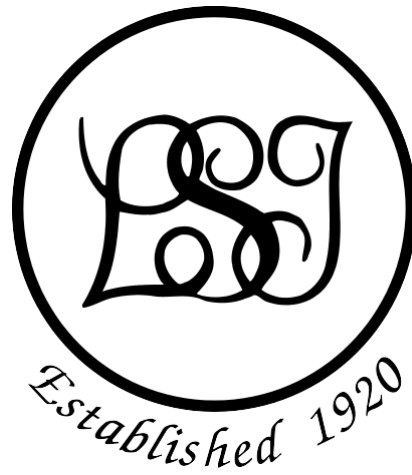


JOURNALISM AND NEWSWRITING



LESSON 7 The Nationals

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CHAPTER 7

THE NATIONALS

Fleet Street then and now. A national outlook. Working for a national. Exclusives. Journalism ethics. Case study.

FLEET STREET THEN AND NOW

Fleet Street used to be the Mecca for all journalists. To be “in the Street” was the private dream of every youngster who decided to make journalism a career – whether or not they ever fulfilled it.

It ceased to be the focal point of the British newspaper world as companies moved out of the City of London to occupy new, larger premises in other parts of the capital – premises full of new printing and journalistic technology, where papers are easier, quicker and cheaper to produce. But you can still take a stroll down ‘Memory Lane’, from the Royal Courts of Justice where it begins as a continuation of The Strand, round a slight right-hand bend and down a fairly gentle slope to Ludgate Circus where it ends.

The buildings on either side are tall and many may not seem worth a second glance. But echoes of the past are hidden down alleys, in photographs inside the pubs, on small plaques that are easy to miss and in a handful of newspaper mastheads that still provide a poignant reminder of the significance of the street in its heyday.

On the sober, stone-fronted building which was the headquarters of the Daily and Sunday Telegraph, you can still pick out the faint outline of the paper’s title – and nearby you can still see Express lettering on the gleaming black glass palace which housed the Daily Express and its Sunday sister paper.

Before that, if you want to spot any newspaper offices, you will have to look for names painted on the entrances to passages or on side walls, or even up at first or second-floor windows for the tell-tale signs of the street’s past history, and the homes of provincial papers like The People’s Journal and Dundee Courier.

But if you dawdle a moment savouring a pint amid the gloom of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese pub – or one of the many other hostelrys favoured by generations of journalists – you may fancy you can still hear echoes of their conversations.

A NATIONAL OUTLOOK

No national paper is actually housed in Fleet Street now, but perhaps it should come as no surprise that these national papers should have relocated. Apart from the practical advantages of moving to modern offices equipped with state-of-the-art technology, unlike regional papers they do not have the same close links with the specific community within which they are physically based.

National papers are intended to appeal to and to offer something of value to readers no matter where they live. A national paper is not governed by geographical limits: it can and must hold up a mirror to the country as a whole, and to the world. The only factor which has any real bearing on its content is the type of reader at whom it is aimed and to whom it seeks to appeal. A national paper aims to cater not only for the curiosity of its readers about what is happening in the country and the world at large, but also for their tastes, attitudes, beliefs and prejudices.

Part of the power of the national press lies in the fact that they are so few in number and can reach – and sometimes influence – so many people. There are thousands of weekly papers, both free and paid-for, but their strength lies in the penetration rather than the outright size of their circulations.

In other words, they may only sell 10,000 copies in a small town, but that figure may represent 80 per cent or more of the local adult population.

There are over 100 regional daily papers, with circulations varying according to the size of the cities in which they are based.

Many now sell only 20,000 copies a day or less – even those in big cities like Glasgow, Leeds, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. It's a far cry from the days when some big city papers topped 100,000 sales. However, although the figures may not sound huge, there are many more people who follow/subscribe to the papers' various online platforms, so their influence should not be underestimated.

But now look at the sales figures of the nationals. Of the serious broadsheets, the Daily Telegraph sells more than 300,000 – albeit a figure that has fallen dramatically in recent years.

