

## Address to Westminster Pastoral Foundation, Oxford, September 2004

### “Of Hacks and Shrinks, Mythmaking Ancient and Modern”

#### On this page

Introduction.....	1
The Journalism – How it Happened.....	1
Journalism’s Impact on the Wellbeing of the Psyche.....	2
What is good Journalism? What is good Therapy .....	2
China and Split Trousers .....	3
Hacks and Shrinks – the Overlap.....	4
Bad journalism and bad therapy .....	4
Death and Tragedy – a Great Story?.....	5
Journalism and The Truth .....	5
What Journalism can learn from Psychotherapy .....	6
Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma.....	7
John Lloyd and the Power of the Media .....	7

#### Introduction

When I titled this talk Hacks and Shrinks, Ancient and Modern, it seemed a catchy title. But as I began to consider a little more carefully what I would say, I realised my focus would more usefully be on the modern aspects of what both do – and yes, journalists wear with pride the epithet hack or hackette – and on the personal narrative of one hack-turned-shrink to illustrate, I hope, some wider parallels.

I’d like us to consider three aspects of how the story of trauma is told by the journalists who witness it:

- the journalism;
- the impact which that witnessing can have on them as journalists;
- and what to DO about that within the journalistic profession – the organisational and individual response to trauma.

Because if there’s one thing I do believe, it’s that journalists who have a deeper sense of themselves and at least a basic understanding of psychology and trauma, are more likely to do a better job – a much better job – of relating news in an authentic and respectful way.

Or to use the title of this conference, much more effectively to question people in news *the story of their lives*.

#### The Journalism – How it Happened

Why did I choose journalism - looking back, I was of course in part putting as much distance as possible between my fairly traumatic early years and the future.

But I think it goes much deeper into Meaning and Narrative, in that with my passion for languages and for other countries, I was also compelled to find ways of expressing myself and being heard.

No one in those early years ever questioned me the story of my life – I felt rather alone with a misery I assumed to be part of the normal human condition. With travel and exploring other cultures, I think I was seeking a language and a culture, well away from England and home, in which I hoped I might at last be understood.

I was longing to *relate* and found a marvellous way to do that relating through that the most intimate of media, radio.

Which medium has the best pictures? Radio or television? Of course, radio. Just you and me, my voice and your imagination. Even when I'm sitting in my windowless studio in Beijing talking to millions tuning in to From Our Own Correspondent. That's the magic of radio – there's nothing like it.

### **Journalism's Impact on the Wellbeing of the Psyche**

But being a foreign correspondent can exact a terrible toll on relationships. Anthony Feinstein, a psychiatrist in Toronto, has done some indeed pioneering research into the experience of frontline reporters and cameramen (previously very little studied) and found, surprise, that they do have, on the whole, pretty messed-up lives.

I'll come back to him in a short while, but briefly, he found that the men he interviewed tended to have had very bad or at best distant relationships with their fathers. By the time he got to them, after an average 15 years frontline career experience, this group of frontline hacks were, on the whole, drinking too much, suffering significantly above-average levels of anxiety and depression, and about one in four – about the same as combat veterans - had at some point in their career experienced full-blown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

But Feinstein found that all were doing their journalistic job with extraordinary commitment and pride. That's a picture which from my experience and observation of my fellows I can enthusiastically endorse.

Some of that shared journalistic dysfunction, of course, comes from early childhood narrative. Journalism per se and the witnessing and experience and questioning involved in covering trauma don't of themselves necessarily mess up the practitioners.

But if an individual's coping and emotional survival skills aren't good, then journalism – both the internal stresses and pressures and the impact of the stories that are being told – does not in my view or experience usually make for good mental health.

That's not necessarily bad for the story-telling. In my psychotherapy work, I believe very much in the idea of the Wounded Healer. I know with my clients that when I'm at my best in supporting them through their darkness into their own light, I am drawing sometimes explicitly, always implicitly, on my own experience of darkness.

