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The tentative hell-raisers: identity and mythology in contemporary UK press journalism

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Introduction

On 28 August 1995 the editor of a small circulation magazine (albeit the then leader in its limited field of UK men's magazines) died suddenly, aged 38. Michael VerMeulen had a reputation as a prodigy and was acknowledged to be highly skilled. He was also famous for his hard living and attracted strong emotion, both for and against. Yet this middling media player was the subject of obituaries in all four UK broadsheet national daily newspapers — some supported by further features — as well as a moralizing page in the mid-market leader, the *Daily Mail*. VerMeulen's death 'almost by implosion' even inspired an emotional feature headed 'We're hacks and not gentlemen' by Peter Preston, highly respected editor and then editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* for nearly 20 years (*The Guardian*, 1 September 1995). *The Guardian* is centre-left and progressive; not be a term of abuse. Yet a reckless drinker, smoker, hard drugs-user and womanizer is being celebrated: 'the rowdy, rolling man from Chicago, driving relentlessly in the office, goading and bingeing when he paused' (*The Guardian*, 1 September 1995). Why? Evidently something else was going on. I argue that Michael VerMeulen embodied press journalists' fascination with extravagant personalities — *monstres sacrés* — and that his dramatic early death also provided 'permission' to express the accumulated anxiety and nostalgia generated by the intensifying pressures and disruptions in UK press journalism.

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New Screen
cultures



The enduring significance of the working world

Everett Hughes (1958: 48) wrote of 'the personal and social drama of work ... the arrangements and devices by which men [sic] make their work tolerable, or even glorious to themselves and others', yet in recent years little academic attention has been paid to what used to be called occupational communities or ideologies, either theoretically or in the form of ethnographies of particular trades. This can be explained by the conjunction of a number of factors: the preoccupation with sweeping systemic concerns like deindustrialization and globalization; the sheer lack of research funds to get among the workers; the collapse of highly skilled and organized sectors of 'traditional' male employment which provided rich material — for instance mining, deep-sea fishing, even the car industry (Beynon, 1973; Goldthorpe et al., 1968; Dennis et al., 1956; Tunstall, 1969); perhaps also a glum assumption among academics that strong work identities have vanished along with the life-long career. Having a job, let alone choosing your job or getting satisfaction from your job, has been ideologically reconstructed as a privilege. This said, it remains a curious lacuna, given the intense interest in identity under conditions of post-modernity (or late or high modernity), as it is undeniable that employment remains a crucial part of self-identity. Even writers specifically pursuing a structural analysis, like Sarfatti Larson in her well-known deconstruction of professions as a discrete social formation, freely acknowledge that aspects of workplace culture are incorporated into the self: 'All occupations which involve special skills and special worlds of work shape to some extent the worker's personality of self-presentation' (Sarfatti Larson, 1977: 228; emphasis in the original). Moreover, both those who enthuse about the freedom from tradition and hierarchy under postmodernism and those who interpret it merely as the latest spasm of capitalist development come together in Giddens's observation that now 'the self ... has to be reflexively made' and that 'the reflexive project of the self ... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives' (Giddens, 1991: 3, 5).

For Giddens this labour is not undertaken playfully, part of revelling in impermanence or the potential for a portfolio of selves. It is, crucially, driven by the search for ontological security and the containment of anxiety. 'In the settings of modernity ... the altered self has to be explored as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change' (Giddens, 1991: 33). This reverberates perfectly with newspaper journalism, an occupation where the expectation that participants will be completely identified with their calling currently coexists with extreme turbulence in both technology and employment security. Journalists are enthusiastic (auto)biographers, mythmakers and myth-feeders. Since their accounts frequently call upon a stock of allegedly

shared values and characteristics, implicitly invoking an occupational community. I explore the features of such territories, and why they exist and persist.

Drawing on his *locus classicus* of 1974, Salaman encapsulates the occupational community as a social grouping,

... within which members establish at least an element of their total identities, share a work-based morality (what things are and should be, who is a hero, who a villain; which contains shared myths and knowledge) and interrelate more intensely and meaningfully than they do with outsiders. (Salaman, 1980: 73)

As he points out, this does not necessarily require shared geographical location or out-of-hours contact. Indeed occupational communities — as Goode's (1957) classic article implies — are among the early exemplars of Giddens's 'disembedding' and 'time-space distanciation'. This is well illustrated by Salaman's reference to professional musicians, whose pattern of life bears a striking resemblance to that of news gatherers and news processors in broadcast and daily print news media. Salaman (1980: 76) goes on to identify several characteristics of occupational communities: that members 'do not attempt to separate their work and non-work lives ... they prefer to be friends with people who do the same work'; that their self-image is centred on their occupational role; and that they share 'a world of values' about what the work is and how it should be done.

Under what circumstances do some occupations develop these characteristics? Salaman (1980: 77) identifies three factors: that workers are subjectively involved in work tasks 'often concerned with skill, danger or excitement'; 'some degree of marginality which makes relationships with outsiders undesirable or difficult'; and the "'inclusiveness" of the work setting ... which tends to create boundaries around those who work together'. One consequence of this is that 'the existence of an occupational community means that changes at work matter greatly to members of the community ... and that members are more likely to resist such changes' (Salaman, 1980: 78; emphasis in the original).

