

Jenny McKay, Director, Journalism Programme, University of Stirling

‘Preparing Journalism Students for the Blameless Bugle and the Guilty Gazette’. Review essay for Ethical Space, Vol 4 no. 4 (2007) pp 51-53.

When a 13-year-old girl from my children’s school drowned with her father in a boating accident a few years ago, the story prompted me, as a journalist and lecturer in journalism, to reflect again on the way journalists act.

I remembered why my training on a regional daily paper convinced me I was not cut out for a career in hard news. I now teach students about how to approach death knocks and rehearse for them the arguments of news editors about why these have to be done, but I was never convinced by the latter and consequently never comfortable about doing the former. Intruding into a family’s grief and shock is, it seems to me still, a low-rent way to make a living. I know editors say the family often finds it therapeutic to talk, or may be keen to see the loved one honoured, but I doubt whether many families would choose to be pursued by a pack of baying hacks within hours of a tragic death. The justifications for death knocks are spurious, as any journalist knows deep down. And, as I’ve suggested elsewhere, (McKay 2006: 217-218) journalists are definitely not the most appropriate or helpful people to speak to in a time of great personal trouble.

Death knocks, when openly and honestly undertaken, are not necessarily the worst thing that journalists can be asked to do. They can also be sent by editors to lie to and deceive innocent people caught up in a tragedy. Why else would reporters have staked out every gate at the dead child’s school the next morning or indeed have posed as parents to get inside the building hoping, no doubt, to find a classroom full of weeping adolescents or maybe a class photograph on the corridor wall from which they could snatch a pic? Count, in this scenario, the breaches of the Press Complaints Commission’s Code of Conduct and then

remind yourself that third parties can't make complaints. In this case no quotes were obtained from classmates and so there was no publication about which to complain. But why were quotes being sought in the first place?

A related point here is how powerless the PCC is over unacceptable behaviour by journalists. I know a family whose young teenage son was ambushed at home by hacks asking him leading questions about an imminent house move, in order to firm up rumours that his father had been offered a job in another part of the country. Not too heinous in the scheme of journalistic misdemeanour but that's, in a way, my point: these two examples were all in a day's work for jobbing reporters.

From a teaching point of view the questionable activities of journalists provide excellent material for lively seminar discussion, especially when I can bring in frontline tabloid reporters to defend what to me is barely defensible. From a practical perspective, though, it's not so simple. As lecturers we can offer models of virtuous journalism pursued by saints as we prepare students for life on *The Blameless Bugle*. But at the same time we must also describe what it's like to work on *The Guilty Gazette* or to be a freelance supplying copy to whichever rag or agency will pay for it. Students have to know the kind of things they'll be asked to do, the compromises they'll have to make, depending on where they manage to find work, if they are citizens of good conscience.

When I began to teach news journalism there was little textbook help. Now, though, publishers are pouring out textbooks to supply the rapidly expanded market in university and college courses. These are mostly based around news and newspapers and deal well enough with the less controversial aspects of reporting. What's interesting to me, though, is the way that the more challenging, more negative aspects are handled – or rather not handled. The pattern seems to be to put the chapter about ethics towards the end of the book and to fill it with material about regulation rather than with a serious look at what ethical journalistic behaviour might be.

Helen Sissons's book *How to Write News* is an example. The relevant chapter is called 'The moral maze', a title which promises philosophical argument or at least juicy accounts of wicked press antics accompanied by ruminations on journalists' moral choices. The chapter, however, disappoints. No one could quarrel too much with the optimism of the opening phrase 'Good journalists work ethically and listen to their consciences' though it is a little vague. What is a good journalist? Is it one who is successful, famous, highly paid, much sought after? What does ethically mean here and how do we as editors or readers take account of the fact that conscience is a personal set of values some of which may conflict with the basic purpose of producing newspapers – to garner financial profit for shareholders?

Sissons's chapter does hint at some of the grubbier things journalists do and notes that there are 'grey areas' but most of it is devoted to outlining the regulations that are in place to restrain mainly broadcast journalists. There are some worthwhile observations about covering grief, trauma and war but the whole is rather sanitised: the examples are minimal and, peculiarly for UK textbook, some are from the US. Nor does the chapter really involve questionable activities from journalists, merely a post-hoc reflection on whether a particular suicide should have been written about at all.

Sissons does mention ethical questions at a couple of other points in her book but the nastiness, viciousness and deception behind some of the journalism that gets printed in our newspapers and magazines is not touched on. I think it should be. Young reporters need to know what they're getting into, partly so that they can consider carefully what kind of journalism they really want to do, for which employers and for what ultimate purpose.

Sissons shouldn't be singled out however. There is a tendency to gloss over the harder end of the reporting trade in almost all our UK journalism textbooks, probably for the understandable reason that it is better to concentrate on what is admirable than than to wallow in the murk. In Susan Pape and Sue Featherstone's *Journalism. A Practical Introduction* we find again a separate chapter at the end to deal with ethics, although it is disguised as 'The Journalist

in Society'. It takes up just 12 pages out of 225 and there are no additional references traceable through the index. Again the approach is mainly about regulation and although this has a bearing on ethical choices it isn't the same thing. The authors are pessimistic about how far print journalists are aware of the code of practice that ought to inform their work. 'Few journalists could have more than a vague stab as to what the contents of the Code is', they say, but allow this troubling point to pass without further comment, once again giving the impression that these things don't matter all that much. (Pape and Featherstone 2005: 185) (Their later volume *Feature Writing. A Practical Introduction* has no references to ethics or codes of conduct or regulation in the index.)

