

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

## ABSTRACT

*New beginnings are a crucial part of career construction and this paper explores how stories of 'lived experience' are used by journalists who have made the career transition into education, both in narrating their own lives and as an educational tool. It contends that personal stories can provide the journalist moving from newsroom to classroom with an authentic means to write the next chapter in a life story, since storytelling is the journalist's 'stock in trade'. The paper's principal feature is 2 stories drawn from in-depth, biographical interviews, both with well-established broadcast journalists who reflect on their experiences as journalism educators at the BBC College of Journalism. The relationship between professional and personal identity is considered and the emergent concept of 'auto/biographical journalism' is utilised to scrutinise the role of self within the context of journalism as a vocation and journalism education as a career choice. Here, autobiographical journalism as catharsis, the role of epiphanies in self-stories and the confessional genre provide some context. My background as a former BBC journalist and my current role as a journalism educator inform this paper: hence, it concludes with personal reflections on the ways in which, as journalists telling the stories of others, we can also draw on our own stories to shape our personae in different periods of our lives.*

Keywords: *self-stories; auto/biographical journalism; journalism; epiphanies; catharsis*

*We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories (McAdams, 1993:11).*

This paper aims to examine how journalism practitioners who have made the transition from the newsroom to the classroom<sup>1</sup>, construct their own career narratives, both through journalistic storytelling, and utilising these lived experiences as credible stories within their new roles as educators. The relationship between professional and personal identity, which for many journalists is one of symbiosis, is central to this study and as a narrative inquiry it is important to keep in view 'this sense of experiential whole' (Clandinn and Connelly, 1998:154).

Self-identity is inextricably linked to the way in which we talk about our lives and our experiences. For McAdams (1993), in autobiography, we construct a 'personal myth,' which is unique, a heroic story of self, giving coherence and meaning to our 'lived experiences.' Storytelling forms a vital component of the human condition, so that autobiography could

---

<sup>1</sup> The study, which was conducted in 2012, focuses on journalists who were based in the BBC College of Journalism, now an online resource and part of the BBC Academy <https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/> Note, that some of the interviewees are now, in 2019, wholly employed within the realm of education and training – generally as freelance trainers, coaches and consultants, whilst others deliver teaching on a more *ad hoc* basis, and continue to work as practising journalists.

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

be said to work on the 'assumption that the self and its experiences may somehow be represented in a text,' (Eakin, 1999:99). Sharing stories can illuminate personal experience and understanding (McAdams, 1993). It can also help to build a sense of community, so that, 'just witnessing – really hearing, understanding and accepting without judgement – another's life story can be transforming' (Atkinson, 2006:235). For journalists, accustomed to telling others' stories, it can be illuminating to draw on their own stories when devising what McIlveen (2007) calls a 'vocational personality'. Bringing autobiography into their practice can also be cathartic particularly for those who bear witness to human suffering, if we acknowledge the identity-shaping nature of reporting on crisis and in conflict zones (Beaumont, 2009; Colvin, 2012; Di Giovanni, 2011; Keane, 2005). The BBC recognises the importance of retrospective writing and has devised the Radio 4 programme *From Our Own Correspondent*<sup>2</sup> for its journalists to reflect on the way they reported stories at the time and to retell them in a personalised way. This model can be applied to ways of thinking about their new career roles as educators, whereby journalists reflect on and share their experience as a route to good practice through the retelling of stories. The confessional (and cathartic) character of autobiography in journalism is also evident in those who have experienced life changing moments, or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989). For some journalists their relationship with their practice and the form in which they present it as educators has been shaped by this highly personal experience, whereby 'new beginnings', evident in their route into a career in education, have been directed by a moment of crisis or illumination.

Notions of memory, self and identity are all present in the telling and re-telling of stories. The role of memory is crucial in a biographical study, since stories are the product of our ability to recall our earlier interpretations of past experiences. This is rarely a coherent process since 'images are not neatly stacked away in memory in a kind of "mental filing cabinet" waiting around to be placed in a narrative' (Gudmundsdottir, 1996:224). 'Self' is understood in the 'sense of the term where we speak of people as selves, meaning that they are beings of the requisite depth and complexity to have an identity' (Taylor, 1989:32). The

---

<sup>2</sup> *From Our Own Correspondent* is broadcast weekly on BBC Radio 4

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qjlg>

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

notion of self, which connects to a sense of identity is characterised by the 'crucial feature of human agency' and 'what I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me' (Taylor, 1989:33-4 in Fowler-Watt, 2017: 11-12); 'Self is thus constructed in dialogue with others' (McIlveen *et al*, 2007:70).

Identity is taken to mean what we make for ourselves out of that concept of self. The concept of self-identity is located in the '*personal order* – that is, the integration of 'inner' and 'outer' world in individual experience and behaviour' (Erickson, 1975:46). The participants in this study also share their sense of professional and personal identities, highlighting the crucial importance of context and location. Individuals are located within a 'social and cultural matrix' (Mishler, 1999: 16). Sometimes professional identity can act as a brake on the expression of deeper emotional discourse. This could be applied to journalists, trained to be impartial where 'the self of autobiographical journalism is restrained from excessive fabrication by the conventions of the profession' (Coward, 2009:244). Our personal constructs are a vital part of our 'world-making' and narrative constitutes an essential method of understanding our own lives; we have no sense of self without a narrative (Ricoeur, 1992; Bruner, 1987).

