STEVE HILL # PAUL LASHMAR

ONLINE JOURNALISM
THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE

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CHAPTER 1

What are the Essential Skills?

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the summer 2011 riots in cities across England, the *Guardian* newspaper embarked on one of its most ambitious interactive projects to date. To try to understand how rumours and speculation to do with the riots spread using social media, the newspaper, in collaboration with a team of academics, examined 2.6 million tweets. The *Guardian* found it was full of outlandish misinformation. There were false rumours that tanks were being deployed by the government and that rioters had broken into London Zoo and were releasing the animals. The *Guardian* produced an interactive visualization on its website that charts how misinformation spreads widely on social media and, more interestingly, how users quickly self-correct false rumours.

The *Guardian*'s Riots Interactive Project is just one example of how journalism is undergoing a radical transformation brought about by the internet and associated digital technology. It is traditional, public interest, verification (fact-checking) journalism for the modern age. It explains a complex topic to a non-specialist audience in a visually appealing and easy to understand way. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003) write in their classic text on media ethics *The Elements of Journalism*, the role of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be 'free and self-governing' and it must be 'independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive'.

However, data journalism is just one way that technology is being used to better inform our audience. In this chapter, we examine a series of new practical and theoretical issues you will need to understand to survive and thrive in the new digital environment. Journalism just became infinitely more interesting.

>>OBJECTIVES<<

In this chapter, you will learn:

- mindset skills for coping with constant change;
- the core principles of journalism;
- how convergence affects our professional lives;
- new forms of journalism including mobile, social and data journalism;
- why it is important that journalists are numerate.

THE MULTIMEDIA MINDSET

Many experienced journalists love newsprint. Newspapers have a smell to them and a tactility that gives the format an emotional appeal. We experience a buzz when we see our work appear on the newsstand, which is very different to seeing work appear on a website.

But newspapers and magazines in print format are expensive to produce when compared with a digital output and their audience is falling. A few exceptional magazines in the UK retain readers while providing very little online content. Satirical magazine *Private Eye* retains a circulation of over 200,000 an issue with a modest internet presence. Some papers have made a unique selling point of being non-digital. The French satirical magazine *Le Canard* (The Duck) states defiantly on its single page website (www.lecanardenchaine.fr), 'Le Canard ne vient pas barboter sur le net'; or to crudely translate, 'The duck does not splash on the internet'. The editor writes that *Le Canard* sees its role to 'inform and entertain our readers with newsprint and ink' and politely points out that readers should pay a visit to their local newsagent to find their favourite magazines.

We love newsprint, but users are increasingly consuming and interacting with content on a range of internet-enabled mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers – the evidence is all around us to see whenever we take a bus or train. Ken Doctor, a US-based media analyst, in a 2011 blog post entitled 'The Newsonomics of Oblivion', warned the newspaper industry that only by adopting a digital-first strategy, where digital media takes priority over paper, and re-organizing themselves to 'scrap old structures, budgets, job descriptions—and, massively, costs', will they have any hope of survival in the new, mainly digital, age.

Simon Waldman (2010), the former head of digital at the *Guardian* newspaper, studied how legacy businesses (companies who have been successful in the pre-web days) have adapted to what he terms the 'creative disruption' caused by the internet. Some companies have successfully re-invented themselves as digital companies. Many, such as high-street retailers like HMV and Blockbuster, have not.

Forward-thinking newspapers and magazines have re-branded themselves as multimedia businesses. Regional newspapers that once came out daily in print are now coming out weekly. The print versions focus on longer opinion and feature articles, which is what print media do best. Meanwhile, online outputs, such as websites and mobile apps (smartphone or tablet computer software applications), are being used to keep users up-to-date with breaking news; this is sometimes known as a digital-first strategy.

A new range of independent news websites have launched with smaller editorial teams and lower production and distribution costs, such as politics site the *Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com). These online-only news outlets are usually run on shoestring budgets compared to those of national newspapers, but they are forcing the mainstream media brands to re-invent themselves. As professional journalists, we

also need to adopt digital working practices and this will involve learning many new skills throughout our careers and adopting a multimedia mindset.

So what is a multimedia mindset?

1 It understands that in our careers as journalists we will face yet more constant, rapid change in our working practices caused by new technologies. We must not succumb to common human emotional responses to change, which include fear, resistance and denial. Instead, we should actively seek out new opportunities that technology affords us to keep our users informed and deliver on our core journalistic principles.

2 We understand that we can learn a lot from those with expertise in computing. We become more employable if we understand just a little bit about computer programming.

3 We understand that we need to be flexible in how we work. There will be periods of time that we will work as a full-time employee for one media publisher and other times when we work on a freelance basis for a number of websites, broadcasters, charities and other employers simultaneously. Our skills as journalists are remarkably transferable. We need to become jugglers and cope with competing demands for our time.

4 We must learn about the media business and how content can be monetized (how it generates revenue). François Nel (2010) from the University of Central Lancashire writes: 'I've argued before that being independent from commercial pressures is not the same as being ignorant of commercial imperatives, and that for journalists to understand the various aspects of the business they're in is crucial.' We couldn't agree more. Our role is simple – we serve our users. Our role is not to serve politicians, members of the public relations industry and certainly not advertisers. However, we don't feel we are tarnishing our journalistic ethics by understanding how journalism generates revenue. It makes us more responsible.

