

# The existentialist journalist

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## ABSTRACT

Ernst Gombrich famously began *The Story of Art*: “There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists.” Similarly, we could write that there really is no such thing as journalism, only journalists. Journalism is a human endeavour in the face of limited knowledge, unreasonable demands and legal constraints. At every point in the creation of journalism, there are philosophical issues to be resolved. This paper explores existentialist responses to some of the challenges facing journalist. It argues that an appreciation of philosophy in general – and existentialism in particular – is necessary for the understanding and practice of journalism.

- GRIFF: *Ah, Pritchard. I, er, I understand the 8.45 to Basingstoke was late again. Pritchard?...Very, very, very late. Three days late. Pritchard!*
- JON: *Yes, well, we were having a tea break in the signal box, sir, and that kettle does take an unconscionable long time to boil.*
- GRIFF: *What did you say, Pritchard?*
- JON: *I said ‘an unconscionable long time’. Sir.*
- GRIFF: *And what should you have said?*
- JON: *‘A bloody long time’.*
- GRIFF: *That’s better.*
- JON: *I’ve been meaning to see you about that sir. I want to put in for a vocabulary rise...I want to use words like ‘existentialism’ on duty, sir!*
- GRIFF: *Existentialism? In a signal box? It hardly seems relevant, Pritchard.*
- JON: *Existentialism informs all areas of life sir!*
- GRIFF: *Yes, but does it explain why the 8.45 to Basingstoke was three days late?*

*Signalman Pritchard sketch from Oh No, It Isn't, BBC Radio 4, 30 August 1974, script reprinted in The Flood: The Authorised and Very Official History of Douglas Adams and the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy (p.45).*

## Introduction

That philosophy has much to inform other subject areas in education is perhaps one of the least contentious of propositions. There are tomes on the philosophy of history, language,

**psychology, film, science and many more subjects besides. Further, that it has much to inform a variety of professions is perhaps only marginally more contentious.**

Jurisprudence is at the heart of law, and lawyers face philosophical questions of justice — as well as the nature of knowledge — on a daily basis. Political philosophy and politics are similarly bedfellows, and there are a wide range of professions that can be categorised as ‘political’ — elected politicians, political party activists, union employees and elected officials, the whole of the civil service, local authority employees, those working for non-government organisations, and so forth.

In civil and commercial professions, across national boundaries as well as political systems, there seems to be a role for philosophy. Just as a small example of the work philosophers can do in the modern world, Professor John Lippitt of the University of Hertfordshire — who has written extensively on Kierkegaard — serves as an external consultant to Hertfordshire Constabulary’s Ethics, Equality and Integrity Board and Ethics Committee, advising on the Police Code of Ethics (University of Hertfordshire, 2017).

Nevertheless, there seems a degree of resistance to the concept of philosophy — indeed of any reflective or critical thinking — being applied to the profession of journalism. At its starkest, this can be seen in the comments of one of the UK’s most prominent former editors, Kelvin MacKenzie, when asked about education in journalism by Harriet Thurley of the City University Student Journalism magazine, Xcity (2011, p.14):

*‘Print journalism is not a profession, it’s a job, and there’s nothing you can learn at university that you can’t learn in one week on a local or regional paper. You cover a car crash, what’s there to know? University may be enjoyable: you make friends, drink a lot and occasionally turn up to lectures but you don’t need any of those things to be a journalist. You’re meant to be the nasty boy in the corner throwing the bread rolls. You’re there to discover a world that people won’t tell you about. So why not leave school at 18 and go straight in? Steve Jobs dropped out of university, as did Bill Gates. If you’ve got anything about you don’t bother with it, unless you want to get into the hedge fund business. Then by all means, go.’*

And just for good measure, Mackenzie added:

*‘I would shut down all the journalism colleges. There are over 80 schools in the UK teaching journalism but these courses are make-work projects for retired journalists, some of whom have been successful in the past and have chosen the academic route to give something back. But some of what they give back isn’t worth it. There is no merit whatsoever in going to university if you want to be a print journalist. It’s a complete waste of time and money. You should go straight from school and start working on a local newspaper. Just like I did.’ (Thurley, 2011, p.15)*

Such scepticism of the value of higher education in Journalism is unlikely to be universal, given that it flies so forcibly in the face of reality. A 2016 study of Journalism in the UK by the Reuters Institute found: ‘Journalism is now fully “academised”. Of those journalists who began their careers in 2013, 2014, and 2015, 98% have a bachelor’s degree and 36% a master’s.