All these features are observable in news journalism. Being a journalist is held to be a vocation, to which practitioners have a passionate, almost compulsive — even if ambivalent — attachment. Rarely stated in these terms, it is nevertheless a repeated theme of biographical accounts (see, for example, Brown, 1995; Coles, 1996; Jameson, 1989; Neil, 1996) and a rumbling subtext of trade publications like *Press Gazette*. However, especially in the contemporary UK, journalists do not feel themselves to be held in high public esteem. It is a very marginal occupation, its outsider qualities intensified at the level of belief by the lingering attachment to 'impartiality' and 'objectivity' and in daily behaviour by having to carry out unpopular tasks. At one moment and sector of the market this can mean attracting the wrath of politicians for uncovering 'sleaze' in the

(increasingly rare) mode of 'investigative journalism'. Equally, it can mean 'monsterring' some formerly anonymous person caught up in a sexual imbroglio or high-profile criminal case — that is, being part of a sustained effort to collect information by every means: the long-lens, door-stepping, trawling round family and friends, sifting through dustbins. (See Chippindale and Horrie, 1990, for the *Sini*'s preeminence in this.) In terms of work organization, the inwardness of daily journalism has been well documented, classically Tunstall (1971) on the press and Schlesinger (1987) on broadcast news. Out of the office, news gatherers work long and erratic hours. Most of their locations are temporary and their interactions transient — unless they are senior specialist correspondents, an expensive and shrinking cadre. Those who process news for the final product, subeditors and editors, can lead even more hermetic lives. For a morning paper, the work will routinely continue until near midnight.

Occupational identity and community is, however, neither simply subjective, nor the inevitable fallout of a particular historic moment and structural location. It is a dynamic that sustains participants and mediates their relationship to other institutions and groups. Bourdieu captures this intangible but powerful quality of investment of self as the 'illusio': 'the adherence to the game ... is worth being played, being taken seriously' (Bourdieu, 1996: 333; cited in Albertsen, 1996). Applying this to architecture, Albertsen (1996) makes a number of observations which throw up surprising and illuminating parallels with news journalism. Architecture, too, has powerful occupational myths about how its members look, think and function: it is a conventional joke that fellow professionals can spot each other instantly by dress and demeanour. Whether 'true' or not, this belief is an important part of the 'illusio'. Both in Denmark (Albertsen, 1996) and in the UK (Levine, 1996), architects exist uncomfortably at the intersection of pure aesthetics and raw financial logic. The same contradiction is obvious for journalists: as architecture is to the plastic arts, so journalism is to literature. Both occupations justify themselves by their creative capacity but practitioners actually spend much of their time in routine — even dull — activity at the drawing board or attending yet another news conference. There is even a parallel in the fundamental disjunction between the hopes of recruits and the life they actually lead. Entrants to architecture hope to design a famous building and supervise its construction (Levine, 1996). Would-be journalists expect to be mingling with the famous and infamous while exposing major wrong-doing. Real life is, respectively, producing cautious, formulaic buildings to a tight budget and 'standing up' a story for which both the topic and the resources available are determined by a superior — and for which you may get no visible credit: 'a treadmill and a hard grind for most reporters', according to a very well-known columnist (Toynbee, 1996).

In one crucial respect, however, architecture and journalism are fundamentally different. While architecture is highly competitive, both for the work available and for prestige, the conflict is at the level of firms. Inside the organization, architecture is necessarily a team effort. Most news journalism, by contrast, not only takes place in an environment of intense commercial competition but the job is constructed so as to pit colleague against colleague (Morrison and Tumber, 1988; Tunstall, 1971). Hence architectural myths are tribal, while those invoked by journalists centre on lone hunters, larger-than-life individuals.

The old dream: 'What you want to be is Ernest Hemingway ...'

... amazingly adventurous travels at someone else's expense, covering wars and revolutions, with mistresses in five continents. That's the dream', according to Stewart Steven (*Journalists' Week*, 14 September 1990). In this typical piece of trade press personalia the key components of journalists' occupational mythology are captured: the need for excitement and the unexpected; being self-made (in this case 'walking out' of higher education); the opportunity and capacity to work autonomously. That the subject was, at the time, editor of the petit bourgeois, morally conservative and highly Conservative *Mail on Sunday* simply underscores the pervasiveness of the belief system.

'News' is not easily defined but for my immediate purposes it is sufficient to define it as axiomatically concerned with change, sometimes spectacular and unexpected. (How these 'events' are discovered, defined, framed — even managed — is not relevant here.) The idea of journalism is thus intertwined in the minds of professionals and the public with drama and excitement. Tuchman (1978) famously identified one of journalists' core values as 'What a story': the unexpected event which bursts on to the news agenda and disrupts work in a way so memorable that it enters the stock of folk knowledge. So constitutive is the drama/excitement of news that routines may be geared to its maintenance, rather than its reduction, as the Glasgow University Media Group (1976: 66–7) observed in relation to television news. No doubt the lionization of foreign correspondents is rooted in their guaranteed contact with the exotic, as well as their relative freedom of action, discussed below in relation to autonomy.

