

# Life on flat earth

**They said it was dog eating dog when Guardian freelance Nick Davies produced a book that took contemporary British journalism to pieces, calling it “churnalism” for the way it recycles stories that aren’t true over and over again. Nick Davies’s dissection of the way we work had editors fuming, but most journalists cheered. He told **TIM GOPSILL** why and how he did it, and gave some pointers to what we might do in response.**



NICK DAVIES has taken up smoking again – and stopped, and started, and stopped again. It is not the stress from the attacks on his new book, *Flat Earth News*, that have done it, he says – virtually all the response has been positive – but there has simply been so much of it: hundreds of emails, invitations to speak at meetings – two or three a week – press, TV and radio interviews ... He is feeling the kind of pressure that the book says is brought to bear on the mass of working journalists themselves.

For our industry, *Flat Earth News* is something of a sensation – and if it’s not, it ought to be. It brings up truths about our work that have long been underground – understood by journalists but not often openly expressed. Nick Davies found “a huge camp of journalists, print and broadcast, national and local, from this country and numerous countries around the world, getting in touch, generally saying ‘Thank God you said that. Let me tell you something that’s going on in my place’”.

But the British media being what they are, it is the critics that made the early running. *Flat Earth News* goes for what he calls the “Fleet Street Establishment” – The Sunday Times, Observer, Daily Mail and the PA – which have been “pouring invective down on the book”. It accuses them variously of concocting stories by dubious means, of running stories they know to be untrue, and of generally following the rules of what Nick Davies calls “churnalism” – the practice of continually regurgitating unchecked stories that may or may not be true, which passes for journalism in the much of the British press.

“Our job is to check facts to get to the truth,” he says, “but

There are some cynical liars in our profession, but most are very good journalists who just want to tell the truth

in the world of churnalism with a ‘ch’ the process of checking has been reduced to a joke procedure where journalists pick up, or sometimes make up, an allegation, trot off to the other side, get a quote and stick it in the paper.

“That does not amount to checking. That does not enable them to get to the truth. In fact what it allows them to do, is that with the exception of serious libels, they can publish any damn allegation they want because it’s covered up with a denial. That’s not checking. That’s not getting to the truth. It’s disgusting.”

So Nick Davies can meet the accusations from people like former Observer editor Roger Alton and David Leppard from the Sunday Times who say he didn’t ask them for their side of the story by pointing to the enormous amount of checking he did into the stories about them.

He worked on the book for 18 months non-stop, with eight researchers, including a team at the journalism department at Cardiff University. (He got outside funding for the Cardiff research but paid for the rest out of his own pocket). There are half a dozen stories that he checked in extravagant detail, to the extent that his subjects were effectively bang to rights.

NICK DAVIES is a reporter who likes to get into long-term investigations, into areas like crime and social problems. He decided on this one, he says, because of the coverage of Iraq, the constant assumption that there were weapons of

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# CRITICISING THE CRITICAL



What can journalism schools do to counter the practice of 'churnalism'? asks **GARY MERRILL**

MOST ACADEMIC research is only read by academics. But occasionally it pricks a nerve and stirs a broader debate. The research that underpins *Flat Earth News* is an example.

Since the book was launched, Professor Justin Lewis has been inundated with interview requests. He headed the research team at Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies that provided some of the most potent data in Nick Davies's book.

Justin Lewis said the team began the project with open minds. But they soon realised that some people, typically those at the top of the media pyramid, would take the results badly. "The one criticism that really hit home was that journalists could in any way be conduits for PR," he says. The research revealed that fewer than half of the stories analysed appeared to be entirely independent of traceable PR.

