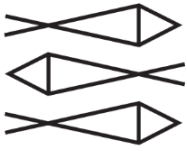
BREAKING NEWS

THE REMAKING OF JOURNALISM AND WHY IT MATTERS NOW

ALAN RUSBRIDGER



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The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now

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Introduction

By early 2017 the world had woken up to a problem that, with a mixture of impotence, incomprehension and dread, journalists had seen coming for some time. News – the thing that helped people understand their world; that oiled the wheels of society; that pollinated communities; that kept the powerful honest – news was broken.

The problem had many different names and diagnoses. Some thought we were drowning in too much news; others feared we were in danger of becoming newsless. Some believed we had too much free news: others, that paid-for news was leaving behind it a long caravan of ignorance.

No one could agree on one narrative. The old media were lazy and corrupt: and/or the new players were greedy and secretive. We were newly penned into filter bubbles: rubbish – they had always been there. There was a new democracy of information: bunkum – the mob were now in control. The old elites were dying: read your history – power simply changes shape.

On this most people could agree: we were now up to our necks in a seething, ever churning ocean of information; some of it true, much of it wrong. There was too much false news, not enough reliable news. There might soon be entire communities without news. Or without news they could trust.

There was a swamp of stuff we were learning to call 'fake news'. The recently elected 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump,

used the term so indiscriminately it rapidly lost any meaning. The best that traditional journalism could offer was – or so he repeatedly told us – fake. We should believe him, not lying journalists.

Truth was fake; fake was true.

And that's when the problem suddenly snapped into focus.

Throughout recent centuries anyone growing up in a western democracy had believed that it was necessary to have facts. Without facts, societies could be extremely dark places. Facts were essential to informed debates, to progress, to coherence, to justice.

We took it for granted, perhaps, that facts were reasonably easy to obtain; and that, over time, we'd developed pretty effective methods of distinguishing truth from falsehood.

Suddenly it was not so easy to establish, or agree on, truths. The dawning realisation that we were in trouble coincided with the near-collapse of the broad economic model for journalism. People had – sort of – known that was happening, but in a world of too much news they had stopped noticing.

In a world of too much to absorb, and never enough time, people skipped the story.

And then people started noticing. For a brief period in January 2017 George Orwell's *1984* – 'How do we know two and two make four?' – went to the top of the Amazon bestseller list while Hannah Arendt's definitive guide to totalitarianism,[1] written just after the Second World War, sold out.

'The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie,' Arendt had written in 1951, 'but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed . . .'

Nearly 70 years later many of us may be surprised to be asking the most basic question imaginable: how do you know if something is true or not?

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Here is just one small example of this new world of information chaos, playing out as I was writing this chapter. I could have chosen a thousand such illustrations, but this had most of the components of the unfolding problem.

In February 2017 Donald Trump used a rally in Melbourne, Florida, to draw attention to disturbing events he said were happening in Sweden.[2] 'You look at what's happening in Germany. You look at what's happening last night in Sweden.'

The President of the United States paused for the name to sink in and then repeated it.

'Sweden.'

'Who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers and they're having problems like they never thought possible.'

Sweden was puzzled. The country, like others in Europe, was not without its tensions after the recent wave of migration from North Africa and the Middle East. There had been a widespread – but by no means universal – welcome to the 163,000 asylum seekers who arrived in the country that year.[3] But, amid a spate of really frightening terror attacks in Europe, it seemed curious to single out Sweden for a stump speech in Florida.

So little of note appeared to have happened in Sweden the previous evening – apart from a national singing competition – that social media regarded the intervention as a bit of a joke.

'Sweden? Terror Attack? What has he been smoking?' former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt tweeted. There were spoof hashtags – #JeSuisIKEA and #IStandWithSweden – while other users questioned the safety of ABBA.

The following day Trump clarified his Sweden statement. He told his 40 million followers on Twitter that it had been 'in reference to a story that was broadcast on @FoxNews concerning immigrants & Sweden'.

And so began an anatomy of how Donald Trump arrived at his version of the truth. Which, given he was the most powerful man on earth, was quite important to understand.

The previous Friday night's *Tucker Carlson Tonight* had included an interview with someone we might call a media controversialist,

Ami Horowitz, about a documentary the latter was making about Sweden.

'There was an absolute surge in gun violence and rape in Sweden once they began this open-door policy,' Horowitz had told Carlson.

Who was Ami Horowitz? For 13 years he worked as an investment banker with Lehman Brothers before reinventing himself as a gonzo filmmaker. His website shows him engaged in a series of provocations ('Ami on the loose') where, for instance, he descends on the campus at the University of California, Berkeley, to alternate between waving an American flag and an Isis flag – and gauge the supposed difference in reaction from students. That, he says, was watched 15 million times across various platforms. In another, he retaliates at Palestinians lobbing stones at an Israeli checkpoint on the West Bank ('It was time to get stupid').[4] His work – inspired, he says, by Michael Moore – has been called 'docu-tainment' or 'mockumentaries'.

In 2017 anyone can be a 'journalist' and anyone can transmit their work to a global audience. It helps if a huge mainstream news channel amplifies your work. Horowitz has described Rupert Murdoch's Fox News as 'a partner' ('They've done a phenomenal job of disseminating the videos and my point of view'),[5] and they duly picked up on a YouTube video he'd published in December 2016 claiming that 'rape and violence has exploded across Sweden due it's [sic] immigration policies'.[6]

Within 15 seconds of the video, an alert viewer would see what kind of an exercise this was. Horowitz lingers on a BBC headline 'Sweden's rape rate under the spotlight'. In fact, that four-year-old, 1,200-word article – pegged to the extradition of WikiLeaks leader Julian Assange, rather than immigration – was a nuanced exploration of whether Sweden's apparently higher rates of rape were mainly down to changes in the way the police record incidents. But that was not how Horowitz used the headline.

Horowitz dealt in outrage, entertainment and provocation. It was central to his Unique Selling Point that he told uncomfortable home truths the despised Mainstream Media (MSM) ignored.[7] He was not a reliable source for the President of the United States. Or anyone else.

Following on from Trump's discovery of Horowitz's work the Swedish paper *Aftonbladet* analysed his film and found it 'contained many

errors and exaggerations'.[8] Another newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter,* quoted two police officers interviewed by Horowitz as saying that the film-maker had selectively edited and distorted their comments to prove his thesis. 'We don't stand behind what he says,' said one of them, Anders Goranzon. 'He is a madman.'[9]

But the truth, or otherwise, of the film appears to have been of little concern to Fox, America's most-watched cable network – described as Murdoch's 'profit machine' by Bloomberg.[10] The programme, seen by as many as 2.5 million viewers, gave further exposure and credibility to the video, which had itself had half a million views on social media.

Enter the President of the United States.

It's doubtful that Donald Trump had any idea of who Horowitz was, or whether he had any journalistic credentials. In general, he appears predisposed to believe Fox News tells the truth and that the *New York Times* tells lies. So – after his stump speech in Florida – the President then broadcast the existence of Horowitz's gonzo docu-tainment to his 40 million-odd followers on Twitter.

Thus were half-truths blasted around the planet's new global information eco-system.

This horizontal transmission of news – from person to person – is virtually unmappable. But let us suppose that hundreds of millions of people around the world would by now have registered – at some level – this . . . germ.

I use the word 'germ' in the absence of another easy label. The exercise Horowitz was engaged in, and which the President and Fox News megaphoned, was not conventional journalism. These were not 'facts'. Deeply buried in some of the assertions in a ten-minute film there may even have been some semi-truths. I will not call the rest 'lies'. The point is that most of the hundreds of millions who will have been touched by the germ will not have registered the detail. They will not have researched the origins of Trump's Swedish intervention or looked into Horowitz's techniques or motivations.

The virus is likely to have lodged itself as little more than a perception, in those ready to believe, that Muslim immigration leads to unspeakable things such as mass rape – and that the West had better wake up. A

couple of days after Trump spoke there was some rioting in the northern suburbs of the Swedish capital, Stockholm. No smoke without a fire? But which was the smoke, and which the fire?

The patient analysis and denials of Swedish newspapers counted for little as the virus spread. In the UK the former UKIP[11] leader (and friend of Donald Trump) Nigel Farage used his radio show on LBC to announce that Malmo, a city in southern Sweden, was now the 'rape capital of Europe and, some argue, perhaps even the rape capital of the world. And there is a Swedish media that just don't report it.'[12]

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Months later I was browsing through my Twitter feed and saw someone I follow – Godfrey Bloom, a leading UKIP figure and former Member of the European Parliament – retweeting news of a horrific attack on a teenage girl in Malmo. Someone calling himself @PeterSweden7 tweeted about his 'blood being at boiling point . . . While she was being raped the rapists poured lighter fuel in her vagina and set it on fire. MSM is quiet. RETWEET.'[13]

This germ was so graphically specific and shocking that it caused understandable revulsion as it ricocheted around the internet. On the social media website Reddit there was a bitterly angry thread. The attack was said to be the fourth rape in two months. It was taken as read that the attackers were Muslim immigrants. If you let Muslims into your country – so many commenters raged – what do you expect?

This was war.

But did the incident – with the obscene barbarity alleged by @PeterSweden7 – actually happen? That was a more complicated question and would take more than a day of patient digging to get near any kind of truth.

A 17-year-old girl had undoubtedly been raped that evening in Malmo – and the attack had been widely reported in the press. But @PeterSweden7 was right to say that newspapers had made no mention of lighter fuel being poured into the victim's vagina and set on fire. Was this out of political correctness, or because it hadn't happened?

