

The Conversation: *In a series looking at the challenges facing the next generation of young journalists, George Pitcher talks to experienced practitioners of the trade about their hopes and fears for them.*

Julie Etchingam, ITV News

Julie Etchingam kept a diary from the age of six, which developed into a news-cuttings journal. Her mother wondered whether this habit pointed to a career in journalism and she was right. She worked at the Leicester Mercury newspaper and BBC Radio Leicester while still at school and, after university, Etchingam joined the BBC graduate news trainee scheme, initially joining the children's news programme Newsround and thereafter Sky News and ITV News, where she is currently a news anchor on the Ten O'Clock News and presenter of Tonight. She has chaired the party leaders' TV debates for the past two general elections and has twice been voted Presenter of the Year by the Royal Television Society.

GP: Now that the internal economy of newspapers has gone, to what extent do you think broadcasters are the go-to choice for career journalism?

JE: Even though we've seen huge disruption in the past 15 years, I think the two media still sit alongside each other and complement each other very well. One of the big stories when I moved from Sky News to ITV was the MPs' expenses scandal in 2009, which of course the Telegraph broke. We were sitting there night after night under a 10 o'clock embargo and the Telegraph was releasing the latest information. I'll never forget it – we were literally sitting there waiting for the Telegraph to put its next tranche out and then we'd move into react mode. So I suppose that's an example, in the not so distant past, of a classic newspaper story that absolutely led the news agenda. Now, fast-forward to the past 12 months and you've seen a collaboration between Channel 4 News and the Guardian busting the Cambridge Analytica story. And ITV has worked very closely with the Guardian to break a story about food hygiene standards at a food processing plant. So I think that, where there may have been a stand-off between print journalism and broadcast journalism in the past, now you can see that out of economic necessity – you know, simply getting boots on the ground for scoop-getting investigative journalism – a great deal more collaboration between the two media, which I think is actually serving the purpose of journalism pretty well. The bottom line is that television news – and I even hesitate to use that as a blocked-off entity – has spread across all digital now. We have audio content, we've got our TV news journalists tweeting and broadcasting pictures live out of events. So print and broadcast distinctions are being blurred now.

GP: Are those wanting to come into the industry seeing it as blurred?

JE: I'd be very interested to see what their opinion of it is. I know ITV News still runs a journalists' training scheme – it's not just for graduates, it's for entry-level journalists with 12 places available, seven of which go out to our regional newsrooms and the rest will train in our network newsroom. And the expectation when they come in is that they learn the full range of skills – production, including digital production and desk production, and they need to be able to go out and produce in the field. So my sense of it is from the young journalists we have in our newsroom is that they come in with a very different skillset, a technical skillset, from the one that I came in with at the BBC 25 years ago.

GP: Let's just go there for a moment – how did you come into journalism?

JE: I kept a diary avidly from the age of six and the older I got the more little news cuttings I got from the Leicester Mercury and whichever newspaper I had to hand. So I had these cuttings in my diary and my mum had spotted this slight hoarding-like habit with news clippings. She asked if I might like to be a journalist. I was just a young teenager by then – and it was just a moment when I thought: Oh yes, that'll do, thanks very much, that'll do nicely. And so I did. But there was also a moment when I was a little older and she handed me the Yellow Pages directory – which sounds like something out of Dickens now – and said “Well you'd better pick the phone up and organise some work experience.” Because I came from a family that had no journalists in it at all.

GP: So how did she know?

JE: She didn't know at all. She was a cookery teacher. My dad was an English teacher and a headmaster, and she said “You'd better find out the number of the Leicester Mercury and the two local radio stations and you better call them.” So I did. So I phoned the Leicester Mercury and got in there and went to make the coffee at the local radio station. Radio Leicester approached my school to see whether anyone in the Sixth Form would be interested in making a programme for Lent – and I said, oh, I'll do that, thanks. So then I got a job on the Sunday morning programme, looking after guests, cleaning the kitchen, getting people off the lift and eventually they let me out with an old Ewer, which is the old portable tape deck for interviewing.

GP: So it made sense when your mum said you could be a journalist and you wanted to do it. You were excited by the prospect, I guess, and it just worked for you. Do you think young people feel like that now? Do you think that they can?

JE: I like to think that they can. Because I think the thing that attracted me to journalism wasn't that it's an important part of our democracy and therefore let me go and be a seeker of truth. It was nothing like that. It was just that I wanted to hear people's stories, I want to know people's stories and I want to tell those stories. It's being a Nosy Parker. I'm news-obsessive and I loved the places a news bulletin took me to even as a child – it opened the world to me. I mean I grew up in a suburban village in Leicester and London felt like it was another country. And TV news back then did what it said on the tin – it gave you that world in that half an hour and it looked thrilling, it looked like the best drama on TV and the people who worked in it looked like they knew what they were talking about.

