely, resigns and goes on to form the British Union of Fascists (Bowker 2003: 127). Led by communists, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement organises a series of 'hunger marches' on London. And in January 1933, Adolf Hitler becomes German Chancellor.

**Putting the spotlight on the 'lumpenproletariat'**

In focusing his attention on down-and-outs, street beggars and tramps, Orwell is deliberately adopting a radical political/ethical approach, highlighting the plight of those too often rendered invisible by society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels set the trend, in effect, in a range of works where they direct not concern but venom at the members of the underclass they call the 'lumpenproletariat'. For instance, in *The communist manifesto* (1848: 20), they are described as 'the dangerous class, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society which may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue'.

However, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin celebrates the revolutionary potential of the 'lumpenproletariat' which he dubs 'that great

  

mass, those millions of the uncultivated, the disinherited, the miserable, the illiterates, whom Messrs Engels and Marx would subject to their paternal rule' (see Ingram n.d).

Contrasting attitudes towards the underclass amongst social justice theorists continue into the 1930s when Orwell is reporting on the plight of the down-and-outs. As Philip Bounds comments (2016: 38):

> With the exception of Wilfred Macartney, whose prison memoir *Walls Have Mouths* was reviewed admiringly by Orwell in November 1936, there were practically no communist intellectuals who wrote sympathetically about the 'lumpenproletariat'. This was probably because the genuinely dispossessed were often regarded as politically unreliable, usually on the grounds that their desperate circumstances made them susceptible to the appeal of fascism.

But drawing on the research of H. Gustav Klaus (2003), Bounds goes on to highlight a group of working class writers who, in the Bakunin/anarchist tradition, portray the tramp as a sort of walking protest against the dull conformities of bourgeois life. They include Liam O'Flaherty, R.M. Fox and James Hanley who write for radical publications such as *Sunday Worker*, the *Worker* and *Forward* (Bounds 2016: 38-39).

**Social justice campaigners**

More important to an understanding of Blair/Orwell's reporting on the poor and outcasts is the tradition of social justice action and reportage associated in the 19th and early 20th centuries with slumming. *The people of the abyss* (1903), Jack London's account of his journeys to the poorest areas of London's East End had a substantial impact on Orwell – inspiring him to conduct his own investigations into the underclass. And his dystopian novel, *The iron heel* (1908), is also to exercise a major influence on Orwell's later *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

But London is just one of a group of journalists and social justice campaigners who venture into the slum districts around Whitechapel and Shoreditch. For instance, novelist and journalist Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Henry Mayhew (1812-1887), author of *London labour and the London poor* (1851), trawl the backstreets of the capital in search of scenes of destitution to reproduce for their indignant readers. But, as Seth Koven stresses (2004: 26), they remain 'sympathetic outsiders and observers of life among the poor'.

In contrast, *Pall Mall Gazette* reporter James Greenwood (1832-1929) ventures into London's netherworlds masquerading as one of the poor and publishes a series of articles in 1866 that causes an immediate sensation. According to Koven, Greenwood's articles 'made the degrading conditions in the casual wards of workhouses an instant *cause célèbre*' (ibid). In the September 1888 issue of *Nineteenth Century*, Beatrice Potter (1858-1943) publishes her 'Pages of a workgirl's diary', recording her experiences going undercover as a Jewish trouser fitter and in an East London sweatshop. London-based American journalist Elizabeth L. Banks (1872-1938) and trade unionist Clementina Black (1853-1922) also highlight the plight of labouring girls and women, matchbox makers and servants around this time (ibid: 155-180). And in November 1883, Samuel Barnett launches the 'university settlement' movement, inspiring Oxford University students (in particular, those at Keble College) to commit to philanthropic work amongst the destitute of London (ibid: 237-276).

**The influence of the super-tramp**

Another inspiration was W. H. Davies's *The autobiography of a super-tramp* (1908) which Orwell read while at Eton from 1917-1921 (Bowker n. d). Davies, born in Newport, Monmouthshire, in 1871, the son of an iron moulder, describes the six years he spent living as a tramp while crossing North America 1883-1899. They take in the terrible accident in Canada which leaves him with one leg, the later years he becomes a beggar and would-be poet in England and Wales – and the eventual publication of his poetry. He was encouraged to publish his autobiography by fellow Welsh poet Edward Thomas and George Bernard Shaw, who suggested the title (somewhat analogous to the title of his play *Man and superman*), praised it in a preface as 'an amazing book'.

**Orwell and the progressive press**

While in Paris, Blair exploits the contacts his radical feminist Aunt Nellie and her partner Eugène Adam have with Henri Barbusse, the communist editor of the journal *Monde*, to contribute an article 'La censure en Angleterre'. As a result of his connection with Barbusse, Orwell comes to the attention of British intelligence who follow him closely for the rest of his life (see Keeble 2012). His follow-up articles on an eclectic range of topics – unemployment in Britain, a day in the life of a tramp, beggars in London, and the British Empire in Burma – are published by another progressive French journal *Le Progrès Civique*. Significantly, his first pub-

lished piece in the UK, 'A farthing newspaper' (for Chesterton's review *G. K's Weekly*) focuses on *Ami du Peuple*, costing just ten centimes, which has recently been launched in Paris with a manifesto claiming it is 'uncontaminated by any base thoughts of gain'. Blair comments ironically:

> The proprietors, who hide their blushes in anonymity, are emptying their pockets for the mere pleasure of doing good by stealth. Their objects, we learn, are to make war on the great trusts, to fight for a lower cost of living and above all combat the powerful newspapers which are strangling free speech in France (1970 [1931]: 34-35).

He proceeds to deconstruct, with polemical vigour, the paper's pretensions – noting that its proprietor is M. Coty 'great industrial capitalist and also proprietor of the *Figaro* and the *Gaulois*'. In other words, it is merely putting across 'the sort of propaganda wanted by M. Coty and his associates' (see Keeble 2020). According to D. J. Taylor, Blair's early essay is missing a conspicuous personal voice approximating more to what a commissioning editor today would call a 'think piece' (Taylor 2003: 95).

Yet Eric Blair's decision to target his first articles, including his next essay, 'The spike', to alternative, progressive journals reflects a crucial commitment to translate his *understanding* of the political economy of the press into journalistic *practice*. And this commitment was to remain throughout his career – right up until his final writings in 1949. The *Adelphi*, which publishes 'The spike' in 1931, was launched by John Middleton Murry in 1923 to promote the ideas of his friend, the novelist D. H. Lawrence (Marks 2011: 22). But in 1930, Max Plowman and fellow old-Etonian, pacifist and millionaire Richard Rees take over the editorship and the journal moves to the radical left, even affiliating to the anti-war Independent Labour Party in October 1932 and promoting anti-Soviet Marxist views. The political allegiances Orwell forms in the early 1930s are to last throughout his life: the pacifist Plowman supports Blair until his death in 1941; Rees becomes a close friend and co-executor of Orwell's will. Jack Common, a proletarian author from Newcastle, who works as the journal's circulation manager, also becomes a lifelong friend after being initially suspicious of Blair's public school mannerisms (Bowker 2003: 123). Indeed, Orwell is to direct most of his journalism throughout his short career not to the corporate press which he considers propaganda for the wealthy but mainly to dozens of social justice, human rights, leftist, anarchist, pacifist and trade union journals.

**Narrative flow**

The narrative of 'The spike' (Orwell 1970 [1931]: 58-66), starts late one Saturday afternoon – and we follow the narrator in the spike (a doss house for down-and-outs, one of many dotted about the country) until he leaves at 10 am the following Monday. Throughout, the chronology is spelled out with unusual precision. The essay begins in typical Orwellian style locating the narrative right from the start in the 'who, when, what, where, why and how' of a traditional news introductory section (intro, in the jargon). So while the style throughout is distinctly 'literary' (incorporating many of the techniques often associated with fiction) Orwell adopts the conventions of 'hard news reporting' (normally considered unliterary) both imaginatively and provocatively to launch into his 'story'.

Let us examine the opening section: 'It was late afternoon' captures the 'when' element; 'Forty-nine of us, forty-eight men and one woman' the 'who'; 'lay' the 'what'; 'on the green' provides the 'where' element; and the 'why' is in 'waiting for the spike to open' (ibid: 58). Indeed, this stress on the five Ws is to become a recurring motif of Orwell's novel writing reflecting an underlying 'literary journalistic' style. For instance, In *Burmese days* (1934), he writes:

- *Who*: U Po Kyin, sub-divisional magistrate of Kyauktada, in Upper Burma
- *What*: was sitting
- *Where*: on his veranda
- *When*: It was only half past eight, but the month was April.

In *A clergyman's daughter* (1935), there's:

- *When*: As the alarm clock on the chest of drawers exploded like a horrid little bomb of bell metal
- *Who*: Dorothy
- *What*: awoke ….. and lay on her back
- *How*: with a start … looking into the darkness in extreme exhaustion.