I tweeted an appeal for help in getting some facts. A couple of Swedish journalists sent me links to reports in the so-called MSM. I tried to read both . . . but, in each case, hit a paywall. One wanted me to commit to £9 a month before it would allow me to read the article; the other wanted nearly twice as much.

Chaotic information was free: good information was expensive.

In the horizontal world of twenty-first-century communications – where anyone can publish anything – the germs about rape in Malmo spread indiscriminately and freely. The virus was halfway round the world and the truth had barely even found its boots. Truth – if that's what journalism offered – was living in a gated community.

But the truth mattered. The idea that immigrants would reward a society's compassion by barbarically raping its women could – if true – profoundly shape popular attitudes and political responses to immigration in Sweden and beyond. That was especially true now Donald Trump – and numerous white nationalists and their fellow travellers – were using the country as a prime exhibit of the dangers of open borders.

I did my best, as a non-Swedish speaker, to establish some facts. For a start, who was @PeterSweden7? Many of those exploiting the horrific lighter fuel story belonged to far-right extremist groups around the world. @PeterSweden7's previous tweets gave some clue to his politics: 'I don't like fascism, but i think hitler had some good points. I am pretty certain that the holocaust actually never happened.'[14] Or another: 'The globalists (mainly Jews) are ones bringing in the Muslims to europe. They seem to work together.'[15] He had 81,000 followers on Twitter, growing at a rate of 10,000 a month.

I contacted @PeterSweden7, who appears in real life to be Peter Imanuelsen, a 22-year-old photographer born in Norway, but possibly living, at least some of the time, in North Yorkshire. He told a website called hopenothate.org.uk that his Holocaust denial was simply a phase brought about by realising that 'mainstream media was lying about everything'. Imanuelsen described this website as 'fake news'. His own website claims to be 'real independent journalism'.[16]

Via Twitter he repeated to me that Swedish media hadn't gone into detail 'on the horrible things the girl suffered'. I asked his source. He

replied that 'word has gotten around in Malmo about the details and locals in Malmo have taken to social media to say what happened'.

So, a combination of local rumour and gossip, amplified instantly by horizontal transmission.

He later pointed me to a Facebook posting by a 37-year-old Chicago-educated researcher, Tino Sanandaji, who is considered to be the most prominent social media critic of Sweden's immigration policies, and also of the established media.

I tracked down Sanandaji. He had, indeed, blogged about the incident to his 76,000 followers. He said he had two sources, 'one citing the police investigation and one friend of the family . . . the same rumour was also on social media'. He was 'fairly sure' about his information, and he thought he had a duty to warn girls in the area after three rapes in Malmo in the space of seven weeks.

But here was the rub. Sanandaji claimed that the detail that had caused such revulsion and sent the germ around the world was not in his Facebook posting in its original Swedish, '*underliv*' – or so he claimed. He claimed to have written that a source had told him that the victim's 'abdomen' had been sprayed with fuel. By the time it had been picked up and redistributed by a Canadian-based British 'journalist' working for the alt-right website Breitbart, 'abdomen' had become 'vagina'.[17] Whether Sanandaji's finger-pointing at Breitbart was correct; or whether there had been inadequate automatic translation or distortion by Breitbart was difficult to establish. The Breitbart writer declined to comment.

In any event, it was untrue. Within days the police addressed the social media rumours and announced that – while the victim had other minor physical injuries – these did not include burns to the lower abdomen.[18] Within a few weeks police announced they had dropped another rape investigation after the woman admitted the attack had never happened.[19] Investigations into the 'lighter fuel' case were closed a few months later, with the police saying they could not show what actually happened, let alone who the offenders were.

Now, none of this is to minimise the severity of the attack, or attacks. The women of Malmo took to the streets to show how they refused to be intimidated. At the time of writing it was not known if Muslims

were behind this, or any other, rape in Malmo. It was very difficult for an ordinary reader to reach a definitive conclusion about whether there was a link between increased immigration and increased rape reports in Sweden – though a painstaking investigation by Dagens Nyheter in May 2018 found no such correlation between them.

But if the facts were elusive, the digital world had transmitted half-truths and lies at a speed and scale that would have been unimaginable even a decade earlier. The patient work of journalists to take time to discover what actually happened was buried in the avalanche of rumour – and then invisible except to the relatively tiny minority who still cared enough for old-fashioned facts to pay for them.

When challenged about their own role in spreading unchecked information, most of the pollinators seemed unbothered. Godfrey Bloom told me his attitude was the same as all other users of Twitter: 'It is a lavatory wall.'

There were, if you looked hard enough, calm pieces to be found on the subject, some of them involving detailed work with available data. The BBC – freely available to all – investigated Farage's claim about Malmo being 'the rape capital of Europe' and concluded that the high level of reported rape was 'mainly due to the strictness of Swedish laws and how rape is recorded in the country'.[20] The Dagens Nyheter analysis agreed.

Bad information was everywhere: good information was increasingly for smaller elites. It was harder for good information to compete on equal terms with bad.

The more invisible decent journalists became, the easier it was to denigrate their work. They became part of the problem – an out of touch elite. *Lamestream media. Fake news. Failing. Lies. They're all the same. Enough of experts. Drain the swamp.*

It caught on.

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By 2017 the newspaper industry in many parts of the world was a sickly thing. The advertising dollars that, for a century or more, had supported

independent journalism were draining away and, in many communities, the local newspaper that once blazed a search beam now cast a flickering torchlight.

The *New York Times* still shone brightly – and it was the *New York Times* that the new president targeted: doing his obsessive best to denigrate and damn its reporting as fake. By the end of his first year in office, the new president had himself – in the eyes of dogged scorers – made nearly 2,000 false or misleading statements. He broke through the 3,000 barrier within 466 days, according to the *Washington Post* – a rate of 6.5 false claims a day. Americans had elected a liar, and now the liar turned his guns on the truth.

Within days of Trump's triumph questions were asked about the role of truth in the election. It transpired that many of the top-performing news stories on social media platforms such as Facebook were fake – generated by hoax sites and hyper-partisan blogs. BuzzFeed reporters identified more than 140 pro-Trump websites being run from a single town in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia.

The economic model for true news might have been failing, but there were numerous incentives – political and financial – for creating untrue news. Indeed, the market in sensationalist, conspiratorial and alarmist junk seemed to thrive in inverse proportion to the fortunes of the old media houses trying to plod the path of traditional reporting. The new automated distribution channels of social media turbo-charged the power of junk. Even before the election the World Economic Forum had identified the rapid spread of misinformation as one of the top ten perils to society – alongside cybercrime and climate change.

By 2017 social media had existed for barely a decade – a blink of the eye in the sweep of human communication, but long enough for a generation to grow up knowing no other world. Among those who had known another age there developed a kind of panic as they contemplated chaotic information systems that seemed to have emerged from nowhere.

Information chaos was, in itself, frightening enough. What made it truly alarming was that the chaos was enabled, shaped and distributed by a handful of gargantuan corporations, which – in that same blink of an

eye – had become arguably the most powerful organisations the world had ever seen.

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How did we get here? And how could we get back to where we once belonged?

For 20 years I edited a newspaper in the throes of this tumultuous revolution. The paper I took over in 1995 was composed of words printed on newsprint involving technologies that had changed little since Victorian times.

It was, in many ways, a vertically arranged world. We – the organs of information – owned printing presses and, with them, the exclusive power to hand down the news we had gathered. The readers handed up the money – and so did advertisers, who had few other ways of reaching our audience.

To be a journalist in these times was bliss – for us, anyway. I'm afraid we felt a bit superior to those without the same access to information that we enjoyed. It was easy to confuse our privileged access to information with 'authority' or 'expertise'. And when the floodgates opened – and billions of people also gained access to information and could publish themselves – journalism struggled to adjust.

Newspapers began to die in front of our eyes.

Societies may not have loved or admired journalists very much but they seemed to acknowledge that it was vital to have truthful and reliable sources of information. The fundamental importance to any community of reliable, unfettered news was one of the most important Enlightenment values.

It still is – or should be. But the significant money is – for the vast majority of news organisations – gone.

We are, for the first time in modern history, facing the prospect of how societies would exist without reliable news – at least as it used to be understood. There has never been more information in the world. We know infinitely more than ever before. There is a new democracy of knowledge that has swept over us so suddenly and so overwhelmingly

that it is almost impossible to glimpse, let alone comprehend. Much of it is liberating, energising and transformative. It is a revolution to rival the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century. And much of it is poisonous and dangerous. Some of it – like the Swedish saga – is sort-of-slightly-true enough to be turned into toxic demagoguery.

In the new horizontal world people are no longer so dependent on the 'wisdom' of a few authority figures. The reach and speed of public connectedness is unbeatable by any media organisation on earth. Journalists, business and politicians are left looking out of touch and flat-footed.

'People in this country have had enough of experts,' said the (former *Times* of London journalist and Oxford-educated) Conservative politician Michael Gove, shortly before a referendum in which the British people defied expert opinion by voting to leave the European Union. In a way Gove was stating no more than the obvious at the end of an ugly, noisy campaign in which neither verifiable facts nor the opinion of Nobel-prize winning economists seemed any longer to count for much.

Old vertical media derided this new post-factual free-for-all. And, in a way, they were right. But much of the old media was itself biased, hectoring, blinkered and – it its own way – post-factual. Old journalism took it for granted that people would recognise its value – even its necessity. But the denizens of new media found it too easy to pick holes in the processes and fallibilities of 'professional' news.

