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978-1-107-69282-4 - So you want to be a Journalist? Unplugged: Second Edition

Bruce Grundy, Martin Hirst, Janine Little, Mark Hayes and Greg Treadwell

Excerpt

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# INTRODUCTION: JOURNALISM UNPLUGGED

*The internet, for the first time, gives us many-to-many and few-to-few communications. This has vast implications for the former audience and for the producers of news because the differences between the two are becoming harder and harder to distinguish.*

Dan Gillmor, *We the Media* (2006)

We began to unplug ourselves over 50 years ago. Perhaps first with the transistor radio, then the cassette tape and the Walkman in the late 1970s; soon afterwards came portable television receivers. In the 1980s we acquired compact discs (cue roller disco soundtrack), and home camcorders unplugged us a little more as we began to shoot our own television-like content. As audiences, we began unplugging ourselves from appointment television about 10 years ago, and this trend is growing. We no longer sit obediently in front of the box at certain times. We time-shift, delay and replay (Alex, 2010). For a decade now, the trend has been towards narrowcasting and on-demand viewing (Hirst & Harrison, 2007).

But we really started unplugging at a greater rate when audio and video recording went digital: devices began to get smaller; wireless services are now more reliable and the range of television-like devices has grown exponentially. Analogue television signals are being switched off across Australia and New Zealand, and a total switchover to digital (due in 2013) will be in place by the time you're reading these words. We are unplugging ourselves from large stationary screens in favour of mobile phones, tablets and laptops; all have in-built HD video capability and are web-active. The number of mobile phones in Australia outstripped the nation's population in 2008 and now smartphones are set to dominate handheld devices. In March 2011, smartphones constituted 70 per cent of the Australian mobile market (Foo, 2011). According to Nielsen Online survey results in February 2012, each day over 500 000 Australians use their smartphone to connect to the internet. We are also using smartphones more to chase breaking and major news events (Christensen, 2012).

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## 2 SO YOU WANT TO BE A JOURNALIST?

As consumers, we are unplugging our attention from news in its traditional print and broadcast formats (Hirst, 2011). We are in the age of 'News 2.0', and most analysts believe News 3.0 is not far away. Our love of mobile gadgets also extends to the applications that they manage for us. Many big-brand global and local news companies are now adopting a digital packaging strategy. Internationally, the leader has been Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. In the United States, News took strategic assets like the *Wall Street Journal*; Sky and Fox are leading brands in content delivery; and in all markets News, in its various forms, is paving the way with subscription packages.

In November 2011, *The Australian* (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au>) offered a full-access digital package and six newspapers a week home-delivered for less than \$8 a week. The total cost for this deal was \$413 a year, a print-only home delivery would cost \$665 annually. Exclusive online content is available to subscribers, but the general news pages online remain available free. In March 2012, the Murdoch-owned *Herald-Sun* in Melbourne became the first Australian tabloid to erect a paywall and offer a mix of free and premium content. According to Victorian business manager for News Limited, Peter Blunden, it is only a matter of time before other titles in the News Limited stable adopt a similar strategy (Kirk, 2012).

The Fairfax Media-owned *Australian Financial Review* also offers a five-day delivery of its print edition and an online package of subscriber-only services for \$65 per month (\$780 per year). Establishing a paywall – and, more importantly, a healthy customer base behind it – was always considered a risky business, but it would seem that by 2012 the more we unplug from our old selves, the more we embrace new pay-per-view delivery models. In March 2012, [www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au) began advertising an even more customised subscription package aimed at media junkies. The 'Media Package' provided a *Weekend Australian* and the *Monday Australian* home-delivered and full digital access for \$5.20 a week.

Every day, it seems we become more and more comfortable with our wireless existence. Anyone can now also unplug from visits to the supermarket. Leading retailers are unveiling new virtual shopping malls at train and bus stations in every city in the world. By scanning pictures of fruit, meat and other grocery lines with a smartphone, an order is generated and delivered to your nominated address (Wells, 2012). When we start shopping online more than in bricks-and-mortar supermarkets and shopping malls, it is no wonder we demand our news and information instantly and 'on the go' as well. Advertisers are also getting the hang of how the internet might work for them. From 2012 on, it seems, the ad 'spend' online is set to outpace both print and television over the next decade (Edwards, 2012; Indvik, 2012).

