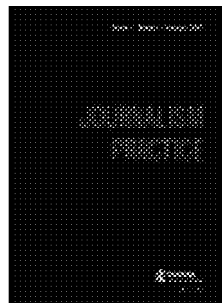


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FOUR RUMOURS AND AN EXPLANATION

A political economic account of journalists' changing newsgathering and reporting practices

Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams, and Bob Franklin

Our analysis of 2207 domestic news reports in a structured sample of UK "quality" (the Guardian, The Times, the Independent and the Telegraph) and mid-market (Daily Mail) newspapers, revealed journalists' extensive use of copy provided by public relations sources and news agencies, especially the UK-based Press Association. A political economic explanation for this reliance on news stories produced "outside the newsroom", draws inspiration from Gandy's notion of information subsidies and presents findings from a substantive content analysis of selected UK national newspapers, interviews with journalists working on national titles and news agencies, as well as detailed archival analysis of UK newspaper companies' annual accounts across 20 years to deliver information about newspapers' profitability, their expansive editorial pagination as well as the number of journalists they employ. The argument here is that this reliance on public relations and news agency copy has been prompted by the need for a relatively stable community of journalists to meet an expansive requirement for news in order to maintain newspapers' profitability in the context of declining circulations and revenues.

KEYWORDS journalism practice; journalists; news agency copy; newsgathering and news reporting; profitability; public relations

Introduction

This article presents detailed findings from a study designed to explore what, to date, has been little more than a rumour among growing numbers of journalists and academics and many more public relations professionals. Indeed we can identify four interconnected rumours which, in aggregate, signal marked changes in journalists' newsgathering and reporting practices.

First, the last decade has witnessed an increasingly influential role for public relations professionals and news agencies (especially the Press Association (PA)) in the newsgathering and reporting processes of UK media: an increasing role in shaping and informing the news content of national and local news media (Cameron et al., 1997; Davis, 2002, 2008; Fletcher, 2006; Franklin, 1986, 1988, 1997, 2006; Franklin and VanSlyke Turk, 1988; Hobsbawm, 2006; Maloney, 2006; Manning, 2008; Michie, 1998; Miller and Dinan, 2000; Sallot and Johnson, 2006; White and Hobsbawm, 2007). By this process, journalists have allegedly become *processors* rather than *generators* of news.

An account of why this has happened is offered by a second rumour which nods theoretically in the direction of political economy (Davis, 2008; Golding and Murdock, 1973; McChesney, 2003). This suggests that relatively fewer journalists are now required to

write more stories to fill the ever-expansive pages of the national press. To maintain profitability against declining circulation, a larger news hole must be filled by an increasingly pressurised and low-paid work force. Added to this is the requirement for journalists to produce the growing numbers of specialist sections published by the quality press devoted to travel, lifestyle, media, education and business news as well as the rapid development of online editions and the necessity for journalists to file and report stories on multiple media platforms.

These developments have triggered a third speculation, namely that the first and second rumours, above, have prompted changes in the journalistic processes of validation and verification of stories deriving from “outside” the newsroom—i.e. from public relations sources and agency copy. In short, there simply is not time to check stories, to be sure that the claims they make are true. Consequently, public relations-generated stories are not only influencing journalists’ newsgathering and reporting practices, but journalists are more likely to accept them without check or criticism; less likely to supplement them with additional materials derived from their own “original” inquiries; more likely to view them as the terminus rather than the starting point of their journalistic inquiries (Franklin, 1997; White and Hobsbawm, 2007).

In aggregate this leads to a final rumour which alleges that UK newspapers are characterised by a lesser editorial independence than 20 years ago. News is increasingly generated outside of formal media organisations and newsrooms by what has been described as a growing army of “journalism literate PR professionals” (Franklin, 1997). The press is consequently less critical than previously and the prospects for the press functioning as a fourth estate are correspondingly reduced (Davis, 2002).

In combination, these rumours constitute a highly significant set of potential hypotheses signalling substantive changes in journalists’ newsgathering and reporting practices. Perhaps what is more interesting, given the potential significance of these concerns, is that research has not been conducted previously to explore, refute or substantiate these claims. This study’s research ambition was precisely to generate detailed empirical evidence to replace speculation and rumour as well as to develop a causal account for these developments.¹

Before presenting the findings from the study, it is important to mention, albeit briefly, two theoretical inspirations for the research. One is Gans’ suggestive dance metaphor, to describe and analyse relations between journalists and sources in news production, which suggested that while “it takes two to tango, sources usually lead” (Gans, 1979, p. 116). Journalists, of course, have always objected to the unwarrantedly dominant role which this formulation attributes to news sources, preferring what might be termed a conflict model which, in perhaps self-serving fashion, casts them as watch dogs protecting the public interest. As H. L. Menken expressed it in a famous formulation, “the attitude of the journalist to the politician should be broadly that which the dog reserves for the lamppost” (cited in Franklin, 1994, p. 3). Subsequent theorists have tended to cast journalist–source relations in a more consensual mode, characterising day-to-day relationships as essentially co-operative rather than conflictual (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), viewing it as an exchange relationship in which sources trade insider information and opinion for coverage in news media which the journalists provide (Ericson et al., 1989; Jones; 2006).

Oscar Gandy’s (1982) notion of an information subsidy provides a second but crucial theoretical starting point for the study. Gandy argues that PR practitioners offer a form

of subsidy to news organisations (via press releases, press conferences, video news releases, press briefings and lobbying, special reports, etc.), which allows them to reduce the costs of newsgathering and to maintain profitability. News subsidies allow news organisations to “square the circle” between cost cutting (i.e. cuts in journalists’ wages and numbers of journalists employed), while sustaining if not increasing news output through greater pagination and the development of online news. In this way, public relations materials offer a direct subsidy to bolster newspapers’ finances in the context of declining circulations and revenues in the UK newspaper market. Newsgathering and news reporting is increasingly “outsourced” to public relations professionals while journalists assume the role of desk-bound, office-based recipients and gatekeepers of the news-gathering activities of those “outside the newsroom”.

