

Teaching journalism ethics and standards at Kingston University London

Information requested by the Leveson Inquiry

Professor Brian Cathcart

November 2011

1.
 - (a) **An introductory section setting out who you are, your current position and a brief outline of your career to date.**

I have been professor of journalism at Kingston University London since 2005; before that I was senior lecturer for two years, since helping to create the course in 2003. I am Irish, with a history degree from Trinity College Dublin. My career in journalism began with a graduate traineeship at Reuters in 1978/9. I remained at Reuters as a correspondent until 1986, when I joined the launch team of the Independent newspaper as a foreign news sub-editor. I was the launch foreign editor of the Independent on Sunday in 1990, later becoming that paper's deputy editor. I left in 1997 to work as a freelance and write books, including *Were You Still Up for Portillo?* (1997), *The Case of Stephen Lawrence* (1999), *Jill Dando: Her Life and Death* (2001), and *The Fly in the Cathedral* (2004). In 2003-7 I was assistant editor and also media columnist of the *New Statesman*, and in 2008-10 I was specialist adviser to the House of Commons select committee on culture, media and sport in the inquiry which produced the report *Press standards, libel and privacy* (2010). At Kingston I am director of research in the department and I have led two research projects in association with the Natural History Museum which have been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to the tune of £275,000. At Kingston I have taught both BA and MA students, creating and leading over time a total of six modules as well as having a role in delivering about six more.

- (b) **An overview of the courses relevant to journalism which the academic institution at which you work provide.**

The department of journalism and publishing is part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Kingston University London. We teach journalism at undergraduate or BA level, both on its own and as part of a joint degree that

allows students to pair journalism with another subject such as English literature or history. We admit 90-100 students at this level each year. We also offer a Journalism MA which includes the diploma of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (students undergo both the assessments set by the university and those set by the council). We further offer a Magazine Journalism MA which is accredited by the Periodicals Training Council and this year we began teaching an MA in Fashion Journalism. Some of our teaching is common to all three MA courses. We admit about 50 MA students per year.

Our first aim in all of these courses is to prepare students for careers in journalism and related fields. We place a strong emphasis on the practical, striving to ensure that graduates leave us able to write news stories and features in most of the styles and formats the industry requires, able to sub-edit, able to lay out pages and create web pages and so forth. We also give them the opportunity to learn the use of audio, video, blogging and social networking for journalistic purposes, and they can learn shorthand. In addition they learn media law, and they put their learning to the test in compulsory work placements in their final year and in the production of a campus newspaper and news website.

Despite this focus the education we offer is emphatically not restricted to the practical. We are determined that our graduates should be *reflective* journalists, with a keen awareness of the role of journalism in society, and our teaching is strongly geared towards achieving that end. Students don't just learn how to do it; they also ask why it is done and how it can be done best, and the answers to those questions naturally relate closely to the matters of ethics and standards which are of interest to the Inquiry.

Our staff, in brief, are experienced journalists, almost all of whom have worked in the national press. About half the staff continue to do so, part-time or freelance.

(c) Details of the training on standards and/or ethics which your institution provides to students on courses for journalists or aspiring journalists.

Introduction

Ethics and standards pervade our teaching at all levels and in virtually every module taught. By way of example, in the first-year BA module *Multi-Media News Writing 1* students are taught early in their first semester how to use quotation in their news writing. This is obviously a practical necessity and a key skill for reporters. In the lecture, emphasis is placed on the need for

fairness, accuracy and honesty when quoting, with reference not only to guidance in recommended books (such as *Essential English for Journalists*, by Harold Evans, and the module core text *Writing for Journalists*, by Wynford Hicks et al) but also to debates about such matters as the Johann Hari affair and the admissibility of correcting grammatical errors made by speakers.

Students go on to test these ideas practically, both in short, real-life stories they must research and write for assessment and in *vox pop* exercises conducted on the street. The real-life stories must be accompanied by contact details for every person quoted so that a sample of quotes can be checked. The same topic of fair and accurate quotation is revisited, with similar rigour, in the second-year module *Multi-Media News Writing 2*, and BA students encounter it again in their third year, notably in *Practical Journalism 1*. MA students have a similar experience, albeit compressed into one year.

