

Better To Be A Cat: How to be a political journalist

This article by Spectator assistant editor [Isabel Hardman](#) is based on a [talk she gave at Polis, LSE](#). In it she explains what it's like to be a Westminster lobby journalist, how to get scoops and what it takes to be a political correspondent in one of the world's most competitive news beats. She argues that starting out on a very untrendy trade magazine gave her the right training. But while political intelligence and guile are vital assets what really gets her stories is an insatiable and independent-minded curiosity about people.

I started my career as a trade journalist, working as a reporter on a magazine called Inside Housing. This was one of the best starts I could have got as this magazine taught its journalists how to work patches, how to find off-diary stories and how to get stories from data and turgid government reports. I am more comfortable as a journalist because of that first job, and I suspect that had I started on a national newspaper, I would not have received this one-on-one attention and training that I did on Inside Housing.

It was a first job that my non-journalist friends looked down on because they expected every journalist to go straight onto a national newspaper, but I am thankful that I followed this route. Trade journals which cover specific sectors are to a certain extent replacing local newspapers as the training ground for reporters because locals are facing a struggle for readers and advertisers that has not hit trades in the same way.

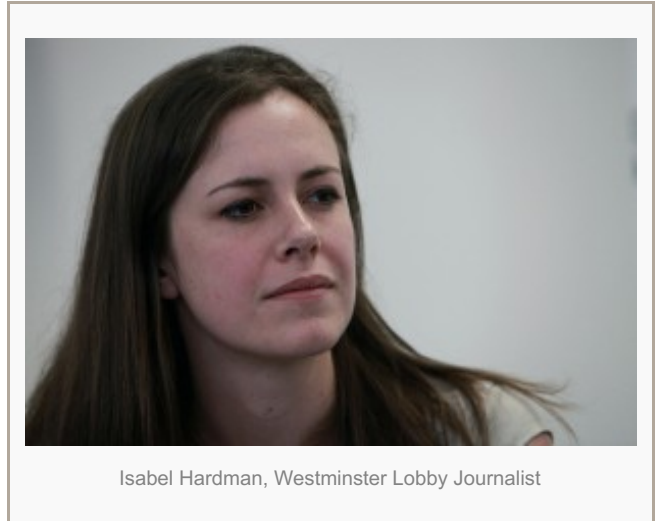
In my current job, I am what's known as a lobby journalist: I have a pass and a desk in the House of Commons and spend most of my days there. I attend lobby briefings where the Prime Minister's official spokesman answers questions from journalists and briefs any stories that Number 10 wants to get out, and I spend a lot of time having coffee and lunch with MPs, and lurking in various parts of parliament where MPs tend to congregate.

Trust and Talking

A lot of my job is about relationships, trust, and the ability to talk to people. It does of course involve a fair bit of writing, but I've always felt that ability to write for a journalist is like ability to speak French as the French ambassador: essential, but not the sole skill that you need.

Every week I get stories from MPs because I haven't stitched them up or lied to them. We have a rule at the Spectator that you do not burn your contacts unless it is for a big story that is absolutely worth the loss of trust. That sort of story usually leads to a sacking or a resignation.

Lobby journalists operate more on trust than many other types of reporter. I'd say that we only write about 50% of what we know, and I am often told things over the lunch table with the express demand that I never write about it. This might sound like a frustrating way of operating – and it often is – but it is the only way that politicians and journalists can work together in a way that means we can break stories. If you break a politician's trust on something they've told you in confidence, they are unlikely to ever give you something they'd want you to report.



Isabel Hardman, Westminster Lobby Journalist

Another way in which journalists in the lobby operate is that we take a huge number of off-the-record briefings from politicians and their advisers. Many of our stories can be based wholly on unnamed sources that do not want to be identified. It is of course much better to name someone and quote them on the record. But Westminster is a world that operates in secret and often people should not be talking to you, so the only way to get that information out is to promise that you will not identify them.



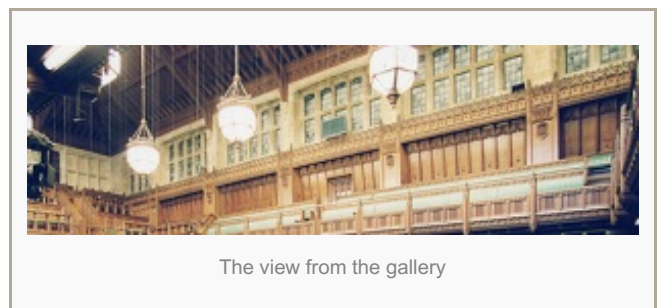
There is of course a hazard here, which critics of the lobby system often level at journalists. If you have an unnamed source in your story, how can the reader be sure that your source is reliable, authoritative, or indeed whether they exist at all. Tribal members of political parties will always accuse journalists they perceive to be hostile of making up their sources. Some may do this, although it's worth remembering that if you were sued and could not produce evidence for what a source said, you'd end up in a mess.

