

The Journalism we Deserve. Reflections on Historical and Generational Context. In; Breaking News? The Future of UK Journalism. House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee. HL Paper 176. 27 November 2020. Written evidence by Graham Majin. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/1280/html/>

Dr Graham Majin, Lecturer in Documentary Journalism, Bournemouth University—written evidence (FOJ0021)

Profile

Dr Graham Majin has more than 20 years' experience working in TV news as an on-screen reporter, news editor and senior producer – including 14 years at BBC News. He is a lecturer in documentary journalism at Bournemouth University where his research area is how the concept of truth is understood differently by audiences, journalists and academics. His research is inter-disciplinary and examines issues of media literacy, journalistic theory and fake news.

The Journalism we Deserve. Reflections on Historical and Generational Context.

Introduction

01 There is no single, unchanging thing called journalism. Journalism is constantly evolving to reflect the values of the society whose needs it serves. Journalism is constantly in the making. Therefore when we speak of journalism we speak, ambiguously, of one of many possible *journalisms*. 21st century journalism is the product of a process of struggle between two forms of journalism; one created during the 19th century, the other created during the second half of the 20th century. To understand the new, we must first understand the old. Hence this submission is an attempt to place today's journalism, and its discontents, in its historical context and help us see where we are on the historical roadmap.

What is Journalism?

02 We recognise journalism as a form of testimony about real events in the real world. Thus the essence of journalism is its relationship with truth. In philosophical terms, news is defined by its epistemic purpose. Journalism must aspire to tell the truth, or at least we must be persuaded that it does, otherwise it does not qualify as journalism. Fictional storytelling is not journalism. The outward shape of journalism may change, but its core, epistemic purpose cannot. It exists to satisfy the eternal human hunger for information, because all human decision-making and opinion-forming depends on reliable information about the real world.

From Narrative-Led Journalism, to Responsible Journalism.

03 Journalism during the 18th century was, in the words of Dr Johnson^[1], a corrupt and disreputable occupation which produced "many narratives". In this tribal world of narrative-led journalism, facts were only reported if they fitted a newspaper's political agenda. As Johnson put it, news narratives were created by concealing, manipulating and misrepresenting facts, as well as by outright lying, "without a wish for truth or thought of decency". This partisan, biased journalism was subject to state censorship in various forms. Early 19th century newspapers which offended the

government, for example by calling for democratic reform, often found themselves prosecuted for seditious libel, their presses seized and their editors imprisoned.

04 The early 19th century saw the slow and painful birth of participative democracy. Parliamentary reform, the abolition of slavery and other social reforms, all took place alongside the fight for a free press. The Great Reform Bill of 1832 was a watershed which marked the emergence of a new way of thinking.

05 The zeitgeist of this new age was one of inquiry and progress, reasonableness and truth seeking. For convenience we can label this ideology "Victorian Liberalism". Victorian Liberalism pushed back against the aristocratic paternalism and corruption of the past. It sought to restrain the authority and reach of the state, and advance the liberty of the individual. Its ideal was democracy; a society composed of responsible, dutiful, informed citizens each contributing to the public good. It was the age of Mill and Gladstone, an age of common sense, based on a healthy respect for reality. In this world, rules were seen as essential mechanisms to protect one individual from another, and to prevent the encroachment of one person's liberty upon another's. As the philosopher Leonard Hobhouse explained,[\[2\]](#)

"The reign of law is the first step to liberty. A man is not free when he is controlled by other men, but only when he is controlled by principles and rules which all society must obey."

In this practical age, truth was seen in pragmatic terms as a destination which could be approached, but never reached. The way to approach it was via open-minded, evidence-based inquiry, and reasoned debate.

06 To serve this new mood, a new journalism evolved. It despised the narrative-led journalism of earlier days, and set itself the task of reporting facts as honestly as possible. It created a new journalistic epistemology and a new professionalism. New techniques of impartiality and objectivity were developed to restrain the natural human tendency towards bias and tribalism. It was at this moment (the 1830s) that the word "journalist" took on its modern meaning. Henceforth it referred to a professional seeking to report the news truthfully, not a hired hack, spinning tales to reinforce a pre-determined narrative.