The theme of being 'self-made' — that is, having achieved significantly without possessing either an advantageous family background or formal qualifications — is a constant in journalistic biography, particularly for senior figures in the local press and popular tabloid national daily and Sunday papers.¹ This motif is rooted in fact: it used to be customary — and

is still possible — to start work on a local newspaper at 16 years old and to move either into the senior echelons of the provincial press or to a national news medium as direct employee ('staffer') or as freelance writer or subeditor.

The perceived salience of 'starting at the bottom', and the consequent tendency to foreground some biographical details while obscuring or neutralizing others, is vividly illustrated by the career of Kelvin MacKenzie, the high-profile editor of the *Sun* during its most coruscating phase. According to Chippindale and Horrie (1990: 74–8) MacKenzie was 'a social diver rather than a social climber' who played down his education at a well-known London direct grant (part-private) school which he left with an O-level in English Literature — not woodwork as he is said to claim. Moreover both his parents were very successful local press journalists.

Interestingly, this 'success despite respectable origins' trope reappears in Taylor's account of Trevor Kempson 'one of the most respected reporters in tabloids' (Taylor, 1992: 290) who left Merchant Taylor's School to join a small Devon paper but 'bought his first Jaguar when he was twenty-three' for cash (1992: 288). Gerry Brown, another well-known freelance reporter and who dedicates his book to Trevor Kempson writes 'I was born in Glasgow ... in the old slums they called the Gorbals' (Brown, 1995: 43). Brown then illustrates the powerful notion of vocation by, paradoxically, a detailed description of how his entry into journalism came about — literally — by accident. The quintessential 'East End boy made good', Derek Jameson, declares 'I came from the bottom of the heap, the product of a slum with little education' (Jameson, 1989: viii). Again, the complexity behind the mythmaking emerges — tough presentation; acute self-doubt. Jameson's career was temporarily devastated when he unsuccessfully sued the BBC for libel after being called 'East End boy made bad' in a satirical radio programme (Jameson, 1989 Chs 1–3). Similar ambivalence is shown by John Cole, whose 'political memoirs' (Cole, 1996) of a career moving through local journalism in Belfast to political editor of *The* (Manchester) *Guardian*, deputy editor of *The Observer* and finally political editor for the BBC frequently reflect his self-consciousness of being an autodidact.

Manifestly reciprocal with the positive value attached to being self-made is the near obsession with autonomy. This takes a number of forms: epistemological individualism; the high status of work relatively free from control either editorially or by sources; and — in a more intellectually attenuated but very pervasive version — the particular veneration for 'characters'.

That journalists tended towards 'Rooted and consistent individualism' well before its promulgation by recent neo-liberal Conservative governments was identified by Golding and Middleton (1982) in their exploration of media representations of social work and welfare. In an interview,

Melanie Phillips, then a contributor to the centre-left *Guardian* says: 'I have never been a claimant ... It would mean I had no initiative to find a job' (Golding and Middleton, 1982: 142–3). The sense of creating one's own fate is reinforced in much of news gatherers' daily life — quite apart from the rampant political individualism of many newspapers. Reporters are required to compete at every level; to be given worthwhile assignments; to have their story used at all; to escape evisceration at the subediting stage; to have their piece given reasonable space and position in the paper; to have a byline on it (Bevins, 1990; Ericson et al., 1987; Morrison and Tumber, 1988). As we have seen, many of the 'Fleet Street legends' were actually self-employed freelancers. Even where journalists are conventional employees, there are entrenched traditions of adding to the day job by casual subediting ('shifting') for rival papers or acting as a 'stringer' (being the local contact for a national news medium).

One of the main themes of Tunstall's landmark *Journalists at Work* is the status order within news organizations. Current anecdotal evidence from biography and the plentiful media trade talk suggests that little has changed. Essentially the less answerable, the higher the status, classically embodied in foreign and war correspondents but also, on a rather different plane, successful freelancers (see above). This is in marked contrast to specialisms like sports and motoring which are seen by fellow professionals as compromised — even contaminated — by their close relationships with sources. This is particularly ironic, given that sport is vital to revenue, both directly through sales and indirectly through advertising. Permanent foreign staff, on the other hand, are a serious financial drain on news organizations, only maintained where market niche makes them essential.

The heroic image of the foreign correspondent is not, of course, without elements of reality. Recent 'messy' wars like that in the former Yugoslavia have led to many deaths and injuries among journalists. For most, however, there is no such risk and the status derives from the absence of close control by either editor or subject. Another demonstration of autonomy is playing the 'fearless crusader'. In the UK, however, the press can call neither upon formal constitutional rights nor a customary standing as the 'fourth estate'. This potential role is thus very circumscribed, but emerges in two contexts. The first is 'investigative journalism', when journalists (or news organizations) have not only developed an issue, but originated it, sometimes against stiff opposition. Like foreign correspondence such work is expensive and increasingly rare. Its symbolic significance is demonstrated by the intraprofessional celebration when it succeeds, as, for example, a senior *Times* journalist's praise of the boldness of *The Guardian's* exposure of political 'steaze' (*The Times*, 2 October 1996), despite the papers' intense market rivalry and political opposition. Inevitably, this kind of reporting will be a team effort; individually journalists dream of their own exclusive or scoop.