Keeping It Honest

There's another thing that keeps journalists honest, which is that the large number of political journalists in the lobby means everyone does have a sense of who talks to who, and whether an unnamed source quote is on the money or not.

If a journalist quotes a source in Ed Miliband's office saying it contains few staff members prepared to tell the leader that he's made a bad speech, other journalists will weigh that up against what they themselves have heard, and reach a judgement on whether that makes sense. And while we protect our sources, some journalists are known – and like to be known – for being close to a certain politician, so when they write that George Osborne is thinking something, you can be pretty confident that this is an accurate account.

This raises another hazard that all journalists in the lobby encounter regularly, which is how close should you get to your contacts? We all work in the same building, frequent the same watering holes, and in the autumn, we all decamp for three weeks to various towns and cities for the party conference season. I have MPs who I'd say are friends as well as contacts. But journalists are here to hold power to account. So don't our relationships compromise our ability to do that? There is a struggle every day, and each journalist has a slightly different way of doing this.



The view from the gallery

Coffee And Gossip

Some are very close to politicians and will write complimentary things about those politicians in return for extra information from them: certain ministers are notorious for having sympathetic journalists who write complimentary pieces about them, and in return they are invited in to their offices regularly for coffee and gossip.

Personally I am not well-connected enough to be in that position, but I'd also rather not be. Naturally all journalists will praise ministers who we think are doing a good job, but I would prefer to be able to write that those ministers are also doing a bad job. Personally I've found that ministers are happier when I write a piece that does agree with them because they know I sincerely agree with them and haven't just been nobbled.

There is also a debate about how tribal political journalists can be. Naturally given I write for the Spectator and the Telegraph, I lean to the right, but there is a very strong distinction between political convictions and political affiliations. I think it would be difficult to analyse politics in the way we do at the Spectator and ask politicians questions on Radio 4 if I had a membership card for one of the parties.

Better To Be A Cat

I think it is better to be a cat – fundamentally disloyal – as a journalist, than a dog who is constantly devoted to a party. At the Spectator we may agree with the principles of the Conservative party, but we are just as happy to point out when they are making a mess of things as we are with Labour. It is for this reason that I suspect journalists who become politicians were always politicians in the making rather than journalists. There is in my mind a fundamental cat-like disloyalty about journalists that makes us deeply unsuitable to be politicians, to take a party whip and support whatever rubbish policy our party is trying to pursue.



I was approached by a party a few months ago asking if I would like to stand as an MP. I was horrified, and set out the above reasons: I cannot imagine not being allowed to criticise and analyse and the trappings of life as an MP are not appealing at all.

Appealing To Women

As for whether journalism is appealing for a young woman – which is a question I get asked a great deal – I would unreservedly say yes. The lobby is not, as many assume, sexist. But it doesn't have many women in it, and this is a problem partly resulting from our prohibitively expensive childcare in this country, and partly because women still look at political journalism and think 'that's full of men, I'll never feel welcome here or get a chance to advance'.

I only started to consider being a political journalist when I saw that the Observer had a female political editor, Gaby Hinsliff. To a certain extent, being a female political journalist is an advantage because there are so few of us that broadcast producers in particular are very keen to use you on their programmes so that they don't get stuck for only booking men. The challenge then is to show that you are there on merit, rather than to tick a box but there are so many brilliant women in the lobby who have clearly been recruited because they are brilliant rather than because they are women that this is becoming less and less of a risk.

Journalism In Flux

Journalism is in a state of flux at the moment: young people like me are valued because we are supposedly 'digital natives', but many senior journalists in the middle of their careers are just as adept at social media as young hacks. Some examples include the Telegraph's Chris Hope and Paul Waugh, who runs PoliticsHome.com. These journalists all tweet their stories and photos of politicians on the campaign trail.

All journalists now need to be platform natural, in that they don't save stories for the print edition of a newspaper, that they are constantly updating their followers via Twitter of the latest developments in a running story and providing authenticity and authority by showing that they are there in the House of Commons chamber, or there in the thick of a by-election campaign.

I love the freedom of online journalism that means you can update a story six times a day with six different posts, and this works particularly well for me when I am covering a rebellion in the House of Commons, for instance, as MPs will often come to me with updates on what the whips are doing now and who is voting for who.

Print simply packages the end result, online gives you the action. But there are pressures – the temptation to chase hits rather than important stories that a journal of record would still cover, the temptation to be quick rather than accurate, and the temptation to scour Twitter rather than build relationships that give you better exclusive stories.

Isabel Hardman is assistant editor of the Spectator, where she runs the daily politics coverage from the House of Commons. She writes a weekly column on politics and public policy for the Telegraph, and presents a programme

on Radio 4 called the *Week in Westminster*. She has worked at the *Spectator* for two years, and prior to that was assistant news editor of PoliticsHome.com.

@IsabelHardman

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science