There were admirable, brave, serious, truthful journalists out there, some of them willing to die for their craft. But the commercial and ownership models of mass communication had also created oceans of rubbish which, in lazy shorthand, was also termed 'journalism'.

The new horizontal forms of digital connection were flawed, but – as with the rise of populist movements in the US and much of Europe – they were sometimes, and in some ways, closer to public opinion than conventional forms of media were capable of seeing, let alone articulating.

We can barely begin to glimpse the implications of this sea change in mass communications. Our language struggles to capture the enormity of what has been happening. 'Social media' is a pallid catch-all phrase which equates in most minds to the ephemeral postings on Twitter

and Facebook. But 'social media' is also empowering people who were never heard, creating a new form of politics and turning traditional news corporations inside out.

It is impossible to think of Donald Trump, of Brexit, of Bernie Sanders, of Podemos, of the growth of the far right in Europe, of the spasms of hope and violent despair in the Middle East and North Africa, without thinking also of the total inversion of how news is created, shared and distributed.

Much of it is liberating and inspiring. Some of it is ugly and dark. And something – the centuries-old craft of journalism – is in danger of being lost.

And all this has happened within 20 years – the blink of an eye. This is a problem for journalism, but it is an even bigger problem for society. The new news that is replacing 'journalism' is barely understood. But it is here to stay and is revolutionising not only systems of information but also the most basic concepts of authority and power.

The transformation precisely coincided with the time I was editing the *Guardian*.

This book describes what it felt like to be at the eye of this storm. A tornado can turn a house into toothpicks – and there was certainly a violent destructiveness to the forces that were being unleashed all around. But there was also exhilaration. Our generation had been handed the challenge of rethinking almost everything societies had, for centuries, taken for granted about journalism.

I had spent the past 40 years as a journalist and ended my career believing as strongly as ever that reliable, unpolluted information is as necessary to a community as a legal system, an army or a police force. But at the moment of its greatest existential crisis, how much journalism lived up to the crying need for it? And were enough journalists alive to the need to rethink everything they did?

I became editor in 1995 – taking charge of a comparatively small British newspaper. We printed stories on newsprint, produced once a day. By the time I stepped down 20 years later, that world had been turned upside down. By then, just 6 per cent of young (18- to 24-year-old) readers were getting their news from print; 65 per cent were relying

on online sources, including social media, for their news. Nor was it just the young. Twice as many over-55-year-olds preferred online to print. In 1995 most journalists had just discovered they could use a phone to send text messages. By 2015 well over half their younger readers were using phones to read their news.

In 1995 it was given that (with the exception of television and radio) your readers expected to pay for news. By 2016, only 45 per cent of news consumers paid for a newspaper even once a week. A small minority (9 per cent in the US, less in the UK) was paying for any online news source.

The old order had, in the space of 20 years, been broken by this Force-12 hurricane of disruption. A new order was forming. The consequences for democracy were becoming all too apparent. We made choices without the benefit of hindsight. There was little data and no roadmap. We made plenty of mistakes; we got some things right. As the editorial floor reimagined journalism, so our commercial colleagues grappled with new business realities. The day-to-day work of news gathering went on as all of us tried to work out how on earth to steer a path into the future . . . not even knowing if there would be one, but determined to try. This was life at a sort of frontier.

In 2015 I stepped down from editing and moved to Oxford University. As well as heading a college, I became Chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. I belatedly discovered a considerable academic literature analysing the implications and fall-out of this revolution. But – oddly, for an industry of writers – there seemed to have been few attempts to describe what it felt like from the inside.

This is a universal story. Virtually every newsroom will have been confronted with the same dilemmas. The *Guardian*'s response is, in some ways, not typical. We were owned by a Trust, not shareholders. We did not have the quarter-by-quarter financial reporting pressures that led so many newspapers to, almost literally, decimate their journalistic resources. But nor were we a charity. The existence of a Trust – channelling money from other companies to subsidise the *Guardian*'s journalism where necessary – simply meant we were at least able to run on to the same playing field with what some called 'the billionaire press',[21] whose

proprietors also took apparently expensive long-term decisions in order to grapple with a route to the future.

But that was the limit of our cushion. During the narrative of this book, the money very nearly ran out as the post-Lehman crash coincided with an advertising slump and the restructuring of the endowment which, for 75 years, had been there to keep the *Guardian* going. If the *Guardian* had taken the same risks as, say, Rupert Murdoch – they included buying MySpace, launching an iPad newspaper and unsuccessfully attempting to paywall the *Sun* – we would have been comprehensively wiped out. And, of course, our available funds were peanuts compared with the sums speculated to launch the West Coast tech giants who would ultimately pose an existential threat to all legacy news providers.

I have tried to capture the turbulence and challenges. And I have tried – while there is still a fresh collective memory – to describe what a news organisation felt like, and why its *institutional* quality mattered.

Great reporters are rightly celebrated. But they are – generally – only as good as the institution that supports them. If their reporting genuinely challenges power, they will need organisational courage behind them. They will need sharp-eyed text editors and ingenious lawyers. They may require people with sophisticated technological or security know-how. If they get into trouble they may need immediate logistical, medical, legal, financial or PR back-up. They need wise colleagues who have been in the same situations before. If they are lucky, they will have enlightened and strong commercial leaders to support and protect them; and gifted business minds who can bring in the money – but also observe the boundaries that preserve trust.

I was lucky enough to have worked for an institution that looked like that. In the middle of the turmoil I think we produced some great journalism that truly mattered. This is a record of those times.

The book also sets out the challenge for journalism. Journalists no longer have a near-monopoly on news and the means of distribution. The vertical world is gone for ever. Journalists no longer stand on a platform above their readers. They need to find a new voice. They have to regain trust. Journalism has to rethink its methods; reconfigure its

relationship with the new kaleidoscope of other voices. It has to be more open about what it does and how it does it.

In a sense Donald Trump has done journalism a favour. In his cavalier disregard for truth he has reminded people why societies need to be able to distinguish fact from fiction. At their best, journalists do that job well. They can now harness almost infinite resources to help them.

But, at the same time, we have created the most prodigious capability for spreading lies the world has ever seen. And the economic system for supporting journalism looks dangerously unstable. The stakes for truth have never been higher.

1

Not Bowling Alone

In 2017, 40 years after joining my first newspaper, I find myself trying to describe the technology of those beginner times to a class of bright young students at Oxford.

I intended the class to be about 'digital' life. Within minutes it becomes obvious these 18-year-olds have little idea what I mean. All their lives have been 'digital'. What on earth is there to discuss?

They know of newspapers, of course. But they rarely read one in printed form or understand what, for 200 years or more, had been involved in the act of communicating news. Does it matter? I think perhaps it does. Otherwise how would you know that this present age is experimental, that there are other possibilities they may not have dreamed of?

I take a deep breath and start drawing little L.S. Lowry[1] stick figures on the whiteboard to show them what – even in recent history – was required for one person to communicate to more than a small group.

I describe the *Cambridge Evening News* of 1976. It was the paper I joined a week after graduating. It was where my own journey in journalism began.

First I draw a reporter – stick figure (SF) 1 – typing words on a manual typewriter (brief explanation necessary) onto a sandwich of paper and carbon paper (ditto) copies. Then I draw SF 1 handing the top sheet of paper to SF 2, the copy taster, and giving the carbon copy

('the black') to SF 3, the news editor. I show a copy taster assessing the stories, then bundling them up with pictures before passing each page plan to SF 4, the lay-out sub, who would then design the page and draw up a plan for the printers to follow, indicating the typographical instructions – type size, across what measure, the length required for each story to fit the allocated space, the size and typeface of the headline needed, and so on.

SF 5, the sub-editor, would then take over and edit accordingly – cutting to length, correcting spelling or grammar and querying any facts. The copy would travel down the line to a revise sub, SF 6. The pages would then pass through a metaphorical curtain to another part of the building, to the composing room where a Linotype operator would key in the copy all over again.

By this stage of my drawing, my students are looking lost . . . and maybe a bit bored.

Deep breath, plough on: they need to know. Linotype machines, I explain, were squat dinosaurs of machinery, not much changed since Victorian times, used to compose metal lines of type. Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, is said to have called these typesetting machines the Eighth Wonder of the World. An operator (SF 7) would sit in front of the clanking contraption – all cogs, chains, rods, wheels, plungers, pumps, moulds, matrices, crucibles, asbestos, pulleys, pistons and grease – and key in the text in front of him. The machinery included a tub of molten metal – a mix of lead, antimony and tin – heated to about 400 degrees Centigrade, which would produce a slug of type.

The students look mildly interested at the thought of foundries of boiling metal being in some way associated with communication.

Elsewhere in the composing room SF 8 would be sitting at a Ludlow machine – a heavy-duty version of the Linotype machine – casting a headline. Enter SF 9, who took all the type and arranged it into columns on a flat iron surface ('the stone') – adjusting it from time to time as readers elsewhere compared the original with the typeset print and sent through corrections. Then came SF 10, who, in a high-pressure press, would stamp a papier mâché mould of the

metal-set page. SF 11 would place the mould, now curved, over a semi-circular casting box and pour more molten metal into it to create a semi-circular printing plate.

One of the students is surreptitiously consulting his mobile phone under the desk.

SF 12 placed the curved plate onto the vast rotary presses, capable of printing 50,000 copies an hour. In the belly of the cathedral-like printing hall, SF 13 would negotiate enormous rolls of newsprint onto the printing presses and gradually thread the paper through the presses' rollers. The presses would thunder into life and, in time, a printed newspaper emerged from the other end of the units and would be cut, folded and counted into bundles of 26 copies by SF 14. Then SF 15 stacked and sorted the bundles with the names and address of the wholesale and retail newsagents.

