Making up the news: journalists, deviance and social control in news production

In May 2003 the New York Times revealed to its readers in a front-page article how one of its most promising and prolific reporters had over several years at the paper broken the fundamental rules of journalism. Jayson Blair, who had been working for the Times’ national news desk, had falsely claimed to be reporting from places he had never visited, to have interviewed people he had never spoken to and to have written reports that were in fact the work of others. The Times article described Blair’s increasingly audacious output as the work of a ‘troubled young man veering toward professional self-destruction’ (Barry, Barstow, et al, 2003). The scandal not only ended Blair’s career as a journalist, but also led to the resignations of the newspaper’s executive editor, Howell Raines, and its managing editor, Gerald Boyd.

This chapter is concerned with journalistic delinquency, an aspect of news work that has so far received relatively little academic attention. The topic is important not least because a firmer grasp of it would contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation of journalists’ occupational identity and thus the production of news. But there is another, perhaps more pressing, reason for taking it seriously: journalists’ behaviour has a bearing on the credibility of news as a source of public knowledge.

Journalists have never been held in very high esteem by the British public, but a national opinion survey conducted in early 2008 showed that their reputation had reached a new low. Alongside diminishing public trust in a number of professions ranging from family doctors to head teachers, politicians, and senior police officers over the previous three years, there was a dramatic decline in trust for journalists, especially those working in print, and an even more dramatic one for those working in the popular press. In a commentary on the survey findings, Barnett suggests that this was a result of the ‘catalogue of disasters’ that had befallen the British media industry in the months prior to the survey (Barnett, 2008: 7). His list includes the imprisonment of a News of the World reporter for using intercepted mobile telephone messages (among them those of three members of the British royal family) and the subsequent resignation of that newspaper’s editor; the revelation in a report to British parliament that the use of illegally obtained information in the pursuit of stories was widespread across the British news industry (Thomas, 2006); the exposure of several ‘media scams’ (e.g. using video edited misleadingly in television transmissions) and apparently endemic dishonesty in the use of phone voting in television. Barnett argues that these events have all had an influence on the public’s feelings of trust - or rather mistrust - in journalists.
In an era of rampant media competition, says Barnett, dishonest behaviour among some journalists can, via a sequence of reporting, public condemnation and further reporting, have quite significant effects on public perceptions. He suggests that the over-reporting of misconduct, whether it is perpetrated inside or outside the media, can easily turn public scepticism for officialdom (which is healthy for democracy), into cynicism (which is less healthy for democracy). While the consequences of widespread cynicism for society at large is damaging enough, wholesale mistrust of journalism, says Barnett, may lead ultimately to its destruction. He concludes that, unless trust can be restored, journalism will cease to make its proper contribution to democracy.

Based on this analysis, one might have thought that journalists’ conduct would be regarded as an important topic for academic study, yet, surprisingly, the subject has attracted little scholarly attention. The way the news is shaped and controlled by the organizational context of news work has of course been the subject of sociological research for many years and has been an explicit focus since the earliest newsroom studies of the 1940s and 1950s, but misconduct and malpractice - what we might call ‘newsroom deviance’ – has not been studied in detail.

In what follows I offer a brief review of some relevant research and discuss some of the ways the topic of deviance in journalism might be investigated in the future. I begin by examining both recent and very much earlier research on the social control of journalists and ask whether, in changing times and under changing conditions, the social practices and organizational mechanisms that help to regulate journalists’ behaviour should now be examined more carefully than they have been in the past. I suggest that the approaches of sociologists of an earlier era who were concerned with deviance in the workplace might help us to do this. If Barnett’s judgement is correct, and journalism is indeed on the brink of self-destruction, such work could have renewed significance.

**Deception in journalism**

As the case of Jayson Blair illustrates, journalistic misconduct is not unique to the British media. Indeed in recent years the instances of deviance among journalists that have earned most notoriety have in fact occurred in the US. Lasorsa and Dai (2007) report that between 1998 and 2004 around 50 journalists working for leading US news organizations were found to have indulged in ‘journalistic deception’, defined, after Elliot and Culver (1992), as ‘an act of communicating messages not only by lying but also by withholding information, so as to lead someone to have a false belief’ (p160). This type of deviance is rather different from the sometimes plainly criminal acts of British journalists.
mentioned earlier, but because the consequences of both are quite similar, the responses to deception are instructive for our understanding of all manner of journalistic deviance.

