

## INTRODUCTION

Whenever in recent years there has been a national opinion poll on the public's esteem for, and trust of, people in various professions, nurses have come somewhere near the top, while estate agents, politicians and journalists have come near the bottom.

Estate agents and politicians may be predictably unpopular: both have a vested interest in *selling* something to the public, whether it is a property or a policy. But *journalists*? They should surely be the friends and champions of the public, not the objects of its distrust and contempt. The placing of them near the bottom of the list is nothing less than a gathering disaster, not only for the journalists themselves, but for the politicians and other public figures they deal with, and for society as a whole.

The affair of the BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan and his widely believed - then and since - allegation that the government had 'sexed up' the intelligence services' information on the possibility of weapons of mass destruction being launched from Iraq at forty-five minutes' notice, as a preliminary to its helping in the invasion of Iraq, undoubtedly increased public interest in the rights and wrongs of journalistic practices, sometimes in relation to the rights and wrongs of the practices of spin-doctors. In the Gilligan case, the Hutton inquiry criticized the BBC, and its Director-General Greg Dyke resigned. But as far as the government's role was concerned, the report of the inquiry was widely thought to be a 'whitewash'.

Of course journalists have tricks of the trade. But they are not always wrong in their techniques and judgments, especially when they try to counter official ‘spin’. However, if, as can happen, they merely try to replace official spin with their own spin, that can be unhelpful to the people who really matter: the public. Campaigns of denigration of people in the public eye, especially though not exclusively politicians, can alienate the public who are supposedly ‘protected’ by press freedom. This can certainly happen if the attacks suggest less a search for truth than a modern version of bear-baiting, cock-fighting or any other activity pandering to those who simply like the sight, not of truth, but of blood.

Today it might provoke cynical smiles or even outright laughter if someone should claim that, at its best, journalism is one of the most vital and valuable vocations. I do not think such cynical smiles would have been produced when I entered journalism over half a century ago. Some may try to dismiss this by saying, ‘Oh, come on; times have changed!’ Times have indeed changed. They are always changing. But a truth is still a truth, a lie is still a lie, and a distortion is still a distortion, and will be for ever more. Honestly telling people at one end of the street what is going on at the other, which is the essence of journalism, is invaluable, and indeed indispensable. Without it, democratic votes would be next to worthless because there would be no adequate information on which any voter could take a wise and well-informed decision.

If journalism is not essentially about being the friend of honesty, the friend of the people and the critic of the misbehaving rich and powerful, if people do not trust it as a friend of their hopes and their rights, ultimately it is nothing but spin-assisted and spin-assisting fantasy, handout re-writing, knee-jerk denigration, money-making and self-aggrandisement.

The essence of good journalism is to avoid tricks and ‘tell it as it is’, without editorializing and sensationalizing, in news columns as distinct from leading articles and leader-page articles. At the present time, there are two powerful pressures against ‘telling it as it is’, and for adopting trickery.

The first is commercial. In the 1970s, and more so in the Thatcher years of the 1980s, the managers of newspapers started referring to journalism as ‘product’. It was a revealing and disquieting term. Their stated aim was to have a better ‘product’ than that of their rivals for the reader to consume. This is the language of the barrow boy rather than the journalist. Journalism is not a product like butter or sausages. It is a *service*: a difficult concept to get to grips with in an era when the whole concept of service in any shape or form, and its importance to tolerable living, has been overrun by the search for profits – money having become virtually the sole measurement of personal status and skill in a money-obsessed civilization.

Those in print journalism who make judgments in terms of ‘product’ and money-generation *alone* were up against the fact that television and radio were now the dominant means of supplying hard news to the public. They came to the conclusion that souped-up news, or comment pieces on issues the public already knew about (in the past the ingredients of magazines rather than newspapers), were the best means of continuing to sell newspapers. Newspapers became more strident in their competition with television, and television started counter-attacking in stridency, both media becoming rather like speeding Titanics heading for an iceberg.

That iceberg was the public’s low opinion of journalists, as repeatedly expressed in those opinion polls.

The second pressure against ‘telling it as it is’ is the glamour and celebrity status of *some* journalists, who were to become rivals or opponents of the people they

were writing about, rather than honest observers. Today we have, on the one hand, indulged and well-paid journalistic ‘stars’, who are usually pontificators rather than on-the-spot reporters, and on the other, perhaps anonymous, under-paid and under-regarded craftsmen who do the routine (some would say the ‘real’) work. The old-fashioned newspaper reporter had his notebook and his pen, but he rarely had glamour or celebrity to tempt him into producing ‘performance’ journalism.