If we are no longer 'plugged in', then perhaps we are becoming 'wireless' and 'networked'. More than two-thirds of the world's internet users interact with social networking sites, such as Facebook and applications like Skype or Twitter, and the number is growing. In 2011, more than 114 million Americans were active on social networks. In China, it was over 155 million people. According to market analysts comScore, one in very five minutes we spend online is spent on social networks. Through widgets and linked apps (such as Facebook's 'like'), news is being pushed towards us along with advertising messages. Websites make 'recommendations' for us and can tailor a news experience to suit every taste and budget. Most importantly, we are doing all this

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while engaged in other activities or on our way somewhere. News and information can follow us, never further away than a swipe of the touchscreen and a few taps of the finger. We are unplugged and we are mobile. The news market is adapting to our new needs.

With all that change going on across the consumption and distribution side of the news ledger, it should not be surprising that changes – just as significant – are continuing on the production and journalism side of the balance sheet. Over the past decade, journalism has to a large degree become unplugged from the newsroom. In the mainstream media, this means more live crosses on television, reporters with satellite phones in remote locations and a greater willingness to take material from eye-witnesses in the form of images and video shot by amateurs and an assortment of non-professionals.

Think of some of the biggest international stories of recent times: the Arab spring and the aftermath, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 and others. Much of the initial television footage was taken by people on the spot and caught up in the story. Quality has become secondary to speed in some cases, and ‘unverified’ footage is commonplace. Journalists increasingly are ‘unplugged’ too, as equipment that is broadcast-capable becomes cheaper and more powerful. Again, smartphones lead the way as portable, effective reporting tools for professionals and amateurs alike.

This unplugged scenario is an important aspect of what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls ‘convergence culture’. Like all things, convergence is a work in progress and our unplugging is one step on this journey. It provides an interesting new background for this book, which also seeks to retain the best of the past and to blend the old with some of the new. The reason is simple: while we are busy unplugging ourselves from wall sockets, televisions and print media, we must also retain the best advice about what news is and what journalism is or might be. In particular, we need to stress that the fundamental aspects of good solid reporting, clear and interesting writing and technical capability with a variety of equipment are still necessary for good journalism today.

## Unplugging from news consumption

Not only are we unplugging ourselves in favour of mobile technologies and ways of consuming information, we are also unplugging from some forms of news because they no longer satisfy us.

Journalists and editors regularly feature towards the bottom of surveys that measure which professions we trust the most. For the last 15 years, journalists have been near the bottom of such lists. Reporters are usually in the low 40s on a list that might contain 50 occupations (Hirst, 2011; Hirst & Patching, 2007). We deal with these issues briefly in our final chapter on ‘professionalism’ in the news.

One major international scandal that has done much to lower the standing of journalists in recent years is the long-running story about phone hacking and the bribery of public officials by reporters working for News International in Britain. This giant media company, headed by Rupert Murdoch, was forced to close one newspaper (the *News of the World*) in 2011 and more than 30

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## 4 SO YOU WANT TO BE A JOURNALIST?

News staff have been investigated by a police task force examining allegations of illegal behaviour by company journalists. This is a salutary lesson for young journalism students because it is a signal event that will shape the first decade (at least) of your career.

## *News of the World no more*

*The News of the World was in the business of holding others to account. It failed when it came to itself. We are sorry for the serious wrongdoing that occurred. We are deeply sorry for the hurt suffered by the individuals affected.*

Rupert Murdoch, 15 July 2011

On 10 July 2011, Rupert Murdoch was forced to close a British newspaper that had been in continuous publication for 168 years. The *News of the World* was not shut down because of financial difficulties – on the contrary, the racy tabloid was one of News International's most profitable print assets. The paper was closed because Murdoch, his senior managers, his team of highly paid editors and scores of *NOTW* reporters had been caught out behaving illegally and unethically.