Thurman *et al*, 2016, p.6)

However, there are other signs that among publishers there is scepticism of reflective and critical thinking — never mind specifically philosophical enquiry — and that it is not vital to journalists in the workplace. For example, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) still holds its Diploma in Journalism at level 3 in the UK Qualifications Framework — the same level as BTEC and A levels. Since the charity is basically overseen by the publishing industry — regional and local press in particular — we can infer that a graduate level of inquiry is not seen as an essential part of journalism by these employers (NCTJ, 2017).

This paper seeks to demonstrate that key philosophical issues have a direct bearing on journalism, and that existentialism in particular has meaningful contributions to make to the understanding of the work of journalists. Not all philosophical insights which might have an impact on the work of the journalist are listed — that is hardly practicable — but some connections are made in the hope of demonstrating that the journalism educator will see a connection as to how philosophical insights can be meaningful for journalism. Through a series of ‘vignettes’, each briefly outlining some key insights by major thinkers, and relating them to journalism, this paper aims to demonstrate that there are clear and important lessons to be gained for journalism students from the study of philosophy and that journalism is more than a form of transcription or glorified gossip, but is, instead, a philosophical inquiry, requiring reflection and insight.

**Objections**  
Challenges to the notion of a comparison between philosophy and journalism, and to philosophy being on a journalism curriculum, may include the following:

The curriculum is already too crowded, what with social media, mobile journalism, law, politics possibly page layout, sub-editing, and so forth. Indeed, the list is endless, do we really need another subject to add?

Philosophy is not about the day-to-day, but ‘eternal truths’ which do not concern journalists, except per-

haps on a slow news day and in some more esoteric comment sections.

Philosophy is written in an obscure, inaccessible fashion, which is antithetical to journalistic writing.

Philosophy leads to inaction — we need trained journalists who can produce content, not muse endlessly on what that content should be.

Not a single publisher has ever insisted that their journalists have philosophy as part of their training.

Show me the great journalists who studied philosophy?

It is not a new idea.

Starting with the last of these, it is true that a relationship between the disciplines has been suggested before, most notably by Carlin Romano, who has taught a blend of the two subjects for decades. In 2009, he wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

*'Having now seen students in those seminars become journalists or philosophy professors themselves, I feel one of my core beliefs has panned out. I've always insisted to the philosophy students that journalistic thinking enhances philosophical work by connecting it to a less artificial method of establishing truth claims than exists in philosophical literature. I've always stressed to journalism students that a philosophical angle of mind—strictness in relating evidence and argument to claims, respectful skepticism toward tradition and belief, sensitivity to tautology, synoptic judgment—makes one a better reporter. Judging by reports from the field, it appears to be true.'*

(Romano, 2011)

Unfortunately, such a programme has not been repeated and replicated extensively in higher education, at least not in the English-speaking world.

However, Romano is far from alone in his attempts to fuse philosophy with journalism education. Kim Pearson of The College of New Jersey, commenting on Romano's piece in *The Chronicle*, wrote: '

Indeed, much of my own journalism teaching is an attempt to engage students in philosophical reflection on the ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and rhetoric of journalism as it is practiced currently and historically in the United States.'

(Pearson, 2009)

This paper is designed to argue, not through empirical evidence, but by the philosophical, didactical method, providing a few short argumentations, each suggesting the value of philosophy in journalism education.

However, the goal is to go further than previous arguments in the field of linking philosophy with journalism. This paper advocates that existentialism in particular as a partial remedy to a fundamental issue facing journalism — that of the challenge by some that the role of the journalist is less that of a serious professional with a significant public interest role in society, but rather a functionary within the publishing industry, whose overarching purpose is to sell advertising.

