



"Who else can?" Nick Davies and the future of journalism (book review)

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Was [The Express](#) newspapers' coverage of the McCanns an extreme but typical example of what is wrong with British newspaper journalism? Peter Wilby suggests that it is, indeed, another sign of [Flat Earth News](#). This is the title of [Nick Davies'](#) book which blames commercial pressure for an erosion of ethical and effective original investigative journalism. 

Journalism is frequently mundane and humdrum but most of us think that it's job is also to do something grander – to expose evil and right wrongs. "If the press cannot do this work, who else can?" said Harold Evans, the Sunday Times editor at the time of the great *Insight* team's Kim Philby scoop. It is a question that Nick Davies asks in *Flat Earth News*. But although Davies comes up with a lot of examples of good and bad practice he does not appear to have an answer to his own more fundamental question of how journalism can make society value and support its more noble endeavours.

By investigative journalism Davies means more than just the kind of expensive long-form, long-term digging work that he has specialised in during his distinguished career. He ends up embracing a whole range of journalistic activity. It ranges from how the media approaches a major issues such as the build-up to the Iraq War to the everyday kind of work on a local paper where a journalist has a critical mind and a few minutes to make the extra phone call or to nip out to see for themselves. He distinguishes that from 'churnalism' which merely recycles agency copy, rewrites press releases or even just makes things up. 

Like Nick, I have done just about all of those kinds of journalism (apart from the making it up bit...). Like Nick I believe there is more pressure on journalists today to write or broadcast rubbish than ever before. His book is a great slew of examples of bad journalism: lies, distortions, inaccuracy, incompetence, malice and bigotry. He is fair enough to include both Left and Right – and even himself – in the litany of junk, funk and bunkum. It is a worthy clarion call for moral and professional standards and a timely tirade against those who are prepared to let them slide. I am grateful that Davies has shown that journalism matters and that much of it is not good enough. But I think his analysis of the history, causes and context of this issue is seriously flawed.

Firstly, Nick never really defines his historical framework. He says quite explicitly that he is not harking back to a Golden Age but the book is constantly nostalgic. Many if not most of the examples he draws upon reach back 10-20 years and yet he seems to feel that this is a new problem. It seems to me that he is suggesting that the 1970s were some kind of better time and yet proprietorial control, commercial imperatives, elitist deference and sheer poor quality were just as prevalent then. I would argue that there is far more good journalism in those same newspapers now than there was ten or 20 years ago. It's just there is also a lot of lifestyle, celebrity and other coverage alongside it.

Davies also ignores the wider context. We don't rely on our newspapers for news anymore. Most people get their daily fact-fix from TV news. The BBC, ITN and Sky (along with Al Jazeera, CNN and the rest) provide more coverage than you can cope with. If we want serious analysis we go to the highly successful magazines such as *Prospect* and *The Economist*. And there is now this funny new techy thing called the Internet which Nick devotes all of two pages to in the book's epilogue.

But back to the newspapers. Davies seems to blame Murdoch and Dacre personally, and commercial competition in general, for a decline in standards and a loss of original, independent journalism. Let's accept for a moment that standards have fallen. I agree with Davies that the Press Complaints Commission (or something like it) should do

more to uphold ethics and provide better accountability when things go wrong. But do we want to trade the competitive diversity of the British media for the kind of bland compliant press that typifies much of American and Continental newspapers? For those with Nick's politics we still have *The Guardian*, *Independent* and the *Mirror*, for example. They all have hundreds of hacks who are beavering away exposing evil and righting wrongs.

When journalists get things wrong they are responsible, not Capitalism or their boss. All my career was a struggle against budget cuts and rivals (and often management) but in the end it was up to me and my colleagues when we failed to maintain standards. Competition is largely what makes British journalism so efficient and ultimately so resilient. Most of what we produce is imperfect – that is the nature of news journalism. I think Davies frequently misunderstands the nature of news and its innate fallibility. Davies aspires to something more than the mistake-ridden first draft of history. Meanwhile, the rest of us have to meet deadlines and work within budgets.

That is not an argument for complacency. As news speeds up and margins narrow, as the Internet and digital communications offer more bewildering choice than ever before, we will need better journalists. Some of them will do the kind of investigative work Davies advocates. But all of them will need to be more trust-worthy and competent than in the past. People are more educated and so more demanding of their media. They need good journalism to help guide them through a complex real world and a confusing media landscape. What we need are fresh ideas about how to re-invent the news media to suit the times.

But Davies has no solutions beyond a kind of welfare state subsidy or protection. His one good example is of a charitably-funded American journalism institute. That kind of support may be one option but I think it lays journalism open to capture by vested interests. And it also creates a cut-off space where 'good' journalism operates in isolation from the real world and the rest of the news media, like a nature reserve in the midst of ecological devastation.

I believe that the solution lies in a mix of market and public service journalism. We need to protect the BBC and invest as societies in other forms of media that address market failure. News media companies need to invest in the future – and they are. But above all we need to seize the opportunities offered by new technology to bring the public in to the process.

Davies acknowledges the potential of the Internet and then dismisses it in two paragraphs: "Bloggers and citizen journalists do uncover stories...but..the Internet is also functioning as an information madhouse". He then stumbles upon the solution but ignores it: "If those savings [from new technology] were recycled back into newsrooms, to employ more journalists, we could start to reverse the process..."

Davies' mistake is to think in terms of the numbers of hacks at desks when we should be thinking about flows of information and transparency. It is the public who have the data, the knowledge and the critical insights that can bridge the funding gap. This is called [Networked Journalism](#) and it is what I set out in my forthcoming book [SuperMedia](#) (Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World).

Flat Earth is a frustrating but important book that raises problems that we should try to address. At the very least Davies has done what journalists are supposed to do. Ask questions that societies should answer.

Go [here](#) for my initial reaction to the book and some links to other people's comments.

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