Not done yet.

It was the job of SF 16 to drive the papers in a van (or, once upon a time, a train for national newspapers) to the wholesale distribution points. SF 17 made sure they got into the hands of newsagents (SF 18) who would employ young children (SF 19) to cycle around the local streets delivering newspapers though people's front doors.

Nineteen stages (in reality, dozens – if not hundreds – of stick figures) needed for me to enable my act of communication with someone else.

'And, of course, now,' I say superfluously, because they already know this, 'if I want to communicate with any of you I just use this.' I wave my mobile phone in the air. 'And then I can communicate not only with you but, potentially, the whole world.'

'And so,' I add even more pointlessly, 'can you.'

The group look as if I have been relating how cave dwellers created fire by rubbing dry twigs together.

'But what if something happened just after deadline?' one of them asks.

'Well, we'd come back and update you the next day.'

The questioner doesn't look impressed.

★

In 1976 journalism was, by and large, something you did rather than studied.

There were very few postgraduate journalism schools. The common route into the business was being thrown into the newsroom of a local paper to learn on the job – with a few months at a local technological college to pick up shorthand along with the basics of law and administration.

A crash course in journalism included a single class on ethics and an awful lot of Pitman's or Teeline textbooks for shorthand. You were required to read two other books, one on libel and another explaining the mechanics and processes of local government written by a former member of Bolton County Borough Council. I was, in due course, to fail my shorthand exam. But I still 'qualified' to become a journalist. Sort of.

A week after finishing my finals paper on the dense modernist poetry of Ezra Pound, I swapped my university college – founded in 1428, all medieval courts, honeyed stone, velvet green lawns, punts and weeping willows – for the prosaic 1960s offices of the *Cambridge Evening News*, a mile to the east on the unlovely Newmarket Road. It was another education: three years spent in a different Cambridge, reporting on a world of factories, housing estates, petty crime and bustling community life.

There were not many graduates in the 20-strong reporting room of the *CEN*, a paper then selling just fewer than 50,000 copies a day. University types were – rightly – viewed with suspicion as arrogant interlopers who would trade the experience we gained in the provinces to secure a better-paid job in Fleet Street just as soon as we had even uncertificated proof of our ability to write quickly and of our familiarity with the finer points of the Local Government Act, 1972.

For the first week I wrote nothing but wedding reports – the journalistic training equivalent of intensive square-bashing or boot-polishing. It was a far cry from the *Cantos* of Pound. It was also more difficult than it looked: the mundane but essential ability to record every small detail with complete accuracy. The news editor took an ill-concealed pleasure in pointing out each and every error to arrogant young trainees with newly acquired degrees in English Literature.

The newspaper was owned by one Lord Iliffe of Yattendon, a largely absent figure who owned a 9,000-acre estate 100 miles away in Berkshire. More important to me was Fulton Gillespie, the chief reporter, known as Jock – a growling silver-haired Glaswegian with dark glasses and the stub of a cigar permanently lodged between bearded lips.

Jock became my new personal tutor. He was not a graduate, but a coal miner's son who had left school with no certificates of any kind and had started work at 14 as an apprentice printer at the *Falkirk Herald* in Scotland before crossing to the editorial side at 16.

He had cut his teeth recording market stock notes and prices in old pence and farthings along with shipping movements and cargoes from the nearby Grangemouth docks. From this he progressed to writing cinema synopses – A and B pictures with titles and stars' names. His equivalent of English Literature essays had consisted of funerals and lists of mourners; amateur dramatic societies' plays and musicals with cast lists; local antiquarian society meetings and debates; miners' welfare committee meetings; WI fêtes recording best cake and best jams. There had been farm shows to record, with their prize bulls and heifers to spell correctly, before turning up to report on local sports matches. And a quick change in the evenings for annual dinners of all kinds of local charities, sporting, civic and faith groups. The following morning back in courts, councils and other public bodies.

That was Jock's life in the mid-'50s. It would have been the same for any trainee reporter in the mid-'60s and it was – give or take – my life in Cambridge in the mid-'70s.

Early in my time as a trainee reporter Jock told us about the ritual for covering Scottish hangings. This involved befriending the murderer's soon-to-be widow by promising to write a sympathetic account, possibly hinting at a campaign to demand an 11th-hour reprieve. Once he'd extracted the quotes and purloined the family photographs the reporter would, on exit, shout at the distraught soon-to-be widow that her husband was an evil bastard who deserved to rot in hell.

'Why did you do that?'

'So that the next reporter to turn up wouldn't get through the door.'

That was what real reporting was about. Get the story, stuff the opposition. Jock saw it as his duty to school us in hard knocks. We would

begin the day with the calls – a round trip to the police, ambulance and fire services. As we set off in the office Mini he would deliver one of a small repertoire of homilies about our craft. 'If you write for dukes, only dukes will understand, but if you write for the dustman, both will understand. Keep it short, keep it simple, write it in language you would use if you were telling your mum or dad.'

He explained that police work involved keeping one foot on the pavement and one in the gutter. You got their respect by kicking them in the balls at regular intervals, because, in the long run, they needed us more than we needed them. That, he emphasised, was a good rule applicable to all those in authority. It had been hammered into him by the old hacks on the *Falkirk Herald* and it would always be true. He repeated this homily often in case I had failed to grasp it. They needed us more than we needed them.

We owned the printing presses: they didn't. End of.

In time I was dispatched to a district office where the routine was the same, only with more alcohol. I drove the 20 miles to Saffron Walden in Essex on a clapped out old Lambretta scooter. There were three reporters for a town of fewer than 10,000 people. The chief reporter poured whisky into my morning coffee before we made the police calls. There were two or three pints at lunchtime, more Irish coffee in the afternoon and more pints in the evening before I wobbled my way back to Cambridge.

We covered all the local council committees and courts. There were golden weddings to record and local amateur dramatics to review. On Saturdays I would be packed off to cover 'The Bloods', Saffron Walden Town Football Club, who were forced to play in a modest Essex league because the sloping pitch at Catons Lane was deemed to have 'excessive undulations'. I knew little about football – just enough to be able to record the bare facts about the game on a telex machine in the corridor at the top of the stairs.

Above the telex – a machine that punched holes in paper tape to transmit the copy back to Cambridge for typesetting – was a list of footballing clichés. For every cliché that survived the attention of the subs back in head office and made it into print, we had to buy the other two colleagues in Saffron Walden a pint. They included describing

the goalkeeper as 'the custodian of the woodwork'; 'a fleet-footed midfielder'; and (to describe a penalty) 'he made no mistake from the spot'. By 6 p.m. the match report was on the streets of Cambridge, along with all the other local and national football teams or in the special late Saturday afternoon 'pink 'un' sports edition.

Most of the news – back in Cambridge as well as the district offices – was pre-ordained, in the sense that the news editor in each newsroom kept an A4 diary on his desk in which he or she would record every upcoming council committee along with the relevant health, fire, ambulance, water and utilities boards. Late in the afternoon you would check the page to see what job had been assigned for the following day.

Often you would travel with a photographer. There was a strong demarcation between writers and snappers. A reporter would not dream of taking a photograph and a snapper would never dare to write a line of text. Indeed, union rules forbade it.

Around two thirds of the work was what you might call 'top down': the newspaper telling the citizens about the workings of the assorted institutions put in place to regulate or order local and civic life.

The other third of the news flowed the other way, bottom up. This was not a *Bowling Alone* world – the deracinated hollowed-out communities described by Robert Putnam 25 years later in America. There was bubbling social and institutional activity all around, and where we lacked the resources to cover it ourselves we recruited local stringers (today they might be called 'citizen journalists') to file accounts of discussion groups and scout sports days and charity baking mornings for the local hospital scanner. Every name sold a paper, as the news editor would remind us at regular intervals. We were duly encouraged to cram as many names as possible into our reports. Every picture sold a paper, too, so photographers knew to take group pictures and collect the names for the captions.

A typical week might include residents with damp problems who wanted to get on the radar of an unresponsive council. The petition about the dangerous pedestrian crossing. The man with the dog who'd made friends with an owl. A couple of times a day a reader would find their way to the Newmarket Road office and one of us would have to sit down in the reception area to debrief them. The representative of a

group trying to stop the bulldozing of a few acres of Victorian cottages to make way for a shopping centre. The reader who has brought in a potato resembling Winston Churchill. Another is obsessed by an electricity junction box at the bottom of his garden. All our visitors want the local paper on their side.

The first edition of the paper hit the streets before lunchtime, with two or three more editions during the afternoon. A hinged door was all that separated the newsroom from the industrial machinery required to turn our words into type. Within a few yards of the sub-editors' desks were the Linotype and Ludlow machines. The smell of molten metal and grease would waft into the newsroom with each swing of the door. Around 11 a.m. the entire building would shudder as the rotary presses started to roll with the first edition.

It was impossible to forget that newspapers were as much light engineering as fine words.

★

There are many things we did not discuss back in 1976. We didn't talk about business models. The model for the *Cambridge Evening News* was relatively straightforward: nearly 50,000 people a day parted with money to buy a copy. There was display advertising – a local department store or car showroom promoting a special deal or sale. And then there was the lifeline of local newspapers: classified advertising. The vast majority of second-hand cars or houses in Cambridge and surrounding towns were offered for sale through the pages of the *Cambridge Evening News*. Every job vacancy was announced in the paper, along with every birth, marriage and death. Every official notification from the council or other public authority: they were all printed at the back of the newspaper between the news and the sport.