It's the same with journalists. Much more research is needed, but I suspect that some of the very best hacks, those who profoundly understand and empathise with the dramas they are witnessing, and are therefore able to re-tell those stories well, have their own experience of wounded rawness that opens them to passion and to understanding.

The BBC's Fergal Keane is just one. He speaks and writes powerfully of his dysfunctional childhood in Ireland, with a drunken father and violent home life. And of how it imbued him with a burning sense of justice – and I would add also a courage that has allowed him to relate personally and explicitly to the stories he has told, Rwanda and South Africa in particular, to bare his soul to some extent, and therefore to allow his listeners and viewers to relate to his story.

### **What is good Journalism? What is good Therapy**

Just as most really good therapeutic work takes place in the mystery of relationship and trust, insight and intuition, the best journalism probably draws on what Denis Healey in a political context called Hinterland – personal experience of passion and pain.

I can't be certain that other journalists have quite this experience. But as I became marginally more conscious through therapy and reading in the early 1990s, my own inner world began to pick up many of the themes that I had been reporting for so many years.

My 22-year-old son who read this script for me – and on the whole liked it, said it fitted with his slightly anarchist views about authority and structure and systems. He said don't talk about your dreams, they bore people. But just a couple of self-indulgent examples.

The Berlin Wall and occupied Vienna of *The Third Man* served for some years as my dream symbol of internal divisions and longing for integration. I dreamed for a while of Tibet, which I adored and visited twice in the 1980s, expressing perhaps a longing for spiritual connection. One dream needed little interpretation – I was in South Korea trying to reach the capital.

S(e)oul, of course, how very corny. The best dreams are like that.

My radio reporting seemed to resonate with my listeners. Which perhaps had something to do with an unconscious search for meaning and intimacy within an external political and geographic narrative of global division and conflict.

That's a sentence with lots of big words. In practical terms, the thesis is perhaps better illustrated by just one *From Our Own Correspondent*, or FOOC as we call them at the BBC, in which I told the story of my daughter's birth in Hong Kong in 1987 and our return to mainland China with some 20 items of check-in baggage, most of them packed with disposable nappies – at that unimaginably consumer-goods-deprived time for China, still unavailable in Beijing.

I used that personal experience, as a peg on which to hang a much deeper and more meaningful narrative about traditions of childbirth in China, and how the Chinese bring up their own children. What DO you do without throw-away nappies, for example?

The answer, in part, has been for literally hundreds of years not cloth nappies as in the West, but to dress babies in trousers with split crotches, and then dangle them over the kerbside or grass (not much of that, unfortunately, in Northern China at least) to pee safely.

### **China and Split Trousers**

I found such split trousers depicted in 1000-year-old Buddhist wall carvings in central China, so it's an old tradition. For nighttime, children would be trained to pee on a whistled command. Horrifying in Freudian terms, and I could talk for hours on my own theories, intuited at the time and largely confirmed in my therapy training, of why one might argue that the Chinese are quite the way they are – at least in my perception. Industrious, passionate, messy, chaotic, lovable and intensely infuriating, unable to separate from the group, unaware of themselves as unique individuals.

I generalise massively – but in conveying that Chinese narrative, at a time of exhilarating opening up under Deng Xiaoping during the 80s and before Tiananmen Square, perhaps I was able to do a reasonable job because I was also searching for, voicing, my own narrative of childhood pain and longing. For many years afterwards, people would tell me how much they enjoyed – and above all remembered – that story of the Chinese nappies.

(By the way, Deng Xiaoping had a great influence on my own practise of psychotherapy. I may have trained in transpersonal, rather eclectic psychotherapy, but at heart, I am a Dengian. As in, it doesn't matter whether a cat is a psychoanalyst or a Cognitive-Behavioural therapist, as long as it catches mice. Or in another great Deng saying, to get well is glorious. The politically aware among you will recognise that the first should have referred to black or white cats, and the second to getting rich...)