GP: What would you tell your 16-year-old self now?

JE: I'd say be bolder, be braver, take more risks. Read more widely. You know, I think we'd all tell ourselves that. One of the things you learn fast in journalism is how little you know about such a vast range of subjects. If you're a generalist journalist, like I am, you're endlessly stumbling across great big gaps in your knowledge that you're desperate to fill. If you are interested in what makes human beings tick under all sorts of almost lab-condition experiences in life and you're interested in how those stories fit into our wider perspective on where we live and what we're at... I can't think of a better job to do. I still can't think of a better job.

GP: And you'd tell any 16-year-old that?

JE: Absolutely.

GP: That sounds to me like journalism hasn't changed...

JE: It never changes...

GP: So storytelling is part of human history and human nature.

JE: Absolutely. I think also that the longer you do it, certainly the longer I've done it, the more you find that's true. I'm sure you'll talk to journalists who came in with a much more academically rigorous idea of what they were getting into journalism for and it's central driving purpose as part of a supposedly well-functioning democracy. You know, there is a status for journalism within a free society that is clearly incredibly important and it is, perhaps, one of the most important aspects of it, particularly in the times we're living in. But, as I say, my motivating factor was just something much more fundamental about communicating people's stories well.

GP: You seem to be avoiding truthfully and quite deliberately the sort of nobility of journalism. Is that simply because you don't remember it applying in your case, or do you think it's not true?

JE: I think there is a nobility in journalism, which all too often gets obfuscated by the day to day noise of what journalists in general are about. In the end – this is speaking personally but I'm sure a lot of others would say it as well – every time I've done an interview and I've taken it back to edit it, there is a judgment process that goes on about what you put in to your edit and what you leave out. And in every single decision that you make when editing an interview, you are making not just a journalistic judgment, but you're also actually making a moral judgment about what needs to be broadcast, whether you are accurately reflecting what that person has shared with you in their story, whether it's a politician or a grieving parent. There is, at every turn, a moral dimension to this job. In it's worst excesses, there are times when journalism's clearly veered way off from being a noble profession, but in the way that I like to think of how you do this job there really is a sort of nobility in it. And there's a nobility in it particularly in the time we're living in now – it's absolutely about being a reliable source of impartial information, which I think people are really beginning to thirst for again.

GP: Is that about the Fourth Estate being a thorn in the side of the state, or is there something more central to the function in your view that is a component of what makes us socially cohesive? Is journalism important to the extent that it's part of a healthy society?

JE: I think obviously it's a function of the Fourth Estate. I think absolutely at a time of big social change, for example, around questions of gender, around questions of how our political landscape is fracturing, around questions of how men treat women and women and men work as equals in workplaces, questions around how we bring our children up, what challenges they're facing – you know, if we're not having these conversations in a frank, full and searingly honest way in the media, those conversations happen behind closed doors, there are masks of misunderstanding that can get erected and I think we really do have a job to get those conversations going in a fair and even-tempered manner.

GP: You mention questions of gender there. Specifically, to those 16-year-olds that I'm asking you to address yourself to, who are considering what to do and are attracted to journalism, specifically for the young women – is it okay now?

JE: It's not perfect yet.

GP: Not for any of us?

JE: Not for anybody.

GP: But in that particular regard, for women?

JE: In that regard, it is so much better I would say than it was. I came into the profession with the rather naive expectation that if I just worked hard there'd be a career path and actually, largely, that's been proved right. But it's not been without the moments where you've been given a story because they think it's a woman's story and who knows what judgments have been made when I've been navigating various parts of my career. I'm the mother of two children as well and you have to accept the reality of that. I've had situations where I've had a male colleague say they can go and do that person and I can interview the wife. I've had lots of little incidences like that along the road. But that actually to most women will feel like First World problems and most of us just learnt to get pretty sharp elbows, sharp tongues, and found our way through it. And when I look across our newsroom now, I see an incredible mixture of young men and women. They're working alongside one another as equals and would absolutely expect to be treated equally. There are still big questions over the gender pay gap, but I would say that at the level that the young journalists are coming into newsrooms now they would, they should, because of the furore that's been made around it, absolutely have the expectation that they won't go through what some of us have been through.

GP: Give me an example?

JE: I'll give you one exactly. It was election night in 2015 and I was with Tom Bradby, who is my colleague on News at Ten, and he was the main anchor for election night and I was in the studio, because my job that night was to work through all the key marginals. So I had the job of taking us through the graphics of where the marginals are and so on. And there was a senior politician who came in early on in the evening, when they're all coming in and out to give their reaction to the exit polls. And he came in and saw me sitting at a desk just alongside Tom's but slightly to the corner. And he said "Oh good evening, are you the secretary?" And it was one of those moments that you think: Did that just actually happen? Did that really, actually just happen? Yes it did! And I think a lot of women, all of us, of an age in particular, will have had those experiences.

