

## Breaking news: The remaking of journalism and why it matters now (a review)

Original work by Alan Rusbridger published by Canongate Books 2018

Reviewed by Barry Tomalin and Humaira Patel

**Barry Tomalin** International House London [barrytomalin@aol.com](mailto:barrytomalin@aol.com)

**Humaira Patel** 7Dnews.com [humaira.patel90@gmail.com](mailto:humaira.patel90@gmail.com)

**Published in Training, Language and Culture** Vol 2 Issue 3 (2018) pp. 101-104 doi: [10.29366/2018tlc.2.3.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2018tlc.2.3.8)

**Recommended citation format:** Tomalin, B., & Patel, H. (2018). Breaking news: The remaking of journalism and why it matters now (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 2(3), 101-104. doi: [10.29366/2018tlc.2.3.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2018tlc.2.3.8)



This is an open access article distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (CC BY 4.0)

Is it Trump and ‘fake news’? Is it the huge changes in journalism and how we receive and process news from around the world? Is it the way that journalism uses language that needs to be studied and understood as part of specialist language programmes? Maybe all of these, but a rash of books on journalism and journalistic language has appeared over the last year or so, some of which have been reviewed in these pages. All have been by eminent journalists, but Alan Rusbridger is especially so.

As editor in chief of the British national newspaper, the Guardian, for twenty years from 1995-2015 he was in some respects the guardian of the nation’s morals, campaigning for rights and ‘speaking truth to power’. If one of the jobs of the press is to publish what power wants to keep hidden the Guardian was one of the trailblazers.

In 23 reasonably short but immensely clear and entertaining chapters Rusbridger reviews his twenty years at the Guardian and the problems and crises the paper faced technologically, in business and politically. Its value to language teachers is its ability to highlight and explain how journalism is changing to meet online and international challenges and to learn language terminology related to journalism and media and see how it is changing. It will be of value to teachers of language for special purposes, particularly for journalism and is a significant contribution to an increasingly important subject in schools and universities, Media Literacy and Critical Awareness.

The key to the change in press and media reporting has been the movement from ‘vertical’ communication in which a relatively select group

of trained journalists investigated and reported stories from around the world, to 'horizontal' communication where anyone, anywhere can report anything they like. Their medium is no longer newsprint but online and social media. No longer are the people posting 'news' concerned with separating facts from opinions. Fewer and fewer people have time to find out what the facts actually are and are swamped by the amount of information they are offered every day from all over the world.

Rusbridger describes this situation as 'information chaos' and quotes the World Economic Forum in 2016 as identifying the rapid spread of information as one of the top ten dangers to society, alongside cybercrime and climate change. What caused this? Two things, technology and business.

When he took over the Guardian in 1995, people got their news once a day, or more frequently on radio and TV, from a newspaper paid for by sales and subscriptions and supported by advertising revenue. Because it was news printed on paper, it has become known in our digital age as 'dead tree journalism'. By the time he retired in 2016, only 6% of young (18-24 years old) readers were regularly getting news from newsprint and 65% mainly depended on online sources. Among older readers (over 55 years old) 55% prefer to get their news online. This means that the old model of newsprint subsidised by advertising is gone and a

new model of online journalism, some of it free and much of it protected by online subscription, known as a 'paywall', has taken its place. The costs of production and distribution may have gone down but the need for good journalists and correspondents to find and examine the facts remain and that is expensive. Rusbridger's job as editor was to oversee this development into online journalism without sacrificing the quality of reporting.

Much of journalism relies on 'newsfeeds' from news agencies, such as Associated Press and Reuters, which journalists then fashion into their own stories, using the agency as a source. This is known as 'commodity news', meaning the same basic story is available to anyone. The other big change was the move from 'reporting' to a 'conversation' between the public who could tweet or even broadcast their views on YouTube and WhatsApp immediately on publication of a story.