Rather than national newspapers, however, it is local newspaper editors and staff that regularly claim a significant role in the democratic process. Historically this concentrated on the reporting of local court proceedings and local politics. The routine aspects of this coverage are now condemned by editors as boring. Instead the search for all-important reader identification is being pursued by increased local editions and micro-local 'neighbourhood news', often supplied by volunteer correspondents. There is also a growing tendency towards raucous, populist reader-interactive campaigns in which a stand can be made against 'them'.

Given the actuality of contemporary press journalism — to be explored in more detail in the next section — perhaps it is inevitable that much of the desire for 'autonomy' emerges in the more stunted form of extravagance in individual behaviour. Accounts of the life and times of editors or those of equivalent rank have a curiously predictable quality. To be 'larger than life' appears to be compulsory. In detail the prescribed behaviour is quintessentially macho, involving any permutation of drinking too much, smoking too much, working too much, turbulent personal relationships and bodily excess: in violence of temper, in capacity for sustained shouting, in profanity of language, in appearance.

To date no national daily newspaper (a key site of perceived political influence) has been edited by a woman. Since 1987, however, several women have edited national Sunday papers.² This startling new species was identified as the 'killer bimbos of Fleet street' by a BBC documentary (Dougarty, 1994: xiii). Then and now they are portrayed as qualifying for the position by their ability to match the lads' behaviour — and with additional excess in big hair, big breasts and big jewellery. The first woman editor Wendy Henry is actually described as 'larger than life' in *The Guardian* (21 November 1989) as well as 'loud'. Amanda Platell is a 'workaholic' (*The Guardian*, 1 February 1993; *The Independent*, 26 May 1993). Bridget Rowe (*Journalists' Week*, 21 September 1990) is 'used to getting her own way', is good at sacking people, shouts, works long hours. Of the men, Taylor (1992: 289–92) writes with awe of Trevor Kempson's temper, drinking and sexual exploits. Jameson (1989: 192) admits to being a workaholic. A 1990 profile of Charles Wilson (*Journalists' Week*, 1 February 1991) speaks of his 'street fighting skills', 'histrionics, the cursing and shouting' and ability to administer 'bollockings', a talent shared by Alex Leys in the provincial press (*UK Press Gazette*, 24 July 1995) and — of course — Kelvin MacKenzie.

MacKenzie would rage and rant ... as the bollockings continued bets were taken on when they would start — would it be from the moment MacKenzie stepped out of the lift?, from the fire bucket in the corridor?, as he smashed through the swing doors? (Chippindale and Horrie, 1990: 88–9)

Naturally, editors of broadsheet newspapers have to demonstrate their charisma differently. Charles Moore, for example, speaks in a 'patrician staccato' and is studiously anachronistic (*The Guardian*, 14 February 1994).

The lead story of *UK Press Gazette* on 5 September 1994 was headed 'Bulldog Hitchen savages Sunday', an account of how the new editor of the *Sunday Express* had marked his first day by 'savagely shanking up' the paper — wholesale sackings. He is pictured at his desk, clutching a large cigar. Hitchen went on, notoriously, to condemn his predecessor in extravagant terms: 'It was all glitterati and rich-white-trash' (*UK Press Gazette*, 27 March 1995). But if he appears to personify the classic style his fate also defines the new realities. Fifteen months later he was retired, to be replaced by a woman (Sue Douglas). She lasted only nine months before being summarily sacked (while on holiday) as part of a rationalized 'seven-day operation', so the *Daily* and *Sunday Express* would be produced largely by the same people, an arrangement called — presumably without irony — 'Team Express'.

The new actuality: soft news and sackings

During the 1980s changing technology and working practices encouraged a conventional wisdom that neither national nor local newspapers were as threatened by broadcast media as had been expected. Newspapers cheerfully redefined themselves as providing features and background to radio and television's cataloguing of immediate events. Since about 1990, however, the market has become even more intensely competitive in response to a number of coinciding factors: economic recession, with its severe impact on advertising revenue; a shrinking market also caused by recession, plus the apparent loss of the newspaper-reading habit among younger people; the expectation of increased competition from television with the multiplication of national channels and the potential of cable to provide genuinely local programming for the first time; the sudden and exponential growth in other, more interactive forms of electronic communication — the Internet and developments in telephony; even a sharp rise in paper prices (see Tunstall, 1996, for a comprehensive review).

The corporate landscape of the press is now in constant flux. As a crude measure, I sampled the first five news stories plus the leading editorial in the *Press Gazette* for the first edition of each month from July 1995 to June 1996 (a total of about 70 items). News of acquisitions, mergers, 'shake-ups', job losses and resignations/sackings outnumbered those of launches or expansions by 27 to 16. Inevitably all this has had an adverse impact on the daily life of news media workers. *Jourissance* is in very short supply: 'entire management teams now manage London newspapers in a much more aggressive, macho manner' (Tunstall, 1996: 79); 'it is now a

treadmill and a hard grind for most reporters. Fear of being the next rationalisation means working all the hours there are, turning over the copy like meat from a mincer' (Toynbee, 1996).