The significance of public interest journalism and its need within society has been well-rehearsed, but it is worth noting that not everyone is convinced of its worth or necessity. Famously, Sam Zell gave a very direct response when questioned by staff at the *Herald Tribune* in 2008, just after he took over the newspaper group. The exchange between proprietor and staff was reported by many newspapers, including the *New Times Forward-Palm Beach*, which included a heated exchange between a member of the editorial staff and Zell:

*"I hear you guys talking a lot about revenues and the bottom line and all that, but I'm a journalist, and I kind of want to know what your viewpoints are on journalism and its role in the community, because we're not the Pennysaver; we're a newspaper."*

*Good, tough question.*

*Zell, who stood behind a podium, said all he wanted to do was make enough money to be able to afford the journalists who make up the "heart and soul" of the business.*

*"You need to in effect help me do that by being a journalist that focuses on what our readers want and therefore generates more revenue," he said.*

*"Readers want puppy dogs, but we also need to inform the community," Fajardo interjected.*

*Zell shifted behind the podium.*

*"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he began, "but you're giving me the classic, what I would call journalistic arrogance by deciding that puppies don't count. I don't know anything about puppies. What I'm interested in is how can we generate additional interest in our product and additional revenue so we can make our product better and better and hopefully we get to the point where our revenue is so significant that we can do puppies and Iraq, OK?"*

(Norman, 2008)

One could argue that this is leaping from the particular to the general. Zell made his money in real estate and his tenure as owner of the Tribune group ended in bankruptcy for the company. Surely, the counter-argument may go, more thoughtful proprietors would recognise that such a shallow view of journalism would inevitably result in financial failure?

It is true that publishers vary in their approach to editorial, but not every publisher who has taken the basest — whatever-it-takes-to-get-money — approach to journalism has failed. The Express group is considered to be among the most contemptuous of fundamental journalistic values (*Telegraph*, 2011) but has proven resilient in terms of profitability (Sweney, 2017)

Nevertheless, the financial failure of publishing that has emerged in the wake of the digital disruption of the industry suggests that pressure on journalists to produce the sort of journalism that is attractive for advertisers is a challenge to the *raison d'être* of journalists and that journalism educators need to consider their response: do we solely seek to produce more skilled journalists to compete more effectively and perform more productively in the new environment, or do we also equip our charges with the self-knowledge, confidence and reflection to navigate an even more challenging work environment? Publishers may be demanding the former, but our paymasters are, ultimately, our students and it is to them we are answerable.

Furthermore the question is not one or the other — skills or philosophical insight — it is both. The former is a challenge to the very concept of higher education itself, while the latter is more in keeping with the traditional role of a university.

Journalism is produced by journalists, and the self-perception of their role is fundamental to the product they will create.

## Einstein and the Problem of Knowledge

A major branch (if not, arguably, the whole focus) of philosophy concerns how we can know anything and what, if anything, is true. Such questions have occupied Western philosophy from its inception and the responses have charted its history, from Greek thinking onward.

But can such considerations — often abstract, complex, even esoteric — be of any consequence to journalism students? Granted that the journalist is a ‘seeker after truth’, but — it may be argued — the truth sought by a journalist’s quest is a simple and plain one — just the facts. Yet to hold such a view is to take a radical, philosophical epistemological position, open to challenge. Are there, indeed, such things as plain facts? How can one know what constitutes sufficient proof to establish such facts? Is the summary of the facts — as can be found in a news story — inevitably a distorting simplification of the truth.

Certainly a grasp of philosophical issues has been regarded as an aid to understanding and discovery in other fields. For example, Albert Einstein was a strong proponent of philosophy in general and epistemology in particular, in the study and understanding of physics:

*‘When I think about the ablest students whom I have encountered in my teaching, that is, those who distinguish themselves by their independence of judgement and not merely their quick-wittedness, I can affirm that they had a vigorous interest in epistemology. They happily began discussions about the goals and methods of science, and they showed unequivocally, through their tenacity in defending their views, that the subject seemed important to them. Indeed, one should not be surprised at this.’*

*Einstein (1916 cited by Janssen and Lehner, 2014, p.356)*

If journalism has any role in protecting the public interest or holding the powerful to account, the cultivation of ‘independence of judgement’ in journalism students is surely something all journalism educators should strive for.

To rephrase the objection: science and philosophy seek eternal truths about metaphysical subjects — the nature of the universe, how we know anything is true and indeed, what is meant, if anything, as ‘true’. A mind tuned to such questions may be of little value to the journalistic quest for the truth of the latest political poll or local government announcement.

In answer, firstly, someone schooled in tackling larger propositions of truth may well find less grandiose, but nevertheless insidious, claims to truth easier to question. That is, a mind used to tackling the deepest questions known to humankind will not be intimidated by press officers, politicians and the leaders of our major institutions. In short, training on the big questions will give confidence and strength in tackling smaller, more day-to-day ones.