None of these books explores the status of the Code in newsrooms or the limited protection it offers or the sanctions that may be imposed on staff found to be in breach of the guidelines. As so often, the idea that reporters will need to be 'devious or cunning' is quoted without challenge.

This notion is supported by a new book, *Essential Reporting. The NCTJ Guide*, from Jon Smith, who trots out the old Nick Tomalin comment that 'rat-like cunning' is one of the only three qualities 'essential for real success in journalism'. (Smith 2007: 3) In fact Smith's book is informative about how far new journalists are encouraged to think about ethical questions in that it contains no mention of ethics or ethical dilemmas that are traceable through the index. Codes of conduct are referred to merely in passing, and with no indication about how regularly enforced they are or how they might impinge on the daily life of a reporter and I couldn't help noticing that the book has more references to cups of tea than to ethics. Smith says almost nothing about the conscience-pricking (as against tea-drinking) decisions that many reporters regularly face. This book, with its National Council for the Training of Journalists blessing, gives no indication that to be a successful journalist may involve questionable behaviour on the part of both the reporter and her employer.

I should say that the book is useful in many ways and I wish it had been available when I started teaching journalism on NCTJ-accredited courses. It

contains a great deal of the kind of information and advice that we lecturers just used to carry in our heads. It would have been equally invaluable to me as a trainee reporter. It may be that its lack of reflection on ethical challenges is a hangover from the days when indentures were the way into journalism and high principles were seen almost as a barrier to entry into journalism by some editors or, from further back, when newspaper contacts or sheer bravado could get you a job on a national paper. Before colleges and universities got in on the act of journalism training in the UK there was barely a whisper about what it was acceptable for journalists to do in pursuit of a story. And so, in a competitive field full of ambitious reporters, no trick was, it seemed, too low to try. Smith's book certainly doesn't condone bad behaviour and it does include three brief references to codes of practice, but that's it.

It's almost as if the NCTJ hadn't quite kept up with the more reflective way in which journalists are now prepared for their careers. (Allen 2005: 318-319) This means that other textbooks (including the two I've mentioned), limited as their questioning is, seem more sophisticated in their approach to reporting as a challenging set of practices, made difficult to negotiate by unwritten rules and nudge-wink hints about what a reporter can get away with. Despite the authors' best intentions, however, there is still the sense that ethical reflection is somehow separate from the day-to-day decisions reporters and editors have to make.

These issues are given fuller treatment, as you'd expect, in textbooks with 'ethics' in their titles such as Richard Keeble's *Ethics for Journalists* and Tony Harcup's *The Ethical Journalist*. Neither, it is worth noting, is included in Jon Smith's list 'Further reading'.

The advantage of books devoted to ethical questions is that their scope can be extended well beyond reporting to include such things as ownership, commercial pressures on editorial teams, newsroom practice and even the underlying purpose of the publication. For example if you're a serious feminist would your conscience allow you to work for a glossy magazine aimed at young

teenage girls such as *Sugar* or indeed for a publishing house that produces hard-core porn as well as newspapers?

The disadvantage of leaving ethics to specialist titles is that this contributes to the notion that ethical reflection is a luxury that can be left to academics in their cloistered world to enjoy while reporters get on with the real-world business of producing news.

Perhaps it's time to think more seriously about how ethics could be fully integrated into journalism training rather than added on as a kind of nod to good practice. My suggestion is that all students of journalism should have a grounding in philosophy, in logic as well as ethics, so that they can learn to think clearly. This is why I recommend Julian Baggini's *The Philosophy Behind the Headlines* and James Whyte's *Bad Thoughts. A Guide to Clear Thinking* to my students. I would prefer to be able to offer an entire course taught by philosophers who could be dispassionate, something that is hard for former journalists (like me) who struggle to shake off the strong feelings, positive and negative, that our training and professional experience have left us with.

Bibliography

- Allen, Rod (2005) Preparing reflective practitioners, in Keeble, Richard (ed.) *Print Journalism a Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge pp 318-327
- Baggini, Julian (2002) *Making Sense. Philosophy Behind the Headlines*, Oxford, OUP
- Harcup, Tony (2007) *The Ethical Journalist*, London, Sage
- Keeble, Richard (2001) *Ethics for Journalists*, London, Routledge
- McKay, Jenny (2006) *The Magazines Handbook*, London, Routledge
- Pape, Susan and Featherstone, Sue (2005) *Newspaper Journalism. A Practical Introduction*, London, Sage
- Pape, Susan and Featherstone, Sue (2006) *Feature Writing. A Practical Introduction*, London, Sage
- Sissons, Helen (2006) *Practical Journalism. How to Write News*, London, Sage

Smith, Jon (2007) *Essential Reporting. The NCTJ Guide for Trainee Journalists*, London, Sage

Whyte, Jamie (2003) *Bad Thoughts. A Guide to Clear Thinking*, London, Corvo