In 2004 Jayson Blair published a book-length account of his story (Blair, 2004). In this he offered as a partial explanation for his behaviour the pressure he felt he was under as a young reporter expected to produce vivid and hard-hitting ‘people stories’ week in, week out. The exposure of his misdeeds placed him in a notorious group of US journalists who had been caught ‘violating professional ethics’ and ‘breaching the trust’ of their readers by plagiarising, fabricating or embellishing stories. Each of these told similar stories to Blair’s in their accounts of their own delinquency, showing how they had avoided the routine checks and controls of the workplace in their efforts to meet their managers’ and colleagues’ expectations.

These cases raised questions inside the occupation and some discussion in the US press itself about employment practices in the news media and the changing traditions of journalism and news reporting. There are divisions in the debate over where blame should lie in individual cases, but whatever the contradictions between the urge for attention-grabbing reporting and the realities of increasingly competitive working environments, most outrage at these events centres on the carelessness with which delinquent journalists seemed to regard their duty to report the facts and to do so truthfully. Respect for facts and for ‘the truth’ continues to symbolise all that is positive about journalism in professional accounts of these events. Again, evidence that these values are treated casually by their colleagues leads members of the occupation to fear for its (and their) future status and credibility.

Some discussions of these cases from the academic field of journalism studies have taken an avowedly normative stance in their summing up of the issues they raise. There is much writing in broad terms of public trust, the social responsibility of the press, the obligations of managers and editors to establish strong professional/ethical norms, and so on. Lasorsa and Dai (2007), for example, account for journalistic deception in terms of ‘newsroom culture’. Drawing on Patterson and Urbanski’s analysis (Patterson and Urbanski, 2006) this culture is for them a ‘toxic environment’ in which journalists abandon sacred occupational norms in pursuit of award-winning stories that can help maintain the profile of their newspapers in their struggle to survive in the hyper-competitive news marketplace. You might expect scholars of journalism to be interested in exploring the culture and environment in which these things happen, but instead of offering an analysis of that culture and the social actors who create it, Lasorsa and Dai examine the characteristics of the deception stories themselves. They search for these stories’ distinguishing characteristics in order that in the
future they might be identified – and spiked – by vigilant editors who must now renew their commitment to a way of thinking seemingly not yet fully absorbed by new recruits and in danger of being forgotten by their colleagues.

While there are clearly practical benefits from such an approach, it seems to me to dodge some important questions about rule-breaking in journalism: if Jayson Blair was ‘out of control’, what keeps his fellow reporters at the New York Times and elsewhere ‘under control’? Are the delinquent journalists who hit the headlines merely aberrant isolates, instances of a few bad apples in the barrel of otherwise orderly and conscientious professionals? In short, what do we know about the social control of news workers? Might the mechanisms that regulate their behaviour be changing and, if they are, how are they being shaped?

**Social control in the newsroom – Breed and beyond**

Although his was not an investigation of deviance in the sense that I have been discussing, the starting point for thinking about the regulation of news workers is inevitably – as it has been for many explorations of newsroom sociology - Warren Breed’s study of the social control of journalists (Breed, 1955). Breed’s conclusions from his interviews with newspaper reporters, as well as his observations as a journalist, were not that journalistic delinquency was rife in the US newspapers of the 1950s. Instead, his functionalist analysis of news workers’ behaviour and motivations, which he described in terms of social norms and roles, explained how newspapers’ policies seemed to be followed a great deal more often than they were flouted.² His curiosity was stimulated primarily by a broader sociological interest in the concept of conformity rather than a concern with journalists’ delinquency, but for Breed a compelling feature of the social realm of news work was that the control of journalists could not be taken for granted, a) because journalistic ethical norms - responsibility, impartiality, accuracy, fair play and objectivity - helped to legitimize journalists’ desire for independence from organizational goals; b) because journalists tended to have more liberal attitudes than publishers and owners; and c) because it was taboo for publishers and owners to make overt demands on their staff to follow policy.