This interweave of the practical and ethical is found in the teaching of other matters such as attribution and sourcing, balance, interviewing, writing for impact and news values. They are hardly ever taught without some reference to the ethical dimension. This is routine and natural for Kingston staff, as it is no doubt for conscientious teachers of journalism everywhere. We find that students are quick to identify ethical issues in their subject and to engage vigorously in discussions on the subject.

BA: Formal ethics and standards teaching

In their final year of study all of our BA students must take the module *Journalism Ethics*. Here is a summary given to students:

“This module aims to introduce you to the notion of journalistic responsibility and different ideas of what it means to act ethically as a journalist, working within guidelines set down by the industry’s watchdog, the Press Complaints Commission. Through considering concepts such as truth, objectivity, a free press, freedom of information and public interest in relation to journalism, you will develop an awareness of the tensions between journalists, readers, sources, proprietors and the political and legal systems in which they operate.

During the module, you will have the opportunity to debate questions like: “Is it ever acceptable to fake an image in print or online to tell a better story?” “Is it right to publish horrifying images because they tell the story or should there be a limit on what we show our readers?” “Can it ever be right to reveal our sources?” “Are there limits on freedom of information?” There may be no right or wrong answer but these are ethical dilemmas which all journalists face.”

The curriculum content is summarised as follows:

- The regulatory framework
- Taste, decency and sensitivity to readers
- Dealing with sources
- The ethical journalist in a commercial world
- The meaning and causes of censorship
- The role of advertising and public relations in journalism
- Truths, half truths and lies – how far can you go?
- Should there be limits to freedom of information?

The module, led by Sara McConnell, formerly of the Times and the Evening Standard, is assessed through group work presentations and essays. So far as the PCC is concerned, this is at least the second time students have examined it in the course of their studies. The module *Law for Journalists* in second year also includes discussion and analysis of the PCC's work.

BA: Modules addressing ethical and standards issues

Besides modules such as *Multi-Media News Writing*, where ethical issues are addressed in a practical context, a number of other modules are relevant to the Inquiry's interests. Module guides for each are attached to this document. At BA level they are, notably:

Journalism in Context, taken by first-year students. Summary:

"This module aims to introduce students to the main debates and discussions going on in the industry and put these in the context of current and historical commentary in the field of journalism studies. Issues to be debated include: What is journalism? What is news? Who controls it? Is there such a thing as "objective" journalism or do all writers have an agenda? What do we mean by the "professional" journalist and how is journalistic professionalism being challenged by new forms of media such as blogs? Has print journalism got a future? How is journalists' relationship with their readers and their sources changing in the digital age? How much power has the media really got?"

Law for Journalists, taken by all second-year students. Summary:

A good understanding of the law is vital for all journalists today. As UK journalists, you will be working in one of the strictest libel regimes in the western world. This module will cover important elements of libel law relevant to journalists and others working in the media, showing you how easy it is to libel someone in print or online, how expensive it is if you lose and how you can defend yourself against a libel action. You will also be introduced to ongoing debates about the impact of the Human Rights Act on existing privacy legislation and the complex balance of the press's right to freedom of expression against the individual's right to privacy. Other parts of the module will focus on what you can and cannot report from the courts, the structure of

the UK court system, the meaning of contempt of court and the challenges to the contempt rules in the digital age. Assessment will take the form of an exam and a coursework case study.

Current Issues in Journalism, an optional second-year module. Summary: “This module reviews the current state of journalism by examining a series of key issues and their history. Students will explore the political economy of modern journalism and the challenges it faces in the digital age. They will examine the role of technology, proprietors, advertisers and political parties in the creation of newspapers and news websites. Among the questions we will ask are: How are newspapers adapting to revolutionary change in the industry? How is the economics of producing news and comment changing? How is journalism to be funded in the future? Is local news dead? Students will also examine what it means to be a modern journalist. Can the traditional role of reporter or notions of objectivity survive in the digital age?”

