

Building an Audience

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I'm a complete fraud really. I'm not a journalist. But I am perhaps a harbinger of what might happen to journalism.

I publish this e-letter. On the left-hand side there is a comment piece from me which is about 700 words, never more. On the right-hand side there is a whole list of links to things that are going on in the health service right now and to reports, and gossip and quite often will link to stories from the *Health Service Journal*.

'Do what you do best and link to the rest' is my guiding maxim but I didn't know that it was.

My background is in business. I retired in 1989 and sold my businesses and at the time I was a member of a local authority council, I was council leader. I was also the chairman of the local health authority and later I was appointed to become the chairman of a hospital. I have also been a policy advisor and I helped to set up the health service's management school at Nottingham University and later at Imperial College London.

I have had a long involvement with the health service since 1974 but I'm not a doctor and I'm not an expert in any of that. I'm just really an educated by-stander. Four years ago I'd been to the USA to meet an old friend, a guy called John Mariotti, who wrote a book called *The Shape-shifters*, which is a management book. John is a right-wing Republican thug really, but he's a great guy! I do like him.

He wrote what for me was an unusual thing. He wrote an e-letter. It was like a comment piece that he sent around his friends. I thought that was a good idea but then thought no more about it. Then when I got back it was August. I was thinking about what to do, and a lot of my friends had often asked me my opinion on what was happening in the health service, what was going on. I wasn't chairing anything at the time, I wasn't doing anything. I wondered whether I can put together a kind of e-letter thing that John did.

I wrote my first electronic letter. People call me a blogger. I'm not a blogger; a blogger uses a website and an e-letter is something different. It's quite an important difference. I sent it to 25 of my friends and asked what they thought of it.

Twenty four of them came back and said 'You can't spell, you have terrible typos, and the layout is horrible. But maybe it's not a bad idea'. I persevered. I kept going. That was 4 years ago. Four years later I still can't spell, I still do terrible typos, the layout is crap really – but I have 170,000 readers.

The next question is, how did that happen? The answer is I don't know, it just happened. I've never bought a mailing list, I've never stolen a mailing list. In fact we have a bit of a complication with mailing lists because our server is in America so I have to comply with American data protection, and because we use the product here I have to comply with UK data protection as well. That's all very

complicated. We're permission based, so if you said to me can you book me on a mailing list I can't do it, you have to do it yourself.

We've really grown by recommendations. I'll start with an example. The time is 6.15 on a Saturday morning. I've just finished a slot on BBC Radio 5 Live, one of our national radio stations, talking about NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) and their draft safe staffing recommendations. I put the kettle on, fired up the computer, first out of the e-mail box is an e-mail from Jay, a nurse.

Jay: 'Please don't identify me. I've just finished a 12-hour shift, one nurse to 14 patients, no time for a break, I am exhausted. I know it's not safe but what can I do?' It just happened to be the same day that NICE was making its recommendations on safe staffing. The recommendations are ludicrous and I said so. I can say that kind of thing because no one pays my wages. I'm not employed by anybody. People say to me 'how do you fund all this, Roy?' – the answer is I pay for it. We won't take advertising approaches twice a week from people saying can we please advertise on your e-letter. We won't take advertising and I won't monetise the e-letter because I value my independence.

We do have little nicknames for all of the bosses in the NHS. We call the head of the NHS Tarzan. We call the Secretary of State for Health La-lite, because his predecessor was called La-La and he is a sort of pale, light-weight imitation so we call La-lite, everybody has a little nickname. We try and be as rude as we can. People seem to like it; I get people ringing me up saying 'When I am going to have a nickname, Roy?'

We discovered the NICE deputy boss, Gillian Leng, in doing the research for the piece inspired by Jay's e mail, and bear in mind I wrote this at 6 o'clock in the morning, I thought I'll put Gillian Leng in there and I need to link to her Wiki-CV so that people will know who she is. I just Googled her. I know Gillian very well, in fact I did her media training when she first joined NICE. I discovered 'Deputy NICE boss, the porcelain Gillian Leng (advisor to BUPA [a private medical insurance company]) says "flexibility might be required".' Really?