UK News Journalism: Journalists’ Reliance on Public Relations and News Agencies

Our study began with a detailed content analysis of UK domestic news coverage in two single-week samples (one in late March and a second in late April 2005) of the “serious” or “quality” national newspapers (*The Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Telegraph*) along with the mid-market tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, to establish a broad profile of published news in the United Kingdom and the respective contributions of journalists, public relations professionals and news agency materials to that output.

Approximately three-quarters of the 2207 newspaper stories analysed were main page articles (1564—71 per cent) of variable length, with 561 (25.5 per cent) shorter “news in brief” items (nibs); the remainder were “picture only” stories (0.5 per cent) or opinion pieces (3 per cent) which had strayed into the news sections from the Op Ed pages.² These news items focused on eight key subject areas. The most popular was “crime” (20 per cent), followed by the cluster category of “domestic issues” (15 per cent) which included the National Health Service (NHS), education, the environment and immigration. Other editorial foci included “politics” (15 per cent), “business/consumer” news (12 per cent—a surprisingly high figure given that business sections were not coded), “health/natural world” (10 per cent), “entertainment and sport” (10 per cent), “accidents/disasters” (5 per cent), “defence/foreign policy” (2 per cent) and “other” (11 per cent) (Lewis et al., 2006, pp. 13–4).

Almost three-quarters of the articles were attributed to a by-lined reporter (72 per cent) with only 1 per cent of stories attributed to the PA or another wire service, as well as a small proportion (2 per cent) to a less specific journalistic identity such as an “Independent Reporter”; approximately a quarter (24.5 per cent) carried no by-line—typically the shorter nibs. By identifying journalists in this way newspapers create the impression that articles had been written by in-house journalists, but when news coverage was analysed, findings revealed that 30 per cent of published items were wholly dependent on agency copy with a further 19 per cent strongly derivative from agency materials. In a further 13 per cent of stories agency copy was evident along with information from other sources, while 8 per cent of items used “mainly other information” and in a further 5 per cent the wire service reported the story but the copy was not used in the newspaper report; in 25 per cent of stories there was no evidence of dependence of agency copy. In summary, approximately half (49 per cent) of news stories published in the quality press and analysed for this study were wholly or mainly dependent on materials

produced and distribute by wire services with a further fifth (21 per cent) of stories containing some element of agency copy (Lewis et al., 2006, p. 15—see Table 1).

Newspapers make little acknowledgement of this reliance on agency copy even when they publish such materials in more or less verbatim form. On 24 March 2006, for example, the *Daily Mail* attributed its front-page story about the health risks of eating oily fish (“Why Oily Fish Might Not Be So Good for Your Health After All”) to a *Daily Mail* Reporter, even though it directly replicates quotations and factual materials from PA and other news wire stories (Lewis et al., 2006, pp. 35–8).

Journalists’ editorial reliance on PR materials is similarly striking with almost a fifth (19 per cent) of stories deriving wholly (10 per cent) or mainly (9 per cent) from PR sources. A further 22 per cent were either a mix of PR with other materials (11 per cent) or mainly other information (11 per cent) while 13 per cent of stories appeared to contain PR materials which could not be identified, with 46 per cent containing no evidence of PR sources. Again, we found a number of stories which offered near verbatim replication of source materials. *The Times* report, “George Cross for Iraq War Hero” on 24 March 2006, which carried Michael Evans’ by-line, for example, reproduced almost exactly a Ministry of Defence press release (Lewis et al., 2006, p. 17).

This journalistic reliance on public relations is not necessarily a negative outcome of changing newsgathering routines, of course, since public relations professionals may generate highly newsworthy stories and may, in this way, increase the plurality of sources of news from which journalists and editors can select for publication. But the actual origins of PR materials suggests otherwise. The corporate sector dominates with 38 per cent of PR materials used in press coverage deriving from the “business/corporate” world. Other contributors to press reports via public relations activity include “public bodies (the police, NHS, universities—23 per cent), “Government and politicians” (21 per cent), non-governmental organisations/charities (11 per cent) and “professional associations” (5 per cent). Meanwhile, the voices and opinions of ordinary citizens are barely audible above the corporate clatter and inform only 2 per cent of stories (Lewis et al., 2006, pp. 21–3). One consequence of journalists’ increased reliance on public relations subsidies is that despite opportunities for citizen journalism and the democratic possibilities of user-generated content, corporate and governmental voices speak loudly while public opinion is worryingly mute.

When the reliance of the quality press on both public relations and agency copy is examined, only 12 per cent of published stories are without content sourced from outside the newsroom; 60 per cent of published stories rely wholly or mainly on external news sources (see Table 2). We recognise, of course, that agency and PR copy are, from a journalistic perspective, epistemologically different (although our study suggests that

TABLE 1
Extent of published items’ reliance on agency copy/other media

	Percentage
All from agencies/other media	30
Mainly from agencies/other media	19
Mix of agency/other media with other information	13
Mainly other information	8
Agency covered story but not used	5
No evidence	25

TABLE 2

Newspaper stories with content derived from PR/wires

Sources of editorial content	Percentage
All from PR/wires/other media	38
Mainly from PR/wires/other media	22
Mix of PR/wires/other media with other information	13
Mainly other information	7
All other information	12
Unclear	8

Source: Lewis et al. (2006, p. 25).

agency stories are *at least* as likely to be based on PR as press stories). Our point here is to highlight how much news is recycled from other sources without acknowledgement.

Interviews conducted with journalists confirm these high levels of reliance on public relations subsidies and editorial copy from wire sources; significantly, they also suggest it is increasing—and as a result of journalists' increasing workload.

We are "churning" stories today, not writing them. Almost everything is recycled from another source . . . It wouldn't be possible to write so many stories otherwise. Yet even more is expected, filing to online outlets is now considered to be part of the job. Specialist writing is much easier because the work is done by agencies and/or writers of press releases. Actually knowing enough to identify stories is no longer important. The work has been deskilled, as well as being greatly amplified in volume, if not in quality. (Nigel Hawkes, Health Editor, *The Times*)³

To explain these changes in journalists' working practices, the study examined journalists' considerably increased workload across the last 20 years by looking at data concerning the employment of journalists and the expansion of editorial content in national newspapers across the same period.

UK News Journalism: Journalists, Pagination and Profitability

Table 3 summarises information taken from the annual accounts filed at Companies House for the major national newspaper groups between the years 1985 and 2004. Most companies are reluctant to divulge particulars about employment figures, and detailed evidence is notoriously difficult to gather. Nevertheless, data from company reports, together with relevant analysis of newspapers' increases in pagination, offers insights into the broad workload trends that underpin British journalism.

Collecting comparable, documented information about employment is difficult, so two qualifications should be attached to these figures. While they generally refer to national newspapers, among some groups these figures also include a small number of non-national newspapers or weekly specialist newspapers. The emergence of online news operations within these groups also complicates analysis.

Secondly, within each newspaper group, figures for total employees are available throughout this period, but more detailed breakdowns into different types of employees are not always listed in company reports, or are listed on some years but not others. This makes it impossible for the average figures for editorial employees to always include all newspaper groups. What is included is an average of the figures available for each year (a

TABLE 3

Average employment of editorial and other staffs at UK national newspaper companies

Year	Average total employees	Average editorial employees*
2004	1130	741†
2003	1169	713
2002	1105	651
2001	1049	583
2000	1118	623
1999	986	523
1998	937	502
1997	932	500
1996	976	530
1995	1033	533‡
1994	957	497
1993	1010	497
1992	1027	513
1991	941	545
1990§	1012	947
1989	1351	552¶
1988	1571	461**
1987	1899	427††
1986‡‡	2808	555§§
1985¶¶	4337	786***

Table 3 notes on p. 33

more detailed explanation of what is included and excluded can be found in the footnotes).

Nevertheless, these figures do offer the most detailed year-on-year breakdown of newspapers' employment of editorial, journalistic and other staffs currently available; they suggest a number of key trends. Taken overall, total average numbers of employees and editorial employees in the companies listed above have been relatively stable across the 1990–2004 period, with a gradual increase in employee numbers recorded during the latter part of this period, coinciding partly with the development of on-line services by most newspapers.

This follows a period of greater instability between 1985 and 1990, which was characterised by a marked decline in total numbers of employees from over 4000 in 1985 to less than a quarter of that figure by 1990. The sacking of striking print workers by Rupert Murdoch, prior to his company's relocation to Wapping from Fleet Street, was only the most widely reported of many programmes of redundancy across the market sector in the mid- to late 1980s. Some companies embarked on their mass-redundancy plans earlier than others (the News International companies and the Mirror Group, for example), but few workforces survived the 1980s unscathed by job losses. The biggest impact, however, was overwhelmingly in print and production. While the figures for editorial employees are particularly limited for the 1985–90 period, those available show little evidence of any similar sharp decline. For example, editorial staff at the Telegraph Group numbered 616 in 1985, declined slightly to 554 in 1989 but remained relatively stable around the 500–550 mark across the 1990–5 period.

Throughout the 1990s, the total number of employees in these groups remained at a fairly stable average of approximately 1000 employees per group, with average editorial employees also being fairly constant at around 500 employees per group. The period from

1999 to 2004 has witnessed some gradual increases in employee numbers among a number of key companies. But these changes do not necessarily equate to increased editorial staff per newspaper. In some cases, it is attributable to new acquisitions (sometimes from subsidiaries within the same parent company) and to investment in the development of online news and services. For example, the Independent Group's employee numbers increased very significantly by 300 between 2002 and 2003, but this can be explained by its purchase of the *Belfast Telegraph* among other publications. Similarly, an earlier very substantial increase in employee levels at the paper from 609 to 1058 between 2000 and 2001 was the result of the incorporation of its subsidiary companies within the parent group rather than to new journalistic investment.

To make further sense of these figures we need to look in more detail at individual companies. Some companies have clearly suffered a reduction in employment levels. Most dramatically, employee levels virtually halved in the 10 years after 1995 at Express Newspapers, falling from 1457 to 739, with sharp declines of almost 500 between 1996

*Because of different accounting practices between the national newspaper companies, it has not always been possible to include an average number of editorial employees for every firm in these calculations.

†Between 1985 and 2004 there are no editorial staff figures for Associated Newspapers Ltd included in the average.

‡Between 1986 and 1995 there are no editorial staff figures for Express Newspapers Ltd included in the average.

§Between the years of 1985 and 1990 there are no figures for Guardian Newspapers Ltd included in calculations for any of the average figures.

¶As well as not including numbers for Guardian Newspapers Ltd this figure could not include a breakdown number of editorial staff for Express Newspapers, The Financial Times Ltd, or Associated Newspapers.

**As well as not including numbers for Guardian Newspapers Ltd this figure could not include a breakdown number of editorial staff for Express Newspapers, The Financial Times Ltd, or Associated Newspapers.

††This average figure does not include Guardian Newspapers Ltd this figure could not include a breakdown number of editorial staff for Express Newspapers, The Financial Times Ltd, Associated Newspapers, or News Group Newspapers.

‡‡In addition to this year not including figures for Guardian Newspapers Ltd, there are no figures included for the Newspaper Publishing Ltd, which published the Independent, as although the company came into existence during this year it did not start printing the newspaper until 1987.

§§This average figure does not include Guardian Newspapers Ltd this figure could not include a breakdown number of editorial staff for Express Newspapers, The Financial Times Ltd, Associated Newspapers, News Group Newspapers, or Times Newspapers.

¶¶This year does not include data for Guardian Newspapers Ltd or Newspaper Publishing Ltd (the Independent was not set up until 1986).

***Only the Telegraph Group and Express News Ltd provide information on numbers of editorial staff for this year. Other companies which provide separate staff figure breakdowns give one figure for editorial and production staff, making it impossible to compare with later figures which do not include production staff.

Source: The data are based on the average number of employees and also average editorial staff at the following companies: Express Newspapers Ltd (the *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Express*, the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Star Sunday*), The Financial Times Ltd (the *Financial Times*), MGN Ltd (*Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*), News Group Newspapers Ltd (the *Sun* and the *News of the World*), the Telegraph Group Ltd (the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Weekly Telegraph*), Guardian Newspapers Ltd (*Guardian* and the *Observer*), Independent News and Media Ltd (*Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday*), Times Newspapers Ltd (*The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, *TLS*, *THES*, *TES*) and Associated Newspapers Ltd (the *Daily Mail*, the *Mail on Sunday*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Ireland on Sunday* and *Metro*).

and 1998 and by a further 250 between 2000 and 2002 (following the “rationalisation” of production implemented by publisher Richard Desmond following his purchase of the group). Within the company, editorial staff numbers fell from 968 to 532 between 1996 and 2004. One senior UK journalist revealed in interview the *Express* had purposefully “stripped out staff”, and that the company seemed to be “living off the remnants of its brand”—a management technique that has been applied to many US newspapers, and is known as “squeezing the lemon”.⁴

But other companies have registered overall increases in employee numbers. Most notably, despite only making a profit twice between 1991 and 2000 (and three times recording losses in excess of £10 million), the *Guardian's* overall employees almost doubled (from 725 to 1429), and its production staff similarly increased from 442 to 843. The *Financial Times* similarly increased overall employee levels from 795 to 1131 between 1985 and 2004, with production/editorial staff increasing from 659 to 869 during the same period. Times Newspapers also registered a broadly stable level of employees across the 1990s of around 450 before some fluctuation in employment levels from the later 1990s to 597 in 2000, back down to 499 in 2002 but up to 591 in 2003 and 683 in 2004. The latter figure was higher than at any point over the preceding 17 years.

The overall pattern is therefore mixed with some newspapers showing falls but others demonstrating increases and an overall pattern of relative stability and gradual increases since 2000. This, of course, is the period that has seen the growth of online news services, and any staffing increases at the UK nationals should be viewed in this context.

Profitability

Taking the sector as a whole, it is clear that national newspapers, while certainly not as profitable as regional newspapers, have generally retained fairly healthy levels of turnover and profits over the last 20 years, as the average figures across the nine newspaper groups analysed illustrate (see Table 4). The average profit margins across the period 1985–2004 for these groups was 7.83 per cent, and the average across this sector as a whole did not vary significantly if we compare it with the 1985–94 period (where the average was 7.54 per cent) and the 1995–2004 period (where the average was 8.12 per cent).

These averages hide a variety of performances both across different years and across different newspaper groups which makes generalisations difficult. The Independent Newspaper Group, for example, suffered a series of heavy losses in excess of £100 million between 1995 and 2001, but regained profitability by 2002, while the Guardian Group made a pre-tax profit on only three occasions between 1991 and 2004 (the only years for which figures are available for the newspaper). Times Newspapers Ltd, meanwhile, made losses in five out of the 10 years across the period 1995–2004.

In general, it has been the tabloid groups that have demonstrated the most consistent and highest levels of profitability. This is notably true for the *Sun* and *News of the World* group. Following the post-Wapping rationalisation, the group's profits soared from £16 million in 1986 to £124 million in 1988, with a pre-tax profit margin of 42 per cent. Throughout the following years profit levels were substantial. In 2004, pre-tax profits were nearly £150 million, and the group achieved total profits of £580 million in the years 2000–4.

Similarly, if less spectacularly, Mirror Group Newspapers have generated high levels of pre-tax profits and profit margins throughout the period, with the exception of the 1991

TABLE 4

Average profits for UK national newspaper companies

Year	Average pre-tax profits (£)	Average turnover (£)	Average profit margin (%)
2004	30,354,333	324,175,784	9.4
2003	6,210,778	364,772,778	1.7
2002	48,654,778	351,829,222	13.8
2001	30,193,222	362,395,333	8.3
2000	44,350,444	363,101,000	12.2
1999	37,619,778	337,068,444	11.2
1998	33,568,555	316,363,778	10.6
1997	25,363,778	298,219,111	8.5
1996	18,659,000	285,003,555	6.5
1995	15,517,555	211,296,111	7.3
1994	29,893,444	254,677,444	11.7
1993	29,309,555	240,584,555	12.2
1992	14,041,555	176,147,500	8
1991	-19,452,333	203,821,778	-9.6
1990*	28,470,874	229,523,625	12.4
1989	30,091,624	227,910,624	13.3
1988	32,284,125	207,783,375	15.5
1987	10,873,500	180,347,749	6
1986†	363,571	214,310,142	0.2
1985‡	10,564,714	184,184,142	5.7

*Between the years of 1985 and 1990 there are no figures for Guardian Newspapers Ltd included in calculations for any of the average figures.

†In addition to this year not including figures for Guardian Newspapers Ltd, there are no figures included for the Newspaper Publishing Ltd, which published the Independent, as although the company came into existence during this year it did not start printing the newspaper until 1987.

‡This year does not include data for Guardian Newspapers Ltd or Newspaper Publishing Ltd (the Independent was not set up until 1986).

Source: These data are based on the average pre-tax profits, turnovers, and profit margins at the following companies: Express Newspapers Ltd (the *Daily Express*, the *Sunday Express*, the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Star Sunday*), The Financial Times Ltd (the *Financial Times*), MGN Ltd (*Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*), News Group Newspapers Ltd (the *Sun* and the *News of the World*), the Telegraph Group Ltd (the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Weekly Telegraph*), Guardian Newspapers Ltd (*Guardian* and the *Observer*), Independent News and Media Ltd (*Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday*), Times Newspapers Ltd (*The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, *TLS*, *THES*, *TES*) and Associated Newspapers Ltd (the *Daily Mail*, the *Mail on Sunday*, the *Evening Standard*, the *Ireland on Sunday*, and *Metro*).

collapse following the death of Robert Maxwell. Pre-tax profits for Mirror Group Newspapers were £92 million in 2004 and were £300 million in aggregate in the years 2000–4. Associated Newspapers saw consistent losses in the years 1986–91, but this was followed by consistent profit levels across the 1990s and impressive results across the period 1999–2004 when £545 million was made in pre-tax profits. So, while the evidence concerning profit and loss is mixed, the received image of national newspapers as consistent loss makers clearly needs to be substantially qualified.

Pagination in National Newspapers, 1985–2006

Taken in isolation, the overall trends in journalistic employment and newspaper profitability appear positive. What underlies them, however, is a significant increase in

journalistic productivity. In order to gauge trends in productivity levels, changes in pagination were identified across the same period. Table 5 reveals the very substantial increases in the overall size of selected national daily newspapers across the years 1985–2006. Using a constant broadsheet page unit of measurement and converting tabloids and supplements accordingly, national newspapers currently publish an average two and a half times as many pages as 20 years ago.

Although the number of pages devoted to advertising has doubled, this does not account for most of the increase. Indeed, the *proportion* of total newspaper content taken up by advertising has actually fallen slightly, while editorial/news content has risen dramatically. Over the last two decades, the average number of editorial/news pages across the national newspapers has increased almost three-fold from a 14.6 page average in 1985 to 41 pages by 2006. Newspaper main sections are bigger and the number of supplements has increased (particularly in the Saturday and Sunday editions, but also, increasingly for the quality/broadsheet papers, in their daily editions as well).

These figures cast a markedly different light on employment trends across the same period. Although the period since 1985 has witnessed a slight increase in employment, today's editorial employees are, on average, expected to produce three times as much content as their counterparts 20 years ago. While there are significant differences in *overall* pagination (including advertising) between different newspapers (especially between tabloids and broadsheets), almost all newspapers show a consistent pattern of increase. The *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Times* and *Daily Mail* each publish approximately 2.5 times as many pages in 2006 as they did in 1985.

Two slight variations are visible within this pattern. The *Daily Telegraph's* pagination doubled in the years 1985–2006 while pagination in the *Guardian* tripled. After increasing its pagination more than any other newspaper in the period 1985–95, the *Telegraph's* size increased only slightly over the following 10 years. In 1995 the *Telegraph* had more pages than any other publication in the sample, yet by 2006 it lagged behind its high-end competitors, offering an average of 66 pages compared with the *Guardian's* 89 and *The Times's* 82.

Included in the figure for “Advertising” are all advertisements, advertorials (also called “Advertising Features”) and classified ads. Total advertising in newspapers has seen a marked rise since the mid-1980s. In 1985 the red-top tabloids averaged approximately 6 broadsheet pages of advertisements per issue, the *Daily Mail* averaged 9.4, and the broadsheets carried around 12. By 1995 this had risen somewhat, with all newspapers except the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror* doubling the average amount of advertising.

During the last decade advertising content has remained fairly stable, with only the *Guardian* significantly increasing its advertising from an average of 24 pages in 1995 to 31.6 in 2006. This limited growth, despite the overall increase in content in the years 1995–2006 charted above, may reflect the decline in the attraction of newspaper advertising, given both their continued circulation decline and competition for advertising from newer media. It should also be noted that while total advertising has increased, advertising as a percentage of total content has actually declined slightly. In both 1985 and 1995 it accounted for 40 per cent of total pages, but in 2004 and 2006 it had declined to around a third of all pages.

TABLE 5

Pagination in national newspapers, 1985–2006

	1985			1995			2004			2006		
	Total pages	Ads	Total minus ads	Total pages	Ads	Total minus ads	Total pages	Ads	Total minus ads	Total pages	Ads	Total minus ads
<i>Mail</i>	21	9.4	11.6	36.8	14.2	22.6	47.2	14.7	32.5	48.7	15.8	32.9
<i>Times</i>	31.7	11.9	19.8	56.7	21.8	34.9	75.6	21.5	54.1	82.5	26.1	56.4
<i>Sun</i>	15.5	5.6	9.9	19.3	13.7	12.5	41.6	13.8	27.8	40.3	12.8	27.3
<i>Telegraph</i>	33.7	14.7	19	60.2	18.7	41.5	62.7	20.8	41.9	66.7	21.3	45.4
<i>Mirror</i>	15.8	6.2	9.4	23	8.3	14.7	40.9	13.6	27.3	39.4	12.7	26.7
<i>Guardian</i>	28.5	10.7	17.8	56	24	32	73.6	23.1	50.5	89.3	31.6	57.7
Average	24.4	9.7	14.6	42	16.8	26.4	56.9	17.9	39	61.5	20	41

The basic unit of measurement is one broadsheet page, into which all other measurements have been converted. One tabloid page counts as half a broadsheet page, and a Berliner page counts as two-thirds of a traditional broadsheet page. The ratios of all non-standard sized newspaper supplements have also been calculated and converted into the equivalent number of broadsheet pages. For each year, averages are calculated from randomly chosen full weeks (Monday to Saturday) in April from each year.

