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## OPENING THE NEWSROOM DOOR

There is a popular view that journalists are persons with the words 'scoop' and 'probe' deeply scarred on their hearts. It is assumed that they are professionally dedicated to making public every kind of scandal, infidelity and corruption, both of private persons and official organisations.

K. Williams, *The English Newspaper* (1977: 7)

This chapter:

- introduces the new journalist to the regional and local newspaper office
- explains the roles and responsibilities of the different people working in the newsroom
- considers the structure and layout of a typical newsroom
- explains the skills a new journalist will need to learn and develop.

Opening the newsroom door for the first time is a daunting experience. Phones are ringing, people are rushing about or sitting, heads down, concentrating on the words on a PC screen, tapping away on keyboards or talking on the phone. There's someone over by the coffee machine and there's someone else rifling through a stack of newspapers. Two people are staring earnestly at a picture on a screen. Who are they all and what do they do?

### THE INDUSTRY

Before we meet the personalities, it is worth saying a little bit about the industry they work for.

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According to the Newspaper Society – the organisation that represents regional and local newspapers – 85 per cent of all adults (that is more than 40 million people) regularly read a regional or local newspaper. As the most widely read medium in the country, the regional and local sector outstrips both magazines and the national press.

The regional and local mainstream press can be divided into newspapers that are paid for and those that are distributed or given away free (sometimes known as free sheets). Papers that are paid for include 19 morning and 72 evening dailies, 21 Sundays and over 500 weeklies. In the free sector, there are over 600 weeklies.

There are 119 newspaper groups in Britain, including the smaller independents, but a spate of takeovers in recent years has concentrated ownership to the extent that 20 publishers account for 85 per cent of all regional press titles in the country. The top four are Trinity Mirror (with more than 250 titles), Newsquest, Northcliffe Newspaper Group and Johnston Press.

The regional press employs over 45,000 people – more than a quarter of whom are editorial staff. Here we highlight some of the people you will come across.

### THE EDITOR

You may have met the editor already at your interview. Make the most of it because you are unlikely to have many dealings with him or her unless and until you manage to find a major scoop or become a more senior journalist.

The editor hires and fires, has final say over editorial decisions and decides the direction the paper will take on particular issues.

He or she may be a hands-on editor – in which case he or she will spend more time in the newsroom than one who isn't – but managerial and commercial matters take up much of the editor's time and he or she will be involved in seemingly endless meetings dealing with the business end of advertising, circulation, promotion and sales penetration.

A good editor needs diplomacy, according to Vic Robbie, a former editor of the Herald series, which includes the *Farnham Herald*:

I used to work on the *Daily Mail* where you tend not to have day-to-day contact with your readers, but here at Farnham – which is a very community minded place – you just step out of the door and you are collared by somebody. If I saw everyone who wanted to talk to the editor I'd never get any work done. With a local weekly paper you are very much part of the community and you have to remember you have a responsibility to that community.

## DEPUTY EDITOR

The deputy editor will have a larger or smaller role depending on the size of the newspaper. He or she might be responsible for either the editorial and newsroom side of the organisation or, as chief sub-editor, the sub-editing side. The deputy editor might also take responsibility for campaigns, special supplements and promotions.

## ASSISTANT EDITOR

On a small, local paper there might be no assistant editor, but, on larger newspapers, there could be as many as two or three, responsible for news and/or features. An assistant editor is also sometimes known as a production editor.

Mike Hill, assistant editor responsible for content at the *Lancashire Evening Post*, says his advice to editorial managers like himself is to keep calm under pressure:

If you are floundering it has a knock-on effect. Don't get too stressed about things. Someone once said to me, 'The paper's never gone out with an empty front page ...' and that's absolutely right. Something will happen or you can take a story from one of the inside pages and turn it into a front-page story. There's always something you can do so don't panic.

## NEWS EDITOR

The general news reporter works for the news desk, which is staffed by a news editor and his or her deputies. The number of deputies will depend on the size of the paper. On a large regional daily, for instance, there could be as many as three or four. There might also be a night news editor whose shift will start in the afternoon and finish later that night. On a small weekly free sheet, however, there might be only one person in charge who acts as news editor, chief reporter and feature writer rolled into one.

The news editor is responsible for the flow of copy; assessing the top stories and discussing with the production editor or chief sub which will make a page lead and which could be held over, bumping up copy flow on a quiet day and making a local issue of a national story.

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The news editor decides which stories are going to be covered and which reporters are going to cover them. He or she will brief reporters, generally suggesting an angle to take, the length of the story that is required and the deadline for the completed copy. If a news editor asks for a couple of paragraphs on a particular story, a reporter would be wasting time writing 750 words – unless, of course, new and important information comes to light that the news editor had not been aware of, in which case, it is the reporter's job to inform him or her and argue the case for making it longer.

The news editor is the first point of contact when a reporter is out on the road, and he or she will also want to see the copy as it is being written up or, certainly, once it has been written.

Janice Barker, deputy news editor of the *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, says that, apart from a sense of humour and endless patience, news editors need a good nose for a story and excellent time management skills:

Although it is important for reporters to bring in or spot new stories, the news editor needs to constantly monitor local, regional and national events, making sure stories are not missed and that local angles or implications are brought out. Matching the right reporter to the right job is also a skill. Some reporters handle a funny, light-hearted job better than a hard news story, which needs tenacity and persistence.

It is the news editor's job to 'create' stories on a quiet news day. Barker says that this involves 'raiding' copy from national news agencies, such as the Press Association (PA) or Reuters, getting local opinions about national events, doing vox pops or carrying out a 'top ten' holiday destination survey or something similar.

She believes that news editors are the pivot for the whole newsroom:

We have to make sure copy is through on time, liase with photographers, keep subs informed of new stories and stories which fall through or get delayed, track down freelancers and decide which jobs to cover. We have to make sure everything is kept to deadlines because, as soon as one passes, another one has to be met. And there is the administration. News editors are the first people to be asked to answer all the questions other departments in the paper cannot deal with, from missing faxes and e-mails to stories from the past, names, contacts, invoices for freelancers and so on.

Media theorists are much exercised by the role of news editors (and reporters and editors too) in creating news. It is a tricky issue. While journalists maintain that decisions about news are based on the need and expectation of their readers to be kept informed about what is happening in their community, theorists emphasise the artificial nature of these decisions.

Walter Gieber, for instance, in a 1956 American study, suggested that what he called newspaper people were primarily task-orientated, motivated not by 'the evaluative nature of news but [by] the pressures of getting copy into the newspaper' (Gieber in Tumber 1999: 219).

Certainly, Mike Hill's earlier comment that an empty front page can be filled with a story from the nether regions of the paper implies that a certain arbitrary quality attaches to the notion of newsworthiness. This certainly gives the suggestion that news values are not absolute but relative. Indeed, Chris Page, editor of the *Selby Times*, admits that news values change at different times of the year:

There will be times during silly seasons – quiet periods, perhaps, when news sources are on holiday – when we may have to dig deeper for hard news and take a more feature style and in-depth approach.

In this context, news, as Gieber suggests, is indeed what 'newspapermen make it' (Gieber in Tumber 1999: 18).

Further, a good news editor must be able to spot talent in a reporter, says Paul Durrant, assistant editor of the *Eastern Daily Press*:

We might have a relatively raw junior who hasn't learned everything about hard news yet but might know something about a certain subject. I am a great believer in horses for courses. I always ask reporters what they know about more than anything else – they might not have learned all the tricks of the trade in hard news terms, but they might know a lot about something else that could come in useful; they still have something to bring to the party.

## SUB-EDITORS

'Subs', as they are known, work under the chief sub-editor and edit the paper. On larger newspapers there will be subs responsible for specific pages, such as news, features or sport, but on smaller papers, a sub would be expected to work on every page. While their job includes designing pages and laying out stories, adding headlines, bylines, standfirsts (text under headline with extra information, often including a byline) and picture captions, one of their most important responsibilities involves checking a reporter's copy once the news editor, features editor or sports editor has seen it. They check for accuracy and will correct spelling mistakes and any other grammatical errors. Subs also check copy for potential libel and contempt. That is not to say a reporter can hand in sloppy work thinking that the sub will automatically correct it for them. As a reporter, you must read and check your own work, make sure spellings are correct,

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ensure that the copy is grammatical and that it reads clearly and well and that it is written in line with the newspaper's own house style.

The sub will ask a reporter to rewrite a story or certainly rejig it if there are too many problems with it. One colleague remembers that at a local newspaper where she was a trainee reporter, the subs would pin on the wall examples of poor writing and sloppy copy: total humiliation for the writer. It is better for a reporter to cultivate a good working relationship with the subs. Rather than treating them as the enemy who are going to pull a story to pieces, think of them as another pair of eyes on a story.

Debbie Hall, assistant publications editor for Hull Daily Mail Publications, says a keen trainee can learn a lot from comparing their original copy with the version that finally appears in the paper: 'One of the worst things reporters do is not get to the point quickly enough. It means I've got to trawl through the whole thing and rewrite it to get the main points in the intro.'