Much of news gathering and news processing has always been a matter of bureaucratically controlled routine — as ethnographies like Coitelle (1993), Ericson et al. (1987, 1989, 1991), the Glasgow University Media Group (1976), Schlesinger (1987) and Tunstall (1971) all demonstrate. Now, however, cost cutting is smothering many of the remaining opportunities for even limited excitement in news gathering. One part of this process is the displacement of so-called 'hard news' in newspapers by 'soft' news and background, much of it supplied by freelance feature writers and columnists. Newspapers are turning into lifestyle magazines, further encouraged by the significance of weekend sales and the universal search for more women readers. (This is not, of course, an ideological conversion but a recognition of women's increased control of disposable income.) Careful reading of the news pages of the daily national press reveals a second trend, 'passive' news gathering: the increased use of agencies for every kind of news — foreign, provincial, court proceedings, celebrity/show business; the use of promotional material of all kinds — rewritten news releases, attendance at staged events, briefings and news conferences; material borrowed from other media more or less shamelessly; the heavy use of predictably productive news beats, notably related to law and order. Much journalism, it is said, is now done without leaving the office. And where reporters do venture out, it is often in response to material thoughtfully provided by the all-pervasive 'promotional culture' (Aldridge, 1996; Wernick, 1991) ranging across politics, commerce, industry, the state sector, non-government organizations and pressure groups of all types and sizes. Postmodern sensibility means knowing how to make yourself newsworthy. If 'What a story' (Tuchman, 1978) was always problematic, given overstretched resources it is now almost unmanageable.

Since the sites of potentially heroic journalism are the most expensive, they have been among the most affected by cost cutting. Permanent foreign staff have been reduced and substituted by material from stringers and news agencies — where there is coverage at all. The 'red top' market sector of mass tabloids is notoriously chauvinistic. Apart from the imputed direct appeal to readers, it has the additional commercial advantage of narrowing international news to extensions of 'us' — the USA and the (principally old) Commonwealth countries.

Investigative reporting, too, is now more wistfully written about than practised because of the costs in staff time and, no doubt, potential legal risks/costs. Among the broadsheets examples are rare enough to be reflexively newsworthy, for example, *The Guardian's* coverage of the 'cash for [parliamentary] questions' furore and the *Financial Times's* painstaking

and possibly decisive anatomizing of the late Robert Maxwell's financial affairs in 1991. Despite its reputation for salaciousness, the real strength of the *News of the World* was its long tradition of investigations (Brown, 1995; Taylor, 1992). This, too, has been displaced by the more cost-effective celebrity scandal genre which can often be acquired off-the-peg as a 'buy-up' from a willing informant or self-promoting author.

Having survived the expansion of advertising-financed 'freeshets', many editors are arguing that the local and regional press can meet new forms of competition by refocusing on their immediate area. However, this civic concern may be as commercially constrained as national media in pursuing unconventional issues and angles. Relying as they do on maximum readership in their sales area, local newspapers cannot afford systematically to alienate whole swathes of potential buyers by indiscriminate political partisanship. The consequence is cautious tracking of perceived reader responses often followed — if an issue ignites — by strident 'commonsense' populism in which complexity, statute, civil rights, and so on are marginalized. One such episode was the Nottingham *Evening Post's* campaign to keep a number of county council elderly persons' homes open (Aldridge, 1994: Ch. 4). Here a complicated tale of local government finance and central government benefits policy was transformed into pure human interest with banal images of distressed elderly people. More recently the *Manchester Evening News's* (sister paper of *The Guardian*) self-righteously named a convicted paedophile living in the area. This initiative was, apparently, linked to the Bournemouth *Evening Echo's* scheme 'to keep a register of convicted paedophiles and to name them in the paper on a regular basis' (*Press Gazette*, 6 September 1996). Other papers have followed suit in what is clearly a very economical enterprise when the limited resources required to collect the facts are measured against the potential drama of the consequences. In the Manchester case, 'After the story was published, six men hired a taxi and went to the man's home to trash his car' (*Press Gazette*, 6 September 1996).

Despite the quotidian reality, the flow of would-be journalists has never been greater. Today, however, many are graduates. According to Delano and Henningham's (1995: 13) estimate, 'In 1995 ... 69% of British journalists have attended university or college, even though fewer than that graduated. Only 4% of journalists had no standard secondary education qualification.' In a Guild of Editors survey 70 percent of trainees described themselves as middle class (*UK Press Gazette*, 6 March 1995). This tendency may, ironically, have been intensified by the readiness of major employers to abandon their internal training schemes during the late 1980s recession (*UK Press Gazette*, 13 March 1995). The tenacity of the belief that journalism is a vocation requiring innate talent, rather than learned skills, is illustrated by the vehement debate in the trade press about

the value — or not — of college-based training courses, even where staffed by practitioners and successful in placing their graduates (Cole, 1996).

Editors, too, are becoming further credentialized. All but one current broadsheet editors are graduates (Oxford and Cambridge three each; Bristol and York universities one each). In the mid-market the only non-graduate is ex-public school, while all the male mass tabloid editors appear to have attended academically-oriented schools (*The Guardian*, 9 September 1996).