Employee Levels Versus Pagination: An Analysis of the Sun

The *Sun* newspaper provides an interesting example of the general pattern in which increases in newspaper size and pagination are not reflected by an equivalent increase in the number of journalists employed. As Table 6 shows, in the mid- to late 1980s editorial employee numbers at News Group Newspapers (which produces both the *News of the World* and the *Sun*) varied between 381 and 420.⁵ In 1985 the average daily number of broadsheet equivalent pages of editorial content published by the *Sun* was 9.9. By 1995 the average number of employees had remained relatively constant at 417, but the average number of editorial pages had increased by a third to 12.5. This disparity became even more marked in the following decade. Between 1995 and 2004 editorial employee numbers at News Group increased by only 15 per cent (from 417 to 485), a figure that would obviously include extra staff employed on the new online editions of these papers, as well as those for the *News of the World*. But this slight rise barely begins to match the substantial expansion in the *Sun's* editorial content, which more than doubled during the same period.

This means that in 1995, 417 employees produced a daily average of 12.5 pages of editorial content (along with the *News of the World*), while in 2004, 485 staff had to produce 27.3 pages of content. Even given the possible impact of new technology in improving levels of output and efficiency, it is difficult to believe that this increase does not impact on the amount of time and quality that can be devoted to stories. These

TABLE 6

Average employment and profitability levels at News Group Newspapers (publishers of the *Sun* and the *News of the World*), 1985–2004

Year	Pre-tax profits (£000s)	Turnover (£000s)	Profit margin (%)	No. of editorial employees
2004	147,169	639,320	23.02	485
2003	93,581	557,441	16.79	529
2002	139,153	571,157	24.36	563
2001	104,312	561,575	18.57	478
2000	97,250	521,756	18.64	524
1999	64,720	488,848	13.24	438
1998	76,863	483,475	15.9	415
1997	69,166	479,893	14.41	439
1996	43,234	463,479	9.33	413
1995	78,884	396,315	19.9	417
1994	38,998	346,431	11.26	356
1993	78,252	363,733	21.51	335
1992	87,964	375,598	23.42	366
1991	63,286	329,965	19.18	382
1990	68,097	318,475	21.38	386
1989	84,090	334,183	25.16	381
1988	124,125	293,818	42.25	425
1987	34,093	223,592	15.25	Start: 1356 End: 420
1986	16,237	232,083	7	3881
1985	28,688	222,966	12.87	5040

Source: Annual reports and accounts of News Group Newspapers, 1985–2004.

findings are borne out by journalists themselves, with many reporting a marked increase in their workload in interviews and their responses to questionnaires.

Journalism Practice: The View from the Newsroom

The opinions of 42 journalists were canvassed by distributing an e-mail questionnaire and, in some cases (approximately 30) respondents were interviewed by telephone to clarify or elaborate qualitative findings. Their responses confirmed the findings of our content analysis and archival research of company records, suggesting that journalists' increased workloads impact on their day-to-day professional practice. Journalists claimed they were required to produce more stories across the working shift and are consequently relying more on public relations material and copy from wire services, to inform their reports. Journalists also claim that the time previously available and necessary to confirm claims made by sources has been increasingly eroded across the last decade. Some journalists were prepared to speak on the record, but the majority preferred to remain anonymous.

Journalism Practice: Workload

The average number of stories produced in a day by our respondents was 4.5, although the press agency journalists we contacted appear to be producing the most copy; approximately twice as many stories as their counterparts working on national newspapers. More than two-thirds of those surveyed (30 out of 42) believed that journalists were filing more stories each shift than they were a decade ago (split equally between those who said they were writing "considerably more stories", and those who said "a few more stories").

The handful of journalists who claimed they were writing fewer stories (four of the 42) was constituted primarily of people who had been promoted to editorial positions or "special correspondent" roles. Michael White, Assistant Editor at the *Guardian*, for example, reported that the volume of his output varied hugely, "in my prime I might have written 3500 words for publication in print next day on a busy day" but that "nowadays I do less than I did, it can be one or none. On the other hand it can be three or four, including [articles for] the web which is increasingly important".⁶

But the more typical state of affairs is summed up by a veteran journalist and section editor at a national daily newspaper who claimed that "the volume of stories we produce in a day has increased a lot. When I started out, in the days before the electronic revolution, I was producing one or two stories a day. Today it's not uncommon to be knocking out five or six in a day—and when you're doing that you rely more on the wires and on PR than you did before".

Journalists working in news agencies confront similar increases in workload. An Industry Correspondent at the PA, for example, claimed, "I'm definitely busier and write more stories these days. I average about 10 a day. When I first joined PA 25 years ago I used to write no more than three a day. The main difference has been the growth in 24-hour news stations which need stories all day and night, so there is no peace for an agency journalist . . . I don't usually spend more than an hour on a story, otherwise I wouldn't be able to write so many".⁷

These accounts are highly congruent with our data derived from political economy analysis, signalling journalists' increased production of stories.

