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Journalists' collective representation and editorial content in British newspapers: never the twain shall meet?

Abstract

This article examines the propensity for journalists to contest the determination of the editorial content of the newspapers they work for and write for. It finds that such instances are relatively infrequent and suggests that not only is stronger workplace union organisation required to provide for the capability for journalists to do so but that a heightened level of trade union consciousness and 'abnormal' occurrences in management practice are also required.

Keywords

Journalists, editorial content, trade unionism

Journalists' collective representation and editorial content in British newspapers: never the twain shall meet?

Introduction

The dominant explanations of the processes and dynamics by which the editorial content of newspapers in Britain is created and determined focus, *inter alia*; on the role of prevailing ideologies in capitalist society, the function of newspapers in a capitalist society as reproducers of social norms and forms of social control, the power of proprietors and editors, the influence of interest groups such as political parties, governments and businesses in setting news agendas, newspapers as units of capital in a regime of capital accumulation and the function of journalists as professionals-cum-journalism as a profession (see for example and *inter alia* Beharrell and Philo 1977, Franklin and Murphy 1991, 1998, Sparks 1999, and Tunstall 1971). Even where the focus is on journalists' ethics (see Keeble 2001, and Sanders 2003), it is hard to find studies that examine the influence of journalists on editorial content where journalists are consequently constituted as a collective body that represents a conscious, coherent and specific interest group at the point of origination (save Harcup 2002a, 2004, and to a varying but small extent: Bromley 1997, Gall and Murphy 1996, Franklin and Murphy 1997, and Tunstall 1971). Indeed, Harcup (2002a:112) went as far as to conclude that: '[A]ny critique of the ethics of journalism that fails to address the role of journalists as workers can only be partial'.

There are just a few radical, but lone, practitioner voices like those of Tony Benn, the late Paul Foot, Tim Gopsill, Seumas Milne and John Pilger that have called for journalists to be able to collectively exert some element of control over editorial content not just to remedy the worst excesses of contemporary newspapers but also to constitute a mainstream and regular legitimate influence. For example, Foot (1991:7-8) argued that the emasculation of trade unionism in 'Fleet Street', the

former traditional location of national newspaper production in Britain, had played a part in the declining quality of national newspapers:

[T]he fear and obsequiousness [following] the collapse of newspaper trade unions [has created an] … atmosphere of abjectness, which is the most deadly poison for invigorating, challenging or entertaining journalism. People play safe because they are worried about the jobs or pensions. The newspapers they turn out are 'safe' as well. Safe, predictable and dull.

Later, he commented: 'You can only have an alternative to the control of the editorial hierarchy if you've got the discipline of being in a collective body behind you' (in Harcup 2002b:13 and 2004:26).

In a broadly similar vein to Harcup, this paper seeks to explore the presence and absence of the collective influence of journalists as workers on the editorial content of provincial and national newspapers in Britain. The approach deployed here is not to counter-pose the overly-narrow perspective of the 'process and politics of production' to that of prevailing values in society and the institutional function of newspapers in the form of a mutually excluding dichotomy. Neither, is it to take a position of merely stating that both perspectives have a place in explaining editorial content outcomes without assessing their relative strengths and the determinants of these. Rather, the approach is an attempt to view the process of origination of editorial content as a potential site of struggle between journalists and employers and their management, where the relationship between the 'process of production' perspective and dominant societal norms can be integrated, articulated and contextualised. In short, it is to seek to understand the outcome of the relationship between potentially competing values and discourses *within* the production process.

Thus, in contrast to Harcup's (2002a) study, this paper is not primarily concerned with the ethics of journalists and journalism in Britain as per the National Union of Journalists (NUJ)'s *Code of Conduct*. The *Code of Conduct* concerns itself primarily

with the manner in which journalism is carried out with the exception of points 2 and 10 (see Appendix). Because the *Code of Conduct* is conceived in terms of tackling the 'rough edges' and not the polity of journalism, it does not concern itself with content *per se* and is unconcerned with the aspirant function of journalism as the 'sword of justice' or as the discussant (rather than just reporter or as reportage) of weighty matters. This paper, however, is concerned with the wider issue of what can be termed 'weighty' and 'worthwhile' journalism and journalists' collective search for, and defence of, such journalism through collective interest representation and mobilisation via their union, the NUJ. Consequently, this study examines a terrain of collective struggle which is primarily located at the *workplace*, in the *origination* process and amongst a collective of workers, rather than at the primarily individual level (i.e. an individual NUJ member abiding by or contravening the *Code of Conduct*) and in the forum of NUJ policy and outside the workplace (i.e. the NUJ Ethics Council, or the NUJ Annual Delegate Conference).