Breed was among the first to point out a key feature of the occupation (one that successive newsroom studies confirmed), namely that journalists are not trained in their newspapers’ policies or told how to slant stories by ‘executives’; he found that all but the most inexperienced knew – ‘by osmosis’ (Breed, 1955: 328) - what their newspaper’s policy was. But, given the factors that would
seem to prevent it, why, he asked, do newsmen conform to a newspaper’s policy? What prevents their deviance?

Conformity, Breed discovered, was the result of several factors. In rare cases of non-conformity employers could apply sanctions – by sacking rule-breakers or by reassigning them to less desirable reporting jobs - but the most powerful controls over journalists’ behaviour were the sharing of norms between junior and more experienced, senior staff, a sense of obligation to and a need to get on with colleagues, and the ‘continuous challenge’ – shared by all - of ‘getting the news’ (Breed, 1955: 331). The news itself was the main source of reward in terms of esteem and it was the main criterion of performance. In other words, in the language of much later newsroom studies, getting the news was the central element of an occupational ideology (see, for example, Golding and Elliott, 1979). Breed concluded that it therefore exercised the main form of control over what journalists – the ‘staffers’ in his newsrooms – did every day:

The process of learning policy crystallizes into a process of social control, in which deviations are punished (usually gently) by reprimand, cutting one's story, the withholding of friendly comment by an executive, etc. [...] [W]hen an executive sees a clearly anti-policy item, he blue-pencils it, and this constitutes a lesson for the staffer. Rarely does the staffer persist in violating policy. (Breed, 1955: 332).

Breed observed that the need for speed and the demands of competition between media meant that journalists gave first priority to getting the news even when their concern over issues of ethics and objectivity over a given story might have been in conflict with their newspaper’s policy. This is a significant point for, as we shall see, it is precisely this element of the journalist’s outlook that we need to consider more carefully.

So, when did deviance happen in Breed’s newsrooms? He found that journalists’ feelings of obligation and esteem towards superiors varied between newspapers and where executives and older staff members were less respected there was increased staff turnover, lower morale, less enthusiasm, and a discernible hostility to policy. Elsewhere occasionally an ‘anti-policy’ story would be printed, Breed found, when policy was unclear; when the superior knowledge of journalists enabled them to subvert it; when journalists were able to ‘plant’ stories in a rival outlet and then plead that it was too big a story for their own paper to ignore; when a story was from a recognised news beat or when it was self-initiated. Breed also found that journalists with star status could transgress policy more readily than newcomers, but his overall conclusion was that such transgressions were the exception and journalistic deviance was rare:
Thus we conclude that the publisher’s policy, when established in a given subject area, is usually followed, and that a description of the dynamic socio-cultural situation of the newsroom will suggest explanations for this conformity. The newsman’s source of rewards is located not among the readers, who are manifestly his clients, but among his colleagues and superiors. Instead of adhering to societal and professional ideals, he re-defines his values to the more pragmatic level of the newsroom group. He thereby gains not only status rewards, but also acceptance in a solidary group engaged in interesting, varied and sometimes important work.

(Breed, 1955: 335).

Breed went on to speculate on the implications of this for the broader concerns about press freedom and diversity that have endured and are threaded through the body of literature on news production published since his study. Curiously, Breed’s early emphasis on conformity appears to have had the effect of deflecting academic attention away from journalistic deviance. Nearly thirty-five years later in a widely quoted article Soloski (1989) reinforced the prevailing assumption of control and conformity in newsrooms arguing that journalists’ adherence to the norms of ‘news professionalism’ helps them to progress in their careers and earn greater rewards. This, together with what Soloski calls the ‘intra-organizational’ control of an organization’s news policy, almost completely directs the actions of journalists: ‘Like a game, professional norms and news policies are rules that everyone has learned to play by; only rarely are these rules made explicit, and only rarely are the rules called into question.’ (Soloski, 1989: 218).