Journalism Practice: "Standing Up" Stories

Pressure on journalists, reflecting their increased workload and reliance on public relations and agency materials, is compounded by the lack of time to check information from sources with any independent corroboration. When journalists were asked how many checks they made on a story the average number for those who answered was more than three. However, more than half of the respondents said they could not answer the question because the amount of checks varied so widely from story to story. If the information came from a trusted source, for example, there might not be any need to check on its veracity, and if the information in a story was particularly controversial a large number of checks may be needed (including consultations with legal experts, etc.) before it goes to press. What most journalists agreed, however, was that the number of checks that the typical journalist made to confirm a story was decreasing. Only one journalist thought that checks had increased (due to the Internet), while two-thirds said they thought the number of checks made on source material had decreased.

A correspondent for a major national newspaper confided that "newspapers have turned into copy factories. This leaves less time for real investigations, or meeting and developing contacts. The arrival of online editions has also increased demand for quick copy, reducing the time available for checking the facts". Another claimed, "I insist on making at least two check calls on every story (one for each side of the story is a minimum) but this is becoming increasingly difficult to do because of time constraints". A third journalist reported that "many more stories are demanded by London desks straight from the wires, with few or no checks".

This lack of time to stand up stories includes copy from press agency wires. "Checking info has decreased, and what is worse it is not expected by the . . . news desk—I cannot tell you the number of times I am told to 'take it off the wires and knock it into shape', which is just terrible", said one national news correspondent. Given that the editorial staff at most wire agencies are equally if not more overworked, under pressure to produce ever more material, and reliant on PR copy themselves, this does not bode well for the quality of the final news story. Despite this, taking news from the wires is generally regarded as more legitimate than from PR copy (it is harder to imagine journalists being told to "knock PR releases into shape" than to "re-nose a story from the wires").

Journalists were also asked if they checked the content of the public relations material they used. The majority (34 of 42) said they thought it was checked "always" or, more commonly, "more often than not". A few, nonetheless (seven out of 42), suggested that this happened "rarely". One journalist in this category said, "sure, I try and check up on factual claims made in press releases, but how do you do that with sponsored surveys or research by some company that 'proves' there's a market for their product? You can't, but you use it anyway".

Journalism Practice: The Influence of Public Relations Material on News

Only two of the journalists contacted claimed that public relations material never influences their work. Most (28 out of 42) stated that PR informs their stories "sometimes",

and the remaining 12 said they use it “often”. The great majority (38 out of 42) indicated that PR plays a greater role in today’s newsroom, suggesting that the use of PR has increased over the last 10 years.

Some journalists appreciated the “good” PR out there. A national newspaper correspondent claimed, “It’s sometimes useful to alert you to a report, event or a concern you haven’t heard about”. NGO material, for example, was seen by some as a useful corrective to government PR. But despite a few comments about the usefulness of PR, there is much bitterness about the volume of material journalists have to deal with and the increasingly important role it plays in their working lives. Nigel Hawkes, at *The Times*, is particularly critical:

There is much more PR these days. I get hundreds of press releases in my mailbox every day, and I get lots of calls from drugs companies offering to pay for me to go to this international conference or that convention . . . It’s become a lot easier to use PR because of the technology. It’s very easy and convenient, and as we’re producing so many more stories, we use it.

He continues: “if you’re not feeling too energetic it’s almost as if you could surf this great tidal wave of PR all the way in to the shore and not come up with any original material all day”.⁸

There are noteworthy differences in the use of PR across different media platforms and news organisations. Most broadcast and newspaper journalists claimed PR informed their work “sometimes”, and some admitted it “often” influenced the news they produced. However, the ratio is reversed for news agency journalists, with three-quarters stating they “often” use public relations copy, and only one-quarter saying they “sometimes” use it. The PA’s Industry Correspondent Alan Jones, for example, provided a valuable insight into the role of PR for an agency journalist by giving a typical example of the kind of public relations material he routinely writes up every day, and sees in print in the national newspapers the next. “I’ve virtually given up now”, he claimed. “Every day, stuff comes in to me that I think is ridiculous, I write it up and it ends up being a page lead or a splash in a national newspaper”. He concluded his interview on a note of despair about the role of PR in dominating the news agenda at the PA. “One day, I just thought OK, I’m not going to bother now. I’m just going to churn out everything that comes in. This nose for news value which we all think we’ve got, . . . this great mystery about what makes a story. I don’t think it is a mystery now. The agenda has totally changed. All bets are off, really”.⁹

Journalism Practice: The Use of PA and Other News Wire Copy

The use of news agency copy is clearly more acceptable to journalists than the use of public relations material. The great majority of respondents to our questionnaire (30 out of 42) said they used PA or other news wire services “often”, while no journalist denied ever using the wires. There was also a general feeling that the PA’s services were used more frequently than hitherto, with 27 out of 42 journalists indicating that this was the case (and only one claiming agencies were used “less often”).

One member of the minority who claimed that usage of wires has remained the same stated, “Wire has always been a vital aid for daily journalism, a vital starting point for stories. Some overworked people just re-write wire but that too has always happened”. This pragmatic attitude is repeated by the *Guardian’s* Michael White, whose attitude to the

use of the wires is that “often, it’s good raw material in appropriate circumstances and—also important—it saves typing time”. Talking of wires and PR material, he went on to say, “you use them both as straw to make bricks”.¹⁰

But some journalists consider the increasing use of wire copy as further evidence that they have less time to do their jobs as well as they would like. One high-profile journalist for a national newspaper (who would only talk under the strict condition of anonymity) clearly saw the use of agency material fitting into a general picture of overwork in a context of resource-starved newsrooms:

I love writing for the internet edition, I love writing a blog, I love three or four by-lines in the paper every day. But doing all of this all day every day, six days a week, is a nightmare (yes I work Sundays too). These working conditions also prevent me from going on the road to find stories, from conducting interviews and from going out to develop contacts. After a 12-hour day of relentless writing—often just rehashing wire and TV material—I am done in.

