

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.*

Andrew Porter, partner, Brunswick

Andrew Porter is a Partner at Brunswick, the communications consultancy. He took a post-graduate diploma in journalism at Cardiff University and joined the Western Morning News, a regional newspaper covering Devon and Cornwall, based in Plymouth. He switched to London to be the paper's London Editor, essentially its political editor, based at the House of Commons. From there, he joined Sunday Business, covering industry and politics, then to the Sunday Times Business section. He progressed to be Deputy Political Editor, before joining The Sun. He was appointed Political Editor of the Daily Telegraph, where he spent four and a half years, notably playing a key role in breaking the MPs' expenses scandal in 2009, before joining Brunswick in 2012, crossing to "the light side" as he calls it with a smile.

GP: Why did you go into PR, Andrew? I guess money has something to do with it?

AP: Yes. I felt I'd done a lot in 15 years as a journalist. I'd worked on some big stories. I'd risen quite quickly, I suppose. I was at that stage – and the record has been beaten since – probably by some distance the youngest ever Political Editor of the Telegraph. I was 34 when I was given that job in 2007 and then we had a great time covering some very big stories. Obviously, the MPs' expenses story was huge. There was also the world financial crisis at that time and the year after MPs' expenses in 2010 saw the first coalition government in the UK for 60 years. So an awful lot was crammed into that period. I was getting towards 40 and I thought about the next stage of my career. Did I want to go into broadcasting and keep my journalistic side going? I came quite close to doing that. Another option was to look at this industry of communications, public relations and public affairs. So why did I choose that? I did think I'd squeezed a lot into my time in journalism and I asked myself where that industry was going. If you could keep a top job in journalism, it paid well in those days. But was it always going to carry on paying well? And the answer to that was no. Some mutual friends of ours, George, felt I'd left journalism too early. I think those people revised their views a few years later, because a lot of journalists that were on, by modern standards, high salaries for journalism, were cleared out of newspapers. So I think there was a change, which reflected how the industry had gone economically, with all the issues around advertising revenues and falling readership. So I bit the bullet, made the decision to switch career and haven't regretted it for one moment.

GP: I did PR for 14 years and stopped to go back into journalism in 2008. PR was very much about media relations back then. I imagine it's changed from that very substantially in the past decade?

AP: It's funny you should say that. Perhaps you might call me one of the old media dinosaurs, but I've just come from a meeting this morning and we were talking about winning two big pieces of business and one of us pointed out how much this huge multinational bank actually still valued the media-handling intelligence that we can give them - which journalists are up, which are down, what's in their heads, what are they writing, what are they looking at in the next six months. All that stuff that I think people like me, as a former journalist who maintains a strong network of journalistic contacts, can bring does remain valuable to companies. So I do think – and of course there are people that might not agree with me – that media handling piece is hugely important. There are lots of things that companies have to worry about now that they never used to have to worry about 15 or 20 years ago if you've got a newspaper on your case. I always say that if you're

on the front page of the Daily Mail twice you've got a big problem, if it's a corporate issue. Issues that have tumbled out of the City pages on to the news pages, that's where the real critical problem is going to come for a business. So I do think there is still value in people understanding the media. And when you sit in front of chief executives, sometimes they're very media savvy and other times they need to be brought the truth – or what you and me as journalists would think is the obvious interpretation of something that they can't quite see until you explain it to them. So if you're saