1

Not Bowling Alone

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not done yet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The questioner doesn't look impressed.

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Why did you do that?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

More Than a Business

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

3
The New World

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

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

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

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

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

As if.

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

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

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

I bought the drinks and listened.

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We wrote it down.

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

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

It was heady stuff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We wrote it all down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reach before revenue.

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

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

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

★

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4
Editor

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

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

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

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

Murdoch, had launched a prolonged price war that was playing havoc with the economics of publishing. His pockets were so deep he could afford to slash the price of the *Times* almost indefinitely – especially if it forced others out of business.

Reach before revenue – as it wasn't known then.

The newest kid on the block, the *Independent*, was suffering the most. To their eyes, Murdoch was behaving in a predatory way. We calculated the *Independent* titles were losing around £42 million (nearly £80 million in today's money). Murdoch's *Times*, by contrast, had seen its sales rocket 80 per cent by cutting its cover prices to below what it cost to print and distribute. The circulation gains had come at a cost – about £38 million in lost sales revenue. But Murdoch's TV business, BSkyB, was making booming profits and the *Sun* continued to throw off huge amounts of cash. He could be patient.

The *Telegraph* had been hit hard – losing £45 million in circulation revenues through cutting the cover price by 18 pence. The end of the price war left it slowly clawing back lost momentum, but it was still £23 million adrift of where it had been the previous year. Murdoch – as so often – had done something bold and aggressive. Good for him, not so good for the rest of us. Everyone was tightening their belts in different ways. The *Independent* effectively gave up on Scotland. The *Guardian* saved a million a year in newsprint costs by shaving half an inch off the width of the paper.

The *Guardian*, by not getting into the price war, had 'saved' around £37 million it would otherwise have lost. But its circulation had been dented by about 10,000 readers a day. Moreover, the average age of the *Guardian* reader was 43 – something that pre-occupied us rather a lot. We were in danger of having a readership too old for the job advertisements we carried.

Though the *Guardian* itself was profitable, the newspaper division was losing nearly £12 million (north of £21 million today). The losses were mainly due to the sister Sunday title, the *Observer*, which the Scott Trust had purchased as a defensive move (against the *Independent*) in 1993. The Sunday title had a distinguished history, but was haemorrhaging cash: £11 million losses.

Everything we had seen in America had to be put on hold for a while. The commercial side of the business never stopped reminding us that only 3 per cent of households owned a PC and a modem.

★

But the digital germ was there. My love of gadgets had not extended to understanding how computers actually worked, so I commissioned a colleague to write a report telling me, in language I could understand, how our computers measured up against what the future would demand. The Atex system we had installed in 1987 gave everyone a dumb terminal on their desk – little more than a basic word processor. It couldn't connect to the internet, though there was a rudimentary internal messaging system. There was no word count or spellchecker and storage space was limited. It could not be used with floppy disks or CD-ROMs. Within eight years of purchase it was already a dinosaur.

There was one internet connection in the newsroom, though most reporters were unaware of it. It was rumoured that downstairs a bloke called Paul in IT had a Mac connected to the internet through a dial-up modem. Otherwise we were sealed off from the outside world.

Some of these journalist geeks began to invent Heath Robinson solutions to make the inadequate kit in Farringdon Road to do the things we wanted in order to produce a technology website online. Tom Standage – he later became deputy editor of the *Economist*, but then was a freelance tech writer – wrote some scripts to take articles out of Atex and format them into HTML so they could be moved onto the modest Mac web server – our first content management system, if you like. If too many people wanted to read this tech system at once the system crashed. So Standage and the site's editor, Azeem Azhar, would take it in turns sitting in the server room in the basement of the building rebooting the machines by hand – unplugging them and physically moving the internet cables from one machine to another.

What would the future look like? We imagined personalised editions, even if we had not the faintest clue how to produce them. We guessed that readers might print off copies of the *Guardian* in their homes – and

even toyed with the idea of buying every reader a printer. There were glimmers of financial hope. Our readers were spending £56 million a year buying the *Guardian* but we retained none of it: the money went on paper and distribution. In the back of our minds we ran calculations about how the economics of newspapers would change if we could save ourselves the £56 million a year 'old world' cost.

★

It would be nice to claim that I had seen the future and would urgently toil night and day to make it happen. But an editor's life isn't like that, as I was discovering. For one thing, we were never out of court.