Levels of reliance on agency copy are clearly not uniform or consistent, and reflect a number of variables. One journalist claimed, “wire copy usage varies enormously. On the desk here we rarely use it at all except for picking up on stories we’ve not been alerted to elsewhere. I know some of our opposite numbers feel they have to use the wires to get their stories out on time”. But most journalists were aware that their colleagues are becoming increasingly dependent on them as a resource. Indeed, some journalists are frustrated with the amount that they are expected to reproduce without any real individual input or extra work. One section editor at a national daily told us: “We’ve always been reliant on wire copy, but we use it a hell of a lot more these days—it’s quite common for us to cut and paste a story off PA, re-nose it a bit to mask where it’s come from, and then put it out there as our own”.

The Decline of Independent Journalism

While we found some pockets of optimism, the picture painted by journalists in this snapshot of industry opinion offers a depressing confirmation of the study’s other research findings, which suggest that much newspaper content now derives wholly or in substantial part from news agencies or PR materials (Lewis et al., 2006), while only a small proportion of news articles make little or no use of such material. While this content analysis is not longitudinal, the other research findings presented here suggest that there is an increasing reliance on pre-packaged material at all levels of British journalism.

It could be argued that the increase in journalistic productivity charted here is an inevitable response to maintaining profitability during a period of steady (and continuing) decline in newspaper readership. Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of the consequences of this process. Expressed broadly, many of the elements of rigorous, independent journalism are inevitably depleted when reporters are obliged to produce more stories in less time. We are not necessarily talking about investigative journalism here: simply the time required to check facts and gather information independently. In short, profits are increasingly being won at the cost of journalistic integrity, autonomy and quality.

This decline in standards has more to do with the information that goes into a story, rather than the presentation of the story itself. If this means taking shortcuts and

depending on pre-packaged material, then most readers will be unaware of it since there is very little acknowledgement of where the information has come from. On the contrary, newspapers rarely acknowledge their source material, and our study identified many examples of “re-nosed” PR or wire copy being credited with a journalist’s by-line.

Indeed, the advantage of all this from the proprietor’s point of view is that it is possible to produce a “quality” newspaper based largely on cheap, if not free, second-hand material. But this subsidy comes at a heavy price, one that is borne, in the end, by all of us, as the quality of information in a democratic society is steadily impoverished. We began by rehearsing four rumours about the editorial integrity of the quality press, the role of public relations and agency copy in the production of news and journalists’ changing newsgathering and reporting practices. The evidence presented here is striking and unequivocal. And it suggests that—within the limits of what philosophers delight in describing as an essentially contested concept—those rumours are true. What is valuable and useful for proprietors and journalists is perhaps more worrying for readers and citizens.

NOTES

1. In total 2207 domestic news items in the sample newspapers (*Guardian, Independent, The Times, Telegraph* and *Mail*) were analysed to establish the extent to which they were based on public relations or agency materials. To establish textual precedents to an article, key words from published items were checked against a database of Press Association and other news agency copy to compare the uses of language and quotes. Each article was also compared with previously published local or national newspaper stories on the same topic following a Lexis Nexis search. Finally, the study tried to track down the influence of PR materials, a task which was not as straightforward as identifying copy from news agencies. The first source was a database of all press releases sent to the *Guardian’s* generic inbox during the two single-week sample periods in March and April 2005. If this yielded no results, we checked for sources cited in the article and any company names or politicians quoted and searched relevant websites for press release archives or contacted key sources to ask for copies of press releases. Some organisations archive their PR very effectively online, others, like the Conservative Party, sent copies of their PR archives for the months around the study sample periods. As a final failsafe check for influences, Web-searches were conducted for quotations used in articles, a process which sometimes yielded unexpected precedents in the form of prior local or trade press articles and press releases which researchers had previously been able to source. Again, researchers compared the texts and made judgements on the level of influence. While the research team became adept at tracing PR material, it is important to begin with a strong word of caution. Public relations activity—particularly the more sophisticated kind—may leave few traces. This, of course, makes tracking the role of PR in news much more difficult. Because the figures for the presence of PR in this study refer to instances where we found verifiable textual evidence, they are inevitably conservative. Despite this, the research uncovered a wealth of PR material behind the news. The research study also involved telephone interviews with 30 journalists working on national newspapers and for news agencies as well as emailed questionnaire responses from 42 national newspaper journalists.

2. For a more detailed presentation and analysis of the findings of this content study, see Lewis et al. (2008).
3. Author interview with *The Times'* Health Editor Nigel Hawkes, 12 September 2006.
4. Author interview with *Guardian* Assistant Editor (then Political Editor) Michael White, 11 September 2006.
5. The first numbers for editorial staff we have at the *Sun* are for 1987, as pre-Wapping the annual accounts include print and editorial employees in the same category.
6. Author interview with *Guardian* Assistant Editor (then Political Editor) Michael White, 11 September 2006.
7. Author interview with Press Association Industry Correspondent Alan Jones, 18 September 2006.
8. Author interview with *The Times'* Health Editor Nigel Hawkes, 12 September 2006.
9. Author interview with Press Association Industry Correspondent Alan Jones, 18 September 2006.
10. Author interview with *Guardian* Assistant Editor (then Political Editor) Michael White, 11 September 2006.

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