#### Context:

*The identity of journalism as a profession lives on the assumption "I know it when I see it" (Donsbach, 2010:38).*

Journalism is usually defined through people working as journalists. It is a highly human activity and engenders heated debate as to whether it is a craft, a trade or a profession. This complicates any efforts to establish standardised notions of career trajectory or progression. One of the participants in this study insists that '*journalism is different. It's a very specific, closely defined thing*'. As artists often feel removed from the reality they are trying to reflect and to change, so for journalists there is often a gap between the romantic, democratic 'vision' of changing the ways in which people see the world and the reality of hitting ceaseless 24/7 deadlines, of churning out news:

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*Autonomy of journalists on the individual or organisational level does not necessarily translate to autonomy on the societal level that is needed for democracy to function (Ornebring, 2010:574).*

In the wider socio-political context, journalism's integrity is under fierce assault and has been for a while. The current post-truth context provides a resonance to the interviews discussed in this paper, which were conducted in 2012 as part of a doctoral research project at a time when journalism faced intense challenges from the collapsing business model of the press and the deplorable newsroom cultures of some tabloids.<sup>3</sup> Over the past decade, a decline in public confidence and trust (Rusbridger, 2018; Kakutani, 2018) alongside a burgeoning citizen journalism (Allan, 2010) driven by digitisation and social media have provided constant themes. The life narrative of any journalist must be placed against the backdrop of seismic change, dwindling public trust and a sense of deep-seated *ennui*.

### The project:

This paper shares findings from interviews with a group of practitioners who transitioned out of their newsroom roles to pioneer an approach to journalism education that moved away from the traditional model of training to adopt a style of teaching focused on engagement and interactivity. The participants all have 'narrative competence' (Gudmundsdottir, 1996), providing rich data and it is hoped that the voices of the two journalists featured here are heard with clarity. Whilst there is an in-depth quality to the interviews, the scope of this paper cannot capture every element, but has focused on the responses, which are central to discovering how journalists narrate their own lives in order to construct their personal sense of a career: 'self - stories are told by a person in the context of a specific set of experiences' (Denzin, 1989: 43). It acknowledges the temporal

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the *News International* 'phone hacking scandal which led to the Leveson Inquiry, a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press chaired by Lord Justice Leveson, which held hearings in 2011/12. The ensuing Leveson Report was published in November 2012 – its key recommendation was the creation of a new press regulator,

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

quality of memory, which shapes and forms the stories that are told. The interview process must always be sympathetic to the vagaries of our powers of recall and to incorporate the importance of time. When writing up the accounts of others it was also important to consider the ethical issues arising from the need for clarity and the crucial question of whose memory is speaking through the text. The act of remembering in a biographical interview 'is a mutual process which requires understanding on both sides' (Thompson, 1988:135 in Roberts, 2002:148). Similarly, as a former journalist and now a journalism educator, I am cognisant of the dangers of friendship narratives and aim to mitigate this through a data driven approach and self-reflexive summary. This is the double hermeneutic, whereby 'we constitute ourselves through real practices' by acknowledging our presence in the process of allowing others' voices to be heard' (Usher, 2000:34). The interviews should speak for themselves as much as possible, so I have sought to illuminate themes emergent from the journalists' individual stories, whilst still positioning 'the self of the storyteller centrally in the narrative that is given' (Denzin, 1989:43) and focusing on 'shareable experience' (Denzin, 1989:45). Crucially, each 'storied self' is linear and focused on personal experience. Even though this paper deals with partial lives, it acknowledges the importance of time and the understanding that 'a life that is studied is the study of a life in time' (Erben, 1998:13). Each interviewee gave informed consent and is anonymised – they are denoted here as **A** and **F**.

**i. The foreign correspondent's story**

*The stories you tell are you. I am my story.*

**A** became a journalist because he thought it was '*exciting, adventurous, and good fun.*' He is not sure that his memory is accurate, or whether

*I'm projecting onto the past attitudes I've acquired subsequently – I think that's the nature of memory – but I think I was excited by public affairs. I think I wanted to live in the public life of my time. I wanted to be connected to big events, and I thought it*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*was exciting, and to be honest I thought it was a bit glamorous as well. That's definitely part of it. And I'm just ... really interested in what was going on in the world, and I want to be connected to it.*

The sense of 'self' and professional self - identity were inextricably linked for him, but this has changed with age and time passing; *'now I've got several lives, one of which is my working life, and several identities'*. He says that he had a life in the countries that he has lived in (as a foreign correspondent) but that he now has a *'much greater sense of distance from what I do for a living than I did for a long time.'*

As a foreign correspondent, he reported from areas of crisis and conflict throughout his career – for him the decision to do so, starting with coverage of the Gulf Crisis of 1990 and subsequent war in 1991 gave him an opportunity to test himself professionally and personally - it was a voyage of self-discovery and one which was necessary in terms of defining himself as a journalist. He asked himself:

*'Why am I doing this?'* And the only answer that I could come up with at the time was because if I don't, I'll never forgive myself. But actually, I think what drove me in that direction was a desire not to show other people what I was made of, if you like, but to find out for myself what I was made of, to see whether I could do it, to test myself, and to see if I could do it...to see if I had the character to withstand the stress of it, and the fear, and ...all of that; but also to see whether I could do it professionally. And when I first went to Baghdad, when I first got that big assignment in 1990, it was the biggest thing I've been asked to do. I was frightened for two reasons. I was frightened because I was an alien in a dangerous part of the world. It was clearly life-threatening to do it. But equally, no less than that, I was frightened because I didn't know whether I'd be up to it, whether I'd be able to do it professionally. I didn't know whether I was good enough, and I had to find out for myself whether I was good enough to do it.