5 We must be numerate and understand statistics. What is it about journalists not being skilled in maths? The joke is that while a journalist can spell 'innumerate', they won't be able to tell you how many letters are in it. Yet numbers are the heart of some of the biggest news stories such as the global financial crash.

6 We must understand the traditions and importance of journalism. We need to understand how the technology works, but it is a means to an end. It is the story that matters most.

What would Google do?

One massively successful digital company is the search engine Google. Although not a media content producer as such, it is a huge distributor of content produced by others and also runs a massively successful online advertising network. Jeff Jarvis in his 2009 book *What Would Google Do?* urges readers to ask themselves the question in the book's title when looking at the challenges we face as journalists. Jarvis refers to a post-information scarcity, open source and gift economy. That's to say we live in an era where journalistic content is easily available to our audience and often for free at the point of consumption.

TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM VERSUS THE MULTIMEDIA MINDSET: A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS?

In the section above, we have highlighted how journalists are adapting to digital working practices. By far the biggest challenge is how we learn the new skills required while retaining traditional journalistic values.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003) list nine key principles which are worth remembering as we contend with difficulties caused by the growth of digital technology:

1 Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2 Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3 Its essence is a discipline of verification (fact checking and accuracy).
4 Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5 It must serve an independent monitor of power.
6 It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7 It must strive to make significant events interesting and relevant.
8 It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9 Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

We need to think how the internet and new digital technologies can make us more efficient at delivering on these nine points and improving our skills at verifying and reporting the facts in explaining complex issues in the most appropriate formats for our audience. Nick Davies, an investigative journalist for the *Guardian* and author of *Flat Earth News* (2008), highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of digital technology. He writes:

> By delivering news electronically, the Internet has the potential to slash the cost of production, reducing or completely removing the heavy costs of printing and distributing conventional newspapers. If those savings were recycled back into the newsrooms, to employ more journalists, we could start to reverse the process which has made the media so vulnerable to Flat Earth News.

The book's title refers to how journalists re-print news that is just as false as saying the world is flat. He outlines how journalists increasingly fail to perform the simple functions of the profession, like the checking of basic information and verifying facts. This is often caused by cuts to newsroom editorial budgets, which means that journalists are having to work faster than ever before. He warns: 'So far, media owners have shown every sign of grasping electronic delivery as yet another chance to cut costs and increase revenue without putting anything back into journalism.'

It's certainly easy to be blinded by techno-optimism. New technology is sold to media companies by computer firms as having almost revolutionary powers. They highlight supposed labour-saving efficiencies, while ignoring potential negative consequences. Media companies have often believed the hype and invested in expensive technology only to find it doesn't do the job. Trade unions representing media workers, such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), say that its members are often placed under immense pressure by their employers to learn new skills and produce stories at an increasingly fast rate.

MULTIMEDIA WORKING PRACTICES

Convergence is one of the most widely used of the numerous multimedia buzzwords currently in circulation and it is likely to affect the way you work. Put simply, convergence describes a coming together of two or more things. So what are these 'things'?

We can view the World Wide Web as being an arena for convergence as it allows us to produce multimedia content news packages that include: text, audio, video, interactive graphics and still images together. Just try getting all of this onto a printed page!

Academic Janet Kolodzy (2006) describes how convergence can improve journalists' storytelling abilities. She writes: 'Convergence refocuses journalism to its core mission – to inform the public about its world in the best way possible. But nowadays, the best way is not just one way: newspaper or television or the internet. The best way is a multiple media way.'

Robert Peston (2009), the BBC's business editor, told the Edinburgh International Television Festival how distinctions between television, radio and print journalists are 'quite close to being obsolete'. He says:

> When I started in journalism, I wrote one or two stories a week on a clunky mechanical typewriter – it was the last century but it really wasn't that long ago. Now I write up to five or six blogs in a single day, I broadcast on the [BBC radio] *Today* programme, the [BBC television] *Ten O'Clock News*, as the broadcasting pillars of my output – and up to 20 or so other channels and programmes in a single day.

Peston is saying that his day-to-day working practices simply reflect what viewers, listeners and web users are doing. Audiences increasingly act in a platform-neutral way. That is to say they really don't care where they obtain their news from – whether it's on a laptop, smartphone, tablet, TV, radio or in print. They move from each platform with ease throughout the day, choosing the most convenient device to engage with news at any given moment. While the PC dominates online news consumption, both mobiles and tablet computers, such as the Apple iPad, are rapidly growing in usage.
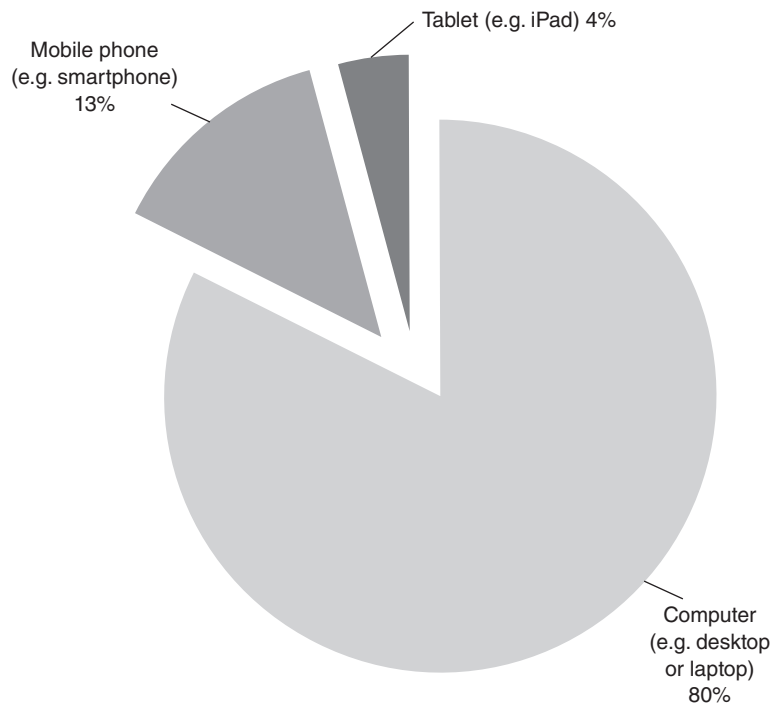

