

# The earth may be flat, but look where you're going

IF I WERE to criticise Nick Davies's supposedly controversial book *Flat Earth News* it would be for taking 400 pages to state the obvious. Reading practically every story he tells, I found myself saying, "of course, it all makes sense, I knew it all along".

Even as the book came out, Flat Earth stories – the ones that don't make sense but are recycled everywhere – were swirling all around us.

Here's one that came with the news blackout on Prince Harry in Afghanistan: the flat earth story is that Harry is a brave warrior who is one of the lads but had to be protected as a "bullet magnet" while on active service.

In truth he was in no more danger than any of his comrades – probably considerably less, with the protection he has. Danger of kidnap? All soldiers in Afghanistan are in danger of kidnap, aren't they? And none have been yet.

Harry's function apparently was to call in fighter planes, the most deadly and terrifying war machines ever constructed, from a safe distance, to blast villages built of mud. That's brave?

He would never have been allowed to go to Afghanistan without the blackout, so effectively it was the media that sent him there. Yet it was reported as if it was a real event.

The publicist Max Clifford got it right. He said: "To me it's blatantly obvious. It's a PR stunt, the whole thing has been put together. He was getting increasing bad publicity from hanging around in clubs and pubs, and coming out drunk." Max Clifford knows what he's talking about.

By the way, Harry said in an interview: "I generally don't like England that much." Isn't that quote from a possible future monarch rather more of a REAL story? And how much play did it get?



## Hero or villain?

JOURNALISTS often say they only realise how bad some reporting is when they see a story about something they know about. Nick Davies could say that himself after some of the stories about his supposed motivation.

According to these, Nick Davies, who has a freelance contract with the Guardian, included his chapter on the Observer at the behest of Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, in pursuit of a vendetta against its Sunday sister title, either because its editor Roger Alton was pro-war or because he was obstructing a crusade on Alan Rusbridger's part to bring the Observer more tightly under Guardian control.

Peter Preston, reviewing *Flat Earth News*, put it all down to the war: "Davies doesn't agree with the Observer's leader line on Iraq." Other reviewers said much the same.

The facts are that Nick Davies was given time off on his retainer to write the book on an understanding that the Guardian could have extracts if it wanted them. Alan Rusbridger knew nothing of what Nick Davies was writing until he saw a proof, when he realised that he couldn't run the chapter on the Observer and therefore couldn't really run anything at all.

Far from dictating a hatchet job, he ended up with nothing but embarrassment from an exercise that cost him 18 months of Nick Davies's pay, and it seems to me he should be applauded for giving the author his head. How many editors would do that?

Finally, there is the small consideration that Nick Davies is not anti-war.

**EVEN STUDENT** journalists are told to look out for PR-inspired non-stories with a barely hidden commercial agenda, especially those based on implausible surveys. But one did the rounds in February, about the supposed danger for pedestrians from walking into lampposts and other "street furniture" while texting on their mobiles.

There are 6.5 million "street incidents and injuries" every year, it said, and a "survey" had shown that 68,258 people in London alone had suffered them while texting last year.

It even came with a headline – "unprotected text" – and a picture of a pretty woman bumping



into a lamppost. Here it is (left). Fortunately the lamppost had been lagged like a hot water tank, and the padding had a company logo on it – that of the 118118 telephone enquiry company.

Yet this nonsense appeared in most UK nationals, including the precious Guardian, and on ITN, CNN, Sky and Fox TV.

The 118118 PR agency deserves a fat bonus, but the journalists who churned the story?

As my informant, East London Advertiser reporter Ted Jeory, put it: "It's the Flat Earth hacks who smacked straight into a PR puff that really need to look where they're going."

## The first to churn

TO HIS CREDIT, Nick Davies doesn't claim to have coined the word "churnalism" to define the kind of mindless repetitive journalism that is blighting our profession.

Apparently it was first used by a BBC Midlands journalist, Waseem Zakir, in the late 1990s. I'm obliged for this tip to Tony Harcup lecturer in journalism at Sheffield University (and a former chair

of the Journalist's editorial board), who heard Waseem Zakir's neologism quoted by colleagues at an NUJ meeting.

Waseem Zakir is now a journalist – not, I'm sure, a churnalist – at BBC Glasgow. He modestly accepts the accolade. "We were just getting copy from the wires and processing stuff and maybe adding the odd local quote," he says, "just churning it out."