I loved reporting when it got personal, and I could use myself, as it were, as a tool to tell a bigger story – rather, I know now, as a therapist uses him- or her-*Self* as an instrument, a mirror, a sounding board, also a tool, to facilitate healing in the client.

### **Hacks and Shrinks – the Overlap**

What my argument today boils down to is that hacks and shrinks, journalists and therapists, do have much more in common than most media folk would like to admit – or for that matter, most psychotherapists, with the disdain they share with most of the public for journalists.

And I'll go further - there is in my view NO profession that is more closely related to psychotherapy than that of the journalist. Not nursing, not medicine, not religious ministry, not education, not social work, not teaching.

Why? Journalists and therapists share the same vocation as story-tellers, builders of narrative.

It's what we (me wearing both hats at this point) DO – though my journalist colleagues don't really like the analogy, as most regard therapy with the deepest of suspicion and were quite shocked (much less so now) that one or their own should actually Come Out as a full-blown therapist.

As a therapist, to continue the analogy, I listen to my client struggling to piece together the fragmented parts of his or her own narrative, to make sense of the story so far. I take those pieces or narrative into myself; I allow them to play consciously and unconsciously with my own experience, my training, my ideas, and especially my informed intuitions.

I struggle – mostly elegantly, I hope, sometimes less so – to reflect back that sense I am picking up of my client's Being, connecting the dreams and events in their life, exploring possible Meaning – and allowing every now and then that Aha moment when suddenly the client gasps, we both fall silent, or burst out laughing, or feel a rush of tearful emotion, and a new understanding is born, and we drop into a new level of work, and connections happen in his or her brain – and in mine - that will never be disconnected again.

It's above all that gentle willingness to listen in the therapy hour that makes such moments possible.

A good journalist does something very similar with the story he or she is pursuing. For in a sense, to pursue the analogy with psychotherapy, here, the "client" is in a sense the story itself, as well as its players.

The journalist listens to that story as it struggles to create its own narrative. He or she listens to the fragmented voices – the sub-personalities if you will, the split off parts – of something which looking back once the story's over will make sense, have a beginning, middle and end.

When you're a journalist in the middle of the story, that coherence is not very often yet visible – and that's where journalists like therapists need to be so careful not to impose on their client's struggle a narrative that is the journalist's/ the therapist's own.

### **Bad journalism and bad therapy**

Bad journalism – and there's a lot of it about - just like bad therapy is about leaping to conclusions, blurting out half-truths and outright distortions, being *disrespectful* to the story's or the client's lived reality. Do you recognise that from the media?

I had many *Aha!* moments when I was covering Eastern Europe and China. I would often start writing a report without a very clear sense of what it really meant, and then in the interplay between my fingers on the keyboard and my pieces of research strewn around

my desk and my moments of sudden memory of connected pieces from earlier assignments, the meaning would emerge as I wrote.

Covering Tiananmen Square or the Romanian Revolution in 1989, for example, my two journalistic highpoints about which I'm afraid I'm ready to bore people for hours, I would often sit down to my laptop with 15 minutes to go to live transmission and only a general idea of what I was going to write.

Every time, the story emerged on screen and in time – and I would marvel before I'd even heard of psychotherapy at how my brain and my fingers and my memory and my notebook jottings would coalesce miraculously into a coherent narrative of which I hadn't been aware when I set out.

The result sometimes was that the narrative was embarrassingly wrong. I sometimes leapt to conclusions which weren't subsequently born out, such as the rumoured resignation of Deng Xiaoping at the height of the student protests in Beijing at the end of May '89.

But for more broadcast pieces than not, what I generated in Peking as we then still called it was some of the best journalistic writing I'd ever done - perhaps because it was so relatively unconscious and trusting of my by then fairly developed experienced-based intuition.