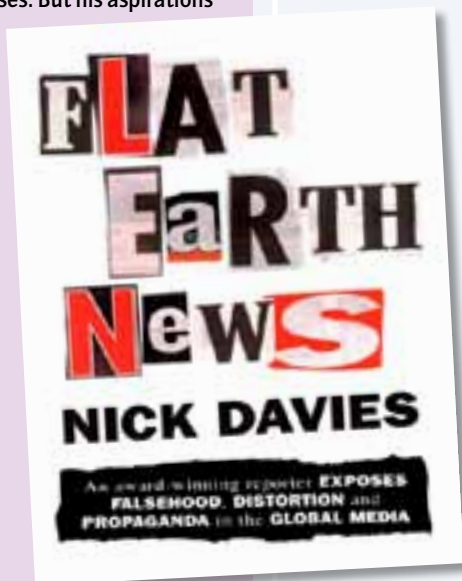
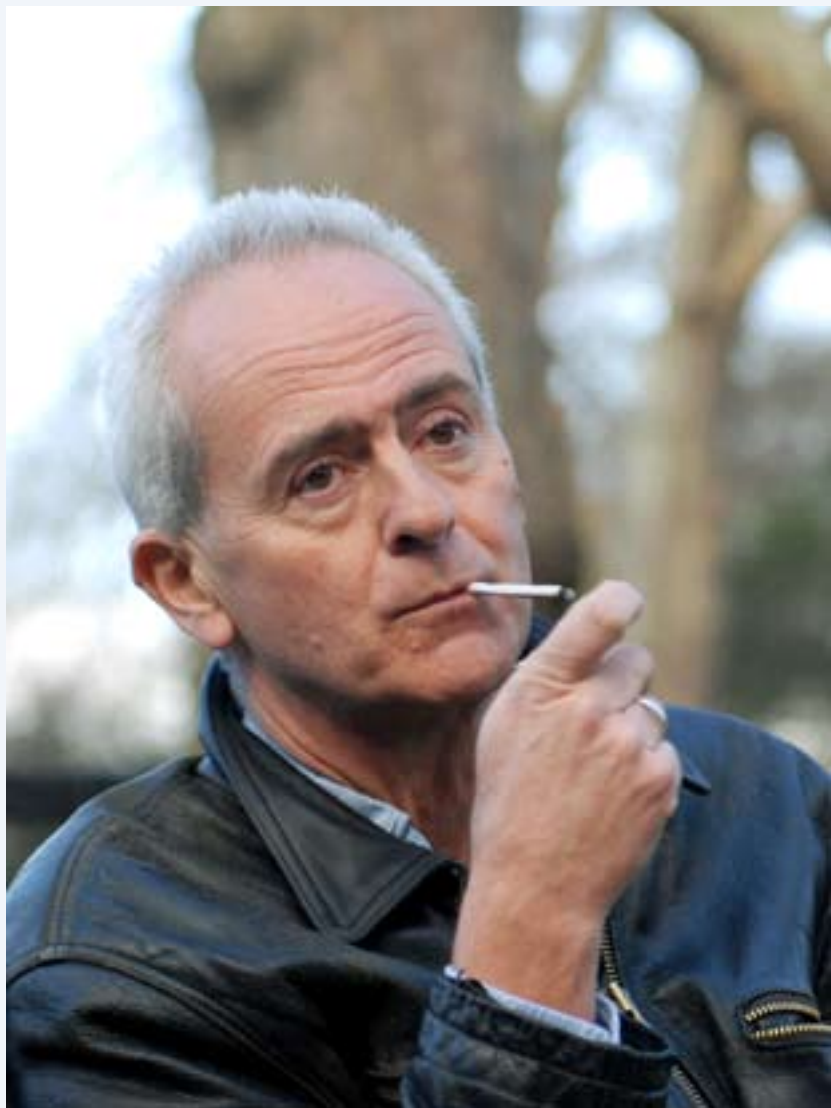
Nick Davies argues that endemic cost-cutting is the underlying reason. But is the prevalence of "churnalism" wholly attributable to the economic imperatives of the media business? Don't educators have a duty to help fight the malaise?

Justin Lewis says: "Students are already taught how to use PR critically and how to contextualise information." But these skills are taught within other modules (law, public administration and, of course, practical journalism training.) Isn't there a case for separate modules covering, for example, critical thinking or statistical analysis? Justin Lewis says he would like to introduce such classes. But his aspirations are tempered by a limit to resources.

At Sheffield University, Tony Harcup, director of teaching of Journalism Studies, says he is torn between a commitment to the principles of journalism, and the demands of students destined to work in a profit-led industry.

"We encourage students to look beyond the press release, to get out and meet people, to corroborate and to be sceptical," he says, "but few students are able to find jobs that allow them to fully use their critical skills." And with curricula heavily influenced by employers, the practical elements of journalism take priority.

The economic forces that restrict on British journalism filter into academia. Journalism schools must provide what their fee-paying customers need. Academic research may reveal the inadequacies of journalism, but it can do little to change an industry that is driven by the omnipresent quest for shareholder value.



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mass destruction that threatened the west, in the run-up to the invasion of 2003. "I wanted to see why the media put out so much falsehood.

"For better or worse" — this will surprise some people — "I am pro-war, and the problem with [the stories about Iraq's] WMD for me is a journalistic one. What irritated was that in the 12 months after the invasion, as it became increasingly clear that the WMD didn't exist, that the media with very, very few exceptions debated that as though it were merely a problem of intelligence agencies and government. Whereas of course the misinformation had a third corner to it. The global media. So you stand back and ask the question that any hack would ask: 'Why? Why did that happen?'