What of the vaunted and longed-for editorial and journalistic autonomy? Here, too, tight control coupled with instability of employment cascades down. Interventionist, fear-inducing proprietors have always figured both in newspaper folklore and reality (Coleridge, 1993; Curran and Seaton, 1991; Neil, 1996). Currently, News International papers and the *Telegraphs* are subject to direct proprietorial influence over general policy and specific content, while the more corporate style of Mirror Group Newspapers and the *Express* and *Mail* managements is no less fierce in its editorial and financial outcomes. Only *The Guardian/Observer* and the *Financial Times* have a more arm's length relationship between parent company and day-to-day running — and whether this would survive a weakening in their market position is doubtful. This has produced what Tunstall (1996: 116) describes as the rise of the 'entrepreneurial editor', who is expected to produce a financial return at least as much as a satisfying product. Even Will Hutton, well known for his progressive views, had to carry out a round of sackings as one of his first acts as editor of *The Observer*.

Nor have editors been merely the agents of job insecurity: seven of the ten editors of national daily papers have been replaced since the beginning of 1994, as well as the arbitrary closure of *Today* by Rupert Murdoch despite its modest success. Among the nine national Sunday newspapers, eight editorships have changed during the same period — several more than once. Max Hastings, highly successful editor of the *Daily Telegraph* from 1986 to 1995, was notorious for his insouciance about proprietorial control, saying that it would be curious for an owner to appoint an editor who did not share his views (see, for example, Coleridge, 1993: 314). Hastings discovered about 'living by the sword' when Conrad Black decided that the *Telegraph* was moving too far from its hard-right traditions and sacked him.

A number of observations have already been made about the further fragmentation of journalistic employment in an occupation where casual and freelance work are traditional — although formerly socially constructed as freedom. One aspect of this personal flexibility was that conditions of employment, whether on a payroll or self-employed, were buttressed by strong union organization. Tunstall summarizes contemporary national newspaper journalism as harshly stratified. There are, he argues, about 'perhaps 300' who are secure and successful, supported by about 2000 'journos' and an ever increasing 'reserve army' of aspirers to staff

posts who subsist on part-time, casual and freelance earning or, if they are fortunate, in magazine journalism (Tunstall, 1996: Ch. 8). The National Union of Journalists (NUJ), meanwhile, is now 'effectively broken as a significant force' (Tunstall, 1996: 141). Journalism, according to Tunstall, now resembles acting: at any one time many self-designated members of the profession are 'resting'.

Another dimension of the recent transformation of employment patterns is the closing off of movement between market sectors, both at national level and from local/regional to national media. During 1995 and 1996 the provincial press also underwent a sudden turbulence as media conglomerates realigned their holdings, either shedding or acquiring groups of newspapers. Much of this has been a response to possibilities in cable television. The Nottingham *Evening Post* is a vivid example of this unfolding process. Formerly a locally owned business, it had a controversial labour history and aroused mixed feelings in its area. Nevertheless, it was highly visible and successful. In 1995 it was acquired by Northcliffe, part of the Associated Newspapers group which owns the *Daily Mail*, the *Mail on Sunday* and the London *Evening Standard*. Among the early changes imposed were a wholesale replacement of senior staff; a shift to tabloid format (and style); promotional events which criticized the previous regime in terms which infuriated many in their audience; and the moving of printing to Derby with a copy deadline of 11:30 a.m., severely undermining the potential of an evening paper to print today's news today and thus compete with broadcasting.

The tale of the Nottingham *Evening Post* is also an exemplar of the intersection of system and action; the personal with the political. Covering a successful claim for constructive dismissal against the *Evening Post*, the *Press Gazette* (23 August 1996) reports that the journalist 'quit his job ... after assistant editor Duncan Hamilton swore at him and said he was useless'. His union representative described this as 'typical of Northcliffe's management style'. Indeed so, as a number of other commentators — not all of them hostile — have confirmed. Coleridge, an 'insider' as a senior executive at Condé Nast, writes of the 'culture of Associated Newspapers — the emphasis on winning, the institutionalized anxiety' (Coleridge, 1993: 277). Or the reign of Sir David English at the *Daily Mail*, then and now mid-market leader: 'a unique culture ... of surging adrenalin, sweat, fear and excitement' (Tunstall, 1996: 120; quoting *UK Press Gazette*, 8 July 1991). Dougary (1994: 135) also describes the 'ferocious *Mail* treatment': English's successor Paul Dacre has 'learned his management style from his predecessor. ... He believes in "creative tension" and the flatter-batter technique — build 'em up and knock 'em down'. Andrew Neil, proud of his own reputation as a bruiser, writes of Rupert Murdoch's 'telephone terrorism' (Neil, 1996: 176) driving even 'tough' editors to 'trembling silence'. In other words, the characterful capacity to administer

'bollockings' is nothing more than bullying and the use of institutional position, rather than power of personality.