Careless spelling and punctuation are also common failings, says Hall:

They're particular bugbears of mine, especially when people see how their copy has been changed but still keep making the same mistakes – for instance, double spacing after every full point. I remember one reporter who did that. It meant whoever subbed her work had to be continually closing it up. Spellings are the other big problem area. You should always get people's names right and the names of streets, too. There's a Leads Road in Hull that regularly gets written as Leeds Road.

It's the avoidable mistakes that really grate, like changing people's names in copy. I've seen stories where Mr Jackson becomes Mr Johnson halfway through. It's a daft mistake to make and, if it's at the end of a long shift, it's possible a sub might miss it. Alternatively, the reporter might have gone home or gone out on another job so I or another sub have got to try and track down their contact, which might take two or three phone calls and, if you're waiting to finish off a page, it can become unnecessarily time-consuming, not to mention annoying.

### AND THE OTHERS ...

The newsroom will also include a chief reporter, general reporters who work from the main newsroom and, in some cases, district reporters, who either travel out to cover a particular geographical patch within the newspaper's circulation area or operate from sub-offices or from home. In one sense, theirs is a harder job than that of a head office-based reporter as they work largely off-diary and are expected to find their own stories relevant to the patch that they are covering.

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The pace of newsroom life means there is little time for ‘nannying’ new recruits. Rookies are expected to stand on their own two feet almost from day one and, although most of today’s junior reporters will complete a National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) accredited course before securing their first job, the real learning starts in the newsroom – as Mo Kazi, an NCTJ student, discovered during a work experience stint on the *Derby Evening Telegraph*:

I was a little nervous. So many people and computers. One of the first things I did was a vox pop and I have to admit that it was scary approaching people, especially when they didn’t want to cooperate, but I knew I just had to carry on until I got the six quotes that the news editor wanted. Once I got into the groove of things it was not too bad, although, after I had interviewed the first three people, I realised I had forgotten to ask for their addresses, so I had to start all over again. I certainly learnt from that mistake. It was valuable experience. It made me realise that if I’m to make it, I just have to get on with it and forget about being shy.

A good reporter, says Chris Page, editor of the *Selby Times*, is someone who can combine the roles of gathering and writing news:

Some are good at research and interview. Others are good at articulating that information in print, quickly and clearly. Few, initially at least, are good at both. As an editor I want someone who not only exhibits these qualities but someone who is, first and foremost, a people person – someone who can elicit with equal ease information from shop floor to boardroom. Those self-same communication skills also make the best newsroom team player.

## THE SPECIALISTS

The newsrooms of large regional dailies will include a number of specialist reporters whose job it is to concentrate on one particular specialism, such as health, crime, education or sport (sport reporters generally occupy their own area and are overseen by a sports editor).

Then there are feature writers, who write features, background articles, profiles and reviews. The features area might include lifestyle page writers, covering fashion, food and lifestyle.

However, none of this is to say that a general news reporter will not be required at some time to write a feature, a sports story or a review.

The picture desk generally includes a picture editor and a team of photographers. Reporters and photographers are expected to liaise on stories – how else will a photographer know what sort of picture to take to accompany your story if he or she has not spoken to you? And there is nothing to

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stop a reporter from developing an eye for a good picture and making a suggestion to the photographer.

On many stories, a reporter and photographer will work together – something one colleague feels ambivalent about: ‘On the one hand they can be company if you are having to hang about for an interviewee, and they can give you confidence if the story you are working on is in a slightly dodgy area, but, on the other, it can be incredibly frustrating waiting for a photographer to take “just one more” picture of the person you are waiting to interview because “just one more picture” means at least a dozen.’

Worse, though, says another colleague, are the ‘helpful’ photographers, who keep butting in during the interview, asking irrelevant and distracting questions:

They keep going off at a tangent and it’s really difficult to follow the threads of the interview because they’ve asked all sorts of irrelevant things. I don’t mind a photographer chipping in now and again – it makes the interview feel more like a conversation and helps the interviewee relax – but it drives me mad if they forget I’m supposed to be in the driving seat.

There is, to put it bluntly, no easy way of shutting them up either. Most regional newspaper photographers have been working their patch far longer than their usually much younger reporting counterparts. They are often a valuable source of tip-offs and contacts and suggesting that they ‘butt out’ is likely to be counter-productive in the long run. Instead, if you find the photographer leading the interviewee into an unproductive area of questioning, make a (written) note of the next question you want to ask (it will act as a memory prompt) and wait patiently for a natural break in the conversation.