**Memory and self-identity:**

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

Here we see the role of memory in telling his own story – he recalls his reasoning *at the time* but gives what he senses is a more honest appraisal with hindsight and presents a more authentic account of himself. This and his subsequent reporting from Bosnia, gave him a strong sense of personal identity and professional worth:

*Of all the experiences I've had, that period was defining for me in terms of my sense of who I was, and certainly in terms of the way I was perceived at work.*

A working - class background instilled a lack confidence and created the sense that he was 'scared': At the BBC he was surrounded by well-educated people with '*this quality of self-confidence that you don't have when you come from a poor background.*' His experiences of covering conflict, in particular the situation in Baghdad in 1990, helped to form his identity and constituted a '*life changing experience*':

*I came out of that and I felt, I am as good as you are! I am as good as you are! And I started to believe in myself for the first time.*

The profile of a foreign correspondent is, arguably, 'classless' – there is no baggage, and self-identity is fashioned within an alien context. Other foreign correspondents have sensed what another interviewee for this project, called this *heightened sense of self-identity* as a result of reporting from conflict zones (Beaumont, 2009; Di Giovanni, 2011; Keane, 2005). This sense of self and **A**'s experiences of reporting in the field combine in his life as a journalism educator. At the BBC College and in master classes at universities and in other institutions, he has taught 'Writing for the Spoken Word' and he is:

*quite surprised to hear myself even use the word, the term "I teach." Because when I was younger, I was rather contemptuous of people who taught. I thought, you know, those who can, do, those who can't, teach. And if you want to be a journalist, be a journalist.*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

He has found this next phase of his career - teaching *through experience* - the most rewarding thing he does:

*I find it very satisfying. I'll tell you why. I try to teach people about the effective use of English, and I've never been taught **that** myself. And so, I try to teach them through my own experience. For example, the first golden rule I teach them is that if they want to be a good writer, they have to be a good reader.*

He uses experience rather than a skill set (since he had not been taught these skills himself) to teach students the art of writing for broadcast. It is learning 'in action' through experience – in doing so, he is writing a new chapter in his own life narrative.

### **The discipline of self-scrutiny:**

Through experiential teaching, **A** conveys a basic skill of journalism – it is about immersion in reading, the application of experience and the use of memory and recall:

*So, I go back over my own life and try to instil in them what conclusions I've drawn about good and effective writing.*

It is a critical practice, which he admits is driven by pride; '*I wanted to be admired, I wanted my work to be admired.*' The focus of his work has changed over time. Initially, he confesses, he was ambitious and he wanted to be '*admired*' by his bosses, as they were the route to promotion and new challenges, but now in his middle age, he is more reflective and wants to '*put something back*' – this is a common theme amongst the journalism educators that I interviewed: they have lived full and challenging professional lives and want to share their experiences and reflections on their practice with the next generation of journalists at this stage of their career journey:



Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*I really care about what young people think. I really enjoy young people who have listened or have seen something I've done and want to emulate it. That's really, really motivating.*

Despite this sense of pride, he refrains from constantly drawing on his own experiences and trading 'war stories', opting to use '*other people's work*' to illustrate quality, but the core tenets of his message are still drawn from his lived experiences in the field. The principles that he has devised for his students have emerged over time as a result of his own practice.

### **Autobiographical story - telling as the route to self-understanding:**

From the experience of reporting in a conflict zone **A** draws the lessons that '*if you want to say something big, say it in short sentences*' and '*tone is achieved through the structure of the language that you use.*' This means taking the journalist out of the story, even if it is 'eyewitness' reporting, since the removal of the first - person strips away sentiment, '*because sentiment would have diminished the impact*'. If sentiment is a '*driving force*' of the story '*it's quite important to capture and describe the sentiment, but in an unsentimental way*'. He believes that there is more room for sentiment and self in retrospective reporting, for example a *From Our Own Correspondent*<sup>4</sup> piece on BBC Radio 4. As already mentioned, the programme embraces the concept of cathartic writing for foreign correspondents. This experience of recall plays a cathartic role for him too – it allows him to assess the experience of the time through the prism of memory and to reach judgements about his own work. It is also an example of practising what he advises his students to do: interrogate *their* own work. It is a deeply autobiographical process, of putting himself, the storyteller, into the story – this is the essence of autobiographical journalism. The elements of catharsis, evident in the autobiographical writing of other journalists (Gardner, 2006; Keane, 2005; Di Giovanni, 2011) are powerful for **A** since '*the important thing is the emotion recollected and the tranquillity.*' The journalist can make sense of deeply personal emotion

---

<sup>4</sup> *From Our Own Correspondent* is a weekly BBC programme in which journalists working outside of the UK for the corporation share stories and short talks, often more personal in nature than their daily news reporting.