The Golden Age of Victorian Liberal Journalism.

07 *The Times* newspaper, under the editorships of Thomas Barnes and John Delane (1817-1877) became emblematic of this novel, responsible journalism. It's self-appointed mission was to supply trustworthy information to inform Britain's newly enfranchised voters.

The Times thundered its political views, but it scrupulously distinguished between fact and opinion, confining the latter to its leader columns. It aspired to impartiality and independence.

Thus did journalism progress to the status of the Fourth Estate, arm in arm with the development of Britain's fledgling democracy. As a later commentator observed, "journalism is usefully understood as another name for democracy".[\[3\]](#) It is for this reason that journalism, during the era of Victorian Liberalism, is often described by historians as having enjoyed its Golden Age.

08 The values of the Golden Age came under strain towards the end of the 19th century due, broadly, to the consequences of mass literacy and a widening of the franchise. The First World War brought a hiatus due to the need for patriotic propaganda. However the end of the war brought hope of a return to the values of

responsible journalism. For example, in 1921 the Guardian editor C.P. Scott famously reminded journalists that their primary role was fact-led journalism. He warned of the dangers of the narrative-led approach which he said "tainted" and imperilled journalism's "soul". Keeping fact and opinion apart was, he said, a sacred duty,^[4]

"Comment is free, but facts are sacred. 'Propaganda', so called, by this means is hateful. The voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard."

Despite such noble sentiments, the inter-war period brought ominous signs that the achievements of the Golden Age were unravelling. The powerful press barons, Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook, were not squeamish about turning their newspapers into "engines of propaganda" in search of "power without responsibility"^[5]. In 1936 the British media self-censored to suppress news of the abdication crisis. Its aim was to promote the myth that royalty lived only according to the highest moral principles. Worse was the media's shameful suppression of news about the cruelty of the Nazi's during the late 1930s. Newspapers including *The Times* conspired to promote the narrative that Hitler's regime was benign, and that it could be pacified by appeasement. The BBC joined in zealously, refusing to allow Winston Churchill to broadcast his contrary point of view.

09 The Second World War brought new levels of media censorship and propaganda. After it was over, Victorian Liberalism, and the journalism which served it, increasingly appeared to be old-fashioned, stuffy and out of date. A new age sought a new journalism. Those with long memories were sceptical, and warned that what appeared to be novel and exciting to late 20th century eyes, was in reality a return to the bad old days of partisan, narrative-led journalism. For example in 1952 the media historian Harold Herd^[6] warned,

"In this age of uncertainty and crumbling faith and moral nihilism – of old political heresies revived in delusive new forms, of evil masquerading as good – the journalist has an urgent task... The price of journalistic liberty, as of all human freedoms, is eternal vigilance."

Boomer Journalism; From Impartiality to Commitment.

10 The baby boomer generation (1940-1955) was raised in unique conditions of post-war affluence. Numerically dominant, their experience of life – and hence their system of values - was vastly different to that of their parents, and to that of the early Victorians. With substantially more wealth and leisure time, the boomer generation privileged youthful goals such as those of self-discovery and the instant gratification of desire. The age of the boomers was one of idealism and utopianism; not what *is*, but what *ought* to be. Boomer ideology was fiercely hostile to the rules and restraints of Victorian Liberalism which they attacked as "bourgeois values", and artificial "social constructs". The boomers intuitively felt their own values to be progressive and correct, and those of the past destructive and obsolete. To the boomers, a better world would spontaneously emerge if the rules and restraints of the past were abolished. The boomers identified along generational lines, forging a strong tribal identity with its own culture, values, music and fashions.

11 From the mid 1970s, boomers began to move into positions of power and authority in the media, and began to create a new journalism to reflect their own values. The values of Victorian Liberal journalism came under a sustained assault. Objectivity, and the strict distinction between fact and opinion, became unfashionable. What excited boomer audiences was committed journalism; journalism intended to make the world a better place. At the same time, the battlefield shifted from print to TV which had become the most influential medium. Therefore, during the late

20th century, BBC News can be regarded as a convenient touchstone for journalism as a whole, in the same way that *The Times* had symbolised the journalism of mid-Victorian Liberalism.