In *Keep the aspidistra flying* (1936):

- *When*: The clock struck half past two
- *Where*: in a little office at the back of Mr McKechnie's bookshop
- *Who*: Gordon Comstock
- *What*: lounged
- *Where*: across the table.

  

In *Coming up for air* (1939):

- *Subject*: The idea
- *What*: really came to me
- *When*: the day I got my new false teeth.

And in *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949):

- *When*: It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.
- *Who*: Winston Smith
- *What*: slipped
- *How*: quickly
- *Where*: through the glass doors of Victory Mansions.

So 'The spike' starts with the narrator waiting outside. The next major event happens at six when 'the gates swung open and we shuffled in'. Next: 'When we had bathed our own clothes were taken away from us and we were dressed in the workhouse shirts. … Then we were sent to the dining room…' (ibid: 60). 'Then the Tramp Major [the man running the spike] served us with three cotton blankets each and drove us off to our cells for the night.' In the morning: 'The Tramp Major came marching down the passage with his heavy tread, unlocking the doors and yelling to us to show a leg. … We hurried into our clothes and then went to the dining room to bolt our breakfast' (ibid: 60-61). 'After breakfast we had to undress again for the medical inspection.' This being a Sunday, 'we were to be kept in the spike over the weekend. As soon as the doctor had gone we were herded back to the dining room and its door shut upon us. Already at eight o'clock in the morning we were bored with our captivity' (ibid: 62).

The narrator says he is much luckier than the others 'because at ten o'clock the Tramp Major picked me out for the most coveted of all jobs in the spike, the job of helping in the workhouse kitchen' (ibid: 63). Then, at three 'I left the workhouse kitchen and went back to the spike. … At last six o'clock did come and the Tramp Major and his assistant arrived with supper. … When we had finished, the blankets were served out immediately and we were hustled off once more to the bare, chilly cells' (ibid: 65). Thirteen hours go by. 'At seven we were awakened and rushed forth to squabble over the water in the bathroom and bolt our ration of bread and tea. Our time in the spike was up, but we could not go until the doctor had examined us again for the authorities have a terror of smallpox and its distribution by tramps. The doctor kept us waiting two hours this time, and it was ten o'clock before we finally escaped' (ibid).

In effect, the narrative flow (precisely outlined) provides the structural base on which the essay can build.

**Narrator's voice**

The voice of the narrator is, above all, ambivalent – mixing fascination and empathy with disgust (so probably reflecting not only Blair's attitudes but also those of the journal's largely middle class readers) and in the writing combining a matter-of-fact 'realism' with literary lyricism. He blends a sense of solidarity with the tramps (particularly when he adopts the 'we' voice) with a critical distance and aloofness from them.



According to Peter Marks, the narrator remains 'an empathetic observer never truly part of the environment' (Marks 2011: 26). Indeed, Orwell never claimed to be a down-and-out. He had preferred his first book to be titled *Confessions of a dishwasher in London and Paris* but his publisher, Victor Gollancz, pressed for the final version as better for selling purposes. As Peter Davison comments (1996: 33), Orwell wrote about the poor 'from an intimate knowledge but from a detached viewpoint'. Davison quotes Orwell's friend Michael Meyer who wrote that he lived among the destitute 'to find out at first-hand how poverty and near starvation conditioned people's outlook. He felt that there had been too much theorising about the feelings of the poor' (ibid). Michael Amundsen (2016) describes Blair/Orwell as an autoethnographer combining subjective responses, sociological enquiries, an engaging narrative and truth-seeking with a sense of moral urgency.

The narrator in 'The spike' is also a 'newcomer' so witnesses the scenes with the special intensity of someone new to the life of the tramp. Near the start, he says he accepts the advice of 'the old hands' to bury his eightpence in a hole under the hedge – since it was forbidden to take money, matches and tobacco into the skip (Orwell op cit: 59).

He is also concerned early on to stress how he is socially superior to the down-and-outs. In the process, he gives a clear indication of his insecurity. The Tramp Major who runs the spike 'gave the tramps no more ceremony than sheep at the dipping pond shoving them this way and that and shouting oaths in their faces' (ibid). But when he comes to the narrator 'he looked hard at me' and this dialogue follows:

> 'You are a gentleman?'
> 'I suppose so,' I said.

Blair continues: 'He gave me another long look. "Well, that's bloody bad luck, guv'nor," he said, "that's bloody bad luck, that is." And thereafter he took it into his head to treat me with compassion, even with a kind of respect.'

In effect, Blair/the narrator makes no attempt to disguise his 'upper classness'. In *Down and out in Paris and London* (1933) Orwell details how he sells his normal clothes for a shilling at a 'rag shop' in exchange for the clothes of a tramp: these were 'a coat, once dark brown, a pair of black dungaree trousers, a scarf and a cloth cap; I had kept my own shirt, socks and boots, and I had a comb and razor in my pocket' (Orwell 1970 [1933]: 115). As John Sutherland comments (2016: 130), Orwell becomes an 'Etonian in rags'. Orwell adds:

> It gives one a very strange feeling to be wearing such clothes. I had worn bad enough things before, but nothing at all like these; they were not merely dirty and shapeless, they had – how is one to express it? – a gracelessness, a patina of antique filth, quite different from mere shabbiness (Orwell 1970 [1933]: ibid).

But even though his clothes give him the appearance of a tramp, Orwell realises that his old-Etonian voice, his body language, even the way the tramp rags fall over his tall, thin body confirm his 'gentlemanly' status.

Interestingly, the scene with the Tramp Major is reproduced in *Down and out*, but with significant changes. Here, the Tramp Major asks sharply: 'Which of you is Blank? (I forget what name I had given).' And Orwell continues:

> 'Me, sir.'
> 'So you are a journalist?'
> 'Yes, sir,' I said, quaking. A few questions would betray the fact that I had been lying, which might mean prison. But the Tramp Major only looked me up and down and said:
> 'Then you are a gentleman?'
> 'I suppose so.'
> He gave me another long look. 'Well, that's bloody bad luck, guv'nor,' he said, 'bloody bad luck that is.' And thereafter he treated me with unfair favouritism and even with a kind of deference (ibid: 173).

So in this version, Blair/Orwell is sufficiently unsure in his role as an undercover reporter that he even lets slip his cover. Which of these two versions is closer to the 'truth' we will never know. But considered together they confirm the narrator's ambivalent stance – combining both journalistic insecurity and clear class identity.

Intriguingly also, the geographical location of the spike – unnamed in the essay – is Lower Binfield in *Down and out* – the very name Orwell gives the village Gordon Comstock revisits in a (fruitless) bid to recapture the Golden Age of his idyllic youth in his novel *Coming up for air* (of 1939).

**Disgust and class**

One particularly prominent feature of the narrator's voice is his disgust and squeamishness (perhaps also reflecting the assumed response of his imaginary middle class audience). Even in the opening paragraph, the narrator evokes the beauty of nature only then to stress how the earth-bound reality of the tramps 'defiles' the scene: 'Overhead the chestnut branches were covered with blossom and beyond that great woolly clouds floated almost motionless in a clear sky. Littered on the grass, we seemed dingy urban riff-raff. We defiled the scene, like sardine-tins and paper bags on the seashore' (Orwell 1970 [1931]: 58). Later on, he dwells at length on the 'disgusting sight' in the bathroom:

> All the indecent secrets of our underwear were exposed: the grime, the rents and patches, the bits of string doing duty for buttons, the layers upon layers of fragmentary garments, some of them mere collections of holes, held together by dirt. The room became a press of steaming nudity, the sweaty odours of the tramps competing with the sickly, sub-faecal stench native to the spike (ibid: 59-60).

As the men line up for the medical inspection, the narrator mixes cool observation with disgust (the adjectives piling on one after another):

> It was an instructive sight. We stood shivering naked to the waist in two long ranks in the passage. … No one can imagine, unless he has seen such a thing, what pot-bellied, degenerate curs we looked. Shock heads, hairy, crumpled faces, hollow chests, flat feet, sagging muscles–every kind of malformation and physical rottenness were there (ibid: 61).

Significantly, the essay ends on a climactic note of intense disgust. One of the tramps, little Scotty, runs after him after the spike is closed.

  

> He pulled a rusty tin box from his pocket. He wore a friendly smile, like a man who is repaying an obligation.
> 'Here y'are mate,' he said cordially. 'I owe you some fag ends. You stood me a smoke yesterday…'
> And he put four sodden, debauched, loathly cigarette ends into my hand (ibid: 61).

Indeed, as Becci Dobbin (2012: 68) stresses, Blair's tendency towards squeamishness betrays a distinct 'class specific sensibility'.

**Character descriptions**

Central to Blair's literary technique is his stress on describing some of the characters he meets – giving identities (however slender), names and occasionally nick-names to those normally rendered invisible. There's old 'Daddy' who is described as 'aged seventy-four, with his truss, and his red watering eyes: a herring gutted starveling, with sparse beard and sunken cheeks, looking like the corpse of Lazarus in some primitive picture…' (op cit: 61). There's George 'a dirty old tramp notorious for the queer habit of sleeping in his hat'; Bill, 'the moocher, the best built man of us all, a Herculean sturdy beggar who smelt of beer even after twelve hours in the spike'; William and Fred: 'two young exfishermen from Norfolk', and there's Scotty, whose tobacco has been seized and so to whom the narrator 'stood him the makings of a cigarette' (ibid: 62).