Dangerous stuff, to talk like this to journalists. But then, most of you are therapists, so I guess you don't mind...

### **Death and Tragedy – a Great Story?**

Isn't it interesting how we journalists talk of our work. That was a great story, we'll say, sometimes a little shame-facedly, after we've reported a major event – like the Hutton Enquiry into the BBC in Britain, or Tiananmen Square, or a row at the European Union, or, I'm afraid, a murder or a war.

How journalists chase the Story is not always a pretty sight. Let me quote the Vicar of Soham Tim Alban-Jones at a discussion the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma organised on the Soham murders the other day in London.

"Interesting word, this," said Tim, " 'the Story.'

"I know," he went on, "that's what journalists refer to. But when you're on the receiving end of it, when you're actually living it, when it's real life, it doesn't feel like a story to you."

But think of Soham and the tabloids; or of WMD in Iraq and the neo-cons in the US or indeed of suicide bombers in Iraq; think of the fall of communism and of Ronald Reagan's "Pull down this Wall Mr Gorbachev"; think of crime figures and the Daily Mail's stirring up of popular fear and loathing; think of the European Union and how it's reported in the British media; think of Parliament at Westminster and how Government and Opposition make up their different "stories" of what the other side is doing.

All of this boils down to the construction, sometimes desperately artificial and thin, of narrative – and if a narrative is understood only through prejudice and ignorance on the part of the listener or story-teller, whether political, journalistic or therapeutic, it is very unlikely to be an authentic one.

### **Journalism and The Truth**

And that's where I find journalists usually innocently but also breathtakingly naive. My colleagues genuinely do largely believe – and this comes out in any conversation that explores these things – that they are in pursuit of Objectivity and The Truth, capital O, capital T, capital T.

That's what Andrew Gilligan truly believed he was doing when he reported on the Dodgy Iraq Dossier for the BBC in 2003. I'm sure, just to take a couple of other journalists with passion, that that is what Robert Fisk of the Independent in Iraq or John Humphreys on the Today Programme, or the vast majority of my former colleagues believe they are doing.

As if there is indeed pure Objectivity, A Truth out there, a Single Truth with the journalist's task merely to uncover it rather than construct it.

If only it were that simple – in journalism as in psychotherapy.

Think *here* of Bosnia and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia. There were in that sad but for so long hopeful country Albanian truths, Bosnian truths, Croatian truths and also Serbian truths – the latter Serbian truths built on centuries of constructed victimhood ultimately visited out upon The Other in the most appalling ethnic cleansing and humiliation.

I vividly recall a conversation some years ago with a Bosnian journalist who simply had no idea, until he left the devastation of war in Sarajevo and came to Britain, just how complex and responsible a journalist's job is, and how important it is to understand all perspectives to a story.

He had thought that exposing the evils of the opposite side, however inaccurate some of the content of his stories, was legitimate and indeed excellent journalism.

On the contrary – journalists just like therapists, to achieve anything of significance with a client or a story, need at least to seek to understand all aspects, often contradictory, of an individual's or a community's or a nation's or the planet's felt experience.

The big difference of course between journalists and psychotherapists is that hacks don't get the training in self-awareness and humility that is central to being a good shrink.

### **What Journalism can learn from Psychotherapy**

Hacks really do need to learn from shrinks. They need to know about the things we as therapists come to take for granted as the basis for healthy working – boundaries, context, attentive and respectful listening, transference and projection, and how our own processes and prejudices and unconscious parts can interrupt the understanding and re-telling of authentic and respectful but often contradictory narrative.

There's occasional talk these days in the media business about how journalists need counselling – and although that's progress from the old macho days, what we hacks need in the first instance isn't necessarily therapy but cracking good *supervision*. Which isn't to say that no small number of my other craft would greatly benefit from a spell of humble psychotherapeutic self-exploration.

And that brings me, briefly, to how things might in fact be beginning to change, at least in some areas.