The value of this book to teachers is that it provides a journalist's eye view of the rise, opportunities and challenges of social media and its effect on more 'traditional' journalism from the point of view of the highly respected former editor of one of British journalism's most important publications. The challenge for what Rusbridger calls 'the legacy press' is that anyone now can publish information and opinion in a variety of

formats and platforms which can be manipulated by political and business interests and by parts of the established press itself. This has given rise to accusations of 'fake news' and in some cases the 'rubbishing' of so-called experts. The opportunity is that it has vastly expanded the scope for press organisations that have embraced online publishing and distribution.

Rusbridger describes how his own paper, the Guardian, took the first hesitating steps in establishing online media and how it has now become the paper's major outlet worldwide. At the personal professional level, he describes how experts have overcome the limitations of 140 or 280 characters on Twitter to develop Twitter threads which allow them to explain complex issues in short stages through a number of successive tweets.

Rusbridger is particularly good at explaining the role of social media in some of the major news stories of the last few years, such as Wikileaks, Edward Snowden's revelations of US data collection techniques, the role of Cambridge Analytica in collecting and passing personal data to Facebook for use in election campaigns and the use of phone hacking, highlighting and developing our understanding of the threat to personal privacy. He also covers environmental issues such as the 'Keep It in the Ground' campaign against the extraction of fossil fuels like oil and gas and,

above all, coal.

But his principal theme is the development of online journalism. He sees the importance of technology driving behaviour. For centuries, technology only allowed one-way communication but the development of online communication allowed two-way or multiple-way communication. Faced with the epoch-changing technology, it would be a mistake, asserts Rusbridger, to carry on as if the world has not changed. Not all journalists agreed with him. Guardian columnist and former Times editor Simon Jenkins, paraphrasing lines from Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, said the Internet would '*strut an hour upon the stage and then take its place among lesser media*'.

Not only did the Internet liberate communication, it also changed the way we use language. Rusbridger, describes the emergence of 'netiquette', the use of symbols and phrases. Tweeters and bloggers initiated italics for quotes from previous posts, the use of bold type for emphasis and indented paragraphs for block quotes. In fact, a new grammar, a new vocabulary and new punctuation have been introduced to convey the narrative of the new technology.

A huge amount of work was put into building a regular subscriber base, even if there was no paywall. 'Clickbait', as it was called, was the packaging of news with racy headlines and

pictures, to attract your attention and click on an article which frankly didn't deliver. However, once you'd clicked there was a name and email that could be used for contact and advertising. The Guardian was one of the press organisations that tried to avoid clickbait but earned the soubriquet of being 'worthy' (i.e. overserious). As one zealous Guardian reader put it years ago, *'You don't get any news but you do feel awfully virtuous!'* Not true, as the Guardian breaks and comments on many important stories but tends to do it in a more serious and reflective way. However, Rusbridger also worries that the Internet creates 'filter bubbles'. In other words, you are only exposed to views you agree with and stories and sites that you 'like'. In this way, free debate can be stifled by the technology itself.

Even the most powerful news companies have felt under pressure from the GAFATs (the huge online media organisations Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Twitter). They have a broader scale of operation, direct customer relations, data, insights and they can connect the dots. This is the view of Axel Springer, founder of the German Springer publishing company and Chair of Germany's

popular newspaper, Bild.

At the end of it all there is a message, which all international press organisations need to heed. We are in a time of change. Rusbridger feels that during that change quality journalism which investigates, identifies and reports and interprets the facts is needed more than ever. Reliable, verifiable and independent sources of information uphold democracy. The volume of fake news makes even 'straight news' suspect, endangering democracy. Rusbridger's contribution is to offer from his experience an expert view of the development of the past, present and future of the press and the forces menacing its freedom. Maybe that's why he says that perhaps Donald Trump has done journalism a favour by creating or encouraging an environment in which it is ever more important to distinguish fact from fiction.

*Breaking News* offers a valuable case study and background resource for language teachers, teachers of media literacy and teachers selecting authentic materials to develop media analysis and critical thinking skills as part of the language learning programme.