Secondly, the apparently esoteric questions of ‘Big Philosophy’, have everyday implications to our lives.

Granted, however, this is not a universally held view. For instance, it is rejected by Stanley Fish of the *New York Times*:

*'What exactly will have changed when one set of philosophical views has been swapped for another? Almost nothing. To be sure you will now give different answers than you once would have when you are asked about moral facts, objective truths, irrefutable evidence and so on; but when you are engaged in trying to decide what is the right thing to do in a particular situation, none of the answers you might give to these deep questions will have any bearing on your decision. You won't say, "Because I believe in moral absolutes, I'll take this new job or divorce my husband or vote for the Democrat." Nor will you say, "Because I deny moral absolutes I have no basis for deciding since any decision I make is as good or bad as any other." What you will say, if only to yourself, is "Given what is at stake, and the likely outcomes of taking this or that action, I think I'll do this." Neither "I believe in moral absolutes" nor "I don't" will be a reason in the course of ordinary, non-philosophical, deliberation.'*

(Fish, 2015, p.110)

But then refuted by [Paul Boghossian](#) of New York University:

*"It is rationally inconceivable that one's meta-ethical attitudes about moral correctness and truth won't influence one's first-order views about how to deal with cultures that practice female genital mutilation. Indeed, it is precisely because they were expected to have such influence – because they were expected to foster greater tolerance for those with whom one might disagree – that people were attracted to moral relativism in the first place'*

(Boghossian, 2011, p4)

The reader will at least concede that there is an argument for the philosophy of the every day. Setting aside that we seem to have left epistemology and slipped into moral philosophy, the question remains whether philosophy may not have day-to-day implications, and while it remains, there is good reason to have philosophy on the journalism curriculum.

But the situation we have before us is more akin to a plea for a right of appeal than a direct argument of innocence. Just as the QC must lay before the judge grounds for appeal – not prove their client has been unfairly convicted – so the argument here is that there are grounds for debate, consideration, experimentation, and further research, to establish the value of philosophy in journalism education.

Central to good journalism there is a whole series of questions journalists need to ask themselves:

How do I know this is true?

Is Journalism entertainment or public interest?

How should we govern ourselves?

What should we report?

How should we report it?

How should we research it?

How do I know this is true?

Who should I interview?

Where should it go in the publication?

Is this story important?

Should we use that photograph?

Who is this for?

The question then is: can philosophy help students resolve these issues better? To argue that philosophical discussion is moribund from the ebb and flow of human society and our everyday moral dilemmas is surely a restrictive and peculiar view of an important and profound subject.

No matter the issues to be resolved in some departments of philosophy, there are undoubtedly other philosophical traditions that regard matters of everyday living as central to philosophy. Chief among them is the school of existentialism.

## Sartre, bad faith and the freedom to define Journalism

Broadly speaking, existentialist thought asks us, as moral agents, to look to ourselves and develop our



own moral perspective in order to answer ethical challenges — that to seek the comfort of an external moral framework is deadening or inauthentic (*mauvaise foi* — bad faith). This gives rise to our anxiety and sense of separateness from the crowd.

This can sound like someone mentally unhinged and at odds with society, but is more a criticism of blind conformity - a much more dangerous phenomenon. A parallel, but somewhat distinct point, was developed by Camus (1942) in his novel, *L'etranger*, in which an Algerian is condemned to death for killing a man on a beach. The jury in his trial loses sympathy (and hence, the protagonist loses his life) with the accused after hearing how little demonstrative sympathy he showed on the death of his mother.

Societal expectations, employment roles and indeed the expectations of friends and family, can, from an existentialist perspective, seem to lock us in to a pre-determined course of action, or even a whole life of set expectations.

Feminism, black liberation and the fight for homosexual rights can all be seen as acts of 'good faith' — alternatives to living a life that is expected of us. Sartre's point, however, is more that we lock ourselves into these roles and that failing to challenge them is a personal defeat, a course of action taken out of fear. The inauthentic life, no matter the external pressure, is a failure of courage on our own part.

Hence, we have a debate within existentialism — societal demands v personal courage. The role demanded of us, and our reaction to the challenge.