In the intervening years the mechanisms of social control in newsrooms seem to have been taken for granted, assumed as a constant factor while other features of news work have altered with changing production practices and the wider media environment. Although Breed’s and Soloski’s interest in conformity was centred on editorial policy rather than the routines of news reporting, it may be that their conclusions have been widely interpreted as applying to journalistic practice in general, that for the same reasons they conform to editorial policy, journalists generally conform to other production norms as well and that this need be given little scholarly attention.

This is not to say, however, that there has been no research exploring the topic of deviance since Breed’s study. In recent work Lee (2004, 2005) has taken a very specific focus and explored the nature of deception in journalism and journalists’ attitudes towards it. Her findings suggest, intriguingly, that deception is a routine part of much news work. This does not necessarily contradict Breed’s conclusions about the conformist character of the newsroom in terms of adherence to policy, but picking up the theme he identified of the centrality of the news as the top priority over all regardless of ethical concerns, Lee offers an insight into the way a sort of dishonesty appears to be firmly embedded in the practices followed there.
Lee (2004) interviewed 20 journalists to explore their attitudes to deception in news gathering, processing, and presentation. She found that deception was a function of a ‘negotiated occupational order’ (Hunt and Manning, 1991 cited in Lee, 2004: 109) in which types of deception were woven into occupational practice. The journalists she interviewed tended to follow three unspoken rules that determined what was acceptable. First, that it is better to deceive news sources than to deceive the audience. Using hidden cameras and lying to sources could be acceptable on certain occasions (in order, say, to expose poor standards of hygiene in food preparation in a restaurant), but fabricating stories could not. Second, that it is better to deceive ‘bad’ people than ‘good’ people in the course of news gathering (concealing one’s identity by getting a job as a waitress in order to investigate the restaurant-owner’s attitudes to food hygiene regulations, for example). In this journalists claim some moral authority, distinguishing the bad from the good in the name of what is in the public interest. The third rule that Lee identified is that it is better to deceive by omission than by commission. Not disclosing that one is a journalist, for example, can sometimes be an acceptable way of facilitating the gathering of information from wary sources. Making up quotes, manipulating still or moving images, or staging events in order to get better pictures, however, are more difficult practices to justify. As Lee writes, this distinction is consistent with other studies in which passive deception was felt to be morally less problematic than active deception (Goodwin and Smith, 1994, cited in Lee, 2004). Lee concludes that deception is part and parcel of the journalist’s craft. As she puts it: ‘Because the subtleties and tacit rules that journalists use to evaluate what is acceptable deception and what is not are derived from a negotiated meaning from within an occupation, journalistic deception becomes a criterion as well as an outcome of group membership.’ (Lee, 2004: 116).

This point is well-illustrated by the case of Martin Bashir, the British journalist who came to prominence in 1995 through his interview on BBC television with the Princess of Wales (in which she spoke for first time in public of her ‘crowded’ marriage and her desire to become the ‘Queen of Hearts’). In February 2004 Bashir was reported to have been offered $1m to join ABC network television in the US as its chief current affairs reporter. This news gave the British press the opportunity to review his record and reflect on his success. His interview with the princess and the 2003 exclusive Channel 4 documentary on the singer Michael Jackson (which subsequently led to Jackson’s career devastating court case) earned Bashir a reputation as a determined and, some say, ruthless and unprincipled operator who wins the confidence of his subjects by promising an easy ride and then exposing rather more of them than they had bargained for. Jackson complained after
the documentary was screened that Bashir had betrayed him. According to the Guardian newspaper, after Jackson’s account of the relationship was made public, the New York Times accused Bashir of ‘callous self-interest masked as sympathy’ (Branigan, 2004: 16).

We have already seen how the pursuit of truth is venerated within the occupation. But taking this beyond what some would argue is acceptable may also seen as a positive attribute. In its profile of Martin Bashir, the Guardian quoted the PR consultant Max Clifford (who has a number of high profile celebrity clients) as saying, ‘You wouldn’t want Martin Bashir getting close to your star because you know you would be putting them in jeopardy… Could you trust him? Of course you couldn’t. But that doesn’t make him anything other than a professional’ (Branigan, 2004: 16, my emphasis).

