

Panel Discussion: Building an Audience

Roy Lilley (RL) (Chair – John Lister (JL))

[Shaun Lintern] As a traditional journalist versus what I would say is a modern-day form of journalism, I would like to ask how do you perceive what you do as a news source to your readers? From my traditional view I would say it's an informative opinion, which is amusing and entertaining, but it's not giving people the full breadth of news that a traditional outlet would and there's still an important place for that I think.

[RL] Yes, it's highly idiosyncratic. I do accept that, but there again so is the *Daily Mail*. So is the *Daily Telegraph*. Because they are the printed page and they are bigger it doesn't mean to say that they don't come with a whole load of luggage and opinion, because I come with luggage and opinion and they come with luggage and opinion. It's just that a lot of people quite like my luggage and my opinion better than their luggage and opinion.

News is generic, it's how it's presented. There was a time when someone would sit and read the news. But now we choose our news presenter, don't we? Paxman is retiring from *Newsnight*. What are we going to do without Paxman? It's the personalities we attach to a generic product, how present that product. We might present the news. The news is the news. You might have the news with tits and bums in the *Sun*. Or you might have the news in column inches in *The Times*. But it's a generic product and it's how its presents. I present my take on the news in the way that I do it. The *Telegraph* do it their way. *The Times* do it their way. The *Sun* does it their way. I think the principles are the same.

[SL] I agree up to a point but you have described news as if it's a product out there and people can just pick it up and present it. They do. But there is news that I do. I investigate things. I create news, I find a piece of news that nobody else would find. That's an investigative journalist's job. There are different types of news, not all of it is just sitting out there waiting for people to present in an e-letter or in other forms. Somebody has got to go out there and look for some.

[RL] It was a great shame that we lost the lamp-lighters. The old boys who used to go around and light the gas lamps. But we've moved on. This is the interesting discussion. Will the superficiality of what I do squeeze out the investigative journalist who go and find out where the real stories are? There is no doubt about it, the news agenda is set by the newspapers. They've got the boots on the ground, to find out where the stories are. The rest of us pick it up and run with it. So we stand to lose that if we can't find ways of funding it. That's a very serious point.

[JL] You have the years of experience you talked about and I think most of us who see a value in your e-letter would see it flowing from that and synthesising the information you get from various sources including Shaun's stuff that's already being produced by journalists writing stories and you bring those things together and present an analysis of that as you see it.

The point about it is, you are bringing that experience. Out there people may want to put together their own newspapers but they won't bring that kind of background of familiarity to the subject.

They need accurate material to work with if it's going to be worth anything to them or to anybody else. And that I think is where the professional journalist comes in, because unless somebody is able to devote a substantial chunk of their lives to doing it and following things through and picking up the unconsidered detail and reading a document nobody else read right through to the end of stopping where everybody else does when they get bored. Unless they do that you're not going to have the stories that can give people the basic information as to what's going on.

[RL] I couldn't agree more. We need that. I often link to HSJ stories. I always give them the byline. I like to think that if I recommend their stories enough people will say 'do you know what? We need to get a subscription to the HSJ'. So I like to drive traffic to what they do, because I think they are good at what they do.

[John Fauber] I agree with you. Nobody knows where it's going. Who knows what journalism will look like in a few years. But I've been in the news business for a long time, and I can honestly say I have never seen an era at least in the United States where there's been so much phenomenal investigative and enterprise journalism. In-depth stories have been exposed, serious societal ills or systematic problems. We have a big obsession with journalism contests in the United States and I see a lot of the entries and it's not even close compared with 20 years ago. Even in our paper we have a lot fewer people working at it, we've never done this kind of journalism before. Some of it is just that we've got better tools, there's resources like the web. But I'm hoping that that's a trend that continues and that's what people will gravitate towards because there is so much great journalism being done right now and I think there is a lot more to be done.

[RL] I'd like to ask you to reflect for a moment. There is a lot more localism in American journalism. It's a big country and so you have community television, community newspapers are much more influential than they are here. We don't have any of that. Local newspapers are pretty much on the news. Local television has never really got off the ground. Local news gets a 15-minute slot on the national news. We don't do that. I think that's probably a pivotal difference between our two countries.

[Unattributed blogger] What you are doing and what a lot of people like me are doing who are bloggers are doing is we're bringing a different voice that sometimes gets missed out by the mainstream press but I don't think it invalidates the need for the mainstream press at all because I feel we need really good investigative journalists, especially in the realm of healthcare at the moment. One of the questions I have for you is, with your 170,000 people who are subscribing, do you get the sense most of them are subscribing because they agree with your views? Or do you get the sense there's a broader range of people, some who maybe disagree with you but still find you provocative and interesting to follow?

[RL] On the days we publish depending on the topic I can get up to 300 e-mails. I try and read through them all. I can't reply to them all but I do my best, and I would think the majority of them say 'Roy, you're right' or some would say 'You're right, but...' and I do get others that say 'Roy, I know that you're talking out of your arse!' If they've got a good point I say to them fine, write me 500 words and we'll do a guest editorial that's where a lot of my content comes from. I say great, let's have another idea. Sometimes they are so abusive I go to bed and cry! But people do disagree.

People subscribe for two reasons. One, they quite like your in-your-face editorial style. Second, there are a lot of useful links.

Part of the reason I started all this was that the front line in the NHS finds it very hard to know what's going on. I'd speak at conferences and say I was going to speak about the latest guidance on so and so, who's read it? They would say what guidance? So now if there's something important that comes out, I say here it is and I usually put a little commentary. I usually say 'executive summary page 9, read that' etc. I call it my 'hobnob'. I try and grade it in the importance it is that I think people should read it and I think quite a lot of people pick it up for those reasons as well.

[Jerome Burn] I have a confession, which is that I write for the *Daily Mail*! You should read some of my pieces, they're great, and none of them are about curing cancer. As every journalist feels, there's lots of stuff that you do that doesn't get on to the page. I've set up a blog. The thing about it which is a bit unusual is that it's not just me ranting away because I think there's a limit to the credibility of one person ranting away - without in any impinging on your [RL's] credibility which is huge - but just to say that one person going on about diet or statins or operations or arthritis is a bit limited. So I have got over the last 6 months about 10 or a dozen people who have written quite detailed pieces for me. There's a theme to it which is essentially criticising the way medicine is done and putting forward ideas and challenging things and so on, a position where there are a group of people writing about it and effectively creating a small magazine but using the technology.

It seems to work quite well. We've had about 65,000 hits in the last 6 months. Quite a lot of comments. Of course, it's vanity publishing but it seems to me to be one of the things that might work. But how the hell you make money out of it I really would like you to tell me!

[RL] We don't make money out of it. We run some conferences on the back of it and usually break even on it. I do this because I want to do it and I can. As far as other people are concerned, I am very aware of the fact that it's Roy Lilley writing it. But since starting this I've had two people want to buy the title. One of them offered me an astonishing amount of money. The deal was I would keep writing for another 2 years. I'm 67 now, I'd like to stop when I'm 70. Then after 2 years they wanted to bring other people in.

I've been enormously blessed, we've had a huge success but I am grateful. It's given me huge opportunities. But I honestly don't know where I go next with this because of its enormous readership, I do feel responsible in a way that I never did when I started about what I write. But I don't know what happens next, I really don't.