Given that the NUJ represents the vast majority of journalists within collective trade union organisations for journalists in Britain[i] and that the NUJ represents around 50%-60% of newspapers journalists, it is an appropriate body to use as a prism by which to examine the issues at hand. But more than this, the NUJ[ii] comprises not merely a trade union organisation as defined by its role in defending and advancing its members' (as workers) economic based-interests but it also undertakes a further role as a professional body for journalists concerned with the pursuit of an ideal type of journalism. This ideal type, indeed, the 'ideal' of journalism, involves the profession or agency of journalism being not only the discoverer of truth and the upholder of truth but also the scrutineer of the rich and powerful and of vested interests where the notion of the 'fourth estate' is to act as a counterweight to other agencies in the body politic and to exercise the 'sword of justice' for groups too weak and ineffectual to do so themselves. If the pervasiveness of this ideal among journalists is any way

widespread, then one would expect, all other things being equal, it to rear its head within the behaviour and practice of newspaper journalists.

Other than the salience of raising the issue of journalists' collective influence on editorial content in the abstract or in an historical context, why might it arise in the current period (i.e. the late 1990s/early 2000s)? There are two reasons. First, it is a widely held belief that as the concentration of ownership in newspapers grows amongst a small number of large units of, often transnational, capital, so too does the centralisation of control of these newspapers, the standardisation of output and the bowdlerisation of product with deleterious consequences for diversity of coverage and perspectives and positions. Linked to this process is another, whereby the power of proprietors, editors and group editorial directors to determine editorial content has also increased as a result of the diminution of the collective power of journalists resultant upon the derecognition and marginalisation of the NUJ. Second, and since 2000, the NUJ has begun to make significant steps towards recapturing earlier lost ground by regaining union recognition agreements with employers in the provincial and national newspaper sectors (Gall 2002, 2004). This opens up the possibility of union renewal and with it the opportunity for contesting the current discourses that determine editorial content. Harcup (2002a:111) made a similar proposition:

If there were few instances of journalists taking collective stands on issues when their jobs were secure and their union relatively strong, there have been even fewer since the post-Wapping employers' offensive led to unconstrained management prerogative …[But] the prospect of journalists raising ethical concerns through their collective organisation, the NUJ, appears more likely in a climate where the union has a voice that is recognised than in an aggressively anti-union atmosphere

Throughout this paper, the technique of counter-factual argument is necessarily deployed. The implicit question is to ask under what circumstances would or could journalists be envisaged to struggle collectively over the editorial content of the newspapers they work for. The technique of the counter-factual is used because the

number of occasions when journalists have done so is, to date, small. This forces one to move to examine why this might be so and under what changed conditions might journalists' general disposition on this issue also change.

Although using counter-factual-ism can be informed by previous experiences and studies that help generate insights, the fruits of this process can only, and necessarily, go so far. The spirit of the counter-factual is not to provide definite judgements but to help interrogate and illuminate the issues at hand, with a view to providing the basis for further and more informed thought, analysis and research. Consequently, this research constitutes only an exploratory study.

The data is derived from material gathered over the last fifteen years researching the industrial relations of provincial and national newspapers through primary sources (interviews with lay and full-time NUJ officers) and secondary sources (the journalists' weekly trade magazine, *Press Gazette*, and the NUJ's monthly magazine, *Journalist*). Over 100 interviews were conducted between 1990-2003 and were concerned with exploring the effect of an employers' derecognition offensive on the ability of the NUJ to contest and shape the terms of the employment relationship, and more latterly, to regain union recognition and then engage in collective bargaining. This necessarily included, albeit as a minor part, the issues of journalists' influence over the editorial content of the newspapers they worked on.