Tabloid sales are even more dramatic – over one million for the best-selling papers, the Daily Mail and the Sun. Their Sunday sister papers, the Mail on Sunday and the Sun on Sunday shift just under a million copies apiece. The British then, despite the continuing fall in circulations in recent years, still value their newspapers. But of course many more prefer to consume their news online and access newspaper websites and apps or read random stories on their social media news feeds.

It is a popular belief that the political 'colour' of a paper has a great bearing on its circulation. This is a moot point. For many years prior to the 1997 General Election nearly as many people voted anti-Tory as Tory; yet the combined circulation of those daily papers with a Conservative bias was staggering.

Nonetheless, in the run-up to the 1997 election, even papers which had traditionally echoed a staunch pro-government line began to sound increasingly critical. Sensing a mood-swing among voters and anxious not to become disenfranchised from their readers by adopting an opposing political viewpoint, many papers began to switch their allegiances.

Some, like The Sun, were suddenly throwing their weight behind the Opposition, and explaining to their millions of readers why they too should back Tony Blair as the next British Prime Minister.

To what extent newspapers influence public opinion and to what extent they merely reflect it has long been the subject of heated debate. Certainly UK national newspapers are as passionately partisan as ever and their front pages still pored over and discussed on TV news and politics shows as opinion-shaping vehicles, but the new media with its bloggers, tweeters, podcasters and youtubers have gained much more power and influence in recent years in lobbying and raising consciousness, particularly amongst the young.

Whatever a newspaper's in-built politics, the need to sell *itself* will always take priority over political judgment. Political 'colour', therefore, although an important factor, is not the major one influencing readers. People read a paper which reflects their social position, certain working interests, hobbies, tastes and general outlook.

WORKING FOR A NATIONAL

So what is it like to join a national daily paper as a journalist?

Let's consider an imaginary broadsheet paper, the Daily Post – which, for safety's sake we will say is politically independent. The Post has a daily circulation of more than 200,000 and is aimed at that wide belt of readers in the middle-income bracket, neither very poor nor very wealthy.

It offers comprehensive coverage of the major news from this country and abroad, restrained comment on topics of importance, lively, topical feature articles, a daily 'best of the web' column which is occasionally dryly humorous but not often malicious, a smattering of 'human interest' stories and all-round sports coverage.

It has a popular website that is updated every five minutes and its social media platforms receive millions of views every day.

It has a large staff of reporters, sub-editors, web editors and feature writers based at home and in the office and a network of staff and freelance correspondents throughout the UK and abroad.

The paper also carries specialists in many fields – politics, business, money, technology, education, motoring, farming, gardening, health – as well as a culture writers.

The world of these specialists will be examined more closely in a later lesson; suffice it to say at this stage that many of them will have begun their journalistic careers as reporters.

One of the first things you will become aware of as a reporter on the Daily Post is the fierce competition for space in the paper. Whereas on the Melford Gazette almost every word you wrote appeared in print, and on the Dorningham Star most of what you wrote saw the light of day in some edition or other, on the Post you will write many stories that will end up 'spiked'. This will not necessarily be because they are poor stories, poorly written; merely that, with the whole world available as a source of material, a story needs something very special about it to be worth a place on a page, online or in print.

With online space not such a huge issue as it is in print, you are still competing for the attention of the time-poor reader, so that means most stories must be put across in the fewest possible words. Look through any daily paper, tabloid or broadsheet, and you will find only a few stories that have rated more than half a column including headlines. So you must master the art of writing crisp, concise English.

That 'special' quality required for a story to be printed in a national daily relates not only to subject matter, but also to the way it is written. Most stories in papers like the Daily Post have more dramatic impact about them than those that appear in weekly or daily regional papers.

They get this dramatic impact because the reporters have narrowed their vision of the story, have grasped the essential dramatic facts and appreciated that the quality of the finished copy will depend as much on what they leave out as what they put in. This is not to say that a story is distorted: all the essential facts are there, but any superfluous matter that blurs the sharp edge and blunts the impact is left out.

What kind of assignment is the daily paper reporter likely to be given? A court trial or inquest, perhaps, or a strike at a hospital, a human interest story about a missing child, the opening of a new tech company or an interview with a Hollywood actor changing planes at Heathrow Airport.