Significantly, again betraying his class background, the narrator devotes the longest description to the tramp he stresses is 'rather superior … a young carpenter who wore a collar and tie and was on the road, he said, for lack of a set of tools. He kept himself a little aloof from the other tramps and held himself more like a free man than a casual. He had literary tastes, too, and carried one of Scott's novels on all his wanderings' (ibid: 64). The narrator enters an argument with this posh tramp – who denounces the down-and-outs as 'scum' – and goes on to ponder the class basis of this attitude:

> It was interesting to see how subtly he disassociated himself from his fellow tramps. He has been on the road six months but in the sight of God, he seemed to imply, he was not a tramp. His body might be in the spike, but his spirit soared far away, in the pure aether of the middle classes (ibid).

Looming over everything there's the Tramp Major who is represented as a monster, a sort of human manifestation of the monstrous, degrading system he runs: 'He was a devil, everyone agreed, a tartar, a tyrant, a bawling, blasphemous, uncharitable dog. You couldn't call your soul your own when he was about, and many a tramp had he kicked out in the middle of the night for giving a back answer.' Later on, he is described as 'a gruff, soldiery man of forty' (ibid: 59).

**Conclusion**

In a major study of 'A hanging', the story of the execution of a man in Burma (1931), John Rodden highlights Blair/Orwell's literary techniques and themes. He suggests it represents not only a 'literary breakthrough in stylistic terms' but also anticipates many of his later themes such as the nightmare of authoritarian power and totalitarian dictatorship, the hypocrisy and cruelty of respectable 'authority', the ruthless exploitation of the powerless. In comparison, Rodden dismisses 'The spike' as a 'pedestrian effort that utterly lacks the sophistication' of 'The hanging'. But Rodden, in his assessment, concentrates entirely on the literary techniques and themes and so fails to take into account the partisan, social justice stance of 'The spike' which adds the crucial political edge to the writing.



Orwell's writings are to take in a vast range of genres: memoir, novels (though, interestingly, no short stories), war reporting, radio plays and commentaries, column writing, book, film and theatre reviewing, essays, political analysis and polemic, poetry, press analysis, investigative reporting, profiles, humorous sketches, social documentaries, letters, cultural criticism, diaries and so on. Yet these genres are forever overlapping. As Lynette Hunter stresses on Orwell (1984: 4): 'The divisions between subject and object, fiction and fact, novel and documentary and the whole field of static genre became subordinate to stance.'

Journalism, then, for Orwell, is not to be seen as a discreet activity but one element of his *life as a politically engaged writer*. Thus he directs his journalism mainly to journals of the left (many of which survive for just a few issues) such as *The Adelphi*, *Commentary*, *Controversy*, *For Anarchism*, *Forward*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Gangrel*, *Left News*, *Left Forum*, *Left Review, New English Weekly*, New York's *New Leader*, *New Republic*, *The Highway*, *New Road*, *New Statesman and Nation*, *New Saxon Pamphlets*, *Polemic*, *Politics and Letters*, *Tribune*. These are to play a crucial role in the intellectual and political debates within the alternative public sphere of the 1930s and 1940s.

Indeed, in his radical, social justice journalism, Orwell is engaging in the crucial political dialogue with people who matter to him. They are an authentic audience compared with what Stuart Allan (2004: 84) calls the 'implied reader or imagined community of readers' of the mainstream media. And through this dialogue emerges some of the greatest journalism of the twentieth century.

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## Note on the contributor

Richard Lance Keeble is joint editor of *George Orwell Studies*, professor at the University of Lincoln and honorary professor at Liverpool Hope University.

  

# Ed Lambeth: Distinguished journalism educator

**Raphael Cohen-Almagor**

I am saddened to learn of the death of Ed Lambeth. His wife Fran calls him 'my gentle giant'. Indeed, Ed was a gentle giant.

Ed had a long and distinguished career in journalism and in the studies of journalism. He was a marvellous educator. In 1961, he was named a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association and later, in 1967-1978, a Nieman Fellow at Harvard.

In 1968, Ed founded the Washington Reporting Program in which he supervised students' reporting projects for newspapers, radio and magazines. Ed left the school in 1978 to serve as a professor of journalism at Indiana University and subsequently as the director of the University of Kentucky School of Journalism.

In 1987, Ed was appointed Associate Dean for graduate studies and research at the University of Missouri (UM). While in this post, he oversaw the growing work of the Stephenson Research Center and Media Research Bureau. Ed also served as director of the Center on Religion & the Professions (CORP). The center was awarded a $1.4 million renewal grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to advance religious literacy in the professions and to conduct research to enhance the news media's coverage of religion and public life.[1] Ed was very proud of this achievement in a field that meant a great deal to him.

In 1992, Ed published *Committed journalism,*[2] which was one of the first books I read in the field of media ethics. What a fine book this is, indeed it's a classic. I am still teaching from this book. Through it, many of my students have come to learn Ed's ideas and his diligent commitment to journalism, ethics and religion.

At UM in 1995, Ed was presented the Thomas Jefferson Award, often considered the highest recognition granted by the four-campus University of Missouri System. Three years later Ed received the Scholarly Excellence Award by the UM Board of Curators for the best faculty book produced by the University of Missouri Press in 1998. His book, *Assessing public journalism*,[3] published in 1998, combines methods of social science and the humanities to explore the new and keenly debated movements in American journalism.

I first came to know Ed in 1996 when he organised at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, a workshop in media ethics. This was a great workshop, with many interesting participants. For about a week, a group of 12-15 people sat from morning until evening to debate ethical issues in journalism. Each of us presented a paper or ethical dilemma. The group was composed of university professors in the fields of media, communication and journalism, and media practitioners who worked in national and local newspapers. Most were Americans. I was one of the junior participants, in age and certainly in experience. I had entered the field of media ethics only a year earlier although I had a background in ethics acquired during my studies at Tel Aviv and Oxford. Listening to those highly experienced and wise people was a great privilege. I learned a lot. I was humbled to be in a group of giants such as Ed Lambeth and Cliff Christians who have served as an inspiration and models to follow.

I loved the dinners in which discussions were less formal and provided an opportunity to know the people on the personal level. This was clearly important to Ed who was the perfect host, always attentive, inquiring, making sure we were all well and in good spirit. That wonderful workshop served as a springboard to designing participants' courses in media ethics. I adopted some of the dilemmas discussed in the workshop and they became an integral part of modules I am still teaching. The case studies change from time to time, but the same dilemmas are still very much alive.

Ed, his lovely wife, Fran, and I kept in touch. Some time after the workshop, Ed told me that he would like to apply for a Fulbright Fellowship in Israel and asked whether I would be willing to host him. I said I'd be delighted. Ed won the fellowship, as could have been expected, and I helped Fran and Ed to find a house in Haifa. It was a lovely home which Fran and Ed enjoyed during their one-year stint. At the University of Haifa Ed taught a course, in English, 'Journalism & Democracy'. The course examined the relationship between the news media and

democracy, drawing upon the work of philosophers, social scientists, humanists, journalists – and citizens. It critically evaluated the performance of the news media as they interact with the legal, legislative and administrative arms of government as well as the culture of democratic societies. The students very much enjoyed the course that was quite different from other courses they were taught at Haifa. Ed showed, again, just how conscientious and caring a person and teacher he was. Ed was attentive, considerate and wise, with a wealth of experience both as a former journalist and as a professor of journalism.

In one interview, Ed humbly said about himself: 'If I have strengths, they may be more in creative activity, teaching and identifying research that is important and doable.'[4] A recognised authority on journalism ethics and civic journalism, Ed said he enjoyed originating and conceptualising research and then mustering the energy and wherewithal to make it happen. Ed was also a great facilitator and organiser. From 1983 to 2003, he directed the National Workshop on the Teaching of Ethics in Journalism – first at the University of Kentucky and later at the University of Missouri.

Ed was a Coolidge Fellow, Taiwanese Science Council visiting professor, National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow and also Fulbright's Orszagh Chair in Szeged and Budapest. Ed served as vice-president, president-elect and then president of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication between 1986 and 1989.[5]

Ed and I kept in touch until the last years of his life. He was the perfect gentleman, appreciative of his life, ethical in his standards, humble, always positive, a wealth of information and a lovely human being. Ed will surely be missed by all who knew him. He was a model to follow.