It is no coincidence, surely, that that most famous example Sartre gives of bad faith is that of a waiter who does his best to conform over diligently to his job role — his true self subjected to the role assigned to him by society. Not only is this an example of employment, but is also one of servility. Bullying is notoriously rife within British journalism (John, 2013), so the point of expected servility will not be lost on the reader. Besides, the profession is also very competitive, and the feeling one needs to project an exterior of hard work and focus on the job is no doubt strong in many junior — indeed senior — journalists.

Such choices bring philosophy directly into the everyday working life that we take up each morning — and which for which we are preparing our students.

But Sartre's point is precisely that to divide ourselves between our work-self, with all its corporate expectations, and who we feel ourselves to genuinely be, is to participate in our own destruction.

This directly impacts on our work as journalism educators, raising the questions: is it our duty to show students they are free? Are we teaching young people to produce something entertaining that will attract an audience, or are we doing something much more vital — helping people see the world with greater clarity?

If the latter, then they need to be able to free themselves from established powers, which attempt to propagate their own vision of the world to their own ends. Are we simply to create diligent workers who will not question their role?

Sartre's point is that we need to look to ourselves to answer some of the moral questions we are faced with, but simply taking on the role — wearing the suit and walking the walk of the executive — is willingly participate in our own destruction; to be subsumed by an other's expectations.

The lesson here for journalism educators is significant — on one level we need to educate our students that there is indeed a choice to be made between our own interpretation of what is journalism and that given to us by our employee. Furthermore, we need to teach a subtler Sartrean lesson — that we must choose between courage and self-fulfilment, or conformity and partial self-destruction.

## The gaze and being summed up in a 300-word news story

Another significant concept of Sartre's was that of *le regard*, 'the look', or more commonly referred now to as 'the gaze', particularly after its adaptation and evolution by other thinkers. Here, again, its exact meaning becomes lost, both in interpretation and in its development by others, especially the psychoanalyst, Lacan. Film studies has mined Sartre and Lacan's notions of the gaze to great depths and wide application, but its contribution to the field of journalism has not been significant. Nevertheless, the notion of the perception of others being a controlling influence on us is important. For Sartre, as a free, undefined subject, we are able to act as we will and hence define ourselves through our own choices. But the gaze of others, their perceptions and judgments, can have a limiting affect on us. This can be disturbing and distressing, as we sense our loss

of self-definition and are forced into the guise of another's perceptions; our subjectivity is challenged when we become the object of another's subjectivity — our limitless subjective self comes into conflict with the limited, defined objective being imposed by another. We become the perceived.

*'The appearance of the Other, on the contrary, causes the appearance in the situation of an aspect which I did not wish, of which I am not master, and which on principle escapes me since it is for the Other. This is what Gide has appropriately called "the devil's part." It is the unpredictable but still real reverse side.'*  
(Sartre, 1943, p.265)

This strikes one as of significance to journalism. The court report, summing up a trial in a few hundred words, creating a simple, truncated account of someone — a person of complexity and possibility. The defendant's perception of their own situation and its depth will be at great variance to the simple news story, tucked away on the inside pages, with only a few lines summing up their whole existence, as far as the reader is concerned. It is at least arguable that Sartre's notion of the look — the objectification of the subject — could go part of the way to explaining the indignation felt by those in the media spotlight. The inevitable limiting of their perspective and voice to a soundbite not only distorts what they are saying, but objectifies them — the rebellious backbench MP, the outraged neighbour, the wicked criminal. They, in turn — while being unable to refute to themselves the image of them displayed in the report (since, as far as it goes, it is accurate) — objectify the press, narrowing them to mere mudrakers, voyeurs and exploiters of tragedy. The judgements and counter-judgements inevitably result in hostility and conflict, just what Sartre's analysis sought to predict and to explain; violence emerges through objectification and counter-objectification.

*'Shame, fear, and pride are my original reactions; they are only various ways by which I recognize the Other as a subject beyond reach, and they include within them a comprehension of my selfness which can and must serve as my motivation for constituting the Other as an object.'*  
(Sartre, 1943, p.291)

It is important to note here that this is not discomfort at some factually 'false' notion of the self. Sartre uses the example of somebody being caught peeping through a keyhole and the sense of shame this brings in them (Sartre, 1943, p.259). The embarrassment is the result of the sense of a self which is a voyeur, although — in Sartre's phenomenology — this 'shameful self' is actually brought into being at the point when the peeping tom realises he has been caught and judged.