Lee’s work, then, takes us in a potentially more fruitful direction than Breed’s could, for if deception is part of what being a journalist is, a defining feature as important as independence and autonomy, perhaps we should not be surprised to learn that some journalists will, on occasion, cross the line into full-blown delinquency. This may well happen more frequently than we might at first think. In Jayson Blair’s account of his misdeeds he implies strongly that he was not alone in producing fraudulent reports at the Times. His case and those of others like him represent a challenge to media sociology that should be taken seriously. For want of such research and in order to begin to understand this behaviour more fully it may be best to turn to research from other branches of sociology for inspiration. Much of this work will be regarded by many as old-fashioned, ill-suited to an examination of the complexities of any contemporary workplace, let alone the modern newsroom, but if we want a deeper understanding of what goes on in contemporary newsrooms, this, I want to suggest, is a very good place to begin.

**Breaking rules at work**

In the well-known anthology of his early work on deviance Howard Becker (Becker, 1963) devotes a chapter to a discussion of research on ‘rules and their enforcement’. In this he develops the argument that rules are enforced only when someone is motivated enough - by personal interest, say - to want them to be. If there are no interests to be served by enforcing a rule, Becker argues, then that rule will continue to be broken. For Becker this is significant because he wants to go on to explain how certain forms of deviance receive a disproportionate degree of public disapprobation, police reaction, and so on, but he illustrates this principle by referring to studies of workplace deviance in which the failure to enforce rules benefits both management and workers. If one
understands journalism principally as an occupation – a form of work – then Becker’s examples are useful to illustrate some general points that might be applied to cases of journalistic delinquency.

Citing Dalton (1959), Becker describes examples of workplace rules that workers break systematically. These include the ‘appropriation’ of an organization’s services and materials for the employee’s personal use - acts that would ordinarily be regarded as theft. Cases discussed by Dalton range from a factory foreman who equipped his home workshop with expensive machinery taken from work, to an office worker who conducted all her private correspondence at work using company stationery and stamps. Dalton argues that to consider these acts merely as theft is to misunderstand them. Management generally conspires in the appropriation of an employer’s services and materials. Their use serves as a reward for an employee’s contribution to the enterprise when other rewards are limited or unavailable.

Breaking rules can have further benefits. Becker describes a study by Roy (1954) which examined routines in a factory workshop and the efforts of machinists to ‘make out’ (i.e. earn more than they would normally be able to by increasing their rate of output). Roy found that if a rule prevented machinists from making out and disrupted the routines of their co-workers, it would be evaded. All workers would participate in the evasion so that work could be completed with the minimum of disruption. Rule breaking was thus a way of making things go more smoothly, and, most importantly, as a way of keeping control over work that all employees tacitly accepted and took part in.

Later research in this vein by Eliot Freidson showed that deviance was by no means confined to the realms of manual or clerical labour (Freidson, 1975). Freidson studied a group of medical doctors working in a group practice financed by medical insurance and administered by a bureaucracy. He wondered how an historically powerful occupation would respond to bureaucratic control and whether the informal social control processes of the workgroup evident in other occupational settings would prevail. He found that they did. Professional etiquette and group loyalty meant that bad medical practice was covered up or, most often, ignored. The key principle of discretion in applying expertise helped to protect doctors from external constraints; their status as medical doctors effectively gave them control over their work. Group membership was based on a reluctance to criticize colleagues’ decisions and a respect for individualism. Administrative schemes of control were ineffective because they either threatened to destroy the scope for the exercise of professional discretion or they threatened to drive it underground. Either way, doctors were in control and delinquent acts – mistakes, bad practice – helped to strengthen the bonds of the workgroup.
Freidson concluded that the doctors he studied could be described accurately as a 'delinquent community'.

Conclusions
How does this work help us understand the social control of journalists? Given what we know of journalistic practice and the attitudes of journalists to deception, can they similarly be described as a delinquent community? Before reaching a conclusion, a brief summary of the argument so far may be helpful.