Just nine days after closing the *News of the World*, Murdoch the elder and his son James were reluctantly dragged in front of a British parliamentary committee to explain the actions of *News of the World* staff and to tell the world what they knew of a scandal that became known as 'hacker-gate'. Murdoch senior said that appearing before the committee was the 'most humble' day of his life. During the proceedings, Murdoch was hit in the face with a shaving cream pie and his wife, Wendi Deng, slapped the pie-thrower, comedian Johnnie Marbles. This was the only light relief on the day; News executives denied prior knowledge of the hacking scandal, even under intense cross-examination.

*News of the World* executives, editors, senior staff and more than a dozen reporters were alleged (some confessed) to have broken the law by hacking into the phones of sports stars, celebrities and even members of the royal family. Both Rupert and James told the parliamentary inquiry that they had only recently been made aware of the extent of the phone hacking. For at least three or four years, the Murdoch family had denied any knowledge of the scale of the offences, and the defensive line from the *News of the World* was that the hacking was the action of a rogue reporter and a private detective who was on the Murdoch payroll.

In fact, the roots of the phone tapping scandal that finally destroyed the *News of the World* go right back to 2005. In that year the royal household complained to British authorities about a story in the *News of the World* in which information could only have come from someone with access to the voice messages on the phone of the young princes, William and Harry. The first public airing of the scandal occurred in August 2006, when *News of the World* royal editor Clive Goodman and private eye Glenn Mulcaire were arrested and charged with hacking the royal phones. In 2007 when the first edition of *So You Want to Be a Journalist?* was published, Goodman and Mulcaire were in gaol and the *NOTW* editor, Andy Coulson, had resigned his editorship of the paper. In May 2010,

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Coulson's career was revived when he became the chief media adviser to new conservative British prime minister, David Cameron. It seemed he may have been spared any further embarrassment or responsibility for the *News of the World* debacle, but once further allegations came to light, the whole of the British establishment was tainted. Unseemly friendships between some key Murdoch executives and political figures were revealed, and even the Prime Minister's Office was embarrassed. In January 2010, Coulson stepped down again and may have felt that he had escaped the worst of it.

However, it was not to be. The 'hackergate' scandal had died down after Goodman and Mulcaire were sentenced in 2007, but a handful of journalists – including Nick Davies from *The Guardian* and others from *The Daily Telegraph* – continued to dig and file follow-up stories. Famous stars, well-known footballers and less-well-known victims of crime continued to claim that their phones had been hacked, and a police investigation seemed to uncover more and more evidence of wrongdoing. Even so, it was not until 2011 that the dam walls broke and all the denials issued from News International offices were swept away in a tsunami of revelations. Two senior Scotland Yard police officers, including a commissioner, resigned; editors and reporters, a handful of senior Murdoch executives from London to New York, Coulson himself and Murdoch favourite Rebekah Brooks were all engulfed. Brooks had been a *News of the World* editor from 2000 to 2003; she had also been editor of *The Sun* and from 2009 the CEO of News International – a position she resigned in July 2011. Coulson and Brooks were eventually among those arrested by Scotland Yard and charged with offences relating to the phone hacking; Murdoch was humiliated and the *News of the World* was unceremoniously shut down. Eventually, in February 2012, Rupert's youngest son James was forced to step down as chairman of News International and retreat to New York, where he took a much lower profile in the family business.

## The final straw

The nail in the coffin of the *NOTW* was the revelation that the paper's reporters – aided and abetted by unscrupulous private detectives and corrupt police officers – had hacked into the phone message bank of a murdered schoolgirl, Milly Dowler. Then, as if it could get any worse, it was also revealed that the paper had hacked the phones of relatives of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. By August 2011, 10 serving or former *NOTW* staff, including three former editors, had been arrested and charged with various counts of phone hacking, conspiracy and corruption. In an ironic twist, Clive Goodman – the *NOTW* royal reporter whose actions kicked off the first police investigation in 2006 – was re-arrested in July 2011 for alleged corrupt payments to police officers. Not only was Rupert Murdoch embarrassed, he also lost money as shares in News International were devalued in the wake of the scandal. The FBI announced that it would investigate allegations of inappropriate behaviour by Murdoch employees in the United States, and News Corporation was unable to proceed with a plan to buy the UK pay television operator BSkyB.