The Combined Absence of Action and Study

The principled, if infrequent, actions of individual journalists refusing to reveal their sources or their notebooks to the police and courts in order to maintain the integrity of the journalistic process have been extensively documented in the public domain (see Keeble 2001:29-31). The same cannot be said of the *prima facie* but equally

sparse incidence of collective actions by journalists to do similarly. The paucity of any study of the collective influence of journalists over editorial content appears to be (positively) related not merely to the actual paucity of such actions but also a prejudice against consideration because of the collective nature of this action. Nonetheless, the absolute sparseness of collective action by journalists over editorial content, whether of a defensive and reactive nature (*against* editorial lines) or of an offensive and proactive nature (*for* editorial lines) can be noted. Harcup (2002a:108-109) drawing on Hollingswood (1986) provides a catalogue of the few examples up to the mid-1980s, concluding that: 'while [journalists] may or may not have critical views as individuals, at an everyday level journalists tend not to see editorial or ethical considerations as issues for collective or trade union intervention' (Harcup 2002a:109) and that up to 2002: 'cases of journalists combining to question their own employers' editorial, rather than industrial, practices have been few and far between' (Harcup 2002b:13). To these can be added just a few more.

But before doing so, it is important to recognise that the collective consciousness and collective actions of journalists with regard to editorial issues cannot be solely judged by the presence or absence of collective industrial action over editorial issues. While collective industrial action, for reasons outlined below, is more identifiable and newsworthy, there have been many occasions when collective discussions in chapels and branches (workplace and extra-workplace units of NUJ organisation) have taken place over editorial issues and content, albeit these have been less frequent than discussion of overt issues of pay and conditions. For example, Harcup (2002a, 2002b) reported on some instances in the provincial press (in Birmingham, Liverpool and Newcastle) of concern over editorial content and styles of journalism and the subject has been aired frequently in the *Journalist*. The difficulty in identifying such actions is derived from the lack of tangible, positive outcomes from such

discussions as well as the absence of study of the production and labour processes under which journalists work.

Occasional Instances? Journalists Confront Editors and Employers over Editorial Content

In the last decade or so, only a few more examples can be added to the list drawn up by Hollingswood (1986). This sits oddly with former *Daily Mirror* editor and newspaper commentator Greenslade's (2003:247, 283) interpretation of the national press in the 1970s and 1980s:

Owners and editors, rightly fearing that journalists would use their union strength not only for bargaining over wage and conditions but also as leverage to control the editorial content of their papers, were determined not to allow the NUJ to win closed-shop rights. … [E]specially the younger [more radical] element [of the NUJ] … realised it could be a political lever to curb the owners' power over editorial content.

The problem with this interpretation is that subsequently Greenslade (2003:284) effectively renders it invalid by stating:

It had been conveniently overlooked that closed shops, in all but name, had existed for years [at the Mirror, Express and Sun national newspaper groups] … Apart from using their leverage to ensure only union members wrote copy and took pictures, there were no cases in Fleet Street of NUJ closed shops being used to prevent editors publishing what they liked.

So in addition to bringing the further examples to a wider attention, it is also worth detailing these examples in order to have an appreciation of the circumstances in which they arose given their sparseness. Indeed, this might go some way to explaining their sparseness.

The first concerns the *Mirror* in the early 1990s, and specifically, the partial occupation by journalists of the space in which editorial content was determined during the hiatus after the death of Robert Maxwell and the resultant but relatively arms length control of the newspaper by legal administrators in 1991. For a period of

about a year, journalists heavily influenced the content and direction of the newspaper in a way they had not before (see Gall 1997). Upon the appointment of former News International and Murdoch manager, David Montgomery, in 1992, the journalists rebelled in the form of a mandatory work-time meeting, fearing for their editorial independence, the paper's pro-Labour line, their jobs and for the continuation of union recognition. Had their meeting not ended when it did, after securing pledges on these issues, the paper would have not been produced that night. Also in 1991, the NUJ chapel *South Wales Argus* in Newport refused to handle the copy on a story about an industrial tribunal involving the company after the editor changed it to make the company look better (Gall and Murphy 1996:241). Nearly a decade later, NUJ chapels and regional expressed publicly criticisms and concerns over a number instances of newspapers coverage. These concerned coverage of racial issues in the north of England (*Journalist* January 1999) and homophobic coverage of the scrapping of the anti-homosexual Clause 28 in Scotland (*Journalist* April 2000). In 2001, the NUJ chapel at Express Group passed a motion condemning the 'confrontational racist hatred' in the papers' coverage of asylum seekers (*Journalist* September 2001). Finally, at the Telegraph Group in late 2003-early 2004, the NUJ chapel expressed grave concerns over the possibility of pornographer Richard Desmond taking over the papers after the downfall of Conrad Black and the collapse of his control over Hollinger, the holding company. The concerns focussed on maintaining the editorial quality expected of a broadsheet newspaper and his style of management. When a bid from German publisher, Axel Springer, appeared likely to be successful, the chapel protested at the possibility of being required to sign up to its five 'essential principles' which included support for further European unification, the state of Israel and the free social market economy.