The interesting thing about this is that I discovered that Gillian Leng is an advisor to BUPA. So here we've got a government official who has declared her interest and is very transparent but if it smells wrong, it is wrong. And the BBC picked that up because the BBC read what I write, and the guys that were here today doing the interviews they wanted to interview me about the fact that I'd unearthed the fact that we have a very senior, very highly paid official working in a very important organisation that is moonlighting with a private insurance company. Is that right or is that wrong? I am not standing in judgment, but I think the BBC think it's a bit of fun. So that's what I do.

I've tried to get access to the Department of Health press release list four times. I've used different names, they've sussed out who I am. I get them for a couple of days and they think 'Ah, it's Roy Lilley – delete!'. I have a bit of sport with them. It doesn't matter because I have friends there and they send it to me anyway. I get a lot of my stuff from people in various organisations.

People ask me what my editorial policy is. If I like it, it goes in. That's it. So it's very subjective, very personal and really should be ignored, because it's just a kind of vanity publishing. That's all it is.

Nobody should take any notice of a single word I write! It is vanity publishing and it's done with malice of forethought. But it's hugely, hugely popular. I am enormously grateful to people who read it. I'm enormously grateful to the people who send me stories. I'm very flattered that people take it seriously and we have to ask ourselves, 'why?'.

I think it's because I am not beholden to anybody. People think that they can send me and tell me their truths. I think it's because I do reflect the views of the people I visit and I do spend a lot of time on the road. I talk to a lot of people. That's taught me it's important if you are going to write about things you need to go and find out about things, and I guess that's a rule of journalism.

What I really wanted to talk to you about is where does all this fit in your world? I am not in your world but I am making an impact in your world. It's not just me, 170,000 readers puts me on a par with one of our national newspapers (twice as big as the *Independent*). I write this from my desk at home. That tells you something doesn't it? Where is all this going to go? All this angst there is about professionalism and how journalists behave, all of that I can see over time it will just erode. Because people will publish what they think is right and people will say what they think needs to be said. People will just do their own thing.

We have to think very carefully about where that puts us because I am not a journalist. I am not even a writer. I can't spell properly. I left school at 15 and I have no formal educational qualifications at all. But I do this because I can, because the technology allows me to do it. As a result, I now have nearly 20,000 followers on Twitter because it links to this. I've been tweeting today; I know that 20,000 people have been in this room with me. It won't interest all the 20,000 but they have all seen it.

So where does this go? I have no idea. In 1994 I researched a book called *Future Proofing*. It was published in 1995. In 1996 it was out of date. I learned a lesson: never write a book about the future because you look a complete arse in about 12 months! But I did write something in that book that I think is true today as it was when I wrote it, and the truth is, if you can imagine it, it can happen.

And do you know what? I can't imagine what's coming next. I know that websites are dead. We had a website, we linked some of our stuff onto the website, there was almost no traffic. Forget websites. I think it's all about Facebook and Twitter. And I don't know what's coming after Facebook. But something will come. I don't know what's going to come after Twitter. I think Twitter will run its course.

I get messages on Twitter all the time and I don't have the resource to follow it up, so I send it to *Private Eye* or the *Health Service Journal*. I've created something I never set out to create. It's grown of its own volition. What have I learned? Content is king. I think you've got to be authentic; it's no good writing about something if people don't think you're authentic. I think what I'm doing now is destined for the electronic delete button because something else will come along and eclipse this as quickly as I've been able to eclipse the readership of a national newspaper – just me.

And that's going to have the big driving impact on your profession. I'm not saying you shouldn't have shared professional values, because I try things that are legal and decent and honest because I don't

ant to get sued and I don't want to trash people if it's not true and I want to be fair. So I try to bring a sense of balance to what I am doing. I am not saying we shouldn't have professional standards. But what I am saying is we are going to have to have our professional standards in an entirely different environment. Almost everything that we are doing now will in 5 years time be redundant. Almost everything. It has to be. You only have to look at the speed with which new products and new ideas are coming into the public domain. There was a time when you would book a holiday sitting next to a girl called Kylie in the high street in the travel agents and she would sell you £3000 worth of travel to a place where you didn't know it was on the map. Now you go on You-tube, you do it yourself, you put your own holiday together.

I think in future people will put their own news together. I do. I use Google alerts quite a lot and I put my own stuff together. I think we're writing for an entirely different audience in an entirely different way in an entirely different time. You never know where this technology is going to take you because this is the product of quite a lot of hard work and invention but it's mainly a product of digital technology, which I never dreamed could happen to me.