In Australia, while no one has yet come forward with evidence of phone-tapping or other illegal behaviour by News Limited reporters, the Gillard Labor government announced it would support

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an independent inquiry into the news media, and former leader of The Greens, Bob Brown, said the inquiry should examine issues of ethics and bias in news journalism. 'Once upon a time you expected that there would be opinion in editorial columns and there would be news in news columns, but that's gone out the window,' Brown told a media conference. When the media inquiry report was released in March 2012, it faced a barrage of criticism from News Limited columnists and editorials. The inquiry chair, former judge Ray Finkelstein, recommended a government-funded media watchdog be established to monitor journalists and handle complaints about news reports. This was denounced as a scurrilous attack on freedom of speech in the Murdoch press.

## Why don't we trust journalists anymore?

It is no wonder, on the back of scandals of such magnitude, that the news industry and journalists are the objects of public mistrust and contempt. Bob Brown was perhaps speaking for many when he said that it seemed as if journalistic ethics had been abandoned in Australia, in particular around intrusions into personal grief.

However, it is not just grief intrusion that causes ethical faultlines in the news media and in the actions of journalists. The commercial pressure to maintain audience share and profits from advertising and subscriptions is also a factor in what appears to be declining ethical standards. The global financial crisis of 2009–11 hit the world's media companies quite hard. Advertising revenues fell substantially as fewer companies needed to promote their goods and services to wary consumers who were not spending as much as they used to. The profitability of the news media in general and newspapers in particular has also been affected by our increasing desire to access news and information online. Newspaper sales in many Western nations have fallen along with circulation and readership numbers, and less money coming in means that costs have to be cut. News-gathering, news-writing and news publishing are expensive, as is broadcasting, so cost-cutting has meant that newsrooms are shrinking. Fewer staff means more shortcuts, and shortcuts lead to mistakes. Cutting corners has increased the pressure on reporters to do more with less – a sure recipe for ethical standards to fall. Finally, as much as we all love surfing the web and getting an instant news fix from social media such as Twitter or from Facebook status updates, and even a news feed from our favourite print or broadcast outlet, the speed of news online also means that mistakes creep in and more ethical shortcuts are taken in order to beat the competition and to be 'ahead' on any particular story.

Taken together, all these factors indicate that perhaps we are indeed entering into another ethical minefield. We have a situation where the technology of online news-gathering and reporting creates opportunities for new ways of doing the news, but despite our apparent need for speed, we also need to back off the pace a little and take some time to reflect on the ethical paths that lie before us (Rosenberg & Feldman 2008). The *NOTW* scandal erupted because a number of senior people employed by News International made the wrong decisions when confronted with legal and ethical choices. Mistakes occur in newsrooms when our hunger for a scoop to feed our professional

pride, or commercial competition, pushes us into making the wrong decision about how we tackle or manage a story. It is important to understand that many ethical dilemmas come down to choice: to do the 'right thing', or not. As the low public regard for journalists and the news indicates, the audience does not necessarily agree with some of the poor choices made in newsrooms. Bearing in mind that news is all about the public interest, we should regard it as a guiding principle when confronted with difficult ethical decisions (see Chapter 12).

## The classroom and the newsroom

When it comes to journalism education, one important mantra holds true for both students and teachers: the classroom is a newsroom and the newsroom is a classroom. This is not (just) a tautology, it expresses two key ideas for the learning of journalism – particularly the 'how to' parts of a journalism education. 'The classroom is a newsroom' simply means that we should always treat our learning exercises like real news work. Where possible, the journalism classroom should encourage real-world experiences under conditions similar to those found on any news assignment. It means students should assume that their work is going to be published or broadcast, not simply an 'in-class' exercise. It means students work under what we might call 'live fire' conditions with real deadlines and real consequences around accuracy and other issues.

The second part of the phrase seems to undercut the first, but it is really complementary: the newsroom is a classroom, and therefore it is a place of experimentation and safety for students. You should feel free to attempt things you haven't done before, and you should experiment with style and language and social media. Above all, you should feel comfortable doing this because it is a learning environment. *So You Want to Be a Journalist? Unplugged* is designed to meet the needs of the newsroom as classroom.