Figure 1.1 In 2012 those who accessed online news mainly did so through desktop or laptop computers, although usage of tablets and smartphones is likely to increase. (Source: Reuters Report, 2012)

Peston concludes: 'What matters is what has always mattered – the facts, the story. The skill for a journalist is unearthing information that matters to people and then communicating it as clearly, accurately – and if possible as entertainingly – as possible.'

Stephen Quinn of Deakin University, Australia, has written extensively on the subject of convergence and lists five types (2005):

- Ownership convergence (sharing of multimedia content within a media organization, such as the BBC)
- Tactical convergence (content sharing arrangements and partnerships that have arisen among media companies with separate ownership)
- Structural convergence (changes in newsgathering and distribution) – as you will see in Chapter 11, newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* have set up convergent newsrooms which allow journalists working on a range of media to work side-by-side
- Information gathering convergence (requires reporters to have multiple skills in using technology)
- Storytelling or presentation convergence (journalists must appreciate the potential of each media platform for content output and interaction)

There are yet more types of convergence. As Janet Kolodzy identifies:

- Technological convergence: Anyone who has used a mobile phone to browse the web, snap a picture, or send a short message service (SMS) knows that mobile feature phones and more advanced smartphones seem to do just about everything. They represent technological convergence as they bring many functions together.
- Economic convergence: Larger media companies seek to buy up or merge with weaker rivals and it's now common to find companies that made their name in print media buying up TV, radio and websites. German media giant Bauer runs 80 influential media brands in the UK. Many of its
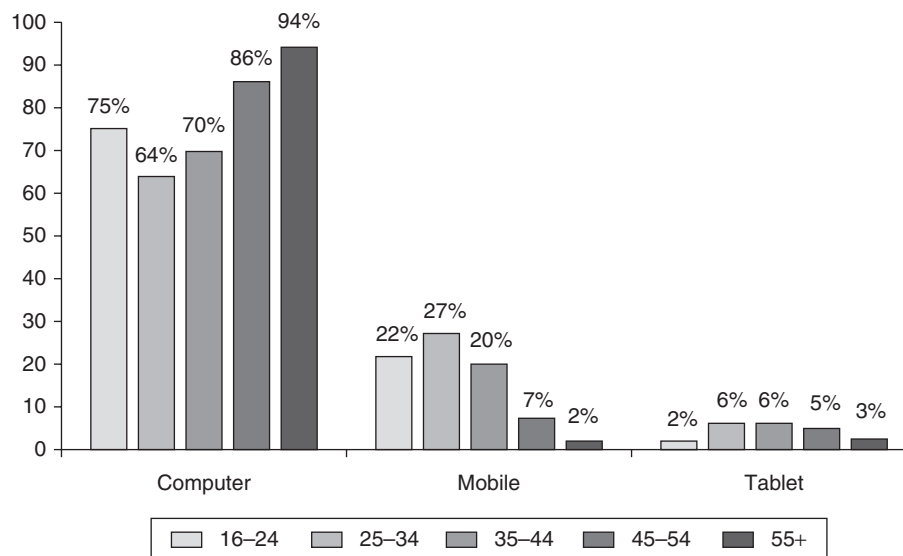

Figure 1.2   Accessing via mobile is most popular among 25–34 year olds – these tend to be young professionals. (Source: Reuters Report, 2012)

magazine titles, including men's lifestyle magazine *FHM*, celebrity magazine *Heat*, and women's titles *Grazia* and *Closer*, were bought from ailing media publisher EMAP in 2008. A large number of these 'magazine' titles have been turned into multimedia brands. For example, *Heat*, which started life as a magazine in 1999, is available today as a digital TV channel, music radio station, website and on mobile.

So convergence is often considered to be healthy for journalists. It makes us more efficient and better reflects the demands of audiences consuming content through multimedia technology. However, there are concerns. When it comes to news journalism, the UK traditionally has had strict controls to prevent one commercial operator from dominating the media landscape. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation bid in 2011 to take over BSkyB was opposed by politicians and commercial rivals due to concerns over a reduction in media plurality and reduced choice for customers. The take over was eventually abandoned. Local World, an alliance of 180 local newspaper titles and 60 websites from former rivals Northcliffe Media and Iliffe News and Media, received approval from the regulators the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) in June 2013. The OFT concluded that the merger would not reduce plurality in the local news market or result in price increases.