Much was already in train at the BBC in particular, but the tragedy of David Kelly's suicide and the criticisms of the Hutton enquiry have prompted some rather uncomfortable but valuable self-analysis within journalism.

There are those, indeed many journalists, who say that the detail of the original Gilligan story didn't matter so much – since what counted was, they say, that he got the story of government mendacity and exaggeration largely right.

But the strictures on the BBC came as a severe and in my view very necessary shock, a wake-up call to a touch more humility, and not just for the BBC. Getting it largely right when such grave allegations are being made is NOT good enough. Especially when journalists claim to hold the government to the highest standards of moral probity.

The BBC has now responded with a very vigorous and welcome new internal drive to shift journalistic consciousness and to set and raise standards that in British journalism are not as high as they should be.

There's a new College of Journalism, and courses in trauma awareness and support, for practitioners and managers. There's training in what we're calling Emotionally Aware Interviewing.

And (and this is one that sadly really matters) the BBC, with support from my own Dart Centre and the Metropolitan Police, is educating managers in how to break the worst possible personal news to the relatives of colleagues killed or seriously injured in the line of duty.

### **Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma**

Drip by drip, the journalistic culture will change – and is changing. And in that, again just briefly, I'd like to mention in a little more detail the work of the [Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma](#).

Take a look at our website – where you'll see what we've been doing in Europe, Australia, the Balkans, Africa and in the US to raise the journalistic game when it comes to reporting trauma.

To help journalists to report victims of violence with much more respect, and with understanding of what trauma is and does; to help journalists be more aware of their own response to trauma; and how they can support and help each other. Helping break down the old macho and indeed supremely arrogant myths in the journalistic culture of invincibility and what one might term all-knowingness – so richly illustrated by the David Kelly tragedy.

I had wanted to talk in some detail also about approaches to post-trauma counselling and support – so very relevant to journalism and an area that as a therapist I find particularly rewarding and also challenging.

I suspect we have all been following the at times quite difficult debate about the value of psychological debriefing immediately post-trauma, and especially the use of outside counsellors.

Among my journalistic colleagues, there's a lot of interest in a rather more robust model of trauma response developed by the Royal Marines and focused on assessing for the risk of post-traumatic distress.

### **John Lloyd and the Power of the Media**

But let's leave that for the discussion. I'll end this prepared part by quoting, with no little pleasure that I'm not entirely alone in making these kind of arguments, from a book by former Financial Times journalist John Lloyd, who writes of the power of the media, and their consequent need for more humility and who seems to have irritated John Humphreys beyond measure, as Humphreys told us just a couple of weeks ago in an address to the Edinburgh Television Festival.

"Nothing," writes John Lloyd, "not religious belief, not political debate and argument, not even conversation with friends and family – possesses the command over mass attention that the media have taken as their own.

"Their themes dominate public and private lives. Their definitions of right and wrong, true or false, impose themselves on politics and on the public domain.

"Their narratives" – yes, narratives, and John to my knowledge has never studied psychotherapy – "[the media's] narratives construct the world we don't immediately experience, which, for nearly all of us, is most of the world.

"The media," Lloyd continues, in a manner which had me jumping with delight when I read him in June 2004, "are critically important players in public life. They stage the dramas and spectacles which provide the content for much of the common interests of acquaintances and friends; they teach attitudes; introduce trends; show how to display emotion."

And as such, and here I'm paraphrasing, the media have an enormous responsibility to seek an understanding of the public world, and of politics in particular, which is richer than that attempted by most media organisations now.

I might add that that they also have a responsibility to understand much more deeply how PEOPLE work – emotions, psychology, trauma, passion, pain, denial, projection, and all the rest.

In short, journalists do have a lot to learn from therapists. And now, after finally finding at least the main thread of my own narrative, and making at least some sense of why I'm here, this one journalist is now very proud to call himself on the one hand a hack – albeit a hack in recovery - and on the other, a professional shrink....

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