**Notes**

[1] Edmund B. Lambeth, https://journalism.missouri.edu/people/edmund-b-lambeth/

[2] https://www.amazon.co.uk/Committed-Journalism-Profession-Edmund-Lambeth/dp/0253313929/ref=sr_1_20?dchild=1&keywords=lambeth+edmund&qid=1589013686&s=books&sr=1-20

[3] https://www.amazon.co.uk/Assessing-Public-Journalism-Edmund-Lambeth/dp/0826211585/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=lambeth+edmund&qid=1589015249&s=books&sr=1-5

[4] Ed Lambeth – Interviewed by Doug Cannon, https://journalism.utexas.edu/faculty/stephen-reese/ed-lambeth-interviewed-doug-cannon

[5] See also this tribute https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-path-to-excellence-hard-thinking-constant-worry-and-lunch-pail-labor/

**Note on the contributor**

Raphael Cohen-Almagor, DPhil Oxford University; Professor and Chair of Politics, Founding Director of the Middle East Study Group, University of Hull. Raphael has taught, inter alia, at Oxford, Jerusalem, Haifa, UCLA and Johns Hopkins. He was also Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Distinguished Visiting Professor, Faculty of Laws, University College London. Raphael has published extensively, including most recently *Confronting the internet's dark side* (2015) and *Just, reasonable multiculturalism* (forthcoming).

# Harold Evans: A personal memoir

**John Mair**

I should have been in awe but I did not show it. This was me dealing with one of journalism's all-time greats and I was asking him to pen 2,000 words (no fee) for low circulation essay collections on matters of the journalistic moment. He was always polite in responding to my requests even if he sometimes turned them down. He loved the idea of near-instant books.

Other times, though, he delivered copy to dream of – especially about the misdeeds of the British tabloid press around the time of the Leveson Inquiry (2011-2012). He was on the side of the angels if not entirely Hacked Off in that. For Harry, journalism was too noble and important a profession to indulge in criminality to obtain stories. This was the editor who had taken on the might of the Distillers Company over thalidomide … and had won!

Harry was not a man of huge physical stature but, even in his 80s when I got to know him, a human dynamo. His enthusiasm filled any room, however big.

I was very privileged to be a moving spirit behind giving him the Media Society (which he had helped to found forty years before) Award in 2013. His name packed the room at a posh Mayfair hotel with household faces and they lined up to pay tribute. They included two serving editors – Lionel Barber, of the *FT* (whose father was a sub editor on Harry's *Sunday Times*), and Alan Rusbridger, then of the

  

*Guardian* – and the then-head of BBC News, Matthew Harding, a fellow Murdoch *Times* editor 'sackee', paid his tribute too. No Murdoch showed that night. Many old *Sunday Times* hacks did, though.

It was a joyous evening with much comedy and laughter. My favourite moment was when columnist Jilly 'Jolly Super' Cooper was telling how Harry gave her the first break in journalism. From the top table came a resounding heckle in a Manchester accent: 'Behave Jilly!' It was Harry. When it came to his own 'thank you' speech he was in tears thanking all those who had 'made' him and his papers. 'Memorable' is too soft a word to describe that evening.

Memorable is also too soft a word to describe the life and times of Sir Harold Matthew Evans 1928-2020.

**Note on the contributor**

John Mair is a former BBC producer who has in the last decade edited thirty five books on modern journalism. The latest are *Pandemic: Where did we go* wrong? (Bite-Sized Books, July 2020) and *The BBC: A winter of discontent* (Bite-Sized Books, October 2020). He was the director of events for the Media Society for 15 years.

# A 'million-petalled flower': A tribute to Clive James

**James Waller-Davies**

Even the expected can come as surprise, if not quite a shock. And so it was with the announcement of the death of Clive James last November, some eight years after he said that, as a consequence of a combination of illnesses, he was 'a man approaching his terminus … getting near the end'. Back in 2012, as with confirmation of his death last year, the news was greeted with an outpouring of respect, admiration and affection. Clive James had infused so much of British, Australian and international culture for so many years and in so many forms that a large cultural hole has been left behind.

Neither is there just a single 'Clive James audience'. Yes, there are those who gladly devoured his every word, but there are equally others who knew him perhaps just from the television, or just from his *Observer* television review column, or just from the radio, or just from the late poetry. He was a writer and presenter who gathered followers wherever he went. And that is no mean feat, even in this modern multiplatform digital age, but to do so consistently from the 1970s is nothing short of remarkable.

**'Writer covers everything I do'**

Where to start with Clive James? Certainly, trying to reduce James to anything 'James-ian' would be as illogical as it would be impossible. James did not fit snugly into a single box and to squeeze him into a neat category is not possible without contortion. Not long after his illness was announced, in conversation with Andrew Marr for BBC Radio 4's *Start the week*, James opted for just the simple word 'writer … writer covers everything I do'. Even this simplest of epitaphs resists doing justice to an output that covered journalism, criticism, memoirs, essays, poetry, television, radio, novels, song lyrics and a whole lot more besides.

Indeed, to delve into these separate oeuvres more deeply only increases the variety even further. For a man who, with a typical turn of self-deprecation, once noted that 'All I can do is turn a phrase until it catches the light', it transpires that this light was myriad and multifaceted. The writer who made his name and his fame for the wit of his *Observer* column belies the fact that much of the column was serious criticism of serious television; and the one-man variety show of the weekly column stands side-by-side with a 3,000-word eulogy to *The Sopranos*. This was the same poet who translated Dante, who also penned the mock epic parodies of Peregrine Prykke, Felicity Fark and Charles Charming; and yet again the same poet of the imitations and parodies of Robert Lowell, T. S. Elliot and R. S. Thomas; and the same who gave us those final emotional reflections on mortality, so infused with pathos but without falling into sentimentality.

It was the same Clive James who wrote the anarchic trivialities of the world's trash TV for the then ground-breaking *Clive James on television*, and became a household celebrity in doing so, who also wrote the extraordinary examination of the impact of fame on modern culture with *Fame in the 20th century* (the writing for which, incidentally, that James considered amongst his best writing in any form).

James, the brash interviewer on primetime, was the same interviewer whose interviews from his library are some best available online. On radio, James was as naturally a witty and erudite a panellist and interviewee as one might expect, but his sixty appearances on Radio 4's *A point of view* are arguably surpassed only by the legendary Alistair Cooke for weekly takes on the world around him.

**'One of the last great liberal humanists'**

If attempting to reduce James to an essence is a fruitless task, it would also be churlish not to acknowledge some consistent motifs that run through his work. Whilst it would be an easy call to repeat the suggestion that James was a 'premature postmodernist' given his critical openness to the full gamut of cultural production, this misses the bigger picture. James was one of the last great liberal humanists and an adherent of the 'grand narrative' of Western history and culture. As he set out in the introduction to the accompanying book to *Fame in the 20th century*: 'I was determined to make the narrative chronological. When I first studied at Sydney University in the late 1950s, a big debate was going on about whether individual personalities had any effect on the flow of events. My own belief, then as now, was that nothing else did … to deny that famous people influence events is essentially fatuous.' This critical approach infuses his work, ever seeking to elucidate the textual within its cultural context, ever aware of the flow of influence and counterinfluence, but always keeping the text central.

As a writing technician, James's art was built on the construction of the sentence. As he once put it, 'the well-made sentence is the key to everything'. The old aphorism attributed to Coleridge of prose being 'words in their best order' and poetry being the 'best words in the best order' is one that James's prose often sought to unify. The result was a prose style that conveyed thoughts, at times very complex thoughts, with a lightness of touch and inclusiveness. James carried his readers with him and it was the crafting of sentences that did the lifting.

If there were to be such a thing categorised as the 'Jamesian sentence' it would be, I think, one that distils an idea into a proposition around a pivot with an anticipatory quality that unifies and throws a reward to the reader. It is another act of generosity, allowing the reader a sense of equality; an 'I saw that coming' moment. Once you notice them, these sentences abound in James's prose. This from *A point of view* (BBC Radio 4, March 2007): 'Helen Mirren deserves her Oscar for having learned to sound like the Queen, but the Queen should get two Oscars for having learned to sound like Helen Mirren.' And another from a review of James Booth's book on Philip Larkin: 'James Booth's new biography of Philip Larkin is not very exciting, perhaps because James Booth has the sense to leave the exciting writing to Larkin.' In its simplest form: 'Some people are different from the rest of us … and so are the rest of us' (*Falling towards England*, 1985). These perfectly balanced sentences, with a pulse anticipating its echo, are pure Clive James. They are at once both illuminating, rhythmical and rewarding.

**Master of the humorous simile**

James was also the master of the humorous simile and some of these have entered the public lexicon far beyond his core readership. Of Barbara Cartland, he noted: 'Twin miracles of mascara, her eyes looked like the corpses of two small crows that had crashed into a chalk cliff.' Arnold Schwarzenegger 'looked like a condom stuffed with walnuts' and Luciano Pavarotti in *Aida* 'looked like R2-D2 wearing a roulette wheel for a collar'. So simple; so wonderful.