Plurality ensures that media power is not held by too few companies. Others argue that to survive in the digital age media companies must be allowed to merge or form alliances. They say that concerns regarding plurality are less important than they once were due to the vast range of diverse opinions represented on news sites and blogs.

MOBILE REPORTING TOOLS

Technology has become cheaper, more portable and easy to use than ever before. Mobile technology such as smartphones and tablets are becoming one of the main ways that users, particularly educated young men, consume journalistic content. It is also used by journalists as a reporting tool to edit and produce content.

A study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2012) discovered that more than 40 per cent of men get news daily on either their smartphone and/or tablet, compared with roughly 30 per cent of women. On tablet computers specifically, men visit news apps and watch news videos online more than women. Women, on the other hand, are more likely than men to use social networks as a way to get news.

The rise of handheld, internet-enabled devices has also led to a new breed of reporter – the mobile journalist. These all-in-one, jack-of-all-trades journalists aim to write content for different media, and can often shoot digital stills and record video and audio.

A basic reporting kit will include:

1 Smartphone: This can be used to shoot basic digital images, audio and high definition video. A range of apps (mobile phone software applications) can be used to carry out basic editing of multimedia material on the phone. At a push, copy (the text of a story) can be written on a smartphone using the tiny onscreen keyboard and emailed to a newsroom or uploaded directly to a news site. If you install the main social media apps, such as Twitter and Facebook, you can post short, breaking news-style headlines online. Oh yes, and we nearly forgot, you can actually use a smartphone to make calls. Indeed, talking to real people remains important as ever!

2 Batteries: Using the smartphone's camera, Wi-Fi or GPS function will kill the battery. Using them all at once and we would not be surprised if your phone dies within 30 minutes. So the golden rule is to pack plenty of spare batteries and a mains charger.

3 SIM Cards: High-speed third generation and fourth generation mobile broadband coverage is patchy at best. If you are sending larger files such as audio and video from a mobile device you may be better off using a free public Wi-Fi hotspot in the area. Most of the large coffee shop chains or fast food outlets offer this to customers.

Case study: Covering the riots of 2011

BBC Radio 5 Live's correspondent Nick Garnett, speaking to Journalism.co.uk (Marshall, 2012), described how he used his smartphone to cover the riots of 2011 in the UK. Covering such events is always dangerous for reporters and in Manchester a radio car was burnt out. Garnett says: 'Using one device I was able to take stills, video, file copy, monitor TV, radio.' He also broadcast live using a voice over internet app called Luci Live (www.luci.eu/) which works a bit like Skype. But it all requires a good mobile broadband signal. 'The most important thing is that you have a good signal. If you don't have a good signal it will go wrong,' Garnett warns.

Figure 1.3   The Flip Video Ultra HD is the video camcorder of choice for mobile journalists; however, a high-quality smartphone can be just as good for video. (Source: Steve Hill)

Mobile journalists have to be multi-skilled and are at least competent in doing many of the jobs that were once carried out by dedicated professionals such as camera workers, sound recordists and photographers (known as snappers, in the trade). They may also have to tweet or live blog from the scene of event and file their copy from the field. It is a fact of human nature that few of us have the skills to be equally proficient in text, images, audio and video. You may feel concerned that by doing all these forms of journalism may mean that none are done very well.

Whatever your personal views on mobile journalism, you should understand and experiment with the functions of your mobile phone. There may be times when this is the only bit of kit you have available on which to file a story.

GOING MOBILE

Mobile smartphone and tablet devices are predicted to become the primary platform for the consumption of entertainment content, leap-frogging both television and the computer screen. In many areas of the developing world where computers are expensive and fixed line broadband not universally accessible, mobile phones are the primary way of accessing online services.

Academics Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) write:

> In India, for example, mobile phones outnumber PCs by 10 to 1. In Thailand, only 13 per cent of the population owns a computer, versus 82 per cent who have access to a mobile phone. It is therefore not surprising that the Pew Research Center Washington-based think tank estimates that by 2020, a mobile device will be the primary internet connection tool for most people in the world.

MOBILE OPERATING SYSTEMS

Smartphones run on an operating system (OS). The two most common OSs are Google's Android and Apple's iOS:

Google's Android: This is a Linux-based mobile operating system for tablets and smartphones. As of June 2012 there were more than 600,000 apps to download in the Google Play store. Samsung and HTC are just a few of the manufacturers whose mobile devices run Android. The first commercially available phone to run it was the HTC Dream in 2008. There are a variety of versions of Android being used 'in the wild' – all with tasty names such as Gingerbread, Ice Cream Sandwich and the current edition at the time of writing, Jellybean. All these different versions cause a headache for Android app developers.

Apple iOS: This runs exclusively on mobile devices made by Apple – that's the iPod Touch, iPhone and the tablet iPad at the time of writing. It is more costly to develop apps for iOS and Apple places strict quality thresholds on developers who submit their progams to the App store.

SMART SMARTPHONE FEATURES

Phones include features that journalists can use for content generation:

- The camera: Mobiles provide a way for both journalists and users to contribute to the news – through tweeting comments and posting photos and video from the scene of live news events. Apps such as CNN's iReport encourage users to post news stories to the CNN website.
- The Global Positioning System (GPS): This allows users to read content, view maps, and access profiles of friends based on their location at any given time. Content can be geo-tagged – which allows information about a users location to appear in tweets and photos, etc.
- The accelerometer: This tool senses movement and gravity and is most commonly used in mobile gaming and in app design.
- Speech recognition: While touch commands remain the primary way of interacting with a phone, tools such as Apple's Siri and Android's Voice Actions allow users to speak common tasks.