The profit margins on local papers at their peak – and the mid-'70s were as good a time as any – were in the 30 to 40 per cent range and would continue to be until the end of the century. Nearly 30 years later the regional press was still taking something like 20 per cent of the UK's advertising spend.

So, no, we didn't talk about business models; we didn't need to.

We didn't talk about ethics. And we didn't talk about technology. Not much had changed about the way our journalism reached the readers in a hundred years or more. Hot metal typesetting machines had been around since the 1880s. The presses had got faster over the years, but otherwise a journalist from the late nineteenth century would have found little to surprise him in the 1970s. We banged out stories on battered typewriters – the only technology we used apart from telephones. If we were out of the office on deadline we'd phone it in to copy takers who did their best to conceal their boredom. No intro more than 30 words. Get the salient facts into the top of the story so, in haste, it could be cut from the bottom. The production methods of a newspaper seemed timeless and immutable.

We met our readers out on stories and, by and large, we were welcomed and – apparently – trusted. Sometimes we deliberately intruded on grief. The 'death knock' was the name given to that heart-sinking moment when the news editor might send you to see the parents whose daughter had just died in a traffic accident. Oddly, we were rarely sent packing by devastated relatives. More often, the response was to welcome us in, even at this moment of unimaginable pain. For many, it seemed to be something of an honour for their relatives to be remembered in the pages of the paper.

★

Some 40 years after my stint in Cambridge I made contact with my old news editor, Christopher South, to check my memory of my local reporting days. South, now nearly 80, produced two cardboard boxes of old papers he'd stuffed into brown envelopes as he cleared his desk between roles. He was, he explained apologetically, a bit of a hoarder.

I had a Proustian moment as I unsealed the first box. The smell of the Newmarket Road office seeped out of the battered cardboard container as I sifted through the papers – mainly the smell of the cheap newsprint on which we typed. I found a story written by my old (now late) colleague John Gaskell on 27 April 1976. In the top right corner, his

surname: in the top left, 'sweepers 1' – the catchline, or running head, given to the story so that it could be followed through the process from sub to compositor to printing press. The intro was tight, 23 words long. At the bottom of the page 'm.f.'. *More follows.*

On another piece of now-tattered copy paper – evidently intended for the staff newsletter – a call for any stamp-collecting enthusiasts who would like to 'pool their knowledge, contacts, exchange deals and ideas in order to enrich their hobby'. On another, a memo from the editor stressing the 'vital necessity for keeping costs down'. No reporter was to spend more than 75 pence on lunch, or £1.20 on dinner, without prior approval.

There was a memo from the agricultural correspondent on the state of the paper – presumably in response to some invitation for feedback. It suggested that the arts coverage should be 'more down to earth and more relevant to the readership we serve who aren't all intellectuals or artistic'. It ended: 'I would think twice before paying the new price of 4p but the basis is there for making it worth 5p if we all work at it.' And a randomly preserved copy of the *Times*, the crossword half-solved: Saturday 8 November 1975. There are 22 headlines on its front page, some of them over entire stories, some of them flagging up further news inside. The typography is busy, workmanlike, factual. There is one small picture. The page is densely informative. The pattern continues inside, with multiple stories and very small black and white pictures.

South had also clipped an article from the *New Statesman* of 21 March 1975 ('The Establishment and the Press'), which referred to the National Union of Journalists' rule, introduced in 1965, that no one could be recruited to Fleet Street without first having had three years' experience on a provincial newspaper. The author, Tom Barstow, reflected on why this rule had been introduced: 'This letter was forged in the heated resentment that developed as growing numbers of Oxbridge graduates were hired straight from university and in many cases given "direct commissions" without any pretence of putting them through the ranks. The anger of newspapermen who had been through the provincial mill wasn't based on the fact that these elite recruits had been to university but that they hadn't been anywhere else.'

And, finally, a staff list for 1973, recording that the company then employed more than 70 journalists, including two reporters in each of seven district offices. In the composing room there were 18 Linotype operators to work the old molten Linotype machines. There were eleven compositors, ten stone hands to assemble the type into pages, seven readers to check the typeset galleys against the original and five print apprentices. There were eight men in the foundries and 29 to run the pressroom, including cleaners and machine minders. Finally, there were 16 mechanics – and drivers to drop off the papers at newsagents and street sellers throughout the county.

★

Back in 1976 there were, if we did ever pause to think about the finances, only two potential clouds on the horizon.

One was the advent of free newspapers, usually launched by small-scale entrepreneurs who imagined a much simpler model than traditional newspapers. They wanted to get the income (advertising) with almost none of the expense (journalism). But none of us really imagined that catching on because – well, people bought the paper for the stories to and read about their communities, schools and councils in a detail no free sheet could match.

The second was something rumbling away 90 miles northwest of Cambridge where a local newspaper, the *Nottingham Evening Post*, was locked in battles with its trade unions over the introduction of something called new technology. This apparently involved journalists doing their own typesetting, thus abolishing the need for all the type hands on the other side of the newsroom swing door. Our journalists' union was against that. And anyway, it all seemed a very distant prospect in 1976.

In a sense it was. It was another ten years before Rupert Murdoch would stage his bold confrontation with his national print workers, throwing 5,000 of them out of work and producing computer-set newspapers from behind barbed wire in Wapping, East London. And it was 13 years before the management at the *CEN* would sack all the pre-press workers and insist on full computer typesetting. After 124

years in independent ownership, the *Cambridge News*, by then renamed and a weekly paper, was sold in 2012 to a new consolidated company called Local World, backed by a hedge-fund manager intent on bringing together 110 titles and 4,300 employees in a 'one-stop shop' serving 'content' to local communities. Three years later the company was sold on to another newspaper group, Trinity Mirror, with the intention of delivering 'cost synergies' of around £12 million. The paper now sells fewer than 15,000 copies a week, reaching around 52,000 a day online.

★

The film of the year in 1976 was *All the President's Men*, in which Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman gave us the journalist-as-hero role model, which would prove very resilient over the decades to come.

It is the narrative we have often told the world, and which a few journalists might even believe. It usually involves the word 'truth': we speak truth to power; we are truth-seekers; we tell uncomfortable truths in order to hold people accountable.

The truth about journalism, it's always seemed to me, is something messier and less perfect. Carl Bernstein, one of the twin begetters of Watergate, goes no further nowadays than 'the best obtainable version of the truth'.

When living in Washington in 1987 I read a new book by the *Washington Post*'s veteran political commentator David Broder,[2] which contained a passage that leaped off the page because it felt so much closer to what journalism actually does.

> The process of selecting what the reader reads involves not just objective facts but subjective judgments, personal values and, yes, prejudices. Instead of promising 'All the News That's Fit to Print', I would like to see us say over and over until the point has been made . . . that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we heard about in the past 24 hours . . . distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to

> lift it from the doorstep and read it in about an hour. If we labelled the paper accurately then we would immediately add: 'But it's the best we could do under the circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow with a corrected updated version . . .'

'Partial, hasty, incomplete . . . somewhat flawed and inaccurate.' Most journalists I know recognise a kind of honesty in those words – as does anyone who has ever been written about by a journalist. That doesn't make journalism less valuable. But, as Broder argued, we might well earn more respect and trust if we acknowledged the reality of the activity we're engaged in.

As reporters and editors of the *Cambridge Evening News*, we lived among the people on whom we reported. We would meet the councillors and coppers the following morning in the queue for bread. Did that, on occasion, make us pull our punches? Probably. But that closeness and familiarity also bred respect and trust. We were on the brink of a new world in which a proprietor on the other side of the world could dictate his view of how a country should be run. Or when the chief executive of a giant newspaper conglomerate would have trouble finding some of his 'properties' on a map. Small was, in some ways, beautiful.

★

While a young reporter on the *CEN* I fell in love. The relationship lasted just under two years. It was between two consenting adults – one male, one female – and was perfectly legal, even if it did not accord with one of the commandments in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 20. The relationship caused some happiness; and some unhappiness to a few people – literally, no more than half-a-dozen either way.

One Friday night there was a knock on the door. A reporter and photographer from the *Sunday Mirror* wanted to tell the 'story of our love', as he put it, to the 4 million readers who then bought the newspaper every week. The reporter, a man called Richard, was charming.

I was a cub reporter, she was a university lecturer. Nobodies, end of story. Well, almost – for her late father had, some years earlier, been on

the telly. So you could, at a stretch, make a consumable tale out of it: 'Daughter of quite famous man has affair.'

Our relationship really didn't seem to be anyone else's business and so we politely declined the opportunity to invite Richard and his photographer over the doorstep.

Richard's tone changed. 'We can do this nice or we can do it nasty,' he said abruptly, and then explained what nice and nasty looked like. Nice was for us to sit down on the sofa and tell the world about our love, and be portrayed in a sympathetic way that would warm the cockles of millions of *Sunday Mirror* readers all over Britain. Nasty meant they would start knocking on the doors of neighbours and contacting our relatives to put together a story that would be altogether less heart-warming.

It was a good pitch. How many people want their elderly parents, friends or neighbours approached or telephoned on a Friday night by a man preparing a self-confessed hatchet job? All the same, we felt this was – well, private. We were living together openly, and made no attempt to hide our relationship from friends or family. But we had no wish to tell the whole world. So we said no.