The underlying context of the majority of these instances is worth remarking upon. The *Mirror* chapel had become reinvigorated after successfully facing down Maxwell

a year earlier over redundancies by using a mandatory work-time meeting to prevent publication of the paper. At the Express Group, full union recognition had just been regained and some significant improvements in terms and conditions of employment had been achieved through a threatened strike. The events in Scotland took place in an environment where derecognition had largely been absent and where union membership was higher than in England. Finally, at the Telegraph Group, the chapel had regained recognition recently and had balloted for strike action on pay at the time. The first two examples (*Mirror*, *South Wales Argus*) took place as the derecognition offensive began and when the NUJ was not yet marginalised. The next examples took place in the period in which the NUJ had begun to win back recognition, beginning to erode its marginalisation. The thrust of this is not to suggest a direct or causal link but to infer that union collective reawakening and mobilisation are conducive to the expression of other collective concerns *vis-a-vis* condemnation of management. Moreover, some of these instances have been located in periods of crisis and significant transition at the newspapers, suggesting that an air of abnormality in the structures and processes of managerial control may again be conducive to such expressions.

The following two examples of acute and collective concern over the behaviour of editors and proprietors as a result of third party intervention are rare. At a small north-east of Scotland weekly newspaper, journalists protested against the future vetting of copy which was of a commercially sensitive by the company after it lost business from an advertiser following a critical story (*Press Gazette* 16 September 2000). A year later the NUJ chapel supported one its members protesting against political interference and company complicity in this at the *Wishaw Press* (*Herald* 22 November 2001, see also *Journalist* January/February 2002). The *Wishaw Press* reporter incurred the wrath of the First Minister in Scotland over coverage of his expenses. This led to the First Minister being given the right, by the editor, to vet

copy on the issue and any other copy concerning him - an agreement which the reporter refused to accept. The NUJ protest led to this concession being withdrawn by virtue of the denial that it had ever been granted.

The overall rarity of such instances (just seven in total) relates not just to the journalists' actions but also the stimuli to their actions. Such overt and naked behaviour of editors and proprietors appears to be rare, raising the question of whether such 'interference' takes place in a more subtle and covert way and whether, if this is the case, journalists are capable of identifying it and acting against it. The rise of 'advertorial' in the provincial newspapers, where there is not a clear and transparent divide between editorial copy and advertising copy (see Gall 1993), and of 'freebie' journalism where journalists are often individually and collectively complicit in corruption and unethical behaviour in regard of travel, business and consumer journalism (Browne 2002) suggests that journalist do not necessarily identify it as a malaise and act against it. Browne (2002:21) ventured that: 'Journalists are the nation's anti-corruption squad, but there is no one to investigate our own corruption. All the public can rely upon is our integrity and sense of fair play. They are being let down'.

A far more common occurrence is the *individual* exit strategy (see also Gall and Murphy 1996:243). As with discontent over working conditions, as with discontent over editorial direction and content: journalists have exercised their ability to leave a particular newspaper and gain employment at another newspaper or in another form of media, or else go freelance, to respond to discontent over editorial direction and content. While subject to the buoyancy of the labour market, the normal path involves individual grumbling becoming semi-collective grumbling within and without the workplace (e.g. the pub) prior to the threshold of 'enough is enough' being crossed and stimulating job applications. For example, but somewhat unusually, as many as

thirty journalists from the *Scotsman* in Edinburgh in 2000 took the opportunity to move to the short-lived *business am* when it was established in Edinburgh.