12 The changing mood, and the desire for “committed” journalism, was reflected in Lord Annan’s 1977 *Report on the Future of Broadcasting* which recommended a new TV channel (Channel 4). Annan stressed that “we do not want more of the same” and called for “genuinely new services”. Annan argued that impartiality, “should not preclude committed public affairs programmes”, and said that, “there should be more of them, particularly on the BBC”. Channel 4, he argued, should pioneer the new, committed boomer journalism, and would, “provide increased opportunity for broadcasting committed programmes.” However Annan’s enthusiasm for committed journalism, was tempered by a sense of unease. Annan recognised that the path being proposed, led down a long winding staircase. Journey’s end was the dark cellar of tribal, narrative-led journalism. Thus the champion of committed news also cautioned, *obiter dicta*, that journalists must not allow themselves to become “naive propagandists”, and warned that,^[7]

“Only the self-righteous can believe that that programme is best which is most openly opinionated. There must still be programmes which dispassionately present all sides of an issue”.

Explanation - Censorship in Disguise.

13 Committed journalism does not simply report *what* happened, it also explains *why* it happened. It suggests solutions to problems. The best known example of this approach is the “mission to explain” introduced at the BBC by John (later Lord) Birt. However an unintended consequence of journalism which sets out to explain the vast complexity of world events and human behaviour, is that it is drawn, as if by gravity, towards “official” narratives – i.e. the explanations favoured by the news organisation. Once adopted, these narratives can ossify into accepted orthodoxies and are difficult to change. Thus do journalists lose their “prudent distrust”, and become guardians of official narratives. This is a key difference between the journalism of Victorian Liberalism and boomer journalism. The latter favours facts which fit the narrative, and omits those which oppose it. News becomes a sermon. Inevitably audiences respond by dividing into rival tribes according to whether or not they accept the narrative. Those who reject it, dismiss it as “fake news”. The existence of institutional group narratives at the BBC is, arguably, widespread. As the corporation's Commissioning Editor for Documentaries Richard Klein put it^[8],

"People who work at the BBC think the same and it's not the way the audience thinks. That's not long-term sustainable."

14 We can see the contrast between the two journalisms in the views of the pre-boomer BBC Director General Hugh Greene. Greene argued that journalists should avoid “explaining” the news. According to Greene, the role of journalism in a democracy is reporting facts so that audiences can form their *own* conclusions. Greene^[9] viewed the audience as, “a series of individual minds, each with its own claim to enlightenment”. Thus it followed that the BBC should present the widest possible range of views and opinions in “an atmosphere of healthy scepticism”. Greene characterised committed journalism as propaganda - censorship in disguise. Explanation was therefore a dangerous temptation and he insisted that,

“BBC broadcasters have a duty not to be diverted by arguments in favour of what is, in fact, disguised censorship.”

Boomer Ideology & Truthphobia.

15 While broadcasters moved away from the journalism of Victorian Liberalism, scholars of the boomer generation launched a sustained attack on the theoretical scaffolding which supported it. Using philosophical relativism, and the language of a heavily modified post-Marxism, boomer historians constructed revisionist narratives in which the past was made to conform to the boomer worldview. For example, in one influential textbook, the journalism of the Golden Age was described dismissively as a "discourse" invented to confer "political legitimation" on an "increasingly powerful bourgeoisie".[\[10\]](#)

16 The boomer generation of scholars was scornful of the concept of truth, and professed a fashionable truthphobia. Drawing on the extreme relativism of Michel Foucault and others, truth was understood only in terms of power. Consequently the epistemic function of news (it's essential function) was banished to the margins of intellectual discussion. Whether a news report was true or false was, for boomer scholars, merely a matter of whose "regime of truth" one chose. The challenge for boomer historians of journalism was to write about news while avoiding entirely the concepts of truth and falsehood. This was a difficult enterprise, equivalent to writing a history of clocks while denying the existence of time.