There was something rather fitting that James's last book published while still alive was the collection of criticism on Philip Larkin, *Somewhere becoming rain* (Macmillan, 2019). It seemed to sum up a life devoted to the appreciation of poetry, its criticism, both as an intellectual pursuit and an aesthetic act in itself and an acknowledgement of Larkin's particular influence on James's own late poetic flowering. If James had a hinterland, this was surely it. Together, the collection of essays covers a period of almost fifty years. They perfectly articulate the parallel simplicity and complexity of Larkin's poetry, whilst batting away modern aversions based on a, at times, problematic personality viewed through modern identity politics. This is not to say that James pulled any punches when addressing aspects of Larkin's personal life, but neither did he allow them to poison the well of Larkin's poetry. James was a generous critic and being a generous critic is not an easy line to walk. And by generosity I do not mean sycophantic or seeking to please – it is seeing objectively what is there to be seen. It is not a hunting trip. In this respect James was an old-school critic, playing the ball and not the man; a more skilful game in an age, increasingly, where playing the man rather than the ball is just a cheap-shot shortcut to temporary notoriety.

  

On radio, Clive James's greatest achievement must surely be the *A point of view* weekly reflections on BBC Radio 4. He took over the slot from the great Brian Walden and immediately made it his own, probably to the chagrin of the other notable writers with whom he shared the scheduling rotation. The sixty, ten-minute vignettes are as notable for James's writing quality as they are for their sheer variety of topic. James picked his way through subjects as diverse as the ethics in public life, the validity of climate change (attracting accusations of being a *denialist*), the role of institutions in a democracy, to more esoteric contemplations on epistemology viewed through the unlikely prism of the 'golf-ball potato crisp'. *A point of view* presented not only James's intellectual enquiry at its playful best, but also as a writer acutely in tune with his own speaking voice.

**His impact and legacy?**

And so, it is time to ask what Clive James's impact and legacy will be. What does the future hold for Clive James? This, perhaps, is not as straightforward as the preceding eulogy might suggest. Who will read television reviews of programmes from over forty years ago? Who will be the new readers of memoirs of someone who left the mainstream public glair before the turn of the millennium? As for James's television output, perhaps *Fame* will be reshown (but there are significant licencing reasons why it has never been reshown so far), but much of the weekly programme output was *zeitgeist*-TV, made with its own unavoidable inherent obsolescence. And as for the poetry, a form whose readership has been niche for centuries, will it ever be sufficient to keep his wider reputation alive? The suggestion would have to be no, but legacy and impact come in other ways.

Much of James's most significant legacy is already so engrained that it is embedded into our journalistic culture and even taken for granted. This was the spawning of a generation of first-person literary journalism columns; of writer-journalists set free to express themselves in fields as diverse as restaurant criticism, travel, sport and a morass of cultural politics. In the realm of modern journalism publishing, the columnist is king or queen; we read writers, not titles. James was not the first to do this, but it could be argued that he was the first to take a dead-end column, as television was in the 1970s, and turn it into a weekly must-read through nothing more than an acute critical eye and the power of his prose.

On television, the 'clip-show' is everywhere. Technology ensures that every event and transmission from every corner of the globe can appear in seconds in the palm of your hand. It is worth remembering that when *Clive James on television* was being made, the physical video tapes had to be recorded, sent to the UK and edited for transmission. The live satellite interviews were something only serious news coverage used. Today we have YouTube, Skype, digital data sharing. There is more production capability at one's fingertips today than James's entire production team had at their disposal in the 1980s. Such is the ephemeral nature of most television output, James's achievements in television, both in terms of presentation and production, have been forgotten. They have slipped out of time to become analogue curiosities in a digital age.

**Will he enter the academic canon?**

What of academe? Will Clive James's passing inspire new considerations of his work and bring him into the academic canon? It would be comforting to think so, but again there are contradictions. As a journalism postgraduate some six or seven years ago, having agreed my dissertation topic (James's *Observer* column) with my tutor, I merrily trotted off to the library expecting to find a hoard of academic work on Clive James. But apart from some archived interviews, the cupboard was bare. Nothing. The best I could find were passing references to James, mainly negative, as someone who had rather queered the pitch for the academic discourse of television criticism. There was some grudging respect for how he had propelled his literary personality into the field of television, but the overwhelming impression was that James, and his subsequent acolytes, had marched their muddy journalistic boots right over their turf, in through the door and were resting their feet on the kitchen table.

But it was not just in relation to James's television journalism were there no scholarly publications. There was nothing to be found on any of his output. James, himself, had often speculated whether more of his serious work would have been taken more seriously were it not for the apparent frivolous nature of other areas. This is both a challenge to, and an opportunity for, budding academics out there to put this right.

Perhaps Clive James's most significant impact will be the nature of his career, in the breaking down of barriers in which writers can work. He may not have been a postmodern writer and

critic, but there is something postmodern about the way he so comfortably and effortlessly slipped between such diverse outputs. Even in today's digital age there are not many writers who manage more than two or three media, let alone in different fields. But at his core, as James himself put it, he was just a writer, but a writer of compassion and intellect, with flair and wit, with range and variety, a 'million-petalled flower', forever catching the light.

- The radio interviews referred to in the text are freely available in the UK and internationally via the BBC website. These include *Start the week with Andrew Marr* from 2013 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03m40zj) and *Meeting myself coming back*, from 2012 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01k1ls1). All sixty Clive James episodes of *A point of view* are also available via the BBC (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02plkmf/episodes/downloads) or via many podcast providers. They are also available in print in a collected volume. *Fame in the 20th century* as well as other television output can be found on YouTube.

**Note on the contributor**

James Waller-Davies is a former postgraduate student of the University of Lincoln and the author of 'Common sense dancing': Clive James's invention of the television column as a comic genre, in *The funniest pages: International perspectives on humor in journalism*, edited by David Swick and Richard Lance Keeble, New York, Peter Lang, 2016. He is a specialist promoting the education of children in care. He lives in north Shropshire, England.

  

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The dinner guest**
Gabriela Ybarra
Vintage Publishing, London, 2018 pp 160
ISBN 9781910701980

Originally *El Comensal*, and translated into English by Natasha Wimmer in 2018, Gabriela Ybarra's *The dinner guest* (2015) is a concise and powerful memoir-esque novel. The pervasiveness of death in Ybarra's family life as well as the influence of the media and technology on her storytelling invites the reader to consider how we tell and construct our own family stories, and why this is so.

The 140-page text could be read comfortably in one sitting, yet its sparse and intricate prose lingers with the reader, inviting them to ponder all that lies beyond Ybarra's tight reportage style. The text is a novel, and Ybarra makes clear in her Author's Note that the work is a 'free reconstruction' (p. 1), to forewarn readers who may mistake the work for a non-fiction memoir (though the work reads like non-fiction). What makes the author's decision to fictionalise the events leading to and during her grandfather's death even more ethically complex is her decision to include also real images and real newspaper articles from the time, sources she then uses as narrative devices to bolster her own imaginings. But the reader does not feel duped or hoodwinked by her melding fiction with documentary. On the contrary, the fictionalisation reads authentically and the author's honesty about her process in the Note signals to the reader that this is a fictionalised rendering, not to be confused with non-fiction life writing. 'Often,' she writes, 'imagining has been the only way I've had to try and understand' (p. 2).

This is all very well, but what are the implications of fictionalising real people, real family members whose experiences are laid bare on the page, or even more problematic, are rerendered or embellished in a way that better suits the author's literary endeavours rather than 'what really happened'?

Gabriela Ybarra was born in Bilbao in 1983. Six years earlier, on 20 May 1977, her grandfather Javier is kidnapped from their family home in Neguri by the ETA terrorist group. Javier Ybarra, who was mayor of Bilbao from 1963 until 1969 and a public political figure in Spain, is taken and held for ransom by terrorists. The story is covered extensively by the Spanish press. During the following two months, negotiations are conducted in secret, while the press fuels rumours, and a priest divines the whereabouts of Javier's body. Ybarra writes: 'At a quarter to seven on the evening of Wednesday, 22 June, my grandfather's body was found under a heavy sheet of grey plastic.' She continues, including a description of the shooting written in newspaper *ABC* on 23 June 1977: '… entrance via the left posterior occipitotemporal lobe and exit via the right frontal region at an oblique angle, bottom to top and left to right. Death was instantaneous …' (pp 30-31). Her grandfather's death comprises part one of the novel and Ybarra notes that many passages she imagined herself. Her fiction is buoyed by real newspaper articles, and from these documentary inclusions she creates an additional narrative thread, Ybarra as the researcher granddaughter, collecting these fragments, compelled to make sense of his politically-fuelled death.

Ybarra lives in Brooklyn, New York, worlds away from the death of her grandfather at the hands of ETA. Her mother travels to New York from Madrid for cancer treatment, and with her mother's gradual decline, the presence of death infiltrates Ybarra's personal conscience: 'Most of the time I don't think about it. … Other times, when I'm lying in bed, I concentrate on my body inflating and deflating and I become aware of being mortal' (p. 62). Ybarra also notes broader notions of death: 'New Yorkers talk more about death than anyone else in the Western world because on September 11, 2001, they all thought they might die' (p. 102).