Sartre's notion of 'the look' has been picked up and transformed by other thinkers (becoming 'the gaze'), such as Foucault (1977), who emphasised its oppressive nature, and in psychoanalytical theory (most notably via Lacan), where scopophilia is then applied to film theory, most famously by Laura Mulvey (1999) in her 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

Print journalism, traditionally, had limited scope for visual representation, although digital technology has somewhat broken down the silos between media. This has been profoundly shown in the cases of Max Mosley, when the *News of the World* put a short video of him cavorting with sex workers online, and again, when Gawker Media put a short video online of the wrestler Hulk Hogan having sex. Both media outlets lost their cases and the limits of visual portrayal were issues in both trials. In the case of Mosley, heard before Mr Justice Eady, there is a clear indication that the visual representation — had it formed part of the claim — would have merited legal disapproval of itself, over and above the revelation in text:

*'In this case, the pleaded claim is confined to publication of the information; it does not include the intrusive method by which it was acquired. Yet obviously the nature and scale of the distress caused is in large measure due to the clandestine filming and the pictures acquired as a result.'*  
(*Mosley v News Group Newspapers Ltd*, 2008)

Nevertheless, the gaze need not be visual for the theory to be relevant. A vivid sketch or even accurate report of events is enough to induce the strong emotions and angst described by Sartre. Indeed, it is not the inaccuracy that is at issue, it is the degrading by categorisation, limitation and exposure that evinces the reaction (Martinot, 2005).

Hence the mirror the press holds up to its subjects — no matter how fair the reporting — inevitably oppresses the subject, if only by limiting their image. Perhaps at the root of many complaints to the Independent Press Standard Organisation (and even some civil cases for libel or privacy), lies an unease with the Sartrean objectification that can result from the attention of the press.

## Kierkegaard, subjective truth and just the facts

Søren Kierkegaard is considered the father of existentialism (McDonald, 2016), with his focus on the meaning — or meanings — of existence. Some find his philosophy more akin to theology, given the extent

it is imbued with religious thought.

An important, and much discussed element of his thinking is the distinction between objective and subjective truth. The notion that truth can be subjective (i.e., dependant on the individual) seems contradictory and, for many, is an oxymoron. But Kierkegaard regarded our subjective interpretation of the objective world, not only valid, but necessary. The same facts may be presented to the rational scientist and the devout priest, and they will come to different conclusions as to their meaning —but each meaning will be valid (although the degree of passion and personal commitment to that interpretation will make one view more valid than that other), regardless of the objective facts themselves.

From the perspective of the journalist to the reader, this seems unimportant. The journalist gathers the facts and puts them to the reader for their own interpretation. The journalist, in this conceptualisation of their role, is free of any existential challenge — their role is simple, defined and objective. But if Kierkegaard is correct, there cannot be this passionless, uninvolved journalist, or at least, that is not what we ought to be, as human beings. Thus, the question is raised: does such a subjectivity have a place within journalism?

Firstly, Kierkegaard's notion of the subjective separates how something is said from what is said, with the question of something being true or false — at least its subjective truth or falsity depending on who is saying it. Therefore, one speaker might speak the (subjective) truth, and the other not, even if they say the same thing:

*'Objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said. This distinction applies even aesthetically and is specifically expressed when we say that in the mouth of this or that person something that is truth can become untruth.'*

*(Kierkegaard, 1846, p.206)*

*'That is, an objective truth said without authenticity or genuine belief, becomes a subjective falsehood. '*

*...the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.'*

*(Kierkegaard, 1846, p.8)*

Kierkegaard also seems to question the subjective truth of something which is not expressed with fidelity to one's own authentic aesthetic. The facts may be objectively true, but unless they chime with our inner convictions, they are false subjectively.

Does that matter? Well, again we come to the experience of the journalist in situ, enduring the requirements of their publication to produce something that is not in their voice, that is inauthentic to them and cuts across their own values. Such a denial of one's own inner subjective truth may well leave one with a sense a despair.

But whether the journalist is writing something they truly believe in or not is surely critical to the authenticity of their work. Indeed, the cynic might dismiss the need for any authenticity — so long as it sells. However, there is — or at least was — a basis in law for expecting a journalist to have a belief in what they were writing.