Professionalism: both bulwark against, and spur to, collective action

Whilst the creation of the NUJ as a breakaway from the IOJ and then its subsequent organisational hegemony amongst journalists emphasised the importance of trade unionism over professionalism, professionalism has remained a potent force amongst NUJ members. However, the nature of this force has been both ambiguous and contingent. In the provincial newspaper industry, its relative persuasiveness and pervasiveness have declined in the years of derecognition and the renewal of the NUJ but it still retains a potency. Most obviously, professionalism can tend toward a belief in the unity of interests between journalists and newspapers as journalism, journalists and newspapers-cum-companies and journalists and companies where it exists as phenomenon which stresses common purpose in pursuit of enhanced status for a learned activity and for 'worthy' journalism (Gall and Murphy 1996). However, the cost-cutting and profit seeking behaviour of newspaper employers has led many journalists to couch their professionalism in terms of being a defender of 'worthy' journalism and laudable news values, thereby leading to the atrophy of the perception of unity of interests between journalists and newspapers-cum-companies and journalists and companies. However, the unity of interests between journalists and newspapers can still act as a *de facto* support to the companies where journalists do not wish to take any action (e.g. industrial action) which might 'hurt' the newspaper or take action to support the newspaper (such as cover for short-staffing by working longer hours). While it would be wrong to suggest that professionalism alone can account for the paucity of journalists' collective action over editorial content, it does play an important role in helping to explain why collective concern may have varying outcomes. Alongside it must stand a consideration of journalists'

collective strength and wider collective consciousness. The crux to understanding the particular role professionalism plays is to understand the indeterminant and contingent nature of the situations in which such collective concerns over editorial content exist. The next section examines the most common expression of journalists' collective expression of concern over editorial issues.

Concerns over Editorial Quality as an Adjunct to Collective Bargaining

NUJ members have most commonly expressed collective concern over issues of editorial quality and content when employers have proposed or implemented changes in work practices and work organisation which are deemed to have deleterious implications for journalists' job security, skills level and work intensity. For example, the NUJ *Daily Record*/*Sunday Mail* chapel's response to job losses in the picture retouching department was: 'This dispute is primarily about saving peoples' jobs, but it is also about maintaining the quality of the product' (*Press Gazette* 9 April 2004). Earlier, journalists at the *Scotsman* in 2002 called for the editorial director, Andrew Neil, to resign over the direction of papers, the damaged reputation of the paper and the eroding of the quality of the newspaper after passing a vote of 'no-confidence' in Neil. However, this rebellion was part of a wider process of a building up discontent at that time. Scotsman Publications journalists were 'awarded' a pay freeze, three departments across three papers (*Scotsman*, *Evening News* and *Scotland on Sunday*) were to be merged with consequent job losses, and working hours were becoming longer as a result of the non-replacement of staff. Indeed, working hours were expected to become longer after the merger of departments as a result of teething problems and the consequent reduction in staffing. The journalists concluded that in addition to the deleterious change in their conditions of work, the merging of departments and sacking of staff 'would be damaging to the papers' and would 'damage the titles' (*Press Gazette* 19 July 2002) and Neil's direction had

raised ‘concerns about the quality of content’ (*Independent* 18 July 2002). Following after a reduction in the editorial ‘headcount’ at the Express Newspapers from 540 to 400 in 2001, the NUJ chapel balloted on strike action against further redundancies in 2004, with a member stating:

We’ve had a whole series of cuts over the years and the general consensus is that this is going too far. We have already probably the most cost-effective national newspapers and people feel that they are working very hard and under pressure already. It’s only going to make matters worse for us as journalists and ***worse for the newspapers as a whole*** *[emphasis added]’.* (*Press Gazette* 23 April 2004)

Over a dozen other instances of job cuts leading to a response from the NUJ that redundancies also detrimentally affect the quality of the newspapers have also been identified (see, for example, *NUJ Press Releases* 25 November 2004, 7 January 2005, 17 August 2005, 19 October 2005, 1, 5, 6, 9 December 2005, and *Press Gazette* 3 December 2004, 19 November 2004, 14 January 2005, 21 March 2005).

Other occasions of collective concern over editorial content expressed through the NUJ (FoCs, MoCs and FTOs speaking on behalf of chapels or the national union) have revolved around the use of business process reengineering and merging of operations within and across newspapers and their departments, and attendant retraining and alleged deskilling of journalists (*UK Press Gazette* 30 August 1993, 30 August 1995, 19 February 1996, 24 May 1996, *Press Gazette* 13 June 1997, *Observer* 10 March 2002). A similar array of instances can be found concerning the deleterious implications of low pay for the morale and motivation of existing journalists as well as the for the ability to recruit and retain young, good quality journalists during NUJ campaigns for higher pay.