APPS FOR JOURNALISTS

Smartphones can act as multimedia production studios for journalists on location. You can shoot, edit and upload video directly into a newsroom production system in just a few easy clicks. In most cases these apps are available in the Google Play and Apple app stores:

Note-taking

Evernote (www.evernote.com) allows you to save notes and images to the cloud from your mobile device and each element of content is made searchable. Cloud computing is an important term that you will see used throughout this book. This is where data is saved on a remote server and users have access to it on any internet-connected device.

Website development

Apps are available for all the main content management systems (CMS) including WordPress, Tumblr, Blogger and Joomla! which we look at in Chapters 9 and 11. These apps allow you to upload content to your website on the go.

Social media

Hootsuite (http://hootsuite.com) provides the ability to post content to the main social media sites and allows for the searching of the posts of others.

Recording interviews

Most phones are able to act as a digital dictaphone to record interviews. SoundCloud (https://soundcloud.com/) and AudioBoo (http://audioboo.fm/) are two options for editing and publishing audio online, and they are discussed in Chapter 5.

Video: recording and editing

iMovie (www.apple.com), a simplified version of the popular video editing software is available only for Apple devices and is discussed in Chapter 6. ReelDirector (http://www.nexvio.com/product/ReelDirector.aspx) and Voddio (http://vericorder.com/solutions/mobile-reporting) are also worth a look.

Broadcasting live using your phone

A smartphone is much cheaper than hiring a satellite truck for a day. Increasingly news organizations use Skype (www.skype.com) for live interviews. But have a play around with dedicated broadcasting tools such as Ustream (www.ustream.tv), Luci Live (http://www.luci.eu/) and Bambuser (http://bambuser.com) for live video streaming from your smartphone.

Photo editing

Most smartphones have basic image editing packages as standard. Adobe's (www.adobe.com) Photoshop and Axiem Systems' (www.axiemsystems.com) Photo Editor apps provide extra functionality.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Business skills are particularly important when working as a freelance journalist. To survive as a freelance you'll need to keep track of income, expenses and profit (or lack of!), and pay your taxes. Compared to the fun of writing stories, doing the business paperwork is a drag. Yet we can't over-estimate how important is to keep on top of this as we discuss in Chapter 10 on entrepreneurial journalism.

A freelance journalist is self-employed and works for a range of different employers. It's likely that you will spend periods of your career working freelance and other times working full-time for just one employer, e.g. as a reporter or editor on a magazine.

One of the fun parts of being freelance is that you can carry out a varied range of work. The types of work that freelance journalists do can include:

1 Creating content: Most large newspapers, magazines and websites will employ journalists on a freelance basis to create content. Most work from home and those with subject-specific specialist skills tend to do well.
2 Shift work: You may be invited do one or two days per week working in a newspaper, magazine or website's office. The type of work is often sub-editing, production or reporting work.

3 Public relations and other corporate work: Public relations agencies recruit journalists to write press releases or create content for corporate in-house magazines and websites. For those looking to build a reputation for independent and honest journalism, this type of work is dangerous territory as it blurs the lines between journalism, PR, marketing and advertising. However, it can be very lucrative work for established journalists.

Your name as a freelance journalist is also your brand name. You can use the internet to build up a loyal following of people who enjoy what you produce. How do you do this?

1 Register your own name as a domain – as a .com or .co.uk. If your real name is quite common it is highly likely that it will have been registered by someone else. In this case, you may wish to adopt a pen name.
2 You will want to create a professional website that advertises your skills, a blog and profiles on all the main social media sites. The aim is to ensure your work can be found on Google and other search engines.
3 Take part in the online debate and contribute comments to blogs in the area you specialize in. Get your name out there and associated with high-quality journalism content online. This is essential for obtaining freelance jobs and improving your prospects of getting full-time work.

INTERVIEW: KIM GILMOUR, FREELANCE JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

1 Which type of work is most personally enjoyable? Or is that purely who pays the most!

A job that pays well is great, but being able to chat to people about a topic I'm interested in such as social networking, digital photography, online music or web design, learning something new that I can share with others, is very rewarding.

2 How do you go about getting jobs?

I was a full-time staffer [in magazines] in both Australia and the UK for about nine years before I entered the world of freelance, so in that time I was lucky enough to have gathered a range of industry contacts. Work comes to me from previous workplaces, or I'd pitch ideas to former colleagues.
It is really a case of who you know sometimes!

3 How has working freelance changed over the years?

Freelancers work from anywhere. All you need is a Wi-Fi connection, a laptop and, most importantly, constant access to strong coffee. But because anyone can set up a blog or tweet their opinions, it's becoming harder to stand out from a global crowd. They have to forge an online personality and engage with people a lot more than before, in order for potential editors (and readers) to trust them.

4 You have worked as a commissioning editor for magazines and a freelancer. What makes for a good story idea?

I often encountered pitches [a writer's description of a potential story to an editor] that were clearly cut-and-pasted and sent to a range of similar publications. Feature editors want exclusive ideas that you haven't pitched to anyone else; ideas that are clearly targeted to their readership.