In most English-speaking jurisdictions, the defence of fair comment or honest opinion in a defamation case required the writer to genuinely hold the beliefs they were expressing (Kenyon, 2006). There might be the impression that the Defamation Act 2013 removed this requirement, in the mainland UK law, but the statute is quite clear — if the claimant can show the opinion was not the defendant's genuine belief, the defence falls (Defamation Act 2013).

I doubt there is much in the way of a lineage between a Danish philosophy and British jurisprudence, but it is interesting to note the role of the subjective in the tort of defamation, and how insincerity in the expression of an opinion can result in the failure of a defence; effectively a ruling that something may not be regarded as true if expressed by the one person, but might have been true if written by someone else.

## Journalism: Art or Science?

If we take journalism back from the publisher, regarding it less as a product for sale and its producers mere interchangeable proletariat, but instead regard it as a the product of human activity – people with both agency and goals beside mere efficient production, we have a conceptualisation of journalism more akin to E. H. Gombrich's approach to aesthetics, summed up in the beginning of his seminal popular work, *The Story of Art* (1950) in which he writes in the introduction:

*'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.'*



*You may crush an artist by telling him that what he has just done may be quite good in its own way, only it is not "Art".*

*Actually, I do not think there are any wrong reasons for liking a statue or a picture.'*

*(Gombrich, 1950, p.16)*

Substitute here, journalism for art:

*'There really is no such thing as journalism. There are only journalists.*

*You may crush a journalist by telling him that what he has just done may be quite good in its own way, only it is not "journalism".*

*Actually, I do not think there are any wrong reasons for liking an article or a picture.'*

We thus have quite an interesting, if contentious, notion of journalism. The practising journalist comes first – they are the subject – and the object is the product, the journalism. Furthermore, there is no predetermined notion of what is journalism – it for the journalist to decide, and even then not even their peers can insist that what they do is or is not journalism.

In the final reiteration, the consumer is granted freedom to enjoy what they please – be it salacious celebrity gossip or penetrating political discussions. Gombrich might not usually be associated with existentialism, but his conceptualisation here of art in these introductory remarks to a wide audience on the subject, strikes me as a clear iteration of the freedom the individual has in their professional life, with a focus on the human participants rather than the objects themselves.

This refocus on the person rather than the product throws up a whole series of issues which must be addressed in terms of *who* is writing. For one thing, it brings journalism out of the world of science and into the world of the artist – that of the creative, human activity, not the seeker of a singular truth.

The dichotomy – art of science? – is perhaps summed up by Lewis Wolpert (1992) when he noted that each artistic creation could only have been produced by its artist, but all scientific activity will eventually arrive at the same conclusion, and the individual is irrelevant, a position he expressed in the *Unnatural Nature of Science*:

*'In addition to being personal, artistic creations are about singular, often internal, experiences, whereas scientists strive for generality and are interested, for example, in ideas that apply to all cells rather than just to particular ones. Whatever the scientists' feelings, or style, while working, these are purged from the final work. Finally, there are objective and shared criteria for judging scientific work, whereas there are numerous interpretations for artistic creations and no sure way of judging them. Given all these differences, one should treat claims for similarity between scientific and artistic creativity with deep suspicion.'*

*(Wolpert, 1992, p.57)*

We see, then, a clear delineation of territory between the arts and science. Indeed, Gombrich and Wolpert seem to agree on the fundamental differences to the two spheres. So, which one is journalism more akin to? My whole thrust in this paper has been the suggestion that – given that journalism can learn so much from the philosophy in general and existentialism in particular- it is more of an art than a science. Others clearly disagree.

## An argument for critical thinking?

The need for citizens as clear thinkers, in the wake of decisions that seem to have been reached more by hubris than reason, is urgent, but even more so, are journalists who are able to reason well.

A study by Claudia María Álvarez Ortiz (2007) found – perhaps unsurprisingly – that the best way for students to learn critical thinking is to teach them critical thinking. Not quite as self-evident a conclusion as might first appear: it might be thought that teaching other subjects, such as philosophy, would have as good, or even better, a learning outcome.

Nevertheless, critical thinking is an important part of philosophy, but the argument of this paper is that teaching philosophy to Journalism students is not just a question of helping them to think more clearly, but also that the content of philosophy is of direct significance to their future lives as journalists.