Ybarra cares for her mother in her final six months and reconstructs these scenes in striking detail. Her observational style forms parts of her prose, as she includes scenes in which she revisits the cancer patient waiting room and the graveyard in which her mother is buried. Ybarra puts the tension between her imagination and the occasional discordant reality into sharp focus: 'My reaction to the news [of her grandfather's death] was nothing like what I'd imagined: no wild religious fervour, no agony' (p. 98); 'They told me how it happened. I don't remember whether there were tears. I had spent days imagining the moment' (p. 110); 'I remember that the day of the burial I stood to the right of the grave, not the left as I had imagined it' (p. 113).

With Ybarra we realise the significance of imaginative construction as a way to reconcile trauma. And how significant external sources are, such as media coverage, films, images and

other stories we are told and collect throughout life, in shaping meaning. For Ybarra, truth is a culmination of sources, some real and some imagined. Writing this family story as fiction can, therefore, be seen as necessary; for one person's perception or process of understanding will never mirror reality. It seems that for Ybarra, the story of the book is separate from reality; we discover Ybarra's relationship with family trauma as one of fragments, silence and grief, for which her imagination is the conduit.

**Tess Scholfield-Peters,**
**University of Technology Sydney**

**Latin American adventures in literary journalism**
Pablo Calvi
Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019 pp 276
ISBN 0822945657

*Latin American adventures in literary journalism*, by Pablo Calvi, covers the emergence and significance of journalism and literary journalism from the 1840s to the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1958, and through the Cold War to the 1960s in Latin America. Calvi demonstrates the growth of a particular type of literary journalism as an inevitable product of the struggles for democratic and republican freedoms.

The text is divided into three sections, bookended by a scholarly Introduction and Conclusion. There are footnotes throughout the chapters, with a comprehensive Notes section and Bibliography. But it is Calvi's carefully crafted narrative merging seamlessly the words, aspirations and achievements of eight extraordinary Latin American writers that impresses. The writers are in Part 1, Francisco Bilbao, Domingo Sarmiento and José Martí; in Part 2, Juan José de Soiza Reilly, Roberto Alt and Jorge Luis Borges; and in Part 3, Rodolfo Walsh and Gabriel García Márquez.

One of the book's most fascinating sections is when Calvi focuses on a Chilean trial in 1844 centring on a 34-page 'tirade against Spain's religious monarchy, along with its morals, uses, and the ideas it had infused into Chilean society during colonial times' (pp 19-20). This 'tirade' was written by a young Chilean journalist Francisco Bilbao (1823-1865) and began what Calvi calls 'one of the most talked about events in the sub-continent' (p. 19). Bilbao was tried for blasphemy, immorality and sedition. Calvi writes that Bilbao's defence and public reaction to his trial were 'the first public acts in support of a liberal Latin American press, the first moves towards the affirmation of freedom of speech' (p. 33).

The chapter on Argentinian Domingo Sarmiento (1811-1888) is steeped in a history of Latin America pertinent to the growth of the region's press. An intellectual, traveller, and contemptuous of the power wielded by the caudillo (military and political leaders) in his own country, he lobbied for the modernisation of the trains, postal system and education system throughout the region. During his various exiles in Chile, he wrote the famed *Facundo: Civilisation and barbarism* (1845), regarded then and today as a foundational literary journalism text. He used hyperbole and exaggeration throughout his texts in attempting to create a political following but Calvi explains that these two literary techniques should be understood 'not only as purely narrative devices but also … as mechanisms that connect Sarmiento's nonfiction with his extra-literary goals … Sarmiento knew that aspiration drives behavior' (p. 48).

The final chapter in Part 1 focuses on Cuban journalist and poet José Martí (1853-1895). Martí is regarded as a Cuban national hero for his writings and his ceaseless mission towards Cuban independence; he targeted Spanish colonial regulations and was always wary of US expansionism in the region. Travelling widely, Martí was 'not strictly a reporter but rather a foreign correspondent … in more than one way, Marti was using the news' (p. 73) to make his audience politically aware. Much of his work was direct translation, mostly not attributed, of articles from the American newspapers; these 'have become a sore point' for many 'purists' (p. 75).

Part 2 centres on three Argentinian writers: Juan José de Soiza Reilly (1880-1959), Roberto Alt (1900-1942) and Jorge Luis Borges (1899-86). Soiza Reilly became 'one of the first best-selling mass journalists in Latin America' (p. 111). He 'professionalized his literary journalism, perfecting genres such as the interview and *crônica* to the point where they became new forms of mass literature' (p. 112). And interestingly, in 1909, Soiza Reilly, in an interview, talks about journalism as an 'art that has its heroes and victims … I am talking about literary journalism' (p. 143). Arlt wrote novels and a

  

semi-autobiographical work, was a staff writer for the evening *Crítica*, as well as author of a stream of columns between 1928 and 1942 for *El Mundo*, the Buenos Aires daily; 'Arlt was, in more ways than one, a cultural reformer and an infiltrator' (p. 146) and his 'effort was like a taxonomist, and through literary journalism he succeeded in painting modern Buenos Aires in its unique and strange colors' (p. 147). And like Arlt, Borges became best known for his novels but worked as a journalist for many years. Using irony, contextual interpretation, antiphrasis and humour, Borges 'built complicity with his readers' using them as a 'sounding board' (p. 147).

Finally, in Part 3, Calvi turns to two authors: Rodolfo Walsh (1927-1977) and Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014). Anticipating the 21st century 'fake news' controversy, Walsh writes of 'an avalanche of information garbage' emanating from wire services. Cuban revolutionaries realised that 'information balance' (p. 182) was key at this time, and so *Prensa Latina*, the first Latin American News Agency, was born, based in Havana, Cuba. Márquez wrote from Colombia and Walsh from Argentina. This chapter also discusses 'testimonial literature' (p. 186), citing Walsh's text *Operación masacre* (*Operation massacre*, 1957) and Márquez's *Relato de un náufrago* (*The story of a shipwrecked sailor*, 1970), as exemplars of literary journalism. Both texts originally appeared as instalments and, Calvi argues, have 'strong links between Latin American and the Anglo-American literary journalism traditions' (p. 186).

But there is a noticeable dearth of the female voices in Latin America throughout this time. In his Introduction, Calvi tells us that this lack of female voices cannot be ignored but 'accounted for as one of the main conditions imposed by the period it describes and attempts to understand' (p. 4). And in his Conclusion, Calvi critiques the field for its 'intellectual chauvinism' (p. 229). He remedies this with mention of contemporary female and non-binary journalists in the late 20th/early 21st centuries – Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), the late Pedro Lemebel (Chile), Leila Guerriero (Argentina) and Gabriela Wiener (Peru). And in a footnote, Calvi tells us: 'Mahieux (2011) has recently incorporated female authors and non-binary approaches into the list of *cronistas*.' Mahieux cites Alfonsina Storni and Salvador Novo as, according to Calvi, 'two interesting voices who, by their sheer existence, expand the scope of the period, though they certainly do not challenge its most dominant aspects as a whole' (p. 249).

Calvi argues that beating at the heart of Latin America during the tumultuous 19th and 20th centuries was the growth of the journalistic voice as a source of information and influence. And a unique tradition of literary journalism was developing – very different from the Anglo-American tradition – incorporating different practices, different techniques and different cultural understandings of literary journalism: 'Due to institutional instability … it has evolved as an allegorical account of the present – a narrative form that could either be read as richly riddled with political undercurrents or interpreted plainly as a novelized historical account …' (228).

This is a colourful, deeply researched text of meta-literary journalism which is likely to inspire practitioners, scholars and students to shrug off the Anglo/American-centric impetus of studies in this field and mine the rich and courageous writings from their Latin American antecedents. Calvi's analytical and hybrid text, robust in its arguments, entices us to wander beyond the comfort of our own cultures.

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**Culture is inclusion: A narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability**

Scott Avery
Sydney, First Peoples Disability Network Australia, 2018 pp 215
ISBN 9780646990927

Scott Avery opens his book *Culture is inclusion* with the blunt truth that the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability is 'excised from the book of Australia's social history' (p. i). Avery continues: '… whole chapters on disability have been ripped from every single inquiry into why so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people end up in prison' (p. i). Likewise: '… the disability story amongst the realm of material on the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people … is missing' (ibid). *Culture is Inclusion* is the lost chapter.

  

The story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability is told through Avery's analysis of data and illustrated by excerpts from the participants themselves. Sections of participants' narratives are placed throughout the text, connecting the audience to them. There are seven 'yarning pieces', positioned and written in a way that allows the reader to feel as though they are sitting in the seat of the interviewer – 'watching and listening to the person's story as it unfolds' (p. 27). By combining qualitative and quantitative data with vignettes of participant narratives, Avery tells the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability in a way which does not minimise participants to numbers or experiences. Importantly, Avery places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a lived experience of disability at the centre of the research and acknowledges participants as 'participant-owners of the research and its outcomes' (p. 32).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability 'experience greater social, health and wellbeing inequalities relative to other population cohorts' (p. 108). This is the result of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people existing at the intersection of two marginalised groups – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and living with disability. This consideration underlines each of the focus areas discussed in the text. Through this Avery calls for his audience to remember that intersectional discrimination is not simply the addition of discrimination associated with both identities. Rather, discrimination is compounded and with this comes a different set of experiences and more profound inequalities compared to the general or sectional populations.