As on a local paper, the assignments will range from the mundane to the most challenging and exciting breaking stories – although it may take time to be sent out on your first genuine "page lead".

At first the reporter may be slightly overawed at times by having to talk to people who are household names; later, the biggest battle may be to avoid becoming cynical, for it will soon be realised that, famous or not, they are just people with the same human foibles as the rest of us.

A newspaper's task is to satisfy public curiosity. But the news side – the reporters and sub-editors – can satisfy that curiosity only in part. So much is happening all the time, with every day providing more stories than can possibly be accommodated, that daily paper reports can often do little more than record the bare facts. These bare facts often stimulate the readers' curiosity in a topic; it is the job of the features editor and the writers and sub-editors working under him to satisfy that demand completely.

For this reason you are likely to find a far bigger team of features writers on a national than on a regional paper. Sunday papers, in particular, may carry a higher proportion of features than breaking news stories.

Topics for national paper features are almost as abundant as news stories – and every day provides far more news stories than any national can possibly print or include online.

Let's say a couple have launched a website to help people host refugees in their home. But what feature does it suggest?

One paper might consider a factual account of the legal position of anyone wishing to host refugees in their home – can they? If so, from what age? Another might study why so many refugees are being able to fully integrate as part of this scheme, while a third might focus on the individual stories of those who have travelled so far and sacrificed so much to be in a safer, more secure and welcoming country.

Whatever the tone, in all cases features are important weapons in the national paper's armoury and its constant battle to satisfy existing readers and attract new converts.

EXCLUSIVES

If there is one factor which sets national journalists apart from their provincial counterparts more than any other, it is the intensity of professional rivalry between publications seeking to woo readers from – and score points over – their competitors. This is not so pronounced at a regional level because so many papers enjoy a virtual monopoly on news on their 'patch', or feel they can cater for their readers by adopting a different approach from rival media like local radio and TV.

National papers, on the other hand, may often be seeking to appeal to the same kind of readers, and can realistically only boost their own circulations at the expense of another paper. This applies to both broadsheet and tabloid titles, although the competition is particularly intense between those papers which share the most common ground – between the Times and Telegraph, the Express and Mail, the Sun and Mirror.

There are a number of ways in which this intense spirit of competition has an impact on the working lives and professional practices of journalists. They know that even the most trivial item will have landed on the newsdesks of all the other national papers; the question is, which of those papers can make the most creative and imaginative use of the material?

From the above example, it should be immediately obvious that national papers prize **originality** above all else. To sell more papers than their rivals, they want to publish articles which other papers do not – or present the same news in a much more appealing, vibrant, exciting and stimulating way.

Editors would argue that they hire the best writers and sub-editors in the country with exactly that aim – which means that heads will roll if a humdrum little story appearing on page 20 in their own paper is transformed into an eye-catching, dramatic feature or follow-up story on a rival's front page.

At one level, this means national journalists honing their ability to spot *all* the potential angles of a story – to have the vision to transform an apparently mundane or run-of-the-mill item into something much more exciting. This may mean speaking to someone that no one else has thought of approaching, or it may involve presenting the article in a visually exciting way on the page by incorporating images or comparisons that rivals have neglected to chase up. At its simplest level, it may mean cropping a picture differently, making a 'connection' that others have missed or even posing an outlandish 'what if?' question and following through the idea with a series of interviews.

For example, a survey may be published showing that youngsters in one part of the country receive more pocket money than in another. One regional paper might publish a short news story containing the survey's results and not think any more about it.

A features editor on another regional paper might suggest interviewing a selection of local school kids to compare their expectations and interview a cross-section of parents about their views. Another features editor might suggest publishing a table showing how pocket money has risen since the turn of the century, and comparing it with the cost of living – or even the cost of specific items, like a bag of crisps, a bar of chocolate and an energy drink.

All the above approaches are valid, but they are unlikely to excite a tabloid editor. They might wave the survey in front of senior executives and lambast them until they come up with some more exciting ideas. What about trying to track down some of the children who receive the most pocket money in the country? "Speak to some pop stars, fashion models, company bosses," she storms. "I want to find half a dozen kids who are obscenely rich."