### **AGENCIES AND FREELANCERS**

Freelance journalists supply stories to local, regional and national newspapers and the PA. You will find that many of them go through local and regional newspapers picking out good stories to sell on to the nationals.

A freelancer could be someone working on their own or as part of an agency, which can be anything from a two-man business to national organisations, such as the PA and Reuters.

### **NEWSROOM DIARY**

The newsroom diary is one of the most vital tools in the office. Details will be logged in here of forthcoming events – from a local flower show to court cases – and anniversaries – for instance, the first 12 months in office of the new council or the anniversary of a notorious local murder.

Alongside each entry will be the initials of which reporter is to cover them. It is essential to check the diary on arrival in the office and it is worth checking it at frequent intervals during the day as it will be continually updated by newsdesk staff.

The news editor or a member of the news desk enters dates in the diary from information they have received from press releases, calls and tip-offs.

## DEADLINES

Journalists are ruled by deadlines. Miss one and your story will not make it into the paper.

All newspapers have deadlines – for written copy, finished pages, printing, hitting the streets – but different newspapers have different deadlines. For instance, a local weekly paper, such as the *Farnham Herald*, which is on the streets by Thursday lunchtime (although it carries a Friday dateline), has a final copy deadline as late as between 5 and 6 pm on a Wednesday. Pages are tied up by between 6 and 7 pm and the paper is printed first thing the following day. This does not mean to say that reporters can relax until Wednesday and then have a mad burst of story writing. Instead, they spread the workload, writing earlier in the week for less time-sensitive pages, such as features and sport.

A regional evening newspaper has tighter deadlines throughout each day because first editions are out on the streets by mid-morning. At the *Lancashire Evening Post*, for instance, the first edition hits the stands at 11.30 am, so reporters writing for the early edition have a copy deadline of 9.30 am. For the two later editions, copy deadlines are 10.30 am and 11.30 am. On a regional evening newspaper, some pages, such as features, will have been worked on the previous day or overnight, but the front page, main news pages and some sports pages will need to be filled on the day.

A regional daily might have less concentration on absolute deadlines and more on page scheduling. At the *Eastern Daily Press*, the back dozen pages must be finished by lunchtime or just after, so Paul Durrant will tell his reporters to have stories finished by then. Deadlines for stories for the front end of the newspaper are between 5 and 7 pm, while breaking stories will be expected between 9 and 11 pm.

The first edition (of five) of the *Eastern Daily Press* goes at 10.40 pm and the final edition at 1.45 am – although this is a moveable feast depending on the quality of any late-breaking story and the size of the paper.

## CONFERENCES

Every newspaper will have news conferences and these will be greater or smaller events depending on the type and size of the newspaper and the

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number of journalists attending the meeting. At the weekly *Farnham Herald*, a former editor Vic Robbie holds a news conference as soon as the current paper has gone off to the printers on a Thursday to discuss the following week's paper with the chief reporter and some staff reporters. He holds another news conference the following Monday to see how stories are developing and a further conference on the Wednesday morning to check that everything is going to plan and to consider late bids for the main news pages.

By contrast, a regional daily will have more than one conference each day. The first one will be at around 10 am and might include just the news editor, sports editor, features editor, business and picture editor. A later conference, at between 2 and 3 pm, will be more formal and include the editor, departmental heads and the sports desk. A further conference will be held between 5 and 6 pm, with the same people checking that what was said at the earlier afternoon conference was still current. This conference is more of a confirmation and handover to the night news editor and the night editor, but will include discussion on what is going on the front page and what the main headlines are.

One of the first things editor Terry Manners did on joining the *Western Daily Press* was to bring forward all deadlines. Former associate editor Peter O'Reilly (now editor of the *Bristol Observer*) says that the old concept of 'news' is now almost dead in the water as TV, radio and the Internet are breaking news stories every minute of the day: 'So holding the whole newspaper back for breaking news is an anachronism because it is almost 12 hours later when you come out on the street.'

The *Western Daily Press* newsdesk starts at 7 am and the first deadline is to have all the various news lists in time for the first conference at 11 am. By 12.15 pm, the first stories are going to page. As O'Reilly says:

From then on it is a case of ensuring a smooth flow of copy for subs who build up the pages during the afternoon. The main deadline of the day is 6 pm by which time the editor has designed Page 1 and the final shape of the newspaper is known. The day newsdesk then hands over to the night newsdesk and the new team takes the paper through until midnight, during which period/any changes can be made based on our four editions going at various times. Copy deadline from the newsdesk to subs for the first edition is 9.30 pm and then each half hour through to the City Final.