Figure 1.4   Freelance journalist Kim Gilmour. (Photo credit: John Trenholm)

5   There is a new breed of e-lance sites which some freelancers use to pick up work. Would you recommend them?

The problem with the e-lance sites is that when it comes to writing, you'll probably be working for peanuts, as you'll be competing with people in different parts of the world where £5 for a feature article might be a meaningful day's wage. Either that, or there'll be literally dozens of people competing for the same meagre job as you, in the hope for extra cash.

6   What are your top tips for surviving as a freelance journalist?

Move away from the mainstream. Find a niche interest to write about, follow that and become an expert on that topic.

Use social networking to market yourself and build up a following. Editors will eventually take note of your abilities.

If you're applying for a job or pitching one, the first thing an editor will do is Google you – and it's always a good idea to have something professional come up in the search results.

Get involved with emerging trends in social media like online pinboard Pinterest or social media story-maker Storify. These might end up being fads, but it's always a good idea to register and reserve a decent web address at these places, as they could serve to tie into your overall social networking presence and reputation in the future.

JOURNALISM AS A CONVERSATION

Journalists need to be aware of the changing producer–consumer relationship. This is discussed in the next chapter, but for the time being it is enough to say that audiences increasingly produce as well as passively consume content. You may be able to think of many sites that mix journalistic content produced by professionals with user-generated content (UGC). As the name suggests, UGC is a general term for when non-professionals produce online content. It reflects how technology such as video cameras and blogging tools have become cheaper and easier to use over the years. Sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Flickr are full of user material.

Formally known as the audience

There is a new model of journalism – the social journalist or the social news gatherer that engages with users online on news sites, blogs and social media to generate news tips, research stories and gain feedback. The social journalist's role is to collect, authenticate and reproduce content produced by audiences, particularly content with news value that has been uploaded to social media sites.

Key theorists including academics Jay Rosen and Clay Shirky and technology writer Dan Gillmor have highlighted how journalists need to appreciate that our users often know more than we do about the topics that we write about. Of course, this makes a lot of sense. As journalists, one day we may be writing about homelessness in London and the next poor exam results in local schools. Those in our audience that have direct experience in these areas may clearly have useful information to offer us and the internet allows us access to a wide range of expert opinion. This aspect of social journalism is closely aligned with the concept of collective intelligence and the wisdom of the crowd. If you post a question in an online social forum you may be staggered by how quickly people respond. Social journalism is also related to the concept of collaborative journalism where journalists work with members of the public to research stories.

Skills of a social journalist

So how does this translate to practical skills? Vadim Lavrusik of the website Mashable (2010) writes:

> " To be a social journalist and one that engages in online communities, journalists will have to practice blogging regularly and serve as curators of other content on the web ... Journalists of tomorrow will be participating in the link economy by gathering, synthesising and making sense of other content across the web. "

Content curation is an important term that is used throughout this book. It involves the journalist sorting, categorizing and presenting information from a wide range of sources in a format that is easy for the user to digest. Social journalism contrasts with the traditional producer–consumer, journalist–audience relationship, where journalists were viewed as authoritative figures on the topic they wrote about. For their part, journalists appeared aloof and distant from the audiences that they served. The social journalist is involved in an ongoing conversation with audiences using social media tools.

The rise of social journalism is one of the most significant trends in recent times and best of all it helps us to deliver on those traditional journalism values listed above. The internet makes it so easy to connect with a wide variety of people in the local community who may have expertise that can help improve our reporting.

A positive view of social journalism is that it can help on delivering one of the most important roles of giving a voice to people who traditionally lacked access to the media. A critical view is that often it merely provides pseudo-empowerment to audiences. That's to say journalists give the impression that users can make a difference, yet audiences often remain sceptical.

Academic Clare Wardle (2007) carried out audience engagement studies at the BBC. She found that user participation in news is a minority activity. Contributors were overwhelmingly white, educated, middle-class, and already heavy news users. Typically, they were already activists in the local community, i.e. they had previously written letters to MPs or were members of local political, church or charity organizations.

So a key role for journalists is to encourage involvement in journalism not just from target readers, but also the wider community. It's well worth thinking about how you can involve the readers at every stage of the news reporting and production process as social journalism is likely to become even more important in the future.

DATA JOURNALISM: MORE THAN PRETTY PICTURES

Reporters are swimming in a sea of data as government and other official bodies publish their research online. If you want to know the number of adoptions in the UK, the number of adults with psychotic disorders living in private households or rates of crime down your street you can find it online. In fact, we've moved from information scarcity to information overload. One of the biggest challenges journalists face is how we go about interpreting these statistics so they make sense to our users and this is what data journalism is all about.

Data journalism is closely aligned with computer-assisted reporting (CAR) which has a long history dating back to the 1950s. Often CAR involved a trip to the public library to search government databases, reference books and CD-ROMs. Today, most government data is placed online. Data journalism began receiving attention with the release of data concerning the war in Afghanistan by WikiLeaks in spring 2010. One spreadsheet had over 92,000 rows of data, each one containing a detailed breakdown of a military event in Afghanistan. The *Guardian* and the *New York Times* newspapers brought in large teams to interpret it and seek out stories.

Key data journalism sites

 Data.gov.uk (www.data.gov.uk) – publishes massive amounts of facts and figures from various government departments as well as the Office of National Statistics (ONS) at www.statistics.gov.uk.

 The *Guardian* newspaper has a massive searchable data of statistics from agencies throughout the world at www.guardian.co.uk/world-government-data.