One executive might suggest contrasting this with some of the poorest youngsters in the country. "How about highlighting the fact that the vast chasm between the haves and the have-nots in this country start at an early age?" she suggests. "Or why not show that the money one of our rich kids spends in a week could keep a child in an African orphanage for a year?"

Now the chief sub – always eager to find good pictorial images – chips in. "I heard a 12-year-old boy from Herefordshire has bought his own flock of sheep by saving up his pocket money. He bought the six sheep for £240 and keeps them at nearby farm," she says.

From this single hypothetical example, you can see how the senior staff of a national newspaper have hijacked a basic idea and started setting their own agenda, injecting sufficient life and depth into a straightforward news story to make it appeal to readers of all ages.

This is a natural extension of the critical thinking you learned about earlier on the course. But in the world of national newspapers it is a prerequisite for any journalist hoping to make it to the top – however trivial, off-the-wall or politically incorrect some of the ideas may seem.

A further extension of this originality of approach is demonstrated by the importance of the **exclusive** (or scoop) – in other words, a story which no other paper has access to.

On the day of publication this can be heavily publicised to sell that particular edition: “**only** in tomorrow’s Mirror”, “a Sun world exclusive” etc. Exclusives are viewed by editors as important weapons in their armoury when it comes to selling more copies of their paper – and embarrassing their rivals.

Some reporters stumble across exclusives by accident – through a chance conversation, perhaps, or simply by being in the right place at the right time.

Few reporters will get to taste the excitement of picking up a world exclusive, but there are plenty of occasions when they will savour the excitement of stumbling across a new ‘angle’ which they know none of their rivals have got.

The national papers’ obsession with exclusives means that a freelance writer or photographer or agency may be able to command top rates – sometimes a four- or five-figure sum – for providing an exclusive news story, picture or feature. But should that be broken in print or online?

Digital journalist Alison Gow in a fascinating article entitled *‘When should newspapers break exclusive stories online?’* sent out a tweet to her followers which read: *should newspapers break exclusive court cases online or wait to go to print. Twitter – your thoughts please?*

She said: “Obviously those on Twitter would be more likely to be biased towards web-publish first, but the reasons posters supplied were very strong: ‘There is an expectation now that things go online first’; ‘You will get the respect of your readers for immediacy and increased followers’ (a good point – build readers online, build advertiser interest); ‘break ’em online – how many people buy a paper to see a court story you know is exclusive’.

‘How can a court case be exclusive? It’s a public hearing’ was another point raised.

“For me,” continued Alison, “the continuing distinction between a newspaper’s print and online products is just another extension of the ‘journalist as gatekeeper’ debate – when do we decide to share things with our readers and when do we let them have (some) information? At the most basic level, when I posted a tweet about a serious road accident near my home on Tuesday night, I was depriving my newspaper of an exclusive. But that’s social media – people who witness incidents now don’t automatically tell their local paper; they update their blog, their status, share links, photos or videos online – this is what we are up against and what we have to be able to compete with. This is also a phenomenon that is only going to grow. Exclusive is an empty word unless you can prove that no other person knows about the story – that it hasn’t been shared on a forum, Twitter, Facebook or a niche blog.”

Despite this there are many different *types* of exclusive, of course – the unique picture story, the chance comment in an interview, the journalist who just *happens* to be in the right place at the right time.

The Telegraph's historic revelations about MPs' expenses were an excellent example of the type of story that demands an enormous amount of effort and persistence.

It took 45 journalists sifting through a million pages of expenses to secure three weeks' worth of front-page leads – but the long hot summer brought an end to the career of at least 20 MPs and led to a massive shake-up of MP's pay and allowances.

It made the lead item on most TV news bulletins and it led to the TV channels broadcasting live from outside Westminster. It caused MPs to travel home to their constituencies in trepidation and it led to heated debates in the House.

Few stories can claim to have quite such a direct impact on people's behaviour, although Robert Peston's scoop for the BBC about Northern Rock's request to the government for emergency funding prompted savers to queue outside its branches and was the first of a series of credit crunch exclusives which created shockwaves around the world's financial markets.