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience  
Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

through the process of retrospective writing, which contains more of the 'self' – it is '*a process of explaining to yourself what is happening, what's going on, and what you've made of it*'. So, there are therapeutic elements too, particularly when dealing with trauma.

It is a completely different experience from eyewitness reporting, but **A** believes that often for journalists cathartic writing is an important route to self-understanding, as are conversations with reporters who have gone through similar experiences: '*That could be cathartic as well because you can hear yourself working out in conversation.*' He thinks this is a '*very useful*' tool for retaining a sense of self and working out one's professional identity, and even future career ambition; for him '*this is a similar much more solitary process of catharsis.*'

These reflections provide illuminating insights to how a journalist might work through personal emotions, the experience of reporting a story in 'real time' which is 'of its time' and the catharsis of reflection through retrospective writing. These are rich areas for the researcher seeking to understand the layers of experience which constitute the essence of an individual journalist's approach to their work, and to their new career roles where passing on deeply personal experience in ways which are useful, accessible, educational and, crucially, credible play a central role in their own life stories.

### **Immersive 'lived' experience:**

For **A**, a keen sense of self-identity was developed during the Balkans conflict of the 1990s, through his experiences in Bosnia, where he lived and worked as a reporter for three years. This sort of immersion presents a different experience to the life of the '*fire-fighter*' - the reporter who flies in to report the story and flies out as soon as it is '*over*'. The lived experiences of this era have shaped him as a journalist and as a person: '*[They] kind of defined me and I loved it and ... whenever I left, I couldn't wait to get back.*' These experiences infuse his world-view: He thought that '*bearing witness would be directly consequential*' and was dismayed to discover that this was rarely the case. But there was *the need to try and make people understand the individual stories, what he describes as 'this*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*visceral need to be understood*' and he thinks that journalists '*answer that need*' through being there and reporting on what they see. The activity of bearing witness highlights the tussle between professional and personal self: the journalist has to get the story out, but the sensitivities of reporting the human stories presented by war affect the personal self:

*And quite often when I've been in that kind of situation, I felt a bit like a vulture, picking over the scraps of other people's misfortune. I felt my livelihood is plundering other people's misery. And it's felt difficult sometimes. Sometimes, I have to walk away from it. But actually, people want a conduit to the outside world. They want their story acknowledged.*

Here, he articulates a tangible sense of unease, whereby the experience of bearing witness contains an uncomfortable notion of 'self'. There is some comfort in the sense that the journalist's stories throw the human condition into sharp focus: **A** quotes Primo Levi's book on Auschwitz, where he claimed that: "*The need to be understood by the world outside is as immediate a need as the need for food and shelter*" (Levi, 2007).

The reporter's role carries with it the burden of responsibility and there is a sense throughout the interview that **A** feels he cannot escape this – both in terms of understanding himself and doing his job. It is this 'self', which also permeates his new role of teaching, with a piercing, lyrical and questioning honesty. Honesty is a word, which he often uses, and he perceives it to be central to his work as a journalist: there is no substitute for bearing witness, despite the uncomfortable sense of intruding on others' grief. His identity is shaped by the suffering that he has witnessed as a reporter in conflict zones around the world: '*I can't imagine what I would be like if I hadn't done it.*'

He feels strongly that being situated in his storytelling, gives it a veracity, which cannot be questioned by '*mythmakers*' or undermined by propaganda. This is crucial in a conflict situation, for example the bombing of the Baghdad shelter where he accompanied the late Marie Colvin, who was reporting for *The Times*, to count the bodies in the morgue in order to counteract the propagandist reports of the Iraqi regime and the Allies:

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*And I was able to say, "Because I saw." It's not eleven hundred like the Iraqis claim.*

*It's not soldiers like the Allies claim. It's women and children, and it's about 400.*

### **The craft of storytelling:**

Journalists, for **A** are craft artists, (Mishler, 1999) and their craft is storytelling, which is instinctive. He describes stories as *'hardwired into our system. Storytelling is like a song or dance.'*

*It's a fundamental way, an almost defining way of expressing yourself, of defining yourself as a human being. The stories you tell are you. I am my story.*

This is central to **A**'s view of his craft and conveys with a direct simplicity how an individual journalist's lived experience or 'story' is defining of 'self': both the stories that he reports as a journalist and the life story that he possesses as his own biographical self. This dualism is powerful: 'self' is always present in the stories that are reported and for the journalism educator, 'self' is always present in the storied experiences which are shared with others, even if these are tailored to audience. As he points out, 18 - 24-year olds studying as trainee journalists are unlikely to grasp the full detail of some of his lived experiences, so he has to 're-tell' them in a focused and targeted way for them to be useful as educational tools. For **A**, the sharing of 'lived experience' and learning from others by watching them represents a sort of apprenticeship, where the master craftsman, the experienced journalist shares his craft of writing and telling stories:

*These are craft skills but they're not a profession. There isn't training ...*

*But you can learn them; you can acquire them; you can serve an apprenticeship in a way, an informal apprenticeship; and most of all, you learn from watching other people, asking yourself, "Why was that?"*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

Now, as an educator, **A** 'leads' his students through this '*informal apprenticeship*' by drawing on his own experiences, using examples - but within a framework defined by his primary role as a journalist. Self-reflexively, he acknowledges that he puts his whole personality into his craft (reporting), which is symbiotic with his biographical self:

*It's the only way I know to do it, which is probably why I had to stop. Because I've found that I can't swing in and swing out very easily.*

He can only cover the story if he is fully immersed within it, and he knows that he has '*never really been able to do it any other way*'. This is different to putting himself into the story or making himself the story – but as the potter's ceramics are an extension of 'self,' so for the journalist the story is an extension of 'self' – there is a great deal of the journalist's biographical self within it. It is different to the job of a '*salesman*', who visits a country to '*sell widgets*' and leaves again – the story, the country, and its people all form part of the journalist's personality because s/he has 'lived' it:

*I believe it's about honesty. To come back to that, it's about honest behaviour and it's kind of about fairness as well; it's about giving a fair account of people.*

### **The biographies of others:**

There is a sense here that the journalist is the guardian of people's biographies, of the '*part of themselves*' that they share with the reporter. Another crucial aspect of the journalist's craft constitutes trying to understand why people act in the way they do; '*It's about what makes people tick, what drives people to be who they are, and to do what they do.*'

For **A**, the journalist enters into a pact, a covenant, with the interviewee and honesty underpins the transaction. Here personal self and professional self, merge and whilst it would be easier to be cool and objective, he is unable to engage in the *transactional* process of sharing and telling someone else's story as a voyeur. His view of journalistic storytelling is that it is an immersive, honest process. It is rigorously authentic:

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*I think you could make an argument that it's much better to be very distanced and very cold about it. You could make a sound argument for that. I don't really know the answer to that, but what I know is that I can't...never really been able to do it any other way.*

Q: So then, your self-identity and your professional identity are the same in so far as the way that you operate? And would you say the way you operate in your daily life is pretty much the way you operate as a journalist?

*Yeah, absolutely.*

**ii. The news producer's story:**

*I provide the canvas and the ink and the paint and they (the reporters and correspondents) do it.*

**A new departure:**

A new chapter in *F's* career as a journalist opened with a one year 'attachment' at the BBC College of Journalism, teaching on its editorial leadership course. She felt compelled to apply for the opportunity after experiencing a huge leap in the expectations placed upon her as a journalist within her workplace. Vaulted from the role of producer into a leadership position without any real experience, she sought independently to learn how to become a better editorial leader, through the experience of teaching others about her own professional life. Her own team, based in the Belfast newsroom, worked as '*journalists not as leaders*' and she wanted this attachment to help her improve herself and her team through sharing her leadership experiences with others. She aimed to learn how to become a '*good*' leader who could take what she learned back to her team - '*I wanted my own team, my senior staff, never to have as big a gap to jump.*' *F* was both student and teacher at the College of Journalism as she felt that she was learning about her own qualities as an editor, whilst facilitating sessions on the leadership course. In joining the teaching team at the College, she hoped to do something for the next generation of journalists, but also, she wanted to find out about herself - professionally and personally - and to ask, '*have I*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*anything to share of my experience?’* This is a key question at the heart of this paper – whether experienced journalists, who have made the career choice to transition into journalism education, feel that there is anything *useful* in their lived experiences that they can pass on to others through recalling, reflecting upon, distilling and articulating their personal stories. This, in turn, imbues them with a sense of self-worth – and of belonging.

### **A life shaped by violence:**

*F*'s life and the experiences that she shares as an educator were shaped by the violence and conflict of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which started in the late 1960s. She was affected personally: *'I was put out of my home when I was young, I had a relative shot'* and professionally: *'Most of my journalistic career has been involved in the reporting of murder, attacks, atrocities.'* Her journalistic focus also had to change as peace came to Northern Ireland in the years after the Good Friday agreement of 1998 and news and current affairs programmes focused increasingly on peacetime stories. This was a shift of emphasis that affected her personally and professionally, in her programme-making:

*As well as dealing with that (peace), actually, as a human being living and experiencing that, also my sons, the agenda for the programme had to change. So, the programme was always filled as I grew up with death, murder, funeral, death, murder and funeral, a bit of politics, death, murder, funeral.*

So, she took with her into this next phase of her career at the College, *'the background of the conflict and the Troubles'* but also a *'growing experience that was certainly about ten years of ordinary stories.'* This particular blend of experiences supported *F* in teaching the key tenets of impartiality at the College of Journalism since you leave personal politics *'with your coat at the door'* in Northern Ireland, as all broadcast journalists should, wherever they work. Whatever the colour of her politics and her sense of self, *F*'s professional identity is that of an impartial broadcast journalist. She was able to place this experience into an educational context and to learn herself from what was *'a really good learning experience'* where she also tried to be a *'sponge'*, soaking up the shared experiences of her students

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

and colleagues to give a wider context and to *'flesh out'* her own sense of professional self. Her students were learning from someone who was, herself, learning. Her time at the college took her on a personal journey, where she was *'sucking it all in and putting it in my back pocket as well.'*

As a result of adopting this 'facilitator' style of teaching **F** developed an understanding of dealing with others as a leader rather than a fellow worker, she learnt about coaching, about *'having those difficult conversations with people'* and about leadership. She says that she finds it difficult to gauge the impact of her teaching, since she was one of a team and displays a humility, which appears to be characteristic, asking herself *'did anybody learn anything from me at all?'*

### **Life-long learning:**

The concept of teaching, using her experience was daunting for **F** and she felt like an outsider to the mainstream of the BBC – in terms of education, background and professional experience. This is a theme which runs through **A's** story as well, but once she had taken control, she found it rewarding: *'you know I enjoyed it, I have to say I really did.'* She reflects on her own professional life through the prism of her experience as a journalism educator, who is listening to and incorporating the stories of other educators within the college into her teaching and her role back in Northern Ireland's newsroom. The experience of working in an educational context, for her, is self-reflexive on different levels. Her new role enabled her to reflect on her profession and her own place within it as she reflected deeply on the point she had reached in her career.