However, this book does not contain everything one needs to know to be a journalist. No book could do that. It would have to contain everything there is to know about everything, and that is a tall order. When Bruce Grundy was a cadet reporter, there was precious little training. You sank or you swam. You found out what to do by listening and watching and reading what others did. Your eyes and ears told you what was good and what was bad. Sometimes you would be given some advice, but not much explanation. In a way, that kind of experience was indeed a good teacher. It made you think about what you were doing, about what was good and what was no good and why. It made you think about what made sense and what didn't, what was logical and what wasn't, what worked and what flopped.

But today, the path into a journalism career is different; most training and learning occurs in a classroom, not a newsroom. In the classroom, it is no good saying: 'Do it this way because I am the boss and if you don't do it this way you can find another job.' Students want to know, quite correctly, why. 'Why do we have to do it this way – or that?' Is there an explanation? Or is it just a convention? If it's a convention, why is it a convention?' The 'Why?' questions have to be answered. The short answer to the 'Why?' questions is, in fact, another question – and it is

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worth remembering. Do you want to communicate with your audience or don't you? That is the explanation, in as few words as possible, behind all the suggestions made in this book. Our suggestions do not necessarily match the style of every news outlet in the country. That is not possible because there are different rules in different newsrooms. But all our suggestions are based on the fundamental notion that everything you do as a reporter should be done to ensure the reader or listener or viewer gets the message – whatever it is – clearly and precisely without any need to struggle with your words. For that outcome, some discipline will be needed. Some rules even – rules around news-gathering and news-writing. That is why we recommend that you have a good style guide handy. One of the best is published by the Commonwealth Government; it is a style guide for all types of writing, but it contains advice that every journalist should heed:

The purpose of writing is to convey to another person what is in the writer's mind. 'Good writing', therefore, is writing which does this effectively. Every organisation needs to encourage good writing for at least three reasons. Firstly, it is efficient: if what is in the writer's mind is conveyed effectively, time will not be wasted in sorting out misunderstandings. Secondly, it is economical: efficient communication saves both time and money. Thirdly, good writing gives a good impression of the organisation. (DCITA, 2002, p. 3)

If all of that is true for people who write memos and reports and position papers to be read by others who get paid to read them, how much more relevant are those words for the journalist whose readers are volunteers who have no obligation to read even a single word of what has been written?

Newspapers are a good example. People read newspapers for all kinds of reasons – sport, for example, and business. Some read the ads, some the comics. Some are keen on motoring or fashion. Some read them for the news they contain, and some read them for stories about people and places and things that may have little to do with the news. Some don't read them at all. Newspapers today are very conscious of the importance of all of the above. For the journalist, this means that, more than ever, being a good reporter and meeting deadlines and being accurate and so on is not enough. Reporters have to be good writers too.

Newspapers are acutely aware that there are, in the main, two kinds of reader out there: those who are pressed for time and those who are not – the time-poor and the time-rich, if you like. Most days of the week, the first group is rushing: work, school, kids, meals, dancing lessons, football training, homework, whatever. The second group is not. They have a little time; they are not so pressed. The time-poor want to know what has happened in the world as quickly as possible. The time-rich want that too, but they want more from a newspaper – a good read. They want something that is not just informative, but also enjoyable. This book will deal with writing for both groups of readers. And it will deal with the many other things a journalist needs to know.

The library shelves are full of books that talk about what journalists and their news organisations *do*. This is not one of those books; this is a book about *how* to do it. It is a book for the student journalist, for someone starting out in the business, for someone who wants to be a journalist and wants to be shown the way. Whether the budding journalist will eventually get a job will be another matter. Much will depend on the individual. But he or she will know what to do – and, importantly, *why*.



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The material in this book draws on the collective experiences of the authors, who between them have more than 80 years of doing journalism and more than 50 years of teaching journalism students. In particular, we wish to record the contribution of thousands of young people who have sat in our classrooms or newsrooms, and who are now respected working journalists.

One final point to consider: journalism comes in many forms and fulfils many functions in our society. At the heart of the matter, though, is one central issue never to be forgotten – journalism is an essential ingredient in that complex and all too vulnerable social structure we call democracy. Unless we remember that, we are all in trouble.

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