The argument for all students to be taught critical thinking is persuasive, and some may regard the teaching of philosophy as an indirect way of doing this. The evidence for the indirect route suggests the direct route is more effective — if you wish to teach critical thinking, then students should specifically learn critical thinking per se, rather than philosophy. However, the point argued here is a different one. For all the virtues of critical thinking and its possible applications to Journalism, it is contended here that philosophy has a

specific application to journalism. Considerations of how one knows anything is true will help students address the problems of what we know and how we should conduct ourselves.

## Discussion and conclusion

*'There comes a point when you research a story too deeply.*

*The story, as you keep on asking more and more questions about it, the story actually disappears.*

*Before you know where you are, we are all sitting there, it is ten to five and we haven't got a front-page lead and the story's just collapsed.*

*Kelvin MacKenzie on the BBC Radio 4 programme, Punt PI (2011)*

With such a vacuous approach to reporting, it was perhaps not surprising that, finally, the hollow men of Fleet Street, with the sort of inevitability of a flawed Othello or King Lear, landed with a noisy crash; some jailed, others with their reputations and careers ruined. Perhaps, in the end, there is no solution to moral failure other than censure. Still, do we not feel any unease at the memory of journalists on trial, some jailed and a torrent of unpleasant revelation of misdemeanour and a misapplied sense of entitlement that the phone hacking scandal presented to us?

In the final analysis, maybe it has become plain that journalism cannot be what we perhaps hoped it could be. It is, in its essence, rogue, untamed and offensive. To define and control journalism would be to turn it into something else: propaganda, rhetoric or simply something ill-defined, dull and unread. What passes for journalism is often these things, but just as often it is not. We trust it will survive through our natural instinct to know and understand the world around us in a manner that relates to the everyday.

As educators, in our efforts to be accredited and approved, we have too often given over journalism to the publishers and taken their perspective, their definition of what journalism is. Without employment skills and a sensitivity to the needs of employers, students will struggle in the job market, but we are failing them in their education if we fail to make them see that they too have a place in defining journalism.

At the beginning of the working day in many, if not most, professions, there is a clear vision of what needs to be achieved by the end of the day. Accounts accurately calculated and written up, an accused convicted or set free (depending on the brief), a wall painted, a class taught long division, and so on.

But what of journalism? A page filled with readable editorial? What editorial? What, exactly, is to be done? The journalist is faced with the blank page and somehow needs to fill it. Surely that is an existentialist challenge.

The distinction between practical and reflective work is not always a useful one, as the best practical work is reflective and the often the most insightful reflection is demonstrated in practical action. This proposition could be regarded as broadly in line with existentialist thinking. Indeed, the notion that morality is best summed by action rather than rules dates at least back to Hellenistic times, with St Paul stating that 'by their fruits you shall know them', meaning that actions give a true demonstration of virtue, rather than adherence to laws.

But still journalism is governed by rules-based thinking rather than inspiring journalists to behave to the highest of standards through the equivalent of the Hippocratic oath; instead they get the 'thou shalt not' of IPSO's editor's code of practice.

Publishers have sought to infantilise journalism education by keeping it limited to skills, partly to hold down wages, but perhaps also to control journalists, by defining their work, standards and lines of enquiry. Professionals elsewhere see their role much more broadly, and their impetus to act is often based on a profound sense of professionalism, rather than conformity. But doctors need medical ethics, lawyers need jurisprudence and journalists need their own, tailor-made philosophical investigation when training, to free them from a simplistic and oppressive notion of their role.

Even more fundamentally, we need independent, free-thinking and able journalists who are not only willing and able to understand the world around them as it is, and not as some would have us think it is, but also to enable the public to comprehend the world with some depth and clarity.

It is a challenge summed up by the Stanford History Education Group in its executive summary of a study in which they found a distinct lack of ability in students to distinguish between genuine and fake news:

*'For every challenge facing this nation, there are scores of websites pretending to be something they are not. Ordinary people once relied on publishers, editors, and subject*

*matter experts to vet the information they consumed. But on the unregulated Internet, all bets are off. Michael Lynch, a philosopher who studies technological change, observed that the Internet is “both the world’s best fact-checker and the world’s best bias confirmer — often at the same time.”*

*Never have we had so much information at our fingertips. Whether this bounty will make us smarter and better informed or more ignorant and narrow-minded will depend on our awareness of this problem and our educational response to it. At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.’*

*(Stanford History Education Group, 2016, p. 4-5)*

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