*It made me think about how important journalism is or reminded me ... so, being in the college, where people were so passionate about journalism and the quality and standard of our journalism at the BBC, I felt that had helped me pass that on in a kind of passionate and fun way.*



Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

The word '*passionate*' features consistently in *F*'s story and infuses the tone of all the stories elicited for this study. It is closely aligned to the sub-conscious desire to be credible:

*I've been told that I can be too passionate about things. I don't know whether I'll ever stop being that.*

The journalists interviewed for the wider study (5 in total) were all enthusiastic and passionate about their craft and the ways in which they share their experiences with editorial leaders and trainee journalists on the course at the college. The transitions that they have made in their career 'from newsroom to classroom' constitute a positive move over which they have control, and which afford them, as individuals, moments of catharsis and self-reflection.

#### **The storytellers use their stories:**

For *F*, finding stories to use as examples away from her experiences of the Troubles was also challenging but '*trying to tell stories as a way of sharing information was interesting.*' She always looked for the learning point in the selection of an example. She suggests that storytelling is an important learning tool by referring to Irish folklore:

*In Ireland, the **seanchai**, the storyteller, was a really important part of life of the king's court. They told the story about what was happening to the king. But they told the story of what was happening, you know, in life. There was life and death and happiness and sadness. And so, they told the stories and learned the stories ... they were almost the first journalists in some ways because they were imparting what information they knew from one place to the next. Suppose I see that's what journalism now is, we have to impart what is happening, why it's happened, some context around that, but also what the implication of that is. And you know, it is a bit what's in it for me? And if I can explain or my team can explain a story then somebody can make a decision about it and might change how they were going to*

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*act as a result of it. And I think that's why it's important that I think you learn ... you learn at your parent's knee, the story, you know, **Jack and Jill** and **Cinderella**.*

The story is central to the journalist's craft, so there is an authenticity about using stories to teach core values and skills to journalists, since this is how they impart information on a daily basis. It is their 'stock in trade':

*The Troubles is about stories, it's about how people's lives were affected. When we do our journalism every day, it is how people are affected by something*

For **F**, being a journalist does not start and end with a shift: Being a journalist is integral to self-identity and curiosity is crucially important. She does not see herself as 'a very academic person' but her life as a journalist is a continuum and guided by a curiosity about people:

*We have to remember we're journalists. We get up in the morning and we have to ask questions all day. Even when you're standing and shopping at Tesco's, you know the kids who bag your groceries - I have to say, 'what were you doing before?' Where were you doing it? .... You know, it's just the way it is ... People have done the most interesting things in their lives or have amazing connections in their lives and we never find out if we don't ask or are actually interested in people.*

**F**'s sense of self as a journalist chimes with her sense of self in her newly-established role as an educator - as a facilitator. She does not feel that she is 'naturally a storyteller, even though I know that's what we do.' Drawing on the example of the *seanchai*, she believes that:

*The storytellers are the journalists who appear, the reporters and the correspondents who tell the story, who explain and break down the story, who use beautiful words.*

She sees herself as someone working behind the camera: 'I know I facilitate storytellers'.

The 'wonderful writers' are the storytellers, but **F** uses stories to teach others how to

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

perform her role and the roles of reporters and correspondents. **A** uses his own writing skills and sometimes stories that he has covered to teach the power of good writing to journalism students. Each interviewee for this study adopts a style of teaching, which 'fits' their sense of self, both personally and professionally. **F** articulates her sense of self as a journalist as:

*The person behind the scenes who provides the pen and the pencils and the inks for the storytellers to tell their story - and the paper, if there are pictures, so I provide the canvas and the ink and the paint and they (the reporters and correspondents) do it.*

### **The reality of the workplace:**

In her new role as an educator, she is '*educating as I go along*' but feels that to do this within a newsroom environment, the infrastructure needs to exist to give journalists the confidence to be passionate about teaching others '*on the job*'. Sometimes the constraints and the competitive nature of the workplace – the newsroom environment - can restrict the free flow of ideas and the application of a passionate, risk-taking approach to imparting new approaches to storytelling. So, the dissemination of what she had **learned**, as an educator, was not straightforward when she returned to the workplace. This affected her confidence and has been '*quite traumatic*' as she has faced resistance to change and the new ideas that she was keen to implement. She found the adjustment of returning to a newsroom from the college intensely difficult and states candidly that:

*Coming home, while I knew I would have the adjustments, was actually much more difficult in the end than I anticipated.*

For **F**, regardless of the obstacles presented by the work environment and habit, it is important to consider the audience when seeking to innovate and educate journalists to shift their working practices and she uses the analogy of a garden - '*I do enjoy gardening*' – to depict this transitional period in her life:

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*A garden never just stays the same. Because people say, why can't things stay the same? Why do we have to move this? And I say look, go back and think of the garden. When I move roses aside, something's not working in that particular area and moved in another area. But something gets out and it works. And you get bored looking at the same thing all the time, so you're changing around. And that's what we're in the business of doing. You know, supplying a really wonderful garden for our audience all the time – but you have to move around it, make that happen and make the journey.*

### **Transformative experience:**

The experience of working as a journalism educator – the year away from her newsroom role – was transformative, intense and emotional for **F** and her return to the workplace was life-changing. It affected her deeply, both professionally and personally in the nature of a *cumulative epiphany* (Denzin, 1989) where her emotional reaction to the experience was identity-shaping. She missed the educational environment, she found it challenging to implement all of the new ideas that she had returned with and she was encouraged to reflect in an elemental way about her own career as a journalist. In this way, her story is a narrative of identity. Her sense of self was transformed by the experience of sharing her 'craft skills', her passion for storytelling within the college environment and so her professional identity shifted. It was initially daunting:

*You're basically taking your life in your hands going to a whole new team who are, in my view, some of the top trainers that there will be in journalism.*

But the positive feedback from students and the trainers on her collaborative teaching style and the experience of reflecting on her own practice was life-changing. Her sense of personal self is unchanged; she remains passionate and persistent. So, what is the essence of her 'self' that she brings to her work, as an educator and as a journalist or 'facilitator' of others' stories?

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

*I think people have to be really interested in people [because] it's about people. It's about their emotions – you share their sadness, you share their joy. That's what we do and that's the storytelling of it, you know.*

The potential for being a role model within her career is not so clear - 'it's very hard for me to say whether I'm a role model.' But there is clarity around the personal characteristics, which she would like 'students' and colleagues to identify as elements of self, which are manifested in her professional life – being 'straight' and 'honest':

*I don't promise anything I can't deliver on ... And I think you know, she did her best, I think that's probably as much as you'd want anybody to say. But that you're a good example for somebody, that somebody would say, "she lived with her personal values." And I think that's important. You know, you try to be honest and straight and have fun.*

For this reason, she stresses learning as an essential aspect of this new stage in her career – going back into editorial leadership - and learning from mistakes - is core to **F's** sense of self as an educator and what she wants to instil in others – the concept of 'learning from learners':

*The learning has brought learning to me personally. But learning that you have to change to adapt to the future and to be flexible.*

She believes that she has applied this to the workplace, in terms of technological innovation and working practices, whilst encouraging journalists to open themselves up to learning about new ways of telling stories.

**An emotional response:**

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

F's own story is infused with emotion, it is a human response to the experience of shifting the emphasis of her professional life into an arena where she was learning whilst teaching and learning about teaching (through the act of sharing her experiences as a journalist).

She is painfully honest as she articulates how her experience as an educator was transformative, in Denzin's (1989) terms, it constitutes a 'cumulative epiphany'. Honesty and integrity shine through each chapter of her life story, since her life as a journalist mirrors her life as a human being:

*It's about people. It's about their emotions – you share their sadness, you share their joy. That's what we do and that's the storytelling of it. So that's what I would like to be known as. I don't think I'll ever write the book. But it's just about that.*

### Reflections

*Stories then, like the lives they tell about, are always open-ended, inconclusive and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations*

(Denzin, 1989:81).

In telling their individual stories, **A** and **F** both evaluate the process of recall, deep reflection and the application of their lived experiences within the new career realm of journalism pedagogy as 'cathartic'. **A's** appraisal of how the emotions evoked by retrospective writing as a journalist can be shared as a sometimes confessional, experience - the notion that reporting after the event can contain more of the 'self' - has resonance here. Sharing experiences through the self –reflexive prism of hindsight and the process of distilling them for consumption by an audience (students) can also be cathartic for the journalist working in an educational context. This brings a highly personal and emotional quality to the process of sharing lived experiences – which could be criticised for being narcissistic or overly-emotional (Coward, 2009; Adie, 2002). But for **A**, in these two different stages of his career – as the journalist in the field and as the educator – sharing life stories (both orally and as

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

text) was a cathartic process, which made him feel valued as he was 'giving something back'. For **F**, the deeply emotional process of moving into an educational space as 'learner' in order to return to her workplace (the newsroom) as 'teacher' and leader constituted a '*cumulative epiphany*' (Denzin, 1989). It made her realise, ultimately that the next chapter in her career would focus on teaching, rather than journalism. This decision emanated from the transformative experience of her secondment to the College of Journalism and – within her own professional development - deep reflection transformed experience into learning (Moon et al, 2007; Schon, 1983). For both **A** and **F**, the sharing of their lived experiences as journalists in a new context (education) flirts with the realm of therapy, it is transactional and immersive and highly personalised. Their storied selves provide insights to context and personal motivation: chiming with the conclusion of McIlveen *et al* (2007) that:

*'Whilst the notion of life themes theoretically accounts for the meaningful "why" of career, dialogical self provides a theoretical solution to [the] problem of "how" that meaning is psychologically constructed into themes and stories by a person'.*

As a journalist who moved into education, this research project has also afforded me an opportunity to reflect on the construction of my own career. Whilst the individual stories of **A** and **F** shared here are unique – in listening to them and analysing them, I am able to discern some recognisable, emergent themes;

- the need to be credible and valued within a new context: here, the telling of stories of lived experience as an educational tool also enables the self - reflexive practitioner to assess the credibility and value of their practice (this is evident in **A**'s personal examples from reporting in the Balkans);
- the desire to 'give something back' (through becoming an educator);
- the notion that storytelling has an 'authentic fit' and forms part of the DNA of the journalist, the journalism educator and the human being (the dialogical self);
- the cathartic and therapeutic effects of storytelling as a process to address past events and challenges in an individual life.