"I started off with absolutely no idea of where I was going to go. My formula, whenever I start with one of these long-term projects, is always the same. You ask obvious questions of accessible people. And because I'm researching an industry in which I've worked for 31 years, I've got some ideas of my own based on my own experience, and also I know masses of hacks so I know what they say. And I have this vague idea that it's something to do with what we're now calling churnalism."

"And asking obvious questions of accessible sources, there are soon four separate leads pointing towards these stories." On the Observer's stream of articles backing the invasion, written by political editor Kamal Ahmed and security specialist David Rose,

Gary Merrill is a lecturer in journalism at Cardiff University

# The book is not an attack on journalists at all. It's an attack on the structures that constrain them

PICTURES: STEFANO CANNONI

a single project is well beyond the opportunities open to most journalists, so how would a churnalist have done it? "Well if you take the current convention," says Nick Davies, "what I would do is I'd collect all this anecdotal evidence, and then I would ring the editors and say, 'is it true that your journalists are so overworked that they don't check most of their facts and recycle a lot of second-hand material?' Well I didn't do that because it's a complete waste of time. The Press Gazette rang those people when they were publishing extracts from the book and asked 'Is it true?' and they said 'Absolutely untrue. It's all garbage.' Marvellous."

"When you've got the story right, and people are stung by it, they can't complain about the story, so instead they find something else to complain about. I talked to Kamal through every single allegation — he then gets on his high horse and says 'Nick didn't listen to what I said'. So all that happens is that the angle of criticism moves."

NICK DAVIES says he makes "a distinction between accuracy and truth." This is the point of one of his most discomfiting revelations: the reliance of British national papers on the PA, the source of more news copy than everything else added together, and the agency's inadequacy for the task.

A group of nine PA correspondents, journalists who are highly esteemed for the accuracy of their work, wrote a hurt and angry letter to the Press Gazette, but Nick Davies says: "I'm not attacking PA reporters. I'm saying they are honest in intent, and I think that agency reporting tends to be accurate. But newsrooms need to recognise that PA is not trying to tell the truth. All PA is trying to do is to be accurate. I quoted the editor saying what's important is what's between the quote marks."

It's the oldest problem in journalism: how to report someone who is lying. "If Blair makes a speech you can produce an accurate account of it, that is one thing," Nick Davies explains, "but you may well not be telling the truth."

But papers depend on PA. They can't cover every single story themselves. What are they supposed to do? "Well, you have a decently staffed newsroom with the right objectives, you set aside some reporters to go out and check the truth." This is now approaching the heart of the matter, which is, what are journalists, and the NUJ, supposed to do about it?

Nick Davies doesn't claim to have the answer. "I think there's no way out of this. With a very few exceptions the book is not an attack on individual journalists at all. It's an attack on the structures that constrain them. As long as newspapers, broadly speaking, are in the hands of these big corporations, they will impose their logic on us and I don't see a way out of that in the real world.

"A lot of outsiders think 'Ah, it's because you're all cynical liars. You couldn't care less.' I'm afraid to say there are some cynical liars in our profession, but most journalists are not. Most journalists want to tell the truth. There are still a lot of seriously good journalists working in British media.

"Every time any one of those good people says to their newsdesk, 'You have to give me time to work on this difficult story', or 'this story may not sell newspapers, but it's important, so you have to give me space', every time somebody wins a battle like that we hold back the tide of churnalism.

"And in that context a well-organised union in an office can be important. And if the union keeps staffing levels in an office, that would help. We might not be able to stop the papers, but we can negotiate, we can do our best."

So the NUJ does have a job it can do? "Yes," he says. "There's something to be fought for."

for instance, he says: "I did a massive media database search on everything that David Rose had written, everything that Kamal had written. Masses and masses of checking to see whether these stories are true. So there's a story by Kamal which says, 'Downing Street sources say that next week there's going to be a report from the Strategic Studies Institute saying such and such. So then I get the report which is published three days later, and it doesn't say such and such at all.

"So, you look around for the correction. It wasn't there. So now that's becoming a little bit more solid. These guys were running false stories, but why? So then I start contacting Observer staff. I



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spoke to a dozen Observer staff. And you slowly start to get this picture of what was going on inside that newsroom. So then I get onto David Rose. Long, long conversations with him about exactly how these false stories were passed into the newspaper. And then I have a long conversation with Kamal, and a detailed exchange of memos, and then I took the whole lot to [deputy editor] Paul Webster, and said, 'let's talk through all this'."

It has to be said that spending so much time and effort on