Nonetheless, of all the instances when such responses might have been occasioned, these are a minority. For example, at the *Yorkshire Post* in Leeds in 2004 a dispute

emerged between the NUJ chapel and the editor over the ending of the post of women's editor. At a chapel meeting attended by around 100 members, journalists passed a motion of 'no-confidence' in the editor and threatened to ballot on industrial action. The dispute concerned the resultant job loss being contrary to assurances of job security given by the new editor in a process of 'modernising' and 'developing' the paper (a process which the chapel did not disagree with the need for) and the way in which the proposed changes were being made, that is, without sufficient consultation and involvement. The result of the chapel's actions was that the member concerned was given another post of equal status to that of women's editor. But at no point did the chapel express any concerns about the issue of the implications of the ending of the post of women's editor for the coverage of women's issues.

The pattern of collective and union behaviour that emerges from these exemplars is one where under certain conditions of assaults upon journalists' terms and conditions of employment which generate considerable and widespread discontent, these assaults are also perceived to have deleterious implications for journalists' conditions of work which in turn have deleterious implications for the standard and quality of journalism and editorial content. On these occasions the basis exists for the two concerns to enmesh. The rather tortuous way of expressing this process is required in order to distinguish and emphasise the nature and direction of causation where grievance identification, interest formation and attribution of the agency of resolution (i.e. management) can arise. This formulation establishes the contingent nature of what can be termed a process of cognitive liberation, and serves to emphasise the need for contextualisation to aid the understanding of outcome. This cognitive liberation process, where it occurs, provides the basis for the Birmingham Post and Mail FoC to argue, in proposing a motion at the NUJ annual delegates conference of 2004 condemning the costing-cutting, profit seeking actions of newspaper employers, that:

In newsrooms the job losses mean falling standards and less time to go the extra yard for a better interview. They mean pulling in a crap press release when there's a real story out there that our readers would be interested in. … We must defend our papers from the corporate vandals that would grind them into the ground. (*Press Gazette* 2 April 2004, *Journalist* May 2004)

However, the cognitive process as it has so far existed does not create or provide a means by which to effectively gain redress of grievance in as much that 'union action' in the abstract is identified as the mechanism by which to force management to resolve the issue in a desired manner. Here 'union action' is a vague and unelaborated proposition that neither specifies the form of action, nor the forces to constitute the action. Thus, there exists a disarticulation between the consciousness of concerns and the means of agency (of resolution) where conceptually the two are linked only when a heightened state of consciousness amongst sufficient numbers of journalists becomes the prerequisite for the creation of an agency which then can be mobilised (or mobilise itself) to seek effective redress by, for example, industrial action. This disarticulation exists in two senses.

One is that the NUJ annual conference is not wholly *representative* of the membership in terms of not merely ideological positions but also in terms of attachment and motivation with regard to union and profession. NUJ annual conference comprises primarily activists who are of a higher trade union consciousness than members, although this is not to imply that there cannot be political agreement between members and activists. The salience of this is that when activists speak or when motions are passed, they do not speak for the entire membership (sic) and they do not necessarily speak for a majority of the membership in terms of high levels of commitment to enact the spirit or instructions of the contribution or motion.

The other sense is that, within the activist milieu, there is heterogeneity of opinion over what can or could be achieved in regard of NUJ members taking effective collective action to regulate or influence editorial content. Activists generally believe that the union has a role in promoting journalists' collective actions to do so, but they differ sharply on how this can be done and if this can be done in the current period. The more left-wing, shading into the ultra-left, believe almost as an article of faith, through pointing to the existence of one or two cases, that journalists can do this if they have the right 'leadership' and if the 'rank-and-file' are sufficiently confident to do so. The less left-wing activists believe that such a goal is legitimate but that attaining this goal is beyond the consciousness and capacity of ordinary members at present. Neither viewpoint makes much attempt to go beyond these bald positions by examining the issues in terms of their social dynamics and setting because the debate and discussion are conducted at the level of polemic, propaganda and, occasionally, agitation.