### CALLS

'Doing the calls' is an important task for any reporter. It means calling all the local emergency services to check if anything is happening. With

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fast, digital telephone dialling and, in many cases, automated prerecorded messages at the other end, it is a straightforward job, although it should be stressed that most good reporters would prefer to speak to the police direct than listen to a voice bank.

If you call the police phone line and pick up a prerecorded message about a particular incident, but there is not enough information given, you must call the police press office for further details.

Thankfully there are still areas where newspaper reporters will contact the local police, fire and ambulance stations personally – either by phone or in person.

Whichever method is used, a reporter ‘doing the calls’ should make a friend of the services they contact and listen carefully to what is said. Odd throwaway lines often produce good stories, too.

## SHIFTS

If you want to work 9 to 5, then perhaps being a journalist is not for you. Working on a newspaper involves working shifts and long, odd and late hours.

As first editions of regional evening newspapers hit the news-stands by mid-morning, reporters must start work between 7 and 8 am, working until somewhere between 3.30 and 4.30 pm.

The majority of staff on a regional daily will work from about 10 am to between 6 and 7 pm, but an early reporter might be expected to start work at 8.30 am, and late reporters at 2 pm and perhaps 6 pm, working later into the evening and night.

In addition, don’t forget, that many of the meetings and events a reporter is expected to cover are held in the evenings and at weekends, such as council meetings, community, sports and arts events. A colleague recalls the many times she has arrived home after a day’s work and settled down with a meal, only to find the phone ringing with an urgent request from the newsdesk to chase a late-breaking story.

For Mark Bradley, editor at the *Wakefield Express*, the unpredictable nature of the newsroom day is part of its charm: ‘I think that’s one of the best things about being a journalist – having the freedom to learn and experience new things and the opportunity to create something readers want to read.’

David Todd, assistant editor at the *Sheffield Star*, agrees. ‘In some ways it is a very unstructured sort of job. There’s a lot of variety and you’re not stuck in a 9 to 5 routine.’

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### USING THE CUTTINGS SERVICE

Most newsrooms now store back copies of newspapers and stories electronically and they can be accessed by journalists from their PCs. (Cuttings got their name from the fact that they were literally that: stories cut from newspapers, filed in envelopes under appropriate reference headings.)

Today's digital system is generally operated by a librarian or IT specialist. Although few modern newsrooms now have a library as such, there should be dictionaries and reference books available such as *Who's Who* and *Crockford's Clerical Directory*, encyclopaedias and atlases.

A word of warning, though: although the database is an important source of information, journalists need to be aware of the importance of evaluating physical sources as carefully as they would human ones. This particularly applies to cuttings from other publications. As Lynette Sheridan Burns (2000: 96) observes, 'A journalist conducting an interview is always aware that a news source may be actively manipulating the information presented. However, a journalist using another journalist's published work may be accepting at face value that the first journalist got it right.'

It is important to apply the same rigorous critical criteria to every source of information. In the case of a cutting, for instance, has the original writer got the facts right? For whom are they writing and what is the purpose of the piece – entertainment, education or information? The answers to both these questions will affect the tone and slant as well as the selection of information. Put simply, you do not know what the original writer has excluded that might be pertinent to your purposes.

Be particularly sceptical about the Internet as a source of information. Yes, it is a useful tool and can provide valuable background information, but, again, reporters need to ask who posted this information and why? Remember, the Internet is largely unregulated and almost anyone can post almost anything they like, which means it can be difficult to verify essential facts.

### AND ELSEWHERE ...

Elsewhere within the newspaper building you will find advertising sales staff, responsible for display and classified ads. Many reporters will quietly – and reluctantly – admit that a newspaper would struggle without the revenue generated by advertising, but it does not make it any easier when stories are cut because a quarter page ad has been placed at the last minute. However, it does not do any harm to keep in contact with the

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advertising department and certainly to check the small ads in the newspaper when it comes out as many a story has been buried in the 'for sale' and 'wanted' sections. Checking the births, deaths and marriages section for possible stories is essential, too.

Promotions and marketing are departments a reporter will come into contact with now and then, especially when competitions are being run in the newspaper and it is the reporter's job to interview the winner.

Don't forget the front counter staff. These are the people in the front line when members of the public – often those all-important readers – visit the newspaper to place an ad, pay a bill or speak to a reporter.

### Exercise

Having read this chapter, make a list of what you consider to be the essential qualities for a good journalist.

(Answers are given at the end of the book.)