The Truth-Seekers: Investigative Journalism from Pulitzer to Palast, an optional third-year module. The module leader, James Morrison, writes: “This module focuses in some depth on ethical questions relating to investigative journalism. Many of the topics/titles that students tackle for their extended essay (worth 50% of their final mark) relate to ethical questions, as do our resulting seminar discussions. A common topic of debate in class (and in essays) is the question of deception and when and whether, for example, going undercover to obtain a story or obtaining information from people by befriending them can be justified. We dwell a lot on the “public interest” versus “of interest to the public” debate and also debate the ethics of tactics including secretly recording people, handling anonymous sources/off-the-record briefings, entrapment and blagging.”

International Journalism, an optional third-year module. Module leader Mary Braid writes: “International Journalism is strongly ethics-based, with ethics considered in everything we study from who decides what is global news (e.g. which countries are neglected and do Western interests dominate the global news agenda?) to the use of local reporters in dangerous parts of the world such as Iraq (they are killed much more often than foreign correspondents living in fortified hotels and compounds) and why is it that we have lower standards of taste and decency when it comes to reporting on far away places?”

Journalism and Diversity, an optional third-year module. Summary: “Not long ago most British journalism was produced for the benefit of a white, male readership, largely by white, male journalists. The culture and the country have changed since then. Journalists, whether they are men or women and whatever their race, class, religion or sexuality, need to communicate with, and address the needs of, people who have different

backgrounds, attitudes and cultures from their own. The aim of this module is to help you think inclusively and to practise journalism with a diverse readership in mind.”

Practical Journalism 1, taken by all but a few third-year journalism students, involves participation in the production of the campus newspaper, *The River*, which was Guardian Student Publication of the Year in 2009-10 and was shortlisted for the same award in 2010-11. An important part of the value of this exercise is to confront students with the ethical challenges and disciplines involved in putting their journalism before a real readership. Many of the routine problems of professional journalism arise: respect for privacy; fairness; public interest justification; taste and decency; right of reply. The readership, which includes the university authorities, is not slow to complain when problems arise. Students edit as well as write (with some supervision) and they must wrestle with these matters. The guide for reporters is attached.

This list is by no means exhaustive. *History of British Journalism, Arts and Entertainment Journalism* and the *Online Revolution* special study module (not available this year because the teacher is on sabbatical) also serve to raise students' ethical awareness. In *Practical Journalism 2*, third-year students have work placements in which they are required to write reflective reviews, and these often involve further consideration of ethical issues. Importantly, the second-year extended essay module *Journalism Research Project* and the third-year *Journalism Dissertation* module, in which students (with some guidance) select their own topics for research, often lead to quite detailed consideration of ethical issues.

Ethics and standards at MA level

This is a one-year course, with the NCTJ diploma at its heart and additional “Kingston” elements to supply the academic Masters degree dimensions. Some modules prepare students for the NCTJ examinations and carry additional teaching and assessments for the MA; other modules are specifically MA-related.

The NCTJ syllabus does not include a discrete ethics module or assessment. Ethics issues are addressed as part of *Journalism and the Law*, which prepares students for the law assessments, and here matters such as the role of the PCC and the Human Rights Act are dealt with. The “Kingston” share of this module develops standards and ethics themes relating to injunctions, judgements and PCC adjudications, and many students choose to write their essay assessments on these subjects rather than strictly legal issues.

Otherwise the ethics content of the course is found in the “Kingston” modules relating to the MA. Students' first experience of the course is a short

introductory module, *Journalism Practices*, which includes a session on ethics focusing on taste and decency. Another module, *The News Business*, directs students towards broad questions in the industry including proprietor power, truth and objectivity, and relationships between reporters and those reported upon. Many students write essays in this field. An important element of the course for students is *Journalism Dissertation* module and here again ethics themes feature largely among the topics chosen.