Concerns over Editorial Quality as Adjuncts to Union Propaganda

In the last two decades, the NUJ and many journalists have continually put the case that worthy and decent newspapers require that newspaper owners are concerned with producing newspapers in themselves rather than just as an activity to make profits and that for journalists to be well motivated and experience good morale requires well remunerated and treated staff (see, for example, Bourne (1995, 1996), Holleran (1998), Dear (*Press Gazette* 16 November 2001), *Scotland on Sunday* 12 January 2003). A recent example concerns the strike by journalists in Coventry for higher pay:

A paper that can't value its journalists can't value its readers. Senior journalists on this paper are paid less than the average in Coventry, less than dustbin men get paid. (*Coventry Telegraph* MoC, *Press Gazette* 17 June 2005)

Although this general argument has been made in a way that suggests that good pay and conditions are necessary, but without being sufficient, conditions of good newspapers, this activity is one of making *propaganda* against newspaper employers. The nature of this propaganda is one of general interest representation of journalists' and NUJ members' interests within public life but which does not involve their participation and is carried out from a position of weakness *vis-à-vis* the newspaper employers. Indeed, it would not be wholly inaccurate to say that making propaganda is about all the NUJ could attempt to do in the period of the 1990s and 2000s.

Political and Trade Union Consciousness within the NUJ's membership

The preceding discussion has focussed primarily on the 'politics of production' and the labour process. However, the determining influences on journalists' behaviour cannot merely be explained by virtue of an examination of this terrain. To this examination, consideration of the influence of the NUJ as a national trade union must also be introduced. In the last twenty years, the NUJ in trade union political terms has been on the left. Since the election of John Foster (1992-2001) and then Jeremy Dear (2001-) as general secretaries, this position has moved further to the left of the political spectrum. The NUJ's national executive has also followed this trend and movement. As with any recent internal elections within trade unions in Britain, turnouts remain low, with 30% being a relatively high turnout. In addition, there has always existed a specific, even idiosyncratic, nature to the NUJ's left-wing policy positions and values. These centre on issues of employment and industrial relations law like union recognition, on press freedom like protection of sources and against concentration of ownership and on international issues like supporting the creation of an independent state of Palestine. Most of these are directly related to the experiences of the NUJ in a way that is not true for other unions other than the

broadcasting union, BECTU, because of the nature of NUJ members' work. Although affiliated to the TUC, the NUJ does not have a political fund and in 2004 rejected having one. In other words, these views and positions do not represent a worldview as such, much less a coherent, full-blown or radical one.

Relating this political consciousness to the issue of journalists' collective concern over editorial content, it would clearly then be erroneous to believe there would exist a necessary or developed connection between journalists as trade unionists and editorial concerns or between journalists as left-wing trade unionists and editorial concerns. Indeed, many journalists are not on the left, some are Conservative voters, trade union membership does not presuppose a single set of political beliefs, and many would oppose the notion that journalists should seek to collectively influence editorial content through their union. The pertinence here is that to that extent that the NUJ as a union has any determining influences on journalists' behaviour in the workplace on editorial issues, this is likely to be very partial and selective across space, time and persons. The arguments and comments of NUJ members like Benn, Foot and Pilger remain those of well-respected and high-profile but lone individuals which at best find a resonance in debates disconnected from struggles over workplace issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

Harcup (2002a, 2002b) argued for a positive link between NUJ strength and assertiveness, on the one hand, and the possibility of journalists acting collectively over ethical concerns, on the other, citing such instances in the provincial press and suggested that there may be signs of a re-awakening of interest about these issues amongst journalists in tandem with the reflowering of the NUJ's relative industrial prowess. This argument can be legitimately widened out to concern editorial content

in general. In doing so, this paper has presented a different analysis that suggests while that the conceptualisation of starting with the NUJ as a collective union organisation of journalists is essential, in isolation, it remains overly narrow, and ultimately, unproductive. Certainly, two points emerge. First, the circumstances in which journalists collectively show a propensity to manifest concern over editorial content, and even take collective action about it, must be located in an analysis of the strength of the NUJ and its ability to contest and influence journalists' working conditions. This is fundamentally about the creation of the resource of an independent power base (cf. Foot in Harcup (2002b:13) on 'discipline'). Second, strongly-held collective expressions over editorial content are more likely to emerge in situations where grievances arise over working conditions and the employment relationship as *an adjunct* and where journalists have recently been engaged in a collective action over wages and conditions or have maintained strong union organisation. While both suggest that the emergence or maintenance of robust collectivism and collective confidence are crucial, the former situations occasion relatively weaker expression and the latter stronger expressions accompanied often by collective action. Nonetheless, both are predicated on the NUJ being a trade union that is also concern with the function of the media from a critical perspective.