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

As journalists telling the stories of others, we can also draw on our own stories – whether as journalists, or as journalists who have transitioned to become educators, coaches, media trainers or consultants – and in doing so, utilise the experiences of others and our own lived experiences to shape our personae in different periods of our lives.

#### References:

**Adie, K.** 2002. *The Kindness of Strangers*. London: Headline

**Allan, S.** 2010. *News Culture*, New York: Open University Press

**Atkinson, R.** 2006. The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry, in Clandinn, J, (ed.) 2006, *Handbook of Narrative inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, California: Sage

**BBC Editorial Guidelines.** 2008. Available at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines>

**Beaumont, P.,** 2009, *The Secret Life of War*, London: Harvill Secker

**Bruner, E.M.** 1986. 'Experience and Its Expressions' in Turner, V.W., and Bruner, E.M., (eds.) *The Anthropology of Experience*, Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press

**Clandinn D.J. and Connelly, F.M.** 1998. Personal Experience Methods, in Denzin N.K., and Lincoln, Y.S., (eds.), 1998, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, California: Sage

**Colvin, M.** 2012. *On The Front Line*, London: Harper Press

**Coward, R.** 2009. Me, Me, Me: The Rise and Rise of Autobiographical Journalism in 'News making: Rules, Routines and Rituals' in Allan, S., (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, London: Routledge

**Denzin, N.K.** 1989. *Interpretive Biography*, California: Sage

**Di Giovanni, J.** 2011. *Ghosts By Daylight*, London: Bloomsbury

**Donsbach, W.,** 2010. Journalists and Their Professional Identities in Allan, S., (ed.) 2010, *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, Abingdon: Routledge

**Eakin, P.J.,** 1999, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

**Erickson, E.H.** 1975. *Life History and the Historical Moment*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company

**From Our Own Correspondent** on BBC News website: Available at:



Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/)

and in Grant, T., (ed.) 2006, *From Our Own Correspondent*, London: Profile

**Gardner, F.** 2006 *Blood and Sand*, London: Bantam

**Gudmundsdottir, S.** 1996. The Teller, The Tale and The One Being Told: The Narrative

Nature of the Research Interview, *Curriculum Inquiry*, **26:3**, 293-306, Ontario: Blackwell

**Kakutani, M.** (2018). *The Death of Truth*. London: William Collins

**Keane, F.** 2005. *All of These People*, London: Harper Collins

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/nov/13/bbc-not-alone-losing-public-trust>

**Levi, P.** 2007. *Survival in Auschwitz*, [www.bnpublishing.com](http://www.bnpublishing.com)

**Marr, A.**, 2013, on *The Andrew Marr Show* BBC 1, March 2013.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22141372>

(Accessed 27.4.2013)

**McAdams, D. P.** 1993. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*,

New York: William Morrow and Company

**McIlveen, P., and Patton, W.** 2007. 'Dialogical Self: author and narrator of career life themes', *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*. **7**: 67-80.

**Mishler, E.G.** 1999. *Storylines, Craftartists' Narratives of Identity*, Cambridge,

Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

**Moon, J., and Thomas, G.**, 2007, The Challenge of Reflective Writing for Media production

Students and Some Proposals to Encourage Better Practice, CEMP research paper,

Bournemouth University.

**Ornebring, H.** 2010. 'Reassessing Journalism as a Profession' in Allan, S., (ed.) *The Routledge*

*Companion to News and Journalism*, Abingdon: Routledge

**Ricoeur, P.** 1980. Narrative Time, *Critical Inquiry*, 'On Narrative', **7:1**: 169-190,

University of Chicago Press

**Roberts, B.** 1998. an auto/biographical account of educational experience in Erben, M., (ed.)

1998, *Biography and Education: A reader*. London: Falmer Press

**Rusbridger, A.** 2018. *Breaking News: The remaking of Journalism and why it Matters Now*

Edinburgh: Canongate

**Schon, D.A.**, 1995, *The Reflective Practitioner*, Surrey: Ashgate

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*

**Taylor, C.** 1989. *Source of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Taylor, C. 1989. *Source of the Self* in Fowler-Watt, K. 2017. 'The Storytellers tell their Stories: using stories of lived experience in journalism education' *Media Education Research Journal* **7 (2)**: 47-64

**Thompson, P.**, 1988, *The Voice of the Past* in Roberts, B., 2002, *Biographical Research*,

Buckingham: Open University Press

**Usher, P.**, 2000, Feminist Approaches to a Situated Ethics in *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*, London: Routledge

Fowler-Watt, K.

The auto/biographical journalist and stories of lived experience

Career Construction Theory and Life Writing - Special Edition of *Life Writing*