 Data journalism is closely aligned with the work of important organizations such as the Open Knowledge Foundation (http://okfn.org/) and the UK's My Society (www.mysociety.org/) which build applications around government data to make it more easily accessible to the public.

Jonathan Gray et al.'s *The Database Journalism Handbook* (2012) (http://datajournalism handbook.org/1.0/en/index.html) is an invaluable resource. Cynthia O'Murchu (cited in Gray et al., 2012) of the *Financial Times* says:

> "Data journalism is another way to scrutinize the world and hold the powers that be to account. With an increasing amount of data available, now more than ever it is important that journalists are of aware of data journalism techniques. This should be a tool in the toolkit of any journalist: whether learning how to work with data directly, or collaborating with someone who can."

So where do you start when planning a data journalism project? It's frequently based on a hunch that there may be a story in some data that has just been released. Data journalism, like investigative journalism, is rarely an 'easy win'. It takes time to analyse pages of data and may involve a team of journalists working together. So it's well worth thinking about the likely impact of any resulting stories. Will it allow users to better understand a complex story? Will it reveal details of an existing story that was previously unknown? Most data comes in the format of large tables and spreadsheets which are intimidating to our users, so can you present the data, or visualize data, in a format that is searchable to users and easier to interpret? Most importantly,

does your data journalism project have a public interest value? That's to say is it important information that should be available to the public to help them make an informed decision in a democratic society.

It's certainly worth heeding O'Murchu's warning:

> " The exercise should not be about just analysing data or visualizing data for the sake of it, but to use it as a tool to get closer to the truth of what is going on in the world. While numbers can be interesting, just writing about the data is not enough. You still need to do the reporting to explain what it means. "

Journalism is about people and not numbers. Often the best way to explain the importance of a story is to interview someone who has some personal experience.

A data journalist requires an eye for detail and numeracy skills. Data can be inaccurate or missing details, which can in itself be a story. Be suspicious about why certain categories of information in a table are grouped together in the way they are. A simple example from the area of crime statistics is that certain types of crime, such as rape and vandalism, can go under-reported to the police. In some cases the police will target specific offences and the rates of crime can appear to artificially go up for a short while.

Data journalism cases studies

Data journalism can be an intimidating area of study. One of the best ways to start is by analysing successful data journalism projects. The *Guardian*'s datablog (www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog) provides all the full datasets behind its news stories, so users can have a play around with the raw data themselves.

CASE STUDIES

The Detail: How quickly did help arrive?

www.thedetail.tv/issues/72/ambulance-response-times/how-quickly-did-help-arrive-where-you-live

Purpose: Investigate the disparity in ambulance response times to Category A (life threatening) calls made to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service during 2010 and 2011. Obtain data and create a visualization, in this case an interactive Google map that allows users to enter their postcode to determine likely ambulance response times.
Hunch: Ambulance response times have increased, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland, following the closure of accident and emergency units in the area.
Data source: An analysis of response time to 215,349 emergency calls made to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) during 2010 and 2011.

BBC: Student finance calculator

www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14785676

Purpose: Investigate the costs of going to university based on the new tuition fees implemented from September 2012 in England and Wales. The result was an online calculator that allowed prospective students to discover approximately the total costs of the repayment of tuition fees on their likely career earnings.
Hunch: How much students will pay off in loans and interest may vary depending on chosen career and future earnings.

Data source: Uses government-supplied data on the various interest rates charged and repayment periods for tuition fee loans; data from the ONS about average earnings, broken down by sex, age group and career group.

The BBC's student finance calculator presents potentially complex data in a simple to understand format that produces a result that is personalized to the needs of the user. So how does it work? Briefly, at the heart is an assumption that earnings at any age may be estimated by looking at how much the average person at that age, based on particular career groups, would have earned today. The figure is then adjusted for predicted growth in the economy over the user's career lifetime. So clearly the creators are making a few assumptions – most significantly that the economy will grow in size! History tells us that this is likely, but even the best economists can only hazard a guess by how much or when.

The user selects a 'career path' that they would like to take. However, one career category such as 'health' may include a wide range of job roles and frustratingly, data from the ONS includes non-graduate jobs mixed in with graduate positions. Ideally, the data journalist would attempt to 'clean' the data by filtering out non-graduate results to improve accuracy.

Data journalists face these issues all the time and we are not being critical. A key question is always what exactly is being counted in the data set? The second question is always – what data could be missing and has anything (like the fact the economy will improve!) been assumed?

One of the leading users of data journalism is Paul Bradshaw, journalist and academic at Birmingham City University, who lists four important stages of data journalism:

- finding data;
- interrogating data;
- visualizing data;
- mashing data.

It is important to be thorough and sceptical in your approach.

See the companion website for an example of data journalism from the *Guardian*.

TOOLS OF THE DATA JOURNALIST'S TRADE

Spreadsheets

Spreadsheet software, such as MS Excel and Google Spreadsheets, are often at the heart of data journalism and most data will have to be processed using it. Bradshaw recommends that when requesting data, you ask for it to be in a comma-separated values (.CSV) file format. This type of data is stored in tabular plain text format and is easy to import into a spreadsheet for processing. The worst-case scenario is when data comes in a PDF file or in hard-copy format. In both cases, you may need to spend hours inputting figures and this is a recipe for errors to creep in.