The contemporary working world of journalism is often a destructive mix of heavy workloads, job insecurity, demands to produce material within the paper's distinctive news values and overbearing interpersonal behaviour. Resistance is easily punished, according to Bevins (1990): 'they suffer professional death. They are ridden by newsdesks and backbench executives, they have their stories spiked on a systematic basis, they face the worst form of newspaper punishment — by-line deprivation'. Unsurprisingly, many exhibit chronic dependency. One of the clearest examples of this was during the Falklands/Malvinas conflict (Morrison and Tumber, 1988). Military personnel who observed the journalists travelling with the Taskforce in 1982 were bewildered not only by the vicious competition between some of the journalists, when their lives could depend on esprit de corps, but their constant need for reassurance in the form of 'herograms' from London which took up scarce transmission time: 'a diet of false praise from their bloody editors' (Morrison and Tumber, 1988: 160). Medical advisors to the military predicted that this existential isolation would lead to psychiatric problems — which it did for some.

When Kelvin MacKenzie left the *Sun*, among the extensive news coverage was a three-page feature in *UK Press Gazette* (31 January 1994). Roy Greenslade wrote: 'Power in British popular newspapers has traditionally been granted to authoritarian figures — not only at the top, but all the way down the line.' Arguably, the professional preoccupation with autonomy arises in direct reaction to the psychic brew of dependency/authoritarianism.

If some aspects of journalists' occupational myths suggest existential confusion, what of the surface? Here, too, we find acute disjunctions between claims and current realities. Chippindale and Horrie's (1990) seminal book on the *Sun* reveals that in the production of that champion of working-class hedonism, smoking and drinking are outlawed. Rupert Murdoch is even reputed to have banned the wearing of brown suede shoes. Responding to Michael VerMeulen's death, an editorial in *Press Gazette* (4 September 1995) grumbled 'In some parts of this glorious industry of ours there are editors ... for whom a business lunch would be akin to Bacchanalia.' While it is hard to identify *The Guardian* with touchiness and endless boozy lunches, Peter Preston expresses the same pain about 'low cholesterol droppings and mineral water' (*The Guardian*, 1 September 1995). Apparently the only remaining outlets for *monstres sacrés* are braces/big hair, shouting, swearing and the ability to sack, all of which are entirely consonant with the goals of their higher management.

By reviewing the components of journalists' laddish occupational mythology I have so far alluded only indirectly to a dimension of this crisis

of identity which hardly dares speak its name: news journalism is being feminized. Women now outnumber men on the approved on-the-job training schemes. In 1994, 37 percent of NUJ members were women (Delano and Henningham, 1995). While the proportion in news journalism is less — 25 percent are women — it is precisely this sector of the profession which is shrinking in the face of broadcasting and magazine work, where women are more prominent. As in many other occupations, however, women are unevenly represented. Some have been appointed to senior posts in national papers, but principally as part of the desperate search for women readers. This motive was, for example, explicit in the appointment of Rosie Boycott to the editor's chair at *The Independent on Sunday* (*Press Gazette*, 18 October 1996). They continue to be under-represented in key, high-status positions relating to hard news and financial control (Tunstall, 1996; Dougarty, 1994). Moreover, as we have already seen, despite the editorships of most national daily papers having recently been vacant, all the appointments have been men, presumably because the owners believe these papers to be both financially vital and a source of political influence. The closing-off of the routes between the local/regional press, in which women are now significant players, and national media will further limit the expansion of women's opportunities. As Tunstall (1996: 139) observes, they would be better aiming at work in broadcasting where, despite the fierce competition, both the BBC and independent television and radio have formal equal opportunities policies. Such a concept is very far removed from the world of the national press. Tellingly, it was only in 1993 that Women in Journalism (WIJ) was formed, so powerful was the hegemony of lad culture. Faced with institutional turmoil and subjective resistance, progress has been slow: WIJ had to relaunch itself in 1996.

Conclusion: clinging to the monster

To be — or hope to be — a national newspaper journalist in the contemporary UK increasingly requires active suspension of disbelief. The job demands the working habits and demeanour of those with a vocation, yet there is neither security nor fulfilment for the mass of employees. As we have seen, the traditional myths of journalists are now in direct conflict with reality, a situation which can be summarized as shown below.

Even the structures of sociability necessary to the development, transmission and internalization of an occupational belief system have been destroyed. 'Fleet Street' no longer exists. Instead newspaper offices are dispersed across London from the mouth of the Blackwall Tunnel in the east to Kensington in the west. Even if they were more physically proximate, the intensification of work would severely limit informal

Myth	Actuality
Editorial independence	Proprietorial control
Editorial-driven	Revenue-driven
Centred on hard news	Move to soft news/features
Self-made	Credentialed
Autonomous	Bureaucratically controlled
Ego strong/robust	Dependent/bullied
Self-raiser	Non-smoker; moderate drinker
Male	Female

contact. Nor can colleagues regularly mingle through NUJ chapel (branch) meetings.

In the face of these aggressive realities, surely one would expect the old myths to be superseded? On the contrary, I would argue: current working conditions do not provide the environment in which new myths can evolve. As Giddens points out, however, such existential fluidity makes 'lifestyle guides' all the more essential (Giddens, 1991: 80ff.). Giddens's examples are typically subtle in that he theorizes not academic texts but widely available, popular self-help manuals, on managing relationships and health problems, for example. While there must be an aspirational element to these programmes of self-improvement and self-discovery, the prescriptions are cast as achievable in principle. Indeed, many of them are centred on the liberation of the self from delusion, conventional wisdoms, traditional gender behaviour, and so forth. Giddens does not pursue the possibility that, faced with intractable contradiction, the chosen lifestyle 'guide' might be largely aspirational; symbolic rather than literal.

