

Are we able to do our job properly any more?

The NUJ Brussels seminar "Trust me I'm a journalist!" on 3rd July 2008 packed the Maelbeek room in the Brussels Centre for a lively and provocative debate led by UK journalist and author Nick Davies. Participants discussed his proposition that journalists on most media channels are either too overworked or too cynical to produce any kind of quality output. Davies points to national stories that turn out to be pseudo-events manufactured by the PR industry, news stories that are shameless rehashes of corporate press releases, and a general lack of considered analysis or thinking in much editorial output. He blames a combination of powerful media barons, a burgeoning PR industry and lack of editorial power for bringing the industry to the point of crisis. Why is editorial quality falling? Why has quality fallen so fast? Davies points to industry changes that mean journalists are required to churn out more and more news, in a shorter time, with no chance to check information that is spoon-fed to them by newswires, PR firms and lobby groups. He cites astonishing figures from his own survey which showed that only 12% of articles in a sample of 2,000 showed evidence of fact-checking. Davies' claims are backed by over a year of media analysis from researchers at Cardiff University. They are confirmed by another recent study, carried out by Leipzig University under commission from the North Rhine-Westphalia Regional Media Authority, which also shows the effects of time pressures on modern journalism. The Leipzig University study indicated that journalists are increasingly copying from each other, and relying too much on Google and other journalists' output rather than accessing primary sources such as the websites of political, scientific or cultural institutions. An industry in decline? Both studies show the effects of a once-proud industry in decline. Talk to most journalists, staff or freelance, and they will tell a similar story. Disillusionment, dissatisfaction and weariness tend to set in after years of trying to stand up for quality reporting, often, it seems, against a management which puts short-term profit above all issues of quality. No wonder then that many journalists are quitting the profession to work in more mundane but more rewarding occupations in the PR industry. In my own conversations with other journalists, there is a clear indication that even in the more quality-driven sectors of the press such as the BBC, long-term employees are leaving after decades of loyalty to their profession, out of disenchantment with their managers' attitudes to their work. What kind of journalism can we expect from such an industry? Insightful analyses that inform people and politicians and help us to make good decisions? Or more shallow "happy slappy" pieces which make us feel good for the moment but seldom guide our thinking? BBC Panorama style investigative reporting? Or the big headlines and big tits style of the Sun? Lack of editorial quality impoverishes society. The answer is pretty clear. Lack of quality in the output of our media ultimately impoverishes society itself. If we are unable to read incisive stories that help us formulate our thoughts about a topic, how can we evade the barrage of media trivia that we are subjected to every day and work out what is right and what is wrong. As journalists we need to stand up for quality in our profession. Many of us do, at some cost to our careers. But it is a battle worth fighting. So fight on, my friends, fight on. You can see the NUJ Brussels report on the 3rd July seminar and videos at http://www.nujcec.org/brussels/?page_id=184

A link to Leipzig University study can be found at http://www.nujcec.org/brussels/?page_id=208 (German language).

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