

Journalism and power: the importance of the institution

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Institution for journalism

The [journalist John Lloyd](#) has written extensively about the relationship between journalism and power. It's at the heart of a book I am writing, so I asked John to send me a summary of his views that I had heard him express at a conference a couple of years ago. The idea that interested me sounds obvious, but is not often set out. Journalism is powerful mainly because it organises itself into professional institutions. This gives the individual journalist, or act of journalism, support and resource. If you lose those institutions (for example if we all turned into bloggers!) do you lose the journalism? Here's John's view in full that he was kind enough to send me and that I will quote in part in the book.

"Newspapers and broadcast news divisions have power. All journalism is a matter of power, for only by exercising power of various sorts can journalism have any effect.

That power includes the major one – to stimulate and organise public opinion in one direction or another, and in so doing put pressure on the political level – being part of the political process, which journalism has always in some measure been. Even broadcast news in the UK, where the rules on neutrality remain strict, is part of the political process – in the sense that it sets a standard of truth telling which the rest of the political process feels bound, or should feel bound, to emulate. It also includes the ability to inspire fear in (especially) public figures – the fear ranging from being reported as acting in an unethical fashion through to being caught having an affair. .

To have that power news organisations need to be organisations – which have a collective memory, a clear goal, ideals, a commercial department which preserves or enhances their power by increasing their reach and influence, a legal department which will protect them from legal challenge, a training and mentoring facility which brings their staff up to the required levels of competence and increasingly retrains them in the use of changing technology, a reputation in the world which will assist reporters to gain entrance and have calls taken, a career structure and a pension plan, so it can attract people who see it as something worth doing for at least part of their life. That is, such organisations professionalise the collection of news, and thus give it a structure.

Without that, it's hard to see how it could keep going: or at least, the nature of news collection and news dissemination would have to be rethought – and (in my view) another organisational structure or structures would have to be invented which reproduced at least some of the elements above."

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