GP: Would you say that journalism must have a woman's perspective?

JE: Absolutely, yes. Well, there's a woman's perspective in so far as that if our newsrooms are going to reflect back accurately a picture of society then it needs to reflect back 50 per cent of that society. And I'm not saying necessarily that a woman's view of Brexit is any different to a man's view of Brexit necessarily, but the life experiences that you bring to a newsroom as a woman are necessarily different to a man's perspective and so is your emphasis and priorities on stories – which stories get into the bulletins and which voices you argue for getting in them. Even the fact that you are in that newsroom as a young woman sends a message. When you are on the road or out in the field it sends a message about what sort of newsroom this is and how it is operating. There was an inquiry into women in the news, instigated by Harriet Harman a few years ago – the figures are improving, but women are still heavily outnumbered.

GP: So not 50 per cent.

JE: Not 50 per cent. We're a long way off it. And globally, there is a report into women's representation in the news – only 25 per cent of what is classed as news is made up of female voices. And that is astonishing. The UK's figure is obviously far better. So where situations for young women coming into newsrooms has improved significantly, in terms of our representation on news programmes there is still a lot of work to be done. That's why we really need young women in newsrooms. And unless we have enough of them there, they don't rise up into management and that's still where they're lacking too.

GP: Has the dominant male atmosphere in newsrooms shifted?

JE: It is absolutely shifting. I mean I can't speak for newspaper offices, I can speak for TV newsrooms that I've worked in and they are significantly less macho. That attitude that the blokes are all sliding off for a game of golf – I don't doubt that occasionally happens and there's no reason why it shouldn't. But it's the culture of women suddenly finding – and this has happened to me in the past – that the bosses have taken your male colleagues to the rugby match. Or they naturally play cricket together. And that in a way is the thing that really unsettles you as a woman in this industry – there's a whole load of stuff going on I'm not even aware of. I would like to put down an immediate sort of footnote to that, as I've been invited to the rugby at Twickenham by Kevin Lygoe [ITV director of television] and very happily have gone along to it. That happened this year and last year and when I got the invitation last year, it was just one of those moments – and it feels like a very insignificant thing – but you suddenly get an invitation to go and see a rugby match at Twickenham, which I adore, from one of my male bosses at ITV. Now, I'd be surprised if that happened 10 years ago. And it's just a little insight – I was there and as many women had been invited as men. I know it's a silly thing, but that stuff 10 or 20 years ago went on all the time and the women probably weren't even aware of it. And then there'd be decision made in the newsroom, and you didn't even know that little informal network existed.

GP: What about false balance putting young people off journalism – the idea that monstrous falsehoods, over issues such as Brexit, can be made in the interest of impartiality?

JE: Well, the base camp for this is that news broadcasters are regulated by Ofcom which gives us all a duty to impartiality, so those of us who trained as journalists and came up through the broadcast journalism route have this sense of impartiality absolutely in our DNA. And of course that's what the BBC and all of us who are in public service news journalism have at the centre of how we operate. Brexit has shone the harshest light on the nuance that we now need to operate with when we're still trying to be impartial observers and factual, truthful relayers of stories. It has really shone a light very critically on how that should function in a splintered political landscape with complex political arguments. You could apply it to issues around climate change as well – that's another big story we've had a challenge on with this. And I think one of the interesting features that has developed, certainly at the BBC and certainly in the way we do our journalism at ITN, is that the fact-check has now come. I think it's a really interesting development in journalism which has come not solely but largely as a result of stories like Brexit, that we now have people who fact-check and broadcast that fact-check, or supplement it on their digital offering, with a critique of the news that's being offered. I think every journalist who is in a live interview environment is now much more alert to calling-out absolutely every blurring of those truths where possible. I think Brexit brought us all up very sharply on that. And my sense is, having talked to young people – and I'm mother of a 16-year-old boy – is that they are looking for reliable news sources. They are desperate for them. And, yes, we all know we've been through the mill with Brexit. But in the end, Brexit is set against this much wider panorama of debate around fake news. I think people are now really getting to the point, because of all the noise around Trump, all the noise around populism, Brexit, wherever you look, where they are looking for a home for factual, reliable journalism. If I could put out a clarion call to young journalists, that's where we want to draw you to, to come and support that kind of quality.

GP: Julie Etchingham, thankyou very much.

George Pitcher advises Dow Jones, publisher of the Wall Street Journal, on ethics and the future of journalism and is a Visiting Fellow at LSE. He formerly held senior editorial positions at The Observer and the Daily Telegraph. @GeorgePitcher

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