Spreadsheets are incredibly powerful tools and it is worth spending a few hours getting to grips with what they can do. Even having a basic understanding how data is imported, sorted, key formulas and how data is outputted visually is a good start and you will find plenty of 'how-to books' for the main packages in your local library. There are added benefits as many freelancers use spreadsheets to monitors their income and outgoings for tax purposes.

Google Maps, Bing Maps and Google Earth

Maps are wonderful tools for visualizing data. What better way to do this than to make a searchable map? The BBC's massive Every Death on Every Road in Great Britain 1999–2010 (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15975720) is a great example. Paul Bradshaw recommends OpenHeat (www.openheatmap.com) as a mapping tool, 'As long as your data is categorized by country, local authority, constituency, region or county'. Advanced data journalists use Google Fusion Tables to host, manage, collaborate on, visualize and publish data tables.

Yahoo! Pipes

Yahoo! Pipes (http://pipes.yahoo.com/pipes) allows you to aggregate (bring together) feeds and mash-up information from around the web. When it comes to web development (as opposed to music!), a mash-up is where data or functionality is combined to create a new service that makes data more useful to the user. They often use application programming interfaces (APIs). Many social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, publish their APIs to allow web developers to create new applications that integrate with user data on social media sites.

The Pipe beneath allows a search to be done on Yahoo! News and Google News for a celebrity's name. It is possible to create a live feed of news about a particular celebrity and this could be added to your website or blog.
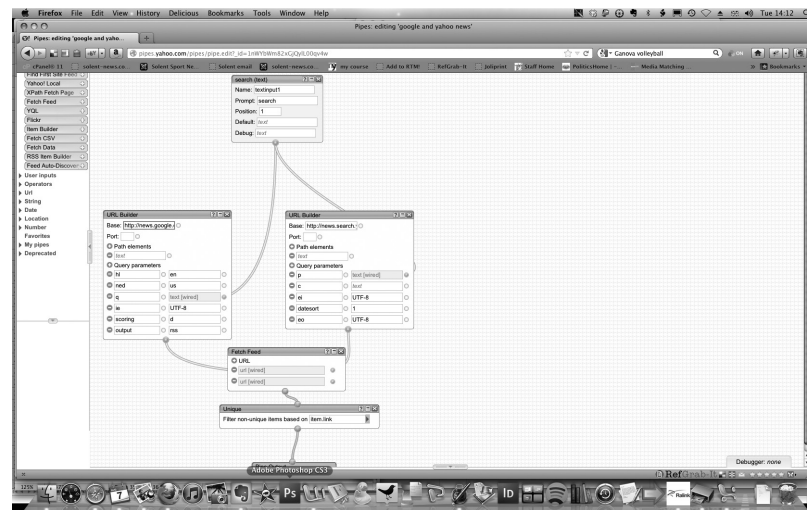

Figure 1.5   An example of a Yahoo! Pipe allowing a search to be done on a celebrity's name. (Source: Yahoo!)

See the companion website for more tips for understanding figures.

>>Summary<<

1 Faced with declining circulations and what Simon Waldman refers to as 'creative disruption' brought about by the internet, many newspaper companies have undergone a process of re-invention. Most have streamlined their operations to make digital output the core of their business.
2 Technological change is constant. We must understand that in our careers we will have to re-main flexible and invest in life-long learning.
3 Despite technological change, the core journalist skills of unearthing information that matters to people and then communicating it as clearly, accurately and, if possible, entertainingly re-main as important as ever.
4 There is a new model of journalism – the social journalist or the social news-gatherer. These journalists engage with users on news sites, blogs and on social media to generate news tips, research stories and gain feedback.
5 With an increasing amount of data available, now more than ever it is important that journal-ists are aware of data journalism techniques.

EXERCISES

1 Invite an editor or journalist from a local newspaper to discuss how the use of the internet and digital technologies has affected professional working practices in news production.
2 Data journalism can be an intimidating area for the novice, so start by choosing any data set to do with crime or health statistics from Data.gov.uk (www.data.gov.uk) and consider how you will make the information relevant or searchable by your users.
3 Use only your smartphone to file your next story. Using the free Wi-Fi in a local coffee shop or bar, see if you can file copy, images, video and audio to your website. How easy was it to work using just your smartphone? Make notes of any problems or challenges you faced in the process. (We strongly sug-gest you take a spare battery or charger for your phone when out on this assignment!)

FURTHER READING

Briggs, Mark. 2012. *Journalism Next*, Washington: CQ Press.
    A practical guide, including step-by-step instructions, to digital reporting and publishing.
Gray, Jonathan et al. 2012. *The Data Journalism Handbook*. Open Knowledge Foundation.
    Comprehensive guide to data journalism. Available for free under creative commons licence.
Jarvis, Jeff, 2009. *What Would Google Do?* London: Collins.
    The *Guardian* newspaper media contributor asks the simple question, 'What would Google do?', when examining the challenges brought about by the internet.
Kovach, Bill and Rosenstiel, Tom. 2003. *The Elements of Journalism*. London: Atlantic Books.
    An essential book for all journalists on media ethics. It lists nine key principles of good journalism.
Peston, Robert. 2009. Peston's Picks: What Future for Media and Journalism? Available: www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/robertpeston/2009/08/what_future_for_media_and_jour.html [8/31/2011]
    Raises numerous points for class discussion about the changing role of journalism.