In recent years several examples of misconduct and bad journalistic practice have been exposed and, arguably, have contributed to a decline in public trust in journalism. Academic understanding of journalistic malpractice and the social control of journalists is surprisingly sparse. The conventional view of news work – based on the findings of one of the earliest newsroom studies - is that journalists tend to conform to the policies of their employing organizations. While the evidence for this is persuasive, the related but perhaps over-generalized conclusion that journalistic deviance is rare appears to have deflected scholarly attention away from the less seemly journalistic practices that are apparently so damaging to public perceptions. More recent research shows that deception in journalism is routine and is in fact a defining characteristic of the occupation, but whether this betrays a tendency to dishonesty of a more general sort is so far unclear. A potentially fruitful way of improving our understanding of journalistic deviance is to examine research on workplace deviance in other occupations. This research shows that rule-breaking is common, helps employees keep control over their work, and is accepted by employers. Given the benefits that breaking rules at work brings, we can expect to find evidence of it in most occupations. In occupations where group loyalty and professional norms, autonomy and discretion are strong, problems and errors are often covered up. Newsroom research has shown that group loyalty is strong among journalists, that they resist regulation and are protective of their autonomy. This suggests that similar attitudes to errors and problems in work found among members of other occupations might be found among journalists.

So, is the community of journalists delinquent? At present too little research has been done and too little evidence collected to lead us to that conclusion. If deception lies at the core of journalism’s culture, it would not be surprising to learn that journalists resist the control and regulation of their practices. How this resistance is enacted and precisely how the rules of deception are learnt and passed on remain important empirical questions. It may well be the case that a tendency towards deception and dishonesty may be reinforced by the working conditions and employment practices in
the news industry’s current climate of competitiveness, but at present we understand too little of the interplay between these factors to reach any firm conclusions.

I look forward to the prospect of further research on this topic of the sort discussed in the previous section of this chapter for this will not only enhance our understanding of the more spectacular cases of deviance such as Jayson Blair’s, but it will also contribute to the larger project of improving understanding of the complex of processes through which journalists accomplish, and maintain, their occupational identity. If Barnett’s fear of a looming crisis in public trust in journalism is justified, such an understanding may be the first step towards ensuring journalism’s survival.

References


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1 These phrases are typical of much of the media coverage of these episodes. Among the most well-known cases of fakery and fabrication are those of Blair and, soon after his exposure, Rick Bragg, both of the New York Times, Janet Cooke, of the Washington Post (see Eason, 1986) and Stephen Glass of the New Republic. Fittingly, after his fall from grace, Glass published an account of his exploits in the form of a novel, casting himself as the central character (Glass, 2003).

2 Breed defined ‘policy’ as the ‘more or less consistent orientation shown by the paper, not only in its editorial but in its news columns and headlines as well, concerning selected issues and events.’ (p327).

3 The essence of Soloski’s point (and that of the sociologists of the professions on which he draws) has resurfaced in research on the wider sociology of occupations and in a slightly wider, and more encompassing,
sense. Several studies have drawn on the work of Michel Foucault to examine how occupational ideologies – in particular the ‘discourse of professionalism’ – can have the effect of controlling employees’ behaviour by fostering self-discipline (Fournier, 1999; Casey & Allen, 2004). Discussions of the professional status of journalists and other media workers in the face of changes in the industry (de-regulation; altered employment practices; the introduction of new production technologies) have taken up this line of reasoning (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Ursell, 2000, 2003) to explain why media workers appear to be relatively docile as a workforce. What this work lacks, however, is a sufficiently detailed understanding of how working environments and ‘workplace discourses’ are experienced by media workers themselves. Without this, it is difficult to make sense of the behaviour of Jayson Blair, for example, who seemed immune to his employer’s controlling discourse.

4 Conboy suggests that the clandestine nature of journalistic practice was characteristic of its earliest manifestation in mid-seventeenth century England and was, to a large extent, important for its survival (Conboy, 2004: 42-3).

5 One way of interpreting the journalists’ accounts of deception in Lee’s research is to see them as attempts to reduce or neutralise the disruption that deviance represents to the stability of their occupational identity and thus their professional project. In other words, journalists may find ways to justify their less dignified practices in order to maintain a sense of their work as overwhelmingly just and honourable. Lee stops short of such a conclusion, but further exploration along these lines may help to illuminate this aspect of journalistic practice.