Hands-On Journalism is the module in which MA students develop their journalism practice, producing a news website. This year the students have launched a local news website, Kingston Chronicle. Students also undertake and reflect on work placements for this module. As with all practical experience undertaken by our students the production of a news website and work placement provide an important and valuable lesson in confronting and dealing with ethical challenges. Reflective practice is a key component of the module and students are required to consider and evaluate their own professional practice as part of the assessment. Working on a local news website means that issues of ethics and standards arise daily and have to be considered and tackled by the students. Taught sessions help them to consider matters of taste, juxtaposition, respect for privacy, public interest and the right of reply. Comments on stories are left open but moderated by the students which is another useful learning tool.

(d) A summary of any published research undertaken within the last decade which is relevant to the terms of reference for Part 1 of the Inquiry.

None of the journalism staff has published academic research relevant to the Inquiry terms of reference, but I have written a good deal in the press and online that relates to the Inquiry remit. The following are links to three items which may be of interest:

“The Real McCann Scandal”, *New Statesman*, 23 October 2008:
<http://www.newstatesman.com/law-and-reform/2008/10/madeleine-mccann-daily-british>

“Code Breakers”, *Index on Censorship*, 30 June 2011
<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/06/code-breakers/>

“The Ordeal of Christopher Jefferies”, *Financial Times*, 8 October 2011:
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/22eac290-eee2-11e0-959a-00144feab49a.html#axzz1evYozTLV>

- (e) The gist of any feedback which you have received from alumni who have worked as journalists in relation to standards and ethics within the media in practice.**

We have not conducted research along these specific lines among alumni. Upon receiving your request we circulated a question on our electronic network but received too few responses to justify any general conclusions. The gist of those we received is that different employers have different standards. One graduate working in the business-to-business magazine market expressed concern about low levels of ethical awareness and the need for ethical training in his workplace, but another in the same sector said he had been impressed by editors' scrupulousness. Another alumnus, working for an upmarket national newspaper, spoke of very high ethical standards. A third spoke highly of standards in the local press, though she was worried about the blurred boundaries of privacy when it came to material available on Facebook. She also remarked: "I think it would be rare for a reporter (especially a new trainee) to refuse to follow an order from the news editor/editor." All spoke highly of the ethics teaching they had received at university, at both BA and MA levels.

2. The documents which you should disclose are:

- (a) Documents outlining the content of your institution's courses relevant to journalism.
- (b) Documents detailing the content of your institution's journalism courses insofar as they relate to standards and ethics.
- (c) Any published research referred to under (c) above.
- (d) Any documented feedback referred to under (d).

Please see the appendix.

3. Additional evidence beyond the statutory requirements being imposed on you by this notice.

It may be of assistance to the inquiry to have some brief observations on the general position of university journalism teaching in this country.

A generation ago the news industry tended to rely on a recruitment model that had itself been in place for more than a generation. Young people, usually school-leavers, gained training positions at local papers, where they

combined on-the-job learning with NCTJ studies, usually at further education institutions. In cases where they worked for larger newspaper organisations they sometimes trained in groups. This training structure, which was endorsed by the National Union of Journalists, provided the principal talent pool for the industry.

This structure now accounts for a small minority of the talent pool. Progressively from the late 1980s many news organisations withdrew from training altogether and others reduced their commitment. A number of factors lay behind this, including the decline of trade union influence, the financial difficulties of parts of the press, and a more general decline in vocational training. The journalism training gap was bridged by private companies and FE institutions teaching the NCTJ courses and also, at first, by university media studies departments. From the 1990s onwards, however, universities increasingly offered degrees in journalism -- that is to say courses that provided instruction in the practice of journalism -- and in 2011 it is fair to say that, in terms of numbers taught, universities now dominate journalism education.

By their nature universities were bound to deliver journalism education in a new way. Especially at undergraduate level they have more time (usually three years) with students, so there is opportunity for greater breadth, but they also consciously add a greater reflective and contextual element -- the subject is often taught in humanities departments. To put it crudely, students think about, and write more essays about, the subject than did their predecessors a generation ago, and many of their essays address ethical issues.

The consequence of the change seen in the past generation has been a generous flow into the employment market of young journalists trained at little or no cost to the industry, who have had rather more formal instruction in matters of ethics and standards than their predecessors. Employers initially greeted this with suspicion, but the period when it was common for established journalists to belittle young journalism graduates as effete and unworldly has largely passed.