Back to the Future; the Return of Narrative-Led Journalism

17 As the lens of history slowly rotates, and as the boomers fade from the landscape, we begin to see that we are standing at a crossroads. Our journalism is an unhappy mixture of two incompatible journalisms. On the one hand there is boomer journalism, with its committed, tribal, moral tone and its desire to make society a fairer, better place. This journalism is narrative-led. It blurs the distinction between fact and opinion, and implies, inevitably, a slowly narrowing range of permitted narratives. Such journalism is intolerant of dissent to the "official" group narrative. This type of journalism is sympathetic to those who call for the censorship of "hate speech", and the de-platforming of those with whom they disagree. On the other hand, there lingers the old journalism of Victorian Liberalism with its meticulous distinction between fact and opinion, its passion for freedom of speech, reasoned debate and a courageous, almost unlimited tolerance for eccentric opinion. It may be argued that this journalism may have been a rare interlude in the normal, tribal affairs of mankind. A brief pause during which journalists aspired to break free from partisanship.

18 The journalism of the Golden Age evolved to support the liberal democracy of the Victorian era. Boomer journalism evolved to support the expectations of a generation raised in seemingly limitless affluence. So what sort of journalism will be needed for the 2020s and 2030s? The question demands clairvoyance. Unfortunately, while the past is becoming clearer, the future remains opaque. We see only that we live in a world of change and uncertainty. We see the global economy unwinding after the Covid-19 pandemic, markets falling and household wealth contracting. We look uneasily at spiralling debt, and the fragility of our economic and financial systems. We see international balances of power shifting. We sense that the conditions which created the world of the boomers are reversing. Gone is the easy idealism of the 1960s. We feel the approach of a post-affluent age. We need a journalism which is relevant and appropriate to our needs, yet there is no consensus about what our needs are. We sense our tools are broken, and not fit for purpose. Digital technology enables us to retreat into our own journalisms.

Education for Media Literacy & Critical Thinking

19 If the role of the state is to create the conditions under which good journalism can prosper, the way forward must lie in education. We should teach young people how to think critically, and how to make reasoned judgements based on

evidence. Instead of teaching which news brands are most trustworthy, we should teach a prudent distrust of *all* journalism. Journalism should be understood, not as a tribal gospel of truth which the morally good should believe, but rather as the testimony of fallible human beings, who may – or may not – be motivated to tell us the truth. Students should learn that credulity is a vice, and that reasonable incredulity is a virtue. Students should understand the importance of journalism to democracy. They should learn that all this requires time and effort. They should unlearn epistemic laziness. They should learn that facts are not the same things as opinions, and that there are always many conflicting opinions. We should teach, in short, an epistemology of journalism grounded in philosophy and cognitive psychology. We should develop new, imaginative curriculum resources, and we shall have to train the trainers. It will be a prodigious task. It will involve creating something exciting and new out of the best of Victorian Liberalism, and the best of boomer ideology. We can choose to rise to this challenge, or choose not to. Ultimately, the journalism of the future will be the journalism we deserve.

April 2020

6

-
- [1] Johnson, S. (1757) *The London Chronicle*.
 - [2] Hobhouse, L.T. (1911) *Liberalism*. Williams & Norgate 26
 - [3] Carey, J. (1997) *A Critical Reader*. University of Minnesota Press. 332
 - [4] Scott, C.P. (1921) *A Hundred Years*. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainability/cp-scott-centenary-essay>
 - [5] Stanley Baldwin, speech to electors, March 17th 1931.
 - [6] Herd, H. (1952) *The March of Journalism*. George Allen & Unwin. 327
 - [7] Lord Annan (1977) *Report on the Future of Broadcasting*. HMSO. 288
 - [8] BBC Trust. (2007) *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel; Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century*.
 - [9] Greene, H. (1974, 1965) *British Broadcasting*. David & Charles. 183
 - [10] Conboy, M. (2004) *Journalism: A Critical History*. Sage. 109