Discrimination and inequality of both identities is greater than the sum of its parts. The interaction of race and disability-related discrimination results in a unique third form of discrimination. Avery utilises lived experience from a participant to portray this effect:

> An example from the testimony is an account of an Aboriginal man with cognitive impairment who is harassed at a shopping centre by security guards who assume he is drunk. In this example, the physical presentation of a person with a cognitive impairment interacts with populist prejudices about Aboriginal people and drinking which exposes a person who is Aboriginal and has cognitive impairment to a heightened vulnerability not adequately explained by racism or ableism alone (p. 36).

But Avery shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability participate socially, within their own communities at the same rate as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without disability. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is grounded in inclusion and there is no word for 'disability' in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and thus difference is not perceived. Avery outlines a First Peoples cultural model of disability, otherwise known as a cultural model of inclusion. The model is based on the intrinsic connection between inclusion and the social life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In fact, inclusion confronts and counters the impacts of intersectional inequality.

In *Culture is inclusion* Avery confronts the sectional approach adopted in policy, law, inquiries and practice, and challenges professionals to recognise intersectionality and the unique experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. It is evident that an intersectional lens and a model of inclusion should be adopted, in order to improve appropriately and effectively outcomes for First Peoples with disability and other marginalised groups.

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## REVIEW ESSAY

**The state of secrecy: Spies and the media in Britain**
Richard Norton-Taylor
I. B. Tauris, London, 2020 pp 331
ISBN 9781788312189

Richard Norton-Taylor knows a thing or two about the secret state having been defence correspondent at the *Guardian* specialising in intelligence matters for 47 years. And in this riveting text, he takes the opportunity to lambast the spooks and their masters in Whitehall in no uncertain terms.

He begins bluntly: 'The culture of secrecy is the root cause of many, perhaps most, of Britain's deep-seated ills. It has prevented a coherent debate about the state of British democracy, how we are governed and about the country's role – in the past, now and in the future. … I look back, unsettled, at the amount of times I was lied to. Whitehall officials would not use the word, of course. They chose alternatives from its large collection of euphemisms. … Euphemism is a barrier to honesty. It also betrays a sense of nonchalant arrogance, patronizing putdowns posing as wit. The brazen use of language with which Whitehall officials have protected themselves from scrutiny has deceived the public and Parliament alike' (p. 1; 4). Amazingly, this anger persists right through this enormously detailed, wide-ranging, opinionated and important book that is bursting with highly revealing personal anecdotes.

In one of the more colourful sections, he writes: 'Secrecy is imposed to cover up wrongdoing and prevent embarrassment, to close down debate and allow Whitehall officials and ministers to enjoy the quiet life. … It is rather like Kafka meeting Alice in Wonderland' (p. 129). And he provides this example to sum up Whitehall's obsession with secrecy: 'When the London Eye, the observation wheel on London's south bank, was erected, senior officials in the MoD across the river warned officials not to read or leave open classified documents on their desks – in case someone posing as an innocent tourist with a long lens camera photographed them' (p. 141).

According to Norton-Taylor, the bodies set up to scrutinise MI5 (responsible for domestic intelligence), MI6 (responsible for foreign intelligence) and GCHQ (providing signals intelligence) have proved incapable of investigating wrongdoing. No statute or outside body, MP or cabinet minister can ensure they act ethically and within the law. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 involved an unprecedented abuse of intelligence 'for which Sir Richard Dearlove, then head of MI6, and Sir John Scarlett, chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, should bear some responsibility' (p. 8). The government, notably Jack Straw, Tony Blair's foreign secretary, consistently over six years denied any British involvement in rendition operations – the abduction and secret torturing of terror suspects. When clear evidence emerged, the Crown Prosecution Service did nothing (p. 9). And while Brexit appeared as a challenge to Westminster and other traditional centres of power as well as Brussels, there was little sign that the secret state kept in place by the Whitehall establishment was being eroded. 'Far from it. The government's preparations for Brexit were shrouded in secrecy' (p. 11).

Tony Blair while prime minister introduced a hyper-secretive style of 'sofa government' in which key decisions were taken informally by a group of political advisers rather than through formal meetings with official minute-takers. 'Blair wanted to take decisions with a bunch of close and trusted advisers accountable to no one but himself' (p. 109). So much for parliamentary democracy.

In fact, according to Norton-Taylor, officials blatantly use the concept of parliamentary privilege to impose secrecy. For instance, parliamentary answers or written statements on controversial issues are slipped out on the eve of Commons recesses, known as 'take out the trash' day. Or ministers are 'economical with the truth' when answering questions. In July 2015, the MoD denied that Britain was bombing ISIS targets in Syria. 'What eventually emerged, through a Freedom of Information request by the human rights group Reprieve, was that though RAF planes had not been involved, British pilots had been' (p. 100). Euphemisms are also used as a kind of soft power. So drones are 'remotely piloted air systems', 'neutralised' means 'killed' and 'precision weapons' do still lead to the killing of civilians, including women and children, in what the MoD calls 'collateral damage' (p. 104). The new thermobaric weapons – incorporating a mixture of chemicals and a high-pressure blast system – are 'enhanced blast' (pp 104-105).

There is also the 'revolving doors syndrome' – the uninterrupted movement of retired Whitehall mandarins and military top brass to the private sector – which perpetuates the culture and vested interests of the establishment. To take a

couple of examples, Sir Mark Allen, MI6's head of counterterrorism, resigned shortly after the 2003 invasion and on joining BP helped the company secure a £15 billion oil drilling contract with Col. Gaddafi, President of Libya. And five months after retiring as MI6 head at the end of 2014, Sir John Sawers joined BP (p. 112).

**The folly of the lobby**

Norton-Taylor highlights the importance of the lobby system to the propaganda operations of the secret state. All Whitehall departments, notably the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and Scotland Yard have their groups of specialist correspondents – or lobbies – which form their own cartels, some more closed than others. 'Official spokespeople in government departments like to deal exclusively with the journalists' lobby groups assuming their members could be trusted not to rock the boat. They assume journalists prefer to operate in cartels so that they are not scooped' (p. 16). 'When I wrote stories that displeased the FO – one I remember was about how Britain was secretly arming Pinochet's Chile – official spokespeople told other journalists, British and foreign, that I was not an accredited "diplomatic correspondent", the implication being that I was unreliable' (p. 17).

Overall, Norton-Taylor is highly critical of his Fleet Street colleagues. 'Too many journalists reporting on the activities of the agencies remain on the defensive, too ready to believe they have to rely on the goodwill of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ and the official spokespeople of the agencies' sponsoring departments, the Home Office and the FO' (p. 45).

**Hacks, spooks and the long tradition of collaboration**

The section in which Norton-Taylor examines the history of journalists' ties with the secret state is fascinating. He mentions David Astor, the editor of the *Observer* and close friend of George Orwell, who appointed Kim Philby the newspaper's Beirut correspondent after a plea from MI6 to help after the Soviet spy was dismissed following Burgess and Maclean's escape in 1951. The *Observer*'s Mark Frankland, Edward Crankshaw and Gavin Young, the *Daily Express's* Sefton Delmer and *The Times*'s Ian (James Bond) Fleming are all identified as having ties to the spooks. But the list could have been far longer. There is no bibliography at the end of the book and the notes indicating sources are brief. Here, for instance, Norton-Taylor may have usefully referenced studies by Stephen Dorril, Nick Davies and Phillip Knightley on the long history of hack-spook collaborations. But Norton-Taylor does record the incident in 1998 when he discovered that articles written under the byline of Kenneth Roberts for the *Spectator* during the civil war in Bosnia were actually penned by Keith Craig, an M16 officer. The editor, Dominic Lawson, always denied knowing that Roberts was a pseudonym for an MI6 officer (p. 37).

Norton-Taylor goes on to examine the work of the Information Research Department spreading anti-communist propaganda during the Cold War – and to which George Orwell offered his 'little list' of crypto-communists months in 1949 just months before he died. The IRD fed material to journalists well aware of the origin 'as well as to the jejune and to those who did not bother to ask' (p. 39). One file in the IRD archives, dated March 1966, shows how MI5 told the cabinet office it had been given 'suitable material by our friends (a reference to MI6) from their student contacts'. The IRD, it adds, 'are ready to help place articles in newspapers which are widely read by students in particular – the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Observer* and *Sunday Times*' (ibid).

**War and the media**

The first war Norton-Taylor covered was the 1982 Falklands conflict. Ian Macdonald was brought in at the last moment by the MoD to be its official spokesman and became in/famous for his deadpan utterances. This was the same Macdonald who later told the Scott inquiry into arms sales to Iraq in the early 1990s: 'Truth is a very difficult concept' (p. 47). A perceived need for a propaganda victory to boost morale was the sole reason for the attack on Goose Green, the first engagement of the conflict, in which 55 Argentinian and 18 British soldiers died – as Sir Lawrence Freedom writes in the official history.