The television journalist talking straight to camera is a rather different case. He may perhaps be excused for being *self*-conscious, especially if reporting from any sort of battlefield, where his self can become a legitimate litmus paper for detecting what is going on and for conveying a decent feeling about it. In the television *studio*, however, with narcissism not instilling the same discipline and restraint as outside circumstances, tricksiness can intervene. Interviews of politicians and others can begin to take on the appearance of battles for supremacy between two equals rather than a search for information and enlightenment. Whether the interview is with the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury or a distinguished scientist, it can on occasion seem as if a *victory* for the journalist interviewer has to be chalked up. This form of ‘telling it as it is’ means telling it as the executives behind the studio interviewer see it, or telling it as the interviewer’s vanity sees it, even if the result is without great benefit to people listening or watching.

Combative television and radio journalists can and sometimes do claim that displaying pugnacity is a trick which is justified because it produces truths. If there has ever been a case of a government minister in such an interview collapsing and saying, ‘Boo-hoo! I’ve been rumbled! I can’t go on! I must confess everything!’ I am afraid I have not witnessed it nor heard of it. Virtuoso journalists employing this sort

of trick usually succeed only in turning politicians and others into more plausible and efficient liars. That can be to the detriment of the public rather than to its advantage.

Does this analysis mean that whoever accepts it wants journalists to ‘go easy’ on celebrities? Not at all. Pugnacious and destructive interviewing by journalists tends to make those questioned close up rather than open out. A conversation between one human being and another is arguably more likely to reveal something of value. And tricks in the presentation of news, especially in the distortion of news in order to produce blooded drama not necessarily justified by the cold facts, will make celebrities of any sort close up even more in the future.

If the public is not necessarily informed by narcissistic tricks, is it at least impressed? Once again, the answer is the presence of journalism towards the bottom of the list of respected occupations.

Real journalism, as distinct from attention-seeking, wrestling-match entertainment to fill in the spaces between lucrative advertisements, consists of a reporter finding and filing as many facts and sincere impressions as possible from the scene of whatever is the action. It might be argued that instead we too often have propaganda based on the spoon-feeding of spin-doctors; tabloid soap-opera fashioned around clichéd and often insignificant characters who may be actors, singers, footballers, politicians or serial killers; crude or exotic smut tailored for those with nothing better to think about; the opinionated droolings onto word processor screens which ultimately fill a multitude of armchair columnists’ slots (whereas most newspapers used to make do with a single serious columnist such as the late great Sir William Connor, Cassandra of the *Daily Mirror*); public-relations sycophancy served up in agreed text and pictures for money, in glossily vacuous fan-magazines; and sour and obsessive destructiveness masquerading as social concern and criticism.

That great American pundit Walter Lippmann talked of good journalism as ‘a picture of reality on which citizens can act’. Is this what we have now? Or is journalism lurching into a repertoire of money-making tricks and tricksiness? That last question is of great concern to all readers, listeners and viewers. If the answer to it were ever to be ‘yes’, it would imply the coarsening of public debate and private expectations, the distortion of the basis of political and moral judgments and the corruption of our view of our fellow human beings.

In recent years there have been a number of criticisms of contemporary journalism, but they have all seemingly passed by with no result. Why has no organization or individual outside journalism campaigned consistently for a re-think within journalism? Primarily, one suspects, because they fear turning the powerful media into an enemy. Thus the media have been encouraged to feel that any criticism of them can be merely brushed aside, and need not be taken seriously. If this is so, it ironically *threatens* press and broadcasting freedom. It gives ammunition to any government wanting to impose statutory controls on the media, safe in the knowledge that the public are as much disillusioned with journalists as with politicians, or more so.

But the brushing off of criticism from outside as merely a self-serving attack by Authority, Eminence or Celebrity, implies that any reappraisal of contemporary journalism does have to come from *within*, the public having already declared themselves in the opinion polls. This is why, in *defence* of a craft I have practised for sixty years, and have regarded as one of the most necessary jobs there is, I have tried to point out some of the ways in which journalism is in danger of alienating the public whose helpful friend any self-respecting journalist should hope to be. One trusts that human intelligence within the job will bring about some measure of voluntary reform.

If I have an increasingly frequent daytime nightmare, it is of a future government seeking to impose statutory controls on journalism, *and the public who are supposed to be protected by journalists' freedom being strongly in favour of government controls over a distrusted occupation.*

It would be helpful if, while we are waiting for intelligence within journalism to begin to function on this issue, the public could recognize, and if necessary discount, some of the increasingly common tricks. Some are major, some are minor - little more than irritations. But even the irritations can subliminally cause journalists *not* to be valued and trusted. I have described here a range of journalistic tricks of all shapes and sizes, and of varying degrees of importance, all of which may in their own way cause the public to think less of journalism and journalists.