The English defamation law in the late 1990s had not developed from its eighteenth-century roots in seditious libel as much as one might imagine. Britain had no first amendment enshrining the importance, never mind the supremacy, of free speech. If someone rich or powerful sued you, a) the onus was on you to prove the facts and b) you had to be prepared to risk very large sums of money – often, millions of pounds – in the defence of your reporting. As a country we paid lip service to Milton, Hazlitt, Wilkes, Junius, Delane, Barnes, C.P. Scott and others who – over three centuries – had helped the press gain its comparative freedom. But, in reiterating the importance of a free press, people usually manage to insinuate a qualifier. As in, 'I stand second to none in my belief in the Freedom of the Press, but . . .'

Libel confrontations were a spectator sport. They ended up as pitched gladiatorial battles in the gothic revival splendour of the Royal Courts of Justice at one end of Fleet Street. Each side would be represented by ranks of lawyers. The press benches would be packed. These were fights to the reputational death.

I knew little about media law at the time beyond what I had studied at Harlow Technical College as a cub reporter. In 1995 the *Guardian* did not employ a single in-house lawyer: complaints were handled by a retired foreign editor, and farmed out to external solicitors if they became unwieldy.

So serious investigative journalism in London – the so-called 'libel capital of the world' – was never easy. For an editor, these confrontations

took up vast amounts of time and nervous energy. I inherited what was to turn into a marathon case over allegations that Neil Hamilton, the MP for Tatton, together with another MP, Tim Smith, had accepted cash from the owner of Harrods department store, Mohamed Al-Fayed, in return for asking questions in the House of Commons. Smith didn't contest the charges and eventually left politics. Hamilton claimed it was all lies and – together with a prominent political lobbyist, Ian Greer – launched a protracted libel suit against the paper.

There was an obstacle: parliamentary privilege prevented MPs from suing. But Hamilton succeeded in changing the British constitution, amending the 1688 Bill of Rights in order to be free to fight his action. There was a scarcely concealed fury among many MPs that a newspaper should vigorously attack corruption in parliament – just as they vented their wrath on the *Sunday Times* (and, later, the *Daily Telegraph*) for their own work in the same area.

In September 1996 – on the eve of the High Court hearing which could have cost the *Guardian* several million pounds – the Hamilton/Greer case collapsed with nine minutes to spare. 'A Liar and a Cheat' was our blunt front-page headline the following morning. There followed another five years of inquiries, committees, further libel actions (thankfully, not directly against the *Guardian*) and appeals. At one stage we were almost certainly in contempt of parliament, for publishing an embargoed copy of the official report into the allegations of parliamentary sleaze we had uncovered.

★

The Hamilton action coincided with another marathon successful defence of a case brought by five police officers based at Stoke Newington police station in North London, who were caught up in a corruption inquiry and could have been awarded £125,000 each if they had won.[1] The point was this: robust, inquiring journalism was time consuming, difficult and expensive. It was knotty, hard and often exhausting to do; and usually laborious, labyrinthine and prohibitively costly to defend. A single journalist on their own could be picked off and silenced. A journalist doing

brave work needed to know their organisation would defend their reporting. In the absence of that defence, journalism meant nothing. The institutional strength of the media was all.

The next gargantuan battle – with the Cabinet minister and Conservative MP Jonathan Aitken – was hardly typical. But within three months of becoming editor I was plunged into yet another drawn-out gladiatorial battle over a series of articles questioning the minister's involvement with assorted figures, including arms dealers, in the Middle East. There were unanswered questions about who had paid his hotel bill when staying at the Ritz hotel in Paris while a government minister. Was it the Saudi businessmen who were also staying there or was it, as Aitken claimed, his wife?

We had taken up this questioning where my predecessor, Peter Preston, had left off. One day in April 1995 a colleague rushed into my office and told me to switch on the television. There was Aitken broadcasting live to the nation: 'If it now falls to me to start a fight to cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism in our country with the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of traditional British fair play, so be it.'

He was going to sue us – and, in an act of supreme bravado, had announced the fact live on television to the nation. I experienced a sensation that had previously just been a figure of speech: my stomach turned over. This was going to be an unforgivingly public fight. Alongside us in the dock would be Granada TV, who had made a parallel programme, *Jonathan of Arabia*. They were insured for costs. We weren't.

We had – as in previous trials – the solicitor Geraldine Proudler and the QC George Carman running our case. Carman – a diminutive, chain-smoking, by then semi-alcoholic in his late 60s – was perhaps the most famous barrister in Britain, with a reputation for pulling legal rabbits out of the hat at the last minute.[2] We were going to need one. The requirement that a defendant has to prove the truth of everything they have written (the opposite of the law in most parts of the world)[3] meant the onus was on us to determine who had been where, when; and who had paid what.

That was only possible by exhaustive and expensive disclosure of Aitken's financial records, which was never going to be easy. In the run-up to the

trial Aitken's supporters in the media anticipated with lip-smacking relish the impending humbling of the *Guardian*. Political loyalties – with some notable exceptions – trumped journalistic solidarity.[4] At this point Aitken was still seen as a future prime minister – handsome, charming, intelligent and well-connected. His £8 million,[5] six-bedroomed house at 8 Lord North Street – barely five minutes' walk from the House of Commons – had a private ballroom and was the perfect venue for political soirées and intrigues. His only serious mistake to date had supposedly been to break the heart of Margaret Thatcher's daughter – a romantic crime for which he had to serve considerable time in the political wilderness.

A newspaper article, once it ends up as an exhibit in a High Court action, becomes cadaver for repeated dissection. Every sentence – every word – is excised and held up to the light. Was it precisely right? What did it mean? Was it balanced by other words or sentences? By this stage it is useless for the journalist to argue what they intended by their words. A judge will decide the meaning. You may end up having to defend a judge's decision about what a sentence meant, rather than what you actually meant.

The case was multi-pronged. On some prongs, we knew we were right but would struggle to prove it. Sources will sometimes tell you things they know to be true, but would run a mile rather than appear as a witness on oath in court in the full glare of the world's press. On some allegations we knew we were right, but – without full access to the movements and financial records of Aitken and his family – we lacked the killer proof. With other prongs we could defend our meaning of our words, but not a judge's view of what he thought we meant to say.

Aitken's subsequent autobiography showed that he, too, had internal turmoil about the ordeal ahead. But, as he observed our exhaustive and expensive attempts at discovery of paperwork, he shrewdly, if recklessly, deduced that we were far from home and dry.

About a month before we were due to lock horns in the High Court I tried a last-ditch effort at resolving the case through Aitken's friend, the advertising magnate Maurice Saatchi, who duly suggested a lunch with Aitken at Wilton's, an old-world fish restaurant near Piccadilly. Saatchi was optimistic he could broker a deal that would save face all round. I

turned up at the agreed time: Aitken didn't. He was out campaigning for the impending general election and obviously felt sufficiently confident he was going to trounce us.

The trial paperwork was mounting up. Aitken's witness statement alone ran to 280 pages. He had 80 witness statements to bolster his case: we had 70. Between them, they ran to 1,800 pages. On top of that there were a further 1,450 documents that might be needed during the course of the High Court hearing. Over the months the 255 pages of pleadings were (in legal jargon) amended, re-amended, re-re-amended and even re-re-re-amended. Every amendment took time. Time was money, and this case was already becoming eye-wateringly expensive for whoever lost.

Every hour I spent locked away with lawyers was an hour away from learning the ropes of editing; or from thinking about the digital future; or from planning the *Guardian* I wanted to shape.

Aitken's QC, Charles Gray, secured a trial without a jury. This was a blow. In the police federation case, the common sense of 12 fellow citizens had saved us from defeat. Trial by jury was the norm for libel actions, and we'd hoped that the Aitken case would be heard by one, too.

But our fate now rested in the hands of Sir Oliver Popplewell, a 70-year-old patrician figure whose own attitude to journalists was perhaps betrayed by his memoirs, which appeared to dismiss them as 'scribblers'. Doubtless, Popplewell would have put his feelings to one side but one reason we had chosen Carman was because he was a supreme jury advocate. His down-to-earth mix of bluntness and twinkly charm might not be so effective in a trial by a judge alone.

Two days before the case started Proudler had suggested a mission so apparently desperate I was at first disinclined to take it seriously. She suggested sending a reporter to Switzerland to see if they could obtain the relevant hotel records to show the whereabouts of Lolicia Aitken at the time the Ritz hotel bill in Paris had been settled. I had little faith that a reporter would be able to gain access to individual client records, but eventually agreed to send Owen Bowcott, a reliable and experienced journalist, on the trail.

The trial opened to a packed court 10 on 4 June 1997 – more than two years after the action had been launched. Gray told the court how

the *Guardian* had 'butchered' Aitken's personal, political and professional reputation. In addition to claiming Aitken had lied about who had paid the Ritz bill, he listed the other prongs of the case: we'd said that he was in the pockets of the Saudi royal family; had been dabbling in the arms trade; and had been pimping for prostitutes to entertain rich Arabs on their visits to the UK.

There followed eight days of Aitken in the witness box. I popped in from time to time to watch him, my heart sinking as (it seemed to me and others in court) he established an easy-going rapport with Popplewell. The judge later wrote that he found Aitken a 'very convincing witness' even though he had simultaneously seen through his lies. He concealed his scepticism about Aitken's story well, perhaps because the plaintiff was a consummate master of detail. He was understated, but confident. He had an attractive self-deprecatory wit. He told convincingly of his 'pole-axing' pain and sleepless nights at reading some of the *Guardian* allegations – the equivalent, he said, of a heart attack. The coverage, he said, had had a devastating impact on his wife, Lolicia, and their three children. Carman later said he was the best-prepared witness he had ever encountered in court.

Carman had Aitken on the stand for five days of cross-examination. Aitken was evasive about the precise details of how or when his wife (rather than the Saudis) had paid his hotel bill in Paris ('I can't even now grip it – exactly who did what where – I wasn't there') but Carman struggled to lay a knock-out blow. The onus was on us to demonstrate exactly what had happened. All we knew was what Aitken *said* had happened: that his wife had been staying at the Hotel Bristol in Villars, Switzerland, before travelling to Paris on the Sunday morning, whereupon she had paid the Ritz bill in cash.

Aitken's story felt impossible. Everything about the supposed Ritz payment pointed to the fact that he was lying, but we still lacked the documentary evidence to prove it. From Aitken's point of view the case was going very nicely indeed. He and Popplewell were both cricket lovers, and Aitken would later deploy the game's imagery, saying: 'I was on a good wicket, finding myself largely untroubled by Carman's bowling.' He heard distant trumpets of victory.

In the course of one slightly gloomy meeting in Carman's chambers off Gray's Inn Road to discuss the fact that we had been forced to withdraw part of our pleas on grounds of 'meaning', we learned that Granada TV's insurers were pulling the plug. If the TV executives didn't settle now, they would refuse to be liable for any subsequent costs. The TV executives themselves wanted to hang in.

All eyes were on me: would the *Guardian* also fold?

The answer was no. To have said otherwise would have been a terrible betrayal of the reporting that had gone into this story. The journalism had, we felt, been overwhelmingly right, even if we were struggling to defend every single sentence in court under the arcane procedures of English libel cases. I knew I had the backing of our managing director, Caroline Marland, and of the Scott Trust under Hugo Young. But we had to prepare for the possibility that this trial could end in expensive disaster. Unless, unless . . .

. . . unless Carman could, for one last time in his long career, produce a legal rabbit out of the hat. The only chance now was a forlorn one – Bowcott's mission impossible. And, yet, with that doomed adventure, there was a twist. Bowcott had arrived at the Hotel Bristol and – what were the chances? – found it had recently gone into receivership. He was granted permission to descend into the deserted hotel's basement to sleuth his way through thousands of shoeboxes containing the old records. And . . . he eventually found something that could conceivably look like a rabbit – Lolicia Aitken's reservation. It meant little to him so he faxed the paperwork back to Proudler in London.

Proudler began her own forensic examination of what these newly acquired records showed. They seemed to suggest that Lolicia – at the very time when Aitken had said she was having a bath in their room in Paris – had in fact been tucking into a breakfast of cornflakes and apple juice 570 kilometres away in Villars. Proudler was even more interested to see that Lolicia had settled her Bristol bill with an American Express card that had never been disclosed to the defence in the libel trial. Proudler began an investigative journey of her own, demanding all the relevant financial statements from Aitken's solicitors. We were not to get sight of them until 12 June, more than a week into the hearing.

From those records – car rental, airline tickets, etc. – Proudler was able painstakingly to piece together Lolicia's movements. It took time. British Airways' own microfilm archive was held in a warehouse near Heathrow. The airline estimated it could take more than a month to provide the clinching evidence. Proudler offered them help. The detective trail was moving agonisingly slowly.

Back in court, Aitken was by now so confident of success he played one last daring card. Thursday 19 June was so-called 'Ladies' Day' at Ascot races – the day punters dress up to the nines to watch the Gold Cup. In a break in court proceedings the previous day Aitken's solicitor, Richard Sykes, tipped off the press that it would also be Ladies' Day in court. Aitken was putting Lolicia and his 17-year-old daughter, Victoria, into the witness box to confirm his story once and for all.

Victoria, then studying for her A levels in Switzerland, had signed a witness statement supporting her father's version of events with an entirely fabricated story he had drafted for her. Aitken later described this as his 'worst and most shameful mistake' but, as he typed out the document of lies, his only thought was: 'That will do nicely.' This, surely, would destroy our case and leave his path clear for re-entry into politics . . . and maybe, one day, Downing Street. The humiliation of the *Guardian* would be complete. My editorship could have been a very short one.

The two women were saved from having to perjure themselves in court.

Shortly before adjournment on 18 June, Carman produced his rabbit. And what an extraordinary rabbit it was. I sat at the back of the court, heart racing, as our QC handed the judge a sworn witness statement from a British Airways investigator, Wendy Harris, showing that Lolicia had never been anywhere near Paris on the relevant dates. She had flown in and out of Geneva. The entire story had therefore been invented by Aitken. Even I (who knew in my heart that his story couldn't possibly be true) found it barely credible that he would have risked so much – his career, his marriage, his home, his freedom – on such a bare-faced lie.

Popplewell took a moment to absorb the significance of the documents before handing them to Aitken's QC suggesting, in mild but deadly legal shorthand, that he might wish to consider his position

overnight.[6] I watched Aitken's features as the realisation sunk in that the case was lost and his life ruined. But his face was a testament to a privileged upbringing of masks, concealment and reserve – the same semi-amused insouciant smile on his lips. In reality, he later admitted, his head was pounding, his confidence was 'exploding into tiny pieces like flying shrapnel'.[7] He had, as he put it, 'been caught red-handed' and in that moment of disaster knew he had lost his whole world. He had unsheathed the 'simple sword of truth' only to be impaled upon it.

For Carman, it was the most sensational ending to any trial in his 44 years at the Bar. In Popplewell's judgement, it had been one of the bitterest and most enthralling libel actions ever heard in an English court.

We adjourned to Proudler's office for an overnight negotiation of the terms of the settlement. In the middle of the evening the Press Association published a brief story announcing that Aitken and his wife had separated.

Word leaked out that, in place of Ladies' Day, there would be surrender in Court 10. Both inside and outside the gothic cathedral of justice there were jostling throngs of reporters and camera crews. Aitken was nowhere to be seen: he had donned a Washington Redskins baseball cap and slipped out of the country before dawn – flying to New York via Paris in an attempt to avoid the press.

The hearing was brief, almost anti-climactic. Popplewell – shocked by Aitken's behaviour, if not (he said in his memoirs) surprised – took the rest of the day off at Lord's cricket ground, discussing the case with the former prime minister John Major. Peter Preston and I emerged blinking into a wall of flashbulbs to pronounce on the verdict. Barely two years earlier I would have been on the other side of the cameras, notebook in hand. I had unwittingly, and to some extent unwillingly, become a public figure.

The emotions were feverish on all sides. There was, for us, relief, exhaustion, exhilaration: for Aitken, hollow emptiness and remorse. He knew he now faced the wreck of a marriage and career as well as jail for perjury and probable bankruptcy,[8] with costs nudging £2 million.

Win, lose or draw, there was nothing remotely enjoyable about fighting libel actions. Ben Bradlee, editor of the *Washington Post* at the time of Watergate, said he would rather be publicly whipped than lose one.

He added, of one battle fought on behalf of two reporters, that if he'd known in advance what would be involved: 'I would have told them both to go piss up a rope.' He wouldn't, of course.

We drew some criticism for reporting Aitken's perjury to the Attorney General, though the judge would almost certainly have been bound to do so himself. For us, it was a matter of principle that libel shouldn't be seen as some sort of high-stakes gamble. I didn't rejoice at Aitken's subsequent downfall, but the defence of a free press did require the law to defend the truth and punish lies. I was unable to shrug the past two years of slog and anxiety off and behave as if it had all been a game.

Aitken subsequently served six months of an 18-month prison sentence, and was released in January 2000. The following year another prominent Conservative politician, (Lord) Jeffrey Archer, was jailed for four years for an even more egregious act of perjury in successfully suing the *Daily Star* in 1987.

The two cases signalled that libel cases had extremely serious consequences. Together, they were the high-water mark of defamation. The number of high-profile contested cases fell off over the next decade and – after some brilliant lobbying by human rights groups and lawyers – the law was eventually reformed.

★

Aitken found God, or God found him. His book, *Pride and Perjury*, is the story of a religious journey as well as a public downfall. In 2005 he was invited to talk at the Hay Festival, a jamboree of books and ideas in a little town on the Welsh borders, then sponsored by the *Guardian*. By mischievous design or accident he had been booked to stay in the same bed and breakfast as me, and we found ourselves sharing a polite cup of tea in the garden of our slightly discombobulated hosts. All bitterness and passion had, on both sides, melted away. I had great respect for the way he rebuilt his life with considerable humility and integrity. He remained very active in the cause of prison reform. When I eventually stepped down as editor in 2015 he came to the farewell party.