If we accept that much of journalists' occupational ideology is residual and anachronistic, questions still remain. Why these myths and why are they so powerful? Introducing his discussion of identity, Giddens draws attention to the extent to which 'authenticity' has become 'both a pre-eminent value and a framework for self-actualization' (Giddens, 1991: 9). Here we see a crucial and intensifying dilemma for journalists, as 'authenticity' has always been an occupational morass.

Journalism in the UK has none of the institutional characteristics associated with the 'profession'. Tunstall (1996) even suggests that in recent years their potential development has retreated as training has fragmented and ethical standards of practice have become more the subject of sardonic jokes than serious debate. 'Professionalism' is, though, widely used in a sense often invoked in other occupations: the ability to handle oneself and do the job regardless of personal feelings. Where, for a police officer, this might mean not weeping or passing out at the scene of a road traffic accident, for the journalist it often indicates *doing something you do not believe in*. Examples are legion and paraded with pugnaacious pride:

Derek Jameson editing the arch-Tory *Daily Express* while considering himself a socialist (Jameson, 1989, 1990); Ian Aitken, political editor of *The Guardian*, explicitly justifying an earlier job at the *Daily Express* because in 'those days it was a genuinely great newspaper and it practised a highly sophisticated version of popular journalism' (*The Guardian*, 14 October 1992); Roy Greenslade, 'a raging Maoist in his early days at the *Star*' (*The Guardian*, 5 February 1990) moved to the *Sunday Times* and then edited the *Daily Mirror* for Robert Maxwell. (There is a sizable 'Why I worked for Maxwell' tendency.) Greenslade became a regular columnist for *The Guardian* in which (3 April 1995) he combined accusing the *Daily Mail* of racism and homophobia with praising its technical excellence. And Stewart Steven, of the Ernest Hemingway dream (related earlier) and with the 'presence of a rhino in a glasshouse ... noisy, sometimes outrageous and rather melodramatic' (*Journalist's Week*, 14 September 1990), is a socialist who edited, successively, the slavishly Tory *Mail on Sunday* and the similarly oriented London *Evening Standard*.

For journalists, then, a durable occupational myth must resolve the authenticity problem. In part this is achieved through real heroism, and it is very telling that, before VerMeulen, the last outpouring of news media staff emotion was at the death in San Salvador of David Blundy, foreign correspondent of the short-lived *Sunday Correspondent*. The tribute in the paper (21 January 1990) is long and complex. Interestingly, it refers to the 'myth' that Blundy's childhood was 'wretchedly underprivileged ... the son of a rag-and-bone man'. Blundy is shown as a brilliant reporter, but as 'essentially a loner' with a chaotic personal life. Very much the flawed hero his 'larger than lifeness' is sustained by death so 'we shall never know ... if advancing years had forced him into the pretence of growing up'. As few (and fewer) get the chance to be physically brave, the alternative, as we have seen, is to be outrageous. In this way the authenticity problem is also solved: the semi-deviant behaviour of such sacred monsters could surely only be the expression of the essential person. Unfortunately, this comforting deduction tends to be followed by disillusion, as in the Robert Maxwell financial and moral melt-down, or the bathos of Kelvin MacKenzie's heading an unwatched cable television channel. This, then, is the key to the Michael VerMeulen phenomenon. He was ultimately authentic: he died as he had lived.

Notes

1. As at June 1997 the UK national press consisted of ten daily and nine Sunday papers, conventionally divided into three market sectors.

Broadsheet/quality: *The Times/Sunday Times*; the *Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph*; *The Guardian/The Observer*; *The Independent/Independent on Sunday*; the *Financial Times*.

Mid-market tabloids: the *Daily Express/Express on Sunday*; the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*.
 Mass market/'popular' tabloids: the *Sun*; the *Daily Star*; the *Mirror/Sunday Mirror*; the *News of the World*; *The People*.

2. Women editors of national newspapers as at June 1997:

Rosie Boycott: *The Independent on Sunday* from October 1996.
 Patsy Chapman: *News of the World* 1992-4.
 Sue Douglas: *Sunday Express* January-September 1996.
 Wendy Henry: *News of the World* 1987-8; *The People* 1989.
 Tessa Hilton: *Sunday Mirror* 1994-6.
 Eve Pollard: *Sunday Mirror* 1988-91; *Sunday Express* 1991-4.
 Amanda Platell: *Sunday Mirror* September 1996-February 1997.
 Bridget Rowe: *Sunday Mirror* 1991-2; *The People* 1992-6; *Sunday Mirror* from February 1997.

3. Delano and Henningham's figures are based on a telephone survey conducted by MORI covering 4.8 percent of the estimated national population of news journalists. The response rate is 81 percent of a random sample — but many employers refused to cooperate. It also does not distinguish between broadcast and print journalists.

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