Richard and his photographer did not go away and sat outside the house for another 24 hours. From time to time he would lean on the doorbell – not to mention the neighbours' – to test whether we had changed our minds. They stayed until Saturday afternoon, reappearing the following Friday evening to try again. Eventually we asked them in for a cup of tea, and I – the trainee kid in the room compared with Richard – suggested I might ring his news editor to explain we wouldn't be talking. That seemed to do the trick. The story – nice or nasty – never saw the light of day.

My life at that point had been learning to report councils, courts, freak weather and flower shows. That was what I understood journalism to be – a record of public events of varying degrees of significance. The ring on the doorbell was my first, sharp realisation that 'journalism' meant many different things to many different people. And, also, of what it was like to have journalism done to you.

2

More Than a Business

It was a lovely time to be a local newspaper journalist. But after a couple of years I had – as my Cambridge colleagues knew I would – started to make my exit plans. I began using my days off doing reporting shifts at the *London Evening Standard*, where ancient typewriters were chained to dark green metal desks. I was turned down for a job there, and also by the *Times*. But my cuttings caught the eye of the news editor on the *Guardian*, Peter Cole. I bought a new suit and gave what Cole later described as the worst interview he could remember. But he was impressed by my scrapbook of stories and considered I had a modest facility with words. I feel I may have lied when asked about my shorthand speed.

There was another young reporter starting at the *Guardian* on my first day in July 1979 – fresh from the Mirror Group training scheme in the west country. His name was Nick Davies. He was extrovert; I was more introverted. He loved standing on doorsteps; I preferred polishing sentences. With his beaten leather jacket, he looked like a beatnik French philosopher. As has sometimes been remarked, I looked more like Harry Potter. We became lifelong friends . . . and got up to mischief.

The *Guardian* Nick and I joined had been around for 158 years.

The *Manchester Guardian* started life as a small start-up in 1821. Its intention was almost purely altruistic. Its founders had no ambition to reap huge profits from it. It was imagined as a piece of public service.

Somehow – amazingly, mystifyingly, staggeringly – it remained a venture devoted to that public service of news more than a century and a half later. It existed to ask questions, to bear witness and to offer forthright (and anonymous) opinion.

There was no great business model for serious, awkward, enquiring journalism in 1821, any more than there was in 2015 when I left the paper, 194 years into its existence. But most of the time – buttressed by advertising and subsidy from other companies within family or trust ownership – the paper struggled through, with occasional crises along the way.

Its founder, John Edward Taylor, was a Manchester businessman and advocate of parliamentary reform who had been present at what became known as the Peterloo Massacre. On 16 August 1819, in St Peter's Square, Manchester, a 60,000-strong unarmed crowd gathered to hear a speech by a great radical orator, Henry Hunt, who believed in some very dangerous things: equal rights, universal suffrage, parliamentary reform, an end to child labour and so forth.

Fearing that Hunt would stir the crowd to some form of insurrection, the city's magistrates ordered in the yeomanry, who literally cut their way to the platform on which Hunt was speaking in order to arrest him. Numerous men, women and children were treated for fractures, sabre cuts and gunshot wounds. More than 400 people were injured and 11 were killed. It was all over in ten minutes. The story of the day led to a great poem, 'The Masque of Anarchy', by Shelley ('Rise like lions after slumber . . . Ye are many – they are few').

The historian E.P. Thompson described the decision facing the authorities on that day in his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 'Old Corruption faced the alternatives of meeting the reforms with repression or concession. But concession, in 1819, would have meant concession to a largely working-class reform movement: the middle-class reformers were not yet strong enough (as they were in 1832) to offer a more moderate line of advance. This is why Peterloo took place.'

The term 'fake news' had not yet been invented. But Taylor, standing on the edge of the carnage, knew what to expect. The official authorities would tell lies about the day. They would claim they were acting

in self-defence; they had been attacked by the mob and had drawn their swords as a desperate last measure.

The one national reporter on the scene, the *Times*'s John Tyas, ended the day in captivity (or sanctuary) and was unable to file a story. Knowing this, Taylor wrote his own report and got it swiftly to London. It was printed in the *Times* on the morning of 18 August, two days later. The story marked, in the words of one writer, the 'birth of the public reporter in English public life'.[1]

By the following day's edition Tyas was free to file his own eyewitness account and the *Times* went to town, filling more than two broadsheet pages.

In the volume of space devoted to the massacre you can feel the editor of the *Times*, Thomas Barnes, grappling with how anyone could establish the truth. Would people naturally trust the word of one reporter over that of the magistrates? Would readers be more convinced if there were multiple accounts broadly corroborating one version? In addition to its own reporting the paper went in for two techniques that became routine in the early twenty-first century – aggregation and crowdsourcing.

The aggregation took the form of excerpts from other local papers' reports of the day. The crowdsourcing came from a petition and from numerous 'private letters' similar to Taylor's. They painted a confusing picture, but the accumulation of evidence overwhelmingly demonstrated that the crowd had behaved peacefully and there was no possible justification for the violence meted out.

Taylor understood the importance of facts – and also predicted that the facts of the day would be contested, and litigated, for months, if not years. He wanted to place on record 'facts, undeniable and decisive . . . truths which are impossible to gainsay'.

He was entirely right. The authorities pushed back hard, creating a set of 'alternative facts' around the events of the day: they claimed to have witnessed pikes dipped in blood and torrents of stones and bricks thrown at the troops. The speakers on the day were later arrested and jailed by the same magistrates who had ordered the violence. Thanks to Taylor's quick response, 'within two days all England knew of the

event', says Thompson. 'Within a week every detail of the massacre was being canvassed in ale-houses, chapels, workshops, private houses.' And, thanks to the public reporting of the facts of the day, Thompson was able to write in 1963: 'Never since Peterloo has authority dared to used equal force against a peaceful British crowd.'

Peterloo is as good an illustration as any as to why good journalism is necessary. Nearly 200 years later, in the early days of the Trump presidency, the *Washington Post* expressed the same motivating ideal with the slogan: 'Democracy dies in darkness'. The *New York Times*, faced with an administration in 2017 that cared little for the distinction between facts and falsehoods, marketed itself with the words: 'Truth is hard to find. But easier with 1,000+ journalists looking.'

Power needs witnesses. Witnesses need to be able to speak freely to an audience. The truth can only follow on from agreed facts. Facts can only be agreed if they can be openly articulated, tested . . . and contested. That process of statement and challenge helps something like the truth to emerge. From truth can come progress. In the absence of this daylight, bad things will almost certainly happen. The acts of bearing witness and establishing facts can lead to positive reform. By the start of the twenty-first century these might – in relatively enlightened democracies – seem unremarkable statements, but 200 years ago these were comparatively new propositions.

Taylor decided to found his own paper. The first edition of the *Manchester Guardian* hit the streets about 18 months later – initially a weekly paper printed on machinery that could turn out 150 copies an hour. Its third edition reported on the House of Commons debate on the Peterloo massacre, over nine-and-a-half columns.

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To compress a very long story into a very short narrative: the Taylor family married the Scott family. A young member of the latter tribe – C.P. Scott – became editor at the age of 25: by the time he died in 1932 he had not only edited the paper for 57 years, he also owned it. On the death, in rapid succession, of Scott and his son Edward, the family

placed the paper into the care and ownership of the Scott Trust in 1936 to preserve and protect the *Guardian* 'in perpetuity'.

The Scotts could have made themselves very wealthy by selling the *Manchester Guardian* to Lord Beaverbrook or any other number of suitors: instead they gave away their inheritance in order to sustain decent, serious liberal journalism. They were not in it for the money. The *Manchester Guardian* was a public service.

Pause and reflect on that very unusual moment – described by Winston Churchill's future lord chancellor, Gavin Simonds, as 'very repugnant' ('you are trying to divest yourself of a property right').[2] Sir William Hayley, later editor of the *Times*, said of John Scott's decision to, in effect, give away the *Guardian*: 'He could have been a rich man; he chose a Spartan existence. And when he made up his mind to divest himself of all beneficial interest in them he did so with as little display of emotion as if he had been solving an algebraical problem. Most men making so large a sacrifice would have exacted at least the price of an attitude.'[3]

On the paper's 100th birthday in 1921 Scott – who'd been editing for nearly 50 years – wrote perhaps the most famous short essay on journalism, with its pithy aphorism: 'Comment is free, but facts are sacred.'[4] He used the article to underscore his passionate belief that, while a newspaper was a business, it had little point unless it was *more than* a business. A newspaper could – then, as now – aim to be 'something of a monopoly'. Many business people might relish that. Scott felt the opposite. The *Guardian*, he thought, should 'shun its temptations'.

> A newspaper has two sides to it. It is a business, like any other, and has to pay in the material sense in order to live. But it is much more than a business; it is an institution; it reflects and it influences the life of a whole community; it may affect even wider destinies. It is, in its way, an instrument of government. It plays on the minds and consciences of men. It may educate, stimulate, assist, or it may do the opposite. It has, therefore, a moral as well as a material existence, and its character and influence are in the main determined by the balance of these two forces . . . It may make profit or power its first object, or it may conceive itself as fulfilling a higher and more

> exacting function. I think I may honestly say that, from the day of its foundation, there has not been much doubt as to which way the balance tipped so far as regards the conduct of the paper whose fine tradition I inherited and which I have had the honour to serve through all my working life. Had it not been so, personally I could not have served it.

It is more or less inconceivable to imagine these words, or anything like them, from the lips of any newspaper owner today.