During the 1999 Kosovo conflict, Norton-Taylor composed a piece in the *Guardian* (re-published later in the *Daily Mail*) claiming Nato was fighting a 'coward's war'. As a result, he and his editor, Alan Rusbridger, were summoned by George Robertson to the MoD's HQ in Whitehall. Along with General Charles Guthrie, chief of the defence staff, Robertson stressed to the journos the need to keep the coalition of Nato countries together. Norton-Taylor comments: '… their efforts did not change the *Guardian*'s sceptical editorial line' (p. 80). Norton-Taylor's memory seems to have failed him here. His newspaper, after all, was far from sceptical. On

  

the eve of the attacks on Belgrave, for instance, it editorialised: 'The only honourable course for Europe and America is to use military force.' And throughout the conflict, the *Guardian* followed the Fleet Street consensus in demonising the president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević. On 11 June 1999, for instance, they dubbed him 'the architect of this historic calamity'.[1]

**Inside Britain's securocracy**

In another, largely unreferenced chapter, titled 'Secrecy obsessed', Norton-Taylor traces the history of Britain's secret state. He tells of the government sending spies to follow the romantic poets Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor-Coleridge in the early 19th century, but fails to mention that the poet William Wordsworth was probably a spy himself.[2] After spy mania fuelled by Fleet Street gripped the country in 1911, the Official Secrets Act was hurried through parliament. Under Section 2, the unauthorised disclosure of any information by any government official, whether or not that information was officially classified, was a criminal offence.

An early victim was the novelist Compton Mackenzie. The story is worth repeating. In 1932, following the publication of his WW1 exploits in MI6 in *Greek Memories*, he was charged with disclosing the identities of intelligence officers and revealing that visa sections of UK embassies and passport control were often used as a cover for British spies. It emerged that one officer named in the book, Col. Sir Eric Holt-Wilson of MI5, had even encouraged Mackenzie to write it. He finally agreed to plead guilty to avoid jail and was fined a sum 'not exceeding £500 and £500 costs'. Under pressure from the spooks, the publisher Cassell withdrew the original text and went ahead with a heavily censored version. The British Library refused to catalogue it while Oxford's Bodleian Library kept it in its 'suppressed books' section. And it was not republished until 2011. In *Water on the brain*, Mackenzie took his revenge telling the story of a Directorate of Extraordinary Intelligence MQ 99 (E) whose HQ becomes a lunatic asylum 'for the servants of bureaucracy who have been driven mad in the service of the country' (ibid: 120). Norton-Taylor does not say, but Mackenzie, a fervent supporter of King Edward VIII, was knighted in 1952. Occasionally the establishment loves its mavericks.

All the major secrets scandals of recent decades are covered – including the ABC trial of *Time Out* journalists, the Clive Ponting acquittal at the Old Bailey, the Peter (*Spycatcher*) Wright saga, and the secret prosecution, in 2007, of David Keogh and Leo O'Connor for leaking a record of a meeting between President Bush and Tony Blair in April 2004 – believed to refer to Bush's alleged proposal to bomb the Al Jazeera TV channel and Blair's criticism of the US bombardment of Fallujah, Iraq. Norton-Taylor also tells of the time when the *Guardian* and *Observer* resisted attempts by the police to force them to hand over documents relating to claims by the former MI5 officer David Shayler that MI6 was involved in a failed assassination attempt against Col. Gaddafi, of Libya, in 1996 (p. 133).

The *Guardian*'s publication in 2010 of the WikiLeaks revelations about US crimes in the 'war on terror' receives only a passing mention. Julian Assange, WikiLeaks editor, is never named – but Norton-Taylor does stress that at the trial of Bradley – now Chelsea – Manning for leaking the documents, the Pentagon's chief investigator admitted he could find no evidence of anyone losing their life as a result (p. 137). This silence over WikiLeaks probably follows the acrimonious end of the Assange-*Guardian* relationship.[3] Suzanne Moore, the *Guardian* columnist, writing in the *New Statesman*, once called Assange 'a deluded, creepy man' with a messiah complex.[4] Oh dear.

**Delving further into the world of spookdom**

Norton-Taylor's many years reporting on the secret state means he is able to pack the book with masses of information about its operations. Here are some useful nuggets: by this year, according to details provided by parliament's intelligence and security committee, MI5 is expected to have almost 5,000 officers, an increase of more than 20 per cent in four years and more than double the number it had on 9/11. The combined budget of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ was about £3 billion in 2017 – though this does not include all counter cyber or counter terrorism operations or the cost of hiring outside contractors and the cost of their building. MI5 and MI6's headquarters at Thames House and Vauxhall Cross in London together cost £547 million, more than twice the original estimate. For decades, MI5, supported by Special Branch, deployed 24 undercover officers – including Annie Machon, partner of MI5 renegade David Shayler – to infiltrate the Socialist Workers Party. And though MI6 officers do not have the 'licence to kill' enjoyed by James Bond, the 1994 Intelligence Services Act does protect them from liability resulting from actions abroad which if carried out in Britain would be illegal (p. 165).

But in a fascinating, detailed review of the text, the *Lobster*'s Robin Ramsay, notes astutely:

> Norton-Taylor almost always focuses on procedural wrongdoings or specific case studies. Perhaps that is simply good journalism, but you sometimes wish that he would tackle the bigger questions. There's no systematic critique. Essentially, as with the good defectors and double-agents of the Cold War, Norton-Taylor seems to understand himself as 'a responsible leaker'. Perhaps one of the most troubling things you realise after reading the book is that Norton-Taylor's measured and often modest questioning of the security services still placed him on the maverick fringes of journalistic acceptability. The British state simply finds his doggedness and persistence irritating.[5]

### *Guardian* reflections

This quite lengthy review still only touches on a very small sample of the enormous amount of information and commentary in the book. In short, it's not an easy read. But Norton-Taylor does not miss the opportunity to pass judgment on his colleagues – and these reflections are always interesting. He is not very complimentary about his first editor Alastair Hetherington. He famously spiked what could have been a great scoop. While in Beirut, the legendary foreign correspondent Clare Hollingworth found out that the spy Philby, on being exposed, had boarded a Soviet ship. But Hetherington refused to carry the story on the grounds that, if it turned out to be untrue, the newspaper could face 'colossal' libel damages. Late in April 1963, three months after she filed the story, when Hetherington was away from the office, she finally persuaded the deputy editor to run it. Even then, it was buried on page seven (p. 24).

His next editor, Peter Preston (known as PP) is described as 'withdrawn and enigmatic, a stoic, partly the result of being struck down by polio as a boy'. Norton-Taylor covers in some detail the jailing in 1984 of Sarah Tisdall after she sent to the *Guardian* photocopies of two documents in which the defence secretary described plans to keep secret the arrival of US Cruise missiles in British bases. Preston agreed with the lawyers to return the documents – and so disclose Tisdall's identity. Norton-Taylor comments: 'I regret I did not challenge PP's argument. PP might have been jailed for denying a court order to hand back the documents. More likely, the *Guardian* would have been quite heavily fined. Either way, PP would have been trumpeted as a principled, even heroic defender of the press' (p. 24). Rusbridger, PP's successor, is clearly the favourite – and not surprisingly so given his handling of so many controversial, risky and major scoops – including Edward Snowden's NSA revelations in 2013.

Princess Diana features in one of Norton-Taylor's gossipy inserts. As Rusbridger escorts her through the newsrooms, she remarks on how untidy Norton-Taylor's desk was with its unsteady pile of papers and books.

> 'It is a mark of a creative mind,' I said, wondering how she would respond. Quick as a flash, fluttering her eyes encased in indigo-blue contact lenses, she replied: 'I thought reporters were not supposed to be creative.' Rusbridger explained that I wrote about the security and intelligence agencies. 'I could tell you a lot about them,' she said before turning briskly on her way (p. 28).

One person also significantly missing from the book is Katherine Viner, appointed *Guardian* editor in March 2015. According to investigative journalists Mark Curtis and Matt Kennard, the intelligence services have, in effect, 'neutralised' the newspaper's coverage of the intelligence services under Viner's leadership.[6] Maybe Norton-Taylor agrees. But on that issue he's keeping his views secret.

### Notes

[1] Keeble, Richard Lance, *Covering conflict: The making and unmaking of new militarism*, Bury St Edmunds, Abramis p. 260

[2] See https://www.irishtimes.com/news/wordsworth-was-a-spy-for-british-professor-claims-1.155746

[3] See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/press/from-allies-to-enemies-how-the-guardian-fell-out-with-assange-2179166.html

[4] https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/04/wikileaks-was-future-once-then-it-became-julian-assange

[5] https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster80/lob80-state-of-secrecy.pdf

[6] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-11-how-the-uk-security-services-neutralised-the-countrys-leading-liberal-newspaper/

**Richard Lance Keeble**

  

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