Patience is a virtue, they say, and it helped Splash news agency journalist David Leigh to bag two front pages – in the Mirror and the Mail – when he went to Panama to track down Anne Darwin, the woman whose husband faked his own death in a canoeing accident.

Investigative journalism is responsible for many of the great exclusives of all time – including the Sunday Times Insight Team who tracked down British intelligence boss turned Russian spy Kim Philby in Russia in 1967, and the revelations by the World In Action current affairs team in 1995 that defence minister Jonathan Aitken had benefited from bribes from Saudi royalty to arrange arms deals.

Sometimes investigations will involve elaborate “sting” operations – as when Observer journalists posed as rich American businessmen and exposed the role of lobbyists with strong links to the Labour hierarchy in 1999, or when Mirror graduate trainee Ryan Parry went undercover as a royal footman for two months in 2003 in what the paper described as the “biggest royal security scandal ever”.

Contacts are everything for a reporter, as demonstrated by many of the great scoops. The Telegraph's Jeff Randall beat the BBC to the news that their own chairman was defecting to ITV in an £8m deal in 2005.

Some scoops are of genuinely historic proportions – like the Times' revelation in 1922 about the discovery of the burial chamber of Tutankhamen, the Daily Express's first picture of the moon's surface in 1966 and John Pilger's revelations in 1979 about the genocide caused by Pol Pot's reign of terror in Cambodia.

Others are of mundane sexual matters which may nonetheless cause the downfall of politicians and celebrities alike.

The News of the World scoop in 1986 about Conservative Party chairman Jeffrey Archer paying off a prostitute eventually landed the peer in jail for perverting the course of justice – while the same paper's revelations in 1988 that Frank Bough "snorted cocaine with prostitutes and drug pushers" effectively ended the career of the affable jumper-wearing TV show host.

Television interviewers sometimes encourage interviewees to be disarmingly frank, and so it was for Martin Bashir in 1995, when his Panorama interview with the Princess of Wales ended with Diana dishing the dirt on her marriage to Prince Charles, three years after their separation. However, this ended ignominiously for the BBC years later following an independent inquiry which found Bashir guilty of deceit and of breaching BBC editorial conduct to obtain the interview.

JOURNALISM ETHICS

Chequebook journalism is frowned on by many regional journalists and editors, who might never dream of paying someone to tell their story. But an individual who has undergone a unique experience – being kidnapped and held hostage, perhaps, or surviving a similarly dramatic ordeal, might be offered a huge sum to tell their story exclusively to one paper.

There are also cases where it might be necessary to pay for a story which is overwhelmingly in the public interest, if it helps to detect or expose crime or anti-social conduct, prevents the public being misled or protects public health and safety.

However, criticism of the ethics involved in such practices has been particularly outspoken in cases involving court cases and 'kiss-and-tell' stories where otherwise anonymous individuals have sold the story of their relationship with a well-known personality.

Since the British Press has traditionally always been self-regulatory, there will inevitably be individual circumstances in which newspapers overstep the mark and behave in a way which the public – and politicians – find unacceptable. For many years the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), formerly the Press Complaints Commission, has attempted through adjudication and declarations of principle, to offer guidance to newspaper editors and has called on them to exercise discretion and a sense of responsibility.

IPSO was set up following the Leveson Inquiry in 2012 into the phone hacking scandal and which called for a more independent and accountable press regulatory body. It exists to "promote and uphold the highest professional standards of journalism in the UK, and to support members of the public in seeking redress where they believe that the Editors' Code of Practice has been breached."

On the question of payment for articles, IPSO has made it clear that payments should not be made to witnesses in court cases, to criminals or other "notorious" persons. The only exception outlined in the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice is "would need to demonstrate that there was good reason to believe the public interest would be served. If, despite payment, no public interest emerged, then the material should not be published." The question of exactly what constitutes "in the public interest" has given rise to many heated arguments over the years and numerous grey areas which are unlikely ever to be satisfactorily resolved.