Since the predominant purpose of the *Guardian* lay in its influence, reporting, commentary and educative mission, it was obvious (to Scott's mind) that it had to be an editorially led venture. Scott wanted there to be a 'unity' between commercial and editorial – both driven by the same values. But he was absolutely clear that 'it is a mistake to suppose that the business side of a paper should dominate'. He had seen experiments to that effect tried elsewhere, and 'they have not met with success'.

> Between its two sides there should be a happy marriage, and editor and business manager should march hand in hand, the first, be it well understood, just an inch or two in advance.

The paper under Scott grew in influence far beyond Manchester. It was never afraid to be unpopular. At the end of the nineteenth century it was virtually alone in the UK press in opposing the Boer War and was excoriated for exposing the existence of British concentration camps – a moment when its reporters needed police guards as they turned up for work. In 1956, again, it stood virtually alone in condemning Britain's foolish adventure in Suez. It exposed labour conditions in apartheid South Africa and, under Peter Preston,[5] sleaze in parliament.

In 1961 it had taken an immense commercial risk by taking on an extra 500 staff to make the move from being a Manchester paper to one based in Fleet Street. The move nearly capsized the paper – but, with hindsight, it was a bold and visionary decision.

Some rivals in Fleet Street thought it was also self-regarding, prissy and politically correct. There was doubtless something in that. The early

twentieth-century Tory politician Lord Robert Cecil once described the *Guardian* as 'righteousness made readable'. There was something in that, too. But the ethos of the paper was formed by its history and ownership. As we'll see by the end of this book, the correlation between ownership, profit, purpose and the quality of national conversation is a complex one.

The BBC was, in some ways, close in spirit – a publicly funded organisation dedicated to providing serious and trustworthy news. Large swathes of Fleet Street, of course, loathed the BBC and did all in their power to undermine or destroy it. The Murdoch family regarded it as a semi-socialist entity that affronted their view of how the free market was best placed to deliver what they regarded as independent news.

They didn't much like the *Guardian*, either.

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That was the paper Nick and I joined in 1979. The paper still had the feeling of a family newspaper. The generation in their late 50s or early 60s who were in charge had begun their careers in Manchester and seen the newspaper transition to being a London title. The Trust was then chaired by Richard Scott, a former Washington correspondent and grandson of C.P. Scott. Peter Preston, our editor, had been on the paper since 1963 and was four years into a 20-year spell as editor. His predecessor, Alistair Hetherington, had also done 20 years. People tended to spend their entire lives at the paper.

For much of its existence the paper teetered on the borderlines of profit or loss – supported, when it went severely into the red, by the profits of the *Manchester Evening News*. In terms of circulation it was ninth in the league of national newspapers. Gradually, in the early '80s, the financial position of the *Guardian* improved. Preston was restless in modernising the paper and, in conjunction with the business managers, building up the classified advertising. By the late '80s the paper had fat, extremely profitable print sections on Monday to Wednesday carrying hundreds of jobs in media, education and public service.[6]

Our day began around 10 a.m., by which time we were expected to have read most of the other papers. The paper's first edition went to bed

around 9 p.m. in the evening, though the flow of copy meant that, if you weren't writing for the front page, they appreciated copy by about 6 p.m.

On most days you wrote one story, maximum two. So the day had a shape to it. Reporters were encouraged to be out of the office as much as possible. If you were in the newsroom there was time to read yourself in to the subject you'd been assigned, to make calls. A break for lunch. Some more calls. You might be writing a backgrounder – the context and analysis – in which case you'd start writing about 3 p.m. Otherwise you might have five or six hours on a story before you threaded your first sheet of carbon paper into the scuffed old typewriter.

Fleet Street, where most of the UK's national papers were based, was both a community and a battleground. Before Murdoch's great confrontation with the doomed print unions at his new plant at Wapping in 1986,[7] most of the newspapers – nearly 20 of them, including Sunday editions, which mostly had separate staffs and editors – were gathered along or around Fleet Street, which runs from St Paul's Cathedral and the Old Bailey in the east to the Royal Courts of Justice in the west.

To walk that half mile from Ludgate Circus to the High Court takes no longer than ten minutes. But – before Wapping – you would pass the glass, stone and marble-front edifices of the *Express*, the *Telegraph*, Reuters, Press Association. Down the eighteenth-century Bouverie Street – once home to William Hazlitt and Charles Dickens' *Daily News* – lay the cathedral-sized press hall of the *News of the World* and the *Sun*, capable of thundering out 4 million copies in a night from presses weighing hundreds of tons, with print lorries and delivery trucks lined up along the narrow street to restock newsprint or race to the night trains.

The outliers on this map in the early '80s were the *Financial Times* – a little to the east – and the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*, half a mile to the north. The *Guardian*, which only began to establish a significant London presence in the 1960s, shared printing facilities with the *Times* but its newsroom was in an unlovely '70s converted light-engineering building in Farringdon Road, ten minutes' walk from Fleet Street. It was always the slight outsider.

There was a demarcation between broadsheet, mid-market and red-tops in which supposed quality was in inverse proportion to proven

popularity. Arguably the most serious broadsheet – the *FT* – sold the fewest: around 200,000 copies a day – followed in unpopularity by the *Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*, which led the 'serious papers' with daily sales of around 1.5 million.

Then came the mid-markets – the *Mail* and the *Express*, each selling around 2 million copies – and finally the really popular red-tops, the *Sun* and the *Mirror* edging towards 4 million.[8]

★

My career took a traditional enough path. A few years reporting; four years writing a daily diary column; a stint as a feature writer – home and abroad. In 1986 I left the *Guardian* to be the *Observer*'s television critic – then a plum chair that had been occupied by Clive James and Julian Barnes. But I discovered I didn't have the right temperament to sit at home watching video-tapes all day, and it was a relief when I was approached to be the Washington correspondent of a new paper to be launched by Robert Maxwell.[9]

The *London Daily News* was a brief adventure: Maxwell ran out of patience within six months of starting it and closed it even more suddenly than he had opened it. But I was in the US long enough to develop a life-long respect for American journalism's methods, seriousness and traditions. If Fleet Street sometimes felt like a knowing game, American newspapers were soberly earnest. Back in the UK, I rejoined the *Guardian* and was diverted towards a route of editing – launching the paper's Saturday magazine followed by a daily tabloid features section (named G2) and moving to be deputy editor in 1993.

I had developed a love of gadgets. During my stint as diary writer in the mid-'80s I had bought a battery-powered Tandy 100 computer, which displayed a few lines of text. On assignment in Australia I learned how to unscrew a hotel phone and, with crocodile clips, squirt copy back to London using packet-switching technology in the middle of the night.

It felt like landing a man on the moon. I had no idea what was to come.

3
The New World

In 1993 some journalists began to be dimly aware of something clunkily referred to as 'the information superhighway' but few had ever had reason to see it in action. At the start of 1995 only 491 newspapers were online worldwide: by June 1997 that had grown to some 3,600.

In the basement of the *Guardian* was a small team created by Peter Preston – the Product Development Unit, or PDU. The inhabitants were young and enthusiastic. None of them were conventional journalists: I think the label might be 'creatives'. Their job was to think of new things that would never occur to the (largely middle-aged) reporters and editors three floors up.

The team – eventually rebranding itself as the New Media Lab – started casting around for the next big thing. They decided it was the internet. The creatives had a PC actually capable of accessing the world wide web. They moved in hipper circles. And they started importing copies of a new magazine, *Wired* – the so-called *Rolling Stone* of technology – which had started publishing in San Francisco in 1993, along with the HotWired website. 'Wired described the revolution,' it boasted. 'HotWired was the revolution.' It was launched in the same month the Netscape team was beginning to assemble. Only 18 months later Netscape was worth billions of dollars. Things were moving that fast.

In time, the team in PDU made friends with three of the people associated with *Wired*. They were the founders, Louis Rossetto and Jane

Metcalfe; and the columnist Nicholas Negroponte, who was based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and who wrote mindblowing columns predicting such preposterous things as wristwatches which would 'migrate from a mere timepiece today to a mobile command-and-control centre tomorrow . . . an all-in-one, wrist-mounted TV, computer, and telephone.'[1]

As if.

Both Rossetto and Negroponte were, in their different ways, prophets. Rossetto was a hot booking for TV talk shows, where he would explain to baffled hosts what the information superhighway meant. He'd tell them how smart the internet was, and how ethical. Sure, it was a 'dissonance amplifier'. But it was also a 'driver of the discussion' towards the real. You couldn't mask the truth in this new world, because someone out there would weigh in with equal force. Mass media was one-way communication. The guy with the antenna could broadcast to billions, with no feedback loop. He could dominate. But on the internet every voice was going to be equal to every other voice.

'Everything you know is wrong,' he liked to say. 'If you have a preconceived idea of how the world works, you'd better reconsider it.'

Negroponte, 50-something, East Coast gravitas to Rossetto's Californian drawl, and altogether more buttoned up, was working on a book, *Being Digital*, and was equally passionate in his evangelism. His mantra was to explain the difference between atoms – which make up the physical artefacts of the past – and bits, which travel at the speed of light and would be the future. 'We are so unprepared for the world of bits . . . We're going to be forced to think differently about everything.'

I bought the drinks and listened.

Over dinner in a North London restaurant Negroponte started with convergence – the melting of all boundaries between TV, newspapers, magazines and the internet into a single media experience – and moved on to the death of copyright, possibly the nation state itself. There would be virtual reality, speech recognition, personal computers with inbuilt cameras, personalised news. The entire economic model of information was about to fall apart. The audience would pull rather than wait for old media to push things as at present. Information and entertainment

would be on demand. Overly hierarchical and status-conscious societies would rapidly erode. Time as we knew it would become meaningless – five hours of music would be delivered to you in less than five seconds. Distance would become irrelevant. A UK paper would be as accessible in New York as it was in London.