But these highly contingent occasions remain extremely limited, forcing our attention to consider the reasons for the paucity of such action. In historical terms, strike activity amongst journalists in newspapers in Britain has never been common. Relative to the industrial prowess of the print unions prior to their defeats at Warrington (1983) and Wapping (1986), the NUJ had not developed cohesive and assertive workplace unionism. Moreover, chapels operated in an autonomous way within a *de facto* federally structured NUJ. Following the *Times*' and provincial newspaper strikes of 1978-1979, the process of developing workplace unionism may have been set in train but any prospect of it continuing, widening and deepening was

stymied by the defeat of the print unions and then the employers' derecognition offensive. In tandem and thereafter, the NUJ was affected by the general disorganisation and demoralisation of trade unionism under Thatcherism and 'new' Labour. Aggregate strike activity remained low in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Such conditions of demobilisation have not been conducive to the raising collective concerns over editorial content, much less taking action over them.

This demobilisation effect is configured in a certain way that within member's consciousness, a significant disarticulation exists between individual journalists having concerns about editorial content and their trade unionism having the capacity to resolve these. Consequently, individual journalists seldom attempt to raise the concerns in a collective environment, i.e. the chapel. Those concerns that are raised focus on the more conventional 'bread and butter' issues of pay and conditions. In this situation, journalists on a day-by-day basis have come to reluctantly and unconsciously accept the hegemonic narrowed vision of their employers of what journalism is and this becomes internalised within them as they strive to meet copy deadlines and work with existing resources. Put another way round, such is the limited and weak nature of the contemporary process by which political and trade union consciousness develops that it would be naïve to expect journalists to take collective action over editorial content until and unless they also undertake sustained industrial struggles over pay and conditions. This causation arises because journalists, on the one hand, require the development of their intellectual and ideological resources to conceive that editorial content not only should be different but (actually) could be different. On the other hand, this causation also arises because journalists require the attitudinal and behavioural resources to form a strong and independent power base from which act on these perspectives. In this way, we can begin to start conceptualising the paucity of journalists' collective challenge to the hegemony of the employers' discourse of what journalism is and should be.

Notes

[i] The Institute of Journalists (IOJ) and the British Association of Journalists (BAJ) as organisations by the extent of their membership are almost irrelevant.
[ii] By contrast, the IOJ and BAJ emphasise far more their profession-al role and far less their union role.

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Appendix

The NUJ's Code of Conduct, adopted in 1936, requires that all members must strive to adhere to it. It comprises:

1. A journalist has a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards.
2. A journalist shall at all times defend the principle of the freedom of the press and other media in relation to the collection of information and the expression of comment and criticism. He/she shall strive to eliminate distortion, news suppression and censorship.
3. A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact and falsification by distortion, selection or misrepresentation.
4. A journalist shall rectify promptly any harmful inaccuracies, ensure that correction and apologies receive due prominence and afford the right of reply to persons criticised when the issue is of sufficient importance.
5. A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustrations only by straightforward means. The use of other means can be justified only by overriding considerations of the public interest. The journalist is entitled to exercise a personal conscientious objection to the use of such means.
6. A journalist shall do nothing which entails intrusion into anybody's private life, grief or distress, subject to justification by overriding considerations of the public interest.
7. A journalist shall protect confidential sources of information.
8. A journalist shall not accept bribes nor shall he/she allow other inducements to influence the performance of his/her professional duties.
9. A journalist shall not lend himself/herself to the distortion or suppression of the truth because of advertising or other considerations.
10. A journalist shall mention a person's age, sex, race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation only if this information is strictly relevant. A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred on any of the above-mentioned grounds.
11. No journalist shall knowingly cause or allow the publication or broadcast of a photograph that has been manipulated unless that photograph is clearly labelled as such. Manipulation does not include normal dodging, burning, colour balancing, spotting, contrast adjustment, cropping and obvious masking for legal or safety reasons.
12. A journalist shall not take private advantage of information gained in the course of his/her duties before the information is public knowledge.
13. A journalist shall not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service save for the promotion of his/her own work or of the medium by which he/she is employed.