It may also help trainee journalists to remember that just because a story is of interest to the public does not mean that it is “in the public interest”. This also applies to many articles which have involved the infringement of privacy, misrepresentation, harassment and intrusion into people’s grief or shock – as well as those which have led to lawsuits for defamation.

The phone-hacking scandal which led to the closure of the News of the World in 2011 and prompted the Leveson Inquiry into press standards is discussed in more detail in the law lesson which follows – but it’s clear that most stories have an ethical dimension and this is something that even the most brash national tabloids have been forced to consider in more detail in recent years.

The growth of privacy law and changing public perceptions of what is “acceptable” behaviour by journalists has also put pressure on editors to think through the consequences associated with each story and the way it is pursued.

Does it involve interviewing young people under 16, for example? Is any element of subterfuge necessary and justified? Such issues are not arcane matters for philosophical discussion but practical dilemmas which journalists face every day, where a poor decision could result not just in embarrassment for those involved, but the possibility of a multi-million pound law suit.

For individual journalists, such considerations are also likely to dictate *which* papers they feel able to work for, since editors are unlikely to look kindly on staff who raise personal moral objections about tackling everyday tasks which are an important, unpleasant but unavoidable part of the job – like interviewing grieving relatives, perhaps.

It therefore makes sense for anyone attracted by the high profile and professional challenge of working for a national newspaper to consider in advance whether they will find it possible to work for a particular publication.

CASE STUDY

The identity and content of each national newspaper is unique and it is useful to compare how different papers choose to approach and handle coverage of the same story. Since papers also vary greatly in size and content from one day to the next, it is also worth studying at least one full week’s worth of papers in order to form an accurate impression of its target readership. (Most titles have special pull-out supplements published on different days of the week dealing with everything from jobs to motoring and sport).

However, to get an initial impression of the sort of material which we might expect to find in the pages of our national press on any one day, let us take one of the most successful daily UK tabloids at random: Metro, which is given away free on public transport and boasts a daily circulation figure of almost one million. It takes a neutral stance politically and appeals to professional and working people alike.

The paper we have chosen contains 32 pages. The paper dedicates nine pages to news, showbiz gossip and readers' views, two pages to money and business news and has a regular one-page Q&A interview called 'Sixty Seconds'. It has a substantial seven-page travel section called 'Escape' in this edition followed by five pages dedicated to sport. The rest are full page ads, save for a 'puzzle' page.

The adverts also reflect the target readership of the paper with ads for a smart money app, a budget airline, a broadband company, a property auction house and an app that enables people to sell their unwanted stuff.

The front page splash details the latest developments in a murder hunt, while page two has the latest political news with a column down the side for NIBs (news in brief). Page three has some celebrity and royal news, while page four continues the murder inquiry story from the front page. It also has two columns of NIBs the paper calls 'news bites'.

Page five has a couple of human interest stories and page seven covers the latest climate change catastrophes. There are yet more NIBs on this page. The showbiz page follows on page nine entitled 'Guilty Pleasures' and then there are two pages of readers' views taken from text messages and emails.

The large travel section includes reports on Switzerland, Croatia and LGBT+ travel options. The sports section is predictably dominated by the English Premier League with one page set aside for F1 motor racing.

Metro.co.uk

The Metro has a highly successful website which boasts millions of visitors every day. Its substantial and seductive mix of breaking news and sport, clickbait pictures and videos, celebrity gossip, columnists and lifestyle content bears little resemblance to its print counterpart. Indeed in 2014 production of the newspaper and website was separated. Since then, they have been produced independently by separate editorial teams while remaining part of the same parent company.

Its Facebook page is also connected to the website team and boasts more than two million likes. It has considerably less engagement on Twitter with 350,000 followers.

ASSIGNMENT SEVEN

This assignment is designed to encourage you to study how different newspapers structure their content in order to meet the needs and expectations of their target readership.

1. Clip out or highlight a news story from any daily paper and suggest ideas for three feature articles based on it. Send along the clipping with the exercise (or give details of a weblink, if appropriate).
2. Write up any one of the features ideas from Exercise 1 as an article in 600 words. Try to make this exercise as realistic as possible by using your own sources and interviewees.