I decided I should go to America and see the internet for myself.

★

It was easy, in 1993, to be only dimly aware of what the internet did. The kids in the basement might have a PC capable of accessing the web, but most of us had only read about it.

Writing 15 years later in the *Observer*,[2] the critic John Naughton compared the begetter of the world wide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, with the seismic disruption five centuries earlier caused by the invention of movable type. Just as Gutenberg had no conception of his invention's eventual influence on religion, science, systems of ideas and democracy, so – in 2008 – 'it will be decades before we have any real understanding of what Berners-Lee hath wrought'.

And so I set off to find the internet with the leader of the PDU team, Tony Ageh, a 33-year-old 'creative'. He had had exactly one year's experience in media – as an advertising copy chaser for *The Home Organist* magazine – before joining the *Guardian*. I took with me a copy of *The Internet for Dummies*. Thus armed, we set off to America for a four-day, four-city tour.

In Atlanta, we found the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*), which was considered a thought leader in internet matters, having joined the Prodigy Internet Service, an online service offering subscribers information over dial-up 1,200 bit/second modems. After four months the internet service had 14,000 members, paying 10 cents a minute to access online banking, messaging, full webpage hosting and live share prices.

The *AJC* business plan envisaged building to 35,000 or 40,000 by year three. But that time, they calculated, they would be earning $3.3 million in subscription fees and $250,000 a year in advertising. 'If it

all goes to plan,' David Scott, the publisher, Electronic Information Service, told us, 'it'll be making good money. If it goes any faster, this is a real business.'

We also met Michael Gordon, the managing editor. 'The appeal to the management is, crudely, that it is so much cheaper than publishing a newspaper,' he said.

We wrote it down.

'We know there are around 100,000 people in Atlanta with PCs. There are, we think, about 1 million people wealthy enough to own them. Guys see them as a toy; women see them as a tool. The goldmine is going to be the content, which is why newspapers are so strongly placed to take advantage of this revolution. We're out to maximise our revenue by selling our content any way we can. If we can sell it on CD-ROM or TV as well, so much the better.'

'Papers? People will go on wanting to read them, though it's obviously much better for us if we can persuade them to print them in their own homes. They might come in customised editions. Edition 14B might be for females living with a certain income.'

It was heady stuff.

From Atlanta we hopped up to New York to see the *Times*'s online service, @Times. We found an operation consisting of an editor plus three staffers and four freelancers.[3] The team had two PCs, costing around $4,000 each. The operation was confident, but small.

The @Times content was weighted heavily towards arts and leisure. The opening menus offered a panel with about 15 reviews of the latest films, theatre, music and books – plus book reviews going back two years. The site offered the top 15 stories of the day, plus some sports news and business.

There was a discussion forum about movies, with 47 different subjects being debated by 235 individual subscribers. There was no archive due to the fact that – in one of the most notorious newspaper licensing cock-ups in history – the *NYT* in 1983 had given away all rights to its electronic archive (for all material more than 24 hours old) in perpetuity to Mead/Lexis.[4]

That deal alone told you how nobody had any clue what was to come.

We sat down with Henry E. Scott, the group director of @Times.[5] 'Sound and moving pictures will be next. You can get them now. I thought about it the other day, when I wondered about seeing 30 seconds of *The Age of Innocence*. But then I realised it would take 90 minutes to download that and I could have seen more or less the whole movie in that time. That's going to change.'

But Scott was doubtful about the lasting value of what they were doing – at least, in terms of news. 'I can't see this replacing the newspaper,' he said confidently. 'People don't read computers unless it pays them to, or there is some other pressing reason. I don't think anyone reads a computer for pleasure. The *San Jose Mercury* [*News*] has put the whole newspaper online. We don't think that's very sensible. It doesn't make sense to offer the entire newspaper electronically.'

We wrote it all down.

'I can't see the point of news on-screen. If I want to know about a breaking story I turn on the TV or the radio. I think we should only do what we can do better than in print. If it's inferior than the print version there's no point in doing it.'

Was there a business plan? Not in Scott's mind. 'There's no way you can make money out of it if you are using someone else's server. I think the *LA Times* expects to start making money in about three years' time. We're treating it more as an R & D project.'

This approach became known as 'reach before revenue'. It was the business model for much of the internet.

From New York we flitted over to Chicago to see what the *Tribune* was up to. In its 36-storey Art Deco building – a spectacular monument to institutional self-esteem – we found a team of four editorial and four marketing people working on a digital service, with the digital unit situated in the middle of the newsroom. The marketeers were beyond excited about the prospect of being able to show houses or cars for sale and arranged a demonstration. We were excited, too, even if the pictures were slow and cumbersome to download.

We met Joe Leonard, associate editor. 'We're not looking at Chicago Online as a money maker. We've no plans even to break even at this stage. My view is simply that I'm not yet sure where I'm going, but I'm

on the boat, in the water – and I'm ahead of the guy who is still standing on the pier.'

Reach before revenue.

Finally we headed off to Boulder, Colorado, in the foothills of the Rockies, where Knight Ridder had a team working on their vision of the newspaper of tomorrow. The big idea was, essentially, what would become the iPad – only the team in Boulder hadn't got much further than making an A4 block of wood with a 'front page' stuck on it. The 50-something director of the research centre, Roger Fidler, thought the technology capable of realising his dream of a 'personal information appliance' was a couple of years off.[6]

Tony and I had filled several notebooks. We were by now beyond tired and talked little over a final meal in an Italian restaurant beneath the Rocky Mountains.

We had come. We had seen the internet. We were conquered.

★

Looking back from the safe distance of nearly 25 years it's easy to mock the fumbling, wildly wrong predictions about where this new beast was going to take the news industry. We had met navigators and pioneers. They could dimly glimpse where the future lay. Not one of them had any idea how to make a dime out of it, but at the same time they intuitively sensed that it would be more reckless not to experiment. It seemed reasonable to assume that – if they could be persuaded to take the internet seriously – their companies would dominate in this new world, as they had in the old world.

We were no different. After just four days it seemed blindingly obvious that the future of information would be mainly digital. Plain old words on paper – delivered expensively by essentially Victorian production and distribution methods – couldn't, in the end, compete. The future would be more interactive, more image-driven, more immediate. That was clear. But how on earth could you graft a digital mindset and processes onto the stately ocean liner of print? How could you convince anyone that this should be a priority when no one had yet worked out

how to make any money out of it? The change, and therefore the threat, was likely to happen rapidly and maybe violently. How quickly could we make a start? Or was this something that would be done to us?

In a note for Peter Preston on our return I wrote, 'The internet is fascinating, intoxicating . . . it is also crowded out with bores, nutters, fanatics and middle managers from Minnesota who want the world to see their home page and CV. It's a cacophony, a jungle. There's too much information out there. We're all overloaded. You want someone you trust to fillet it, edit it and make sense of it for you. That's what we do. It's an opportunity.'

I spent the next year trying to learn more and then the calendar clicked on to 1995 – *The Year the Future Began*, at least according to a recent book by the cultural historian W. Joseph Campbell, who used the phrase as his book title twenty years later. It was the year of O.J. Simpson, the Dayton Ohio peace accord and the entanglement of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. It was the year Amazon.com, eBay, Craigslist and Match.com established their presence online. Microsoft spent $300m launching Windows 95 with weeks of marketing hype, spending millions for the rights to the Rolling Stones hit 'Start Me Up', which became the anthem for the Windows 95 launch.

Cyberspace – as the cyber dystopian Evgeny Morozov recalled, looking back on that period – felt like space itself.[7] 'The idea of exploring cyberspace as virgin territory, not yet colonised by governments and corporations, was romantic; that romanticism was even reflected in the names of early browsers ("Internet Explorer," "Netscape Navigator").'

But, as Campbell was to reflect, 'no industry in 1995 was as ill-prepared for the digital age, or more inclined to pooh-pooh the disruptive potential of the Internet and World Wide Web, than the news business'. It suffered from what he called 'innovation blindness' – 'an inability, or a disinclination to anticipate and understand the consequences of new media technology'.

1995 was, then, the year the future began. It happened also to be the year in which I became editor of the *Guardian*.

4
Editor

I was 41 and had not, until very recently, really imagined this turn of events. Peter Preston – unshowy, grittily obstinate, brilliantly strategic – looked as if he would carry on editing for years to come. It was a complete surprise when he took me to the basement of the resolutely unfashionable Italian restaurant in Clerkenwell he favoured, to tell me he had decided to call it a day.

On most papers the proprietor or chief executive would find an editor, take him/her out to lunch and do the deal. On the *Guardian* – at least according to tradition dating back to the mid-'70s – the Scott Trust made the decision after balloting the staff, a process that involved manifestos, pub hustings and even (by some candidates) a little frowned-on campaigning.

I supposed I should run for the job. My mission statement said I wanted to boost investigative reporting and get serious about digital. It was, I fear, a bit Utopian. I doubt much of it impressed the would-be electorate. British journalists are programmed to scepticism about idealistic statements concerning their trade. Nevertheless, I won the popular vote and was confirmed by the Scott Trust after an interview in which I failed to impress at least one Trustee with my sketchy knowledge of European politics. We all went off for a drink in the pub round the back of the office. A month later I was editing.

'Fleet Street', as the UK press was collectively called, was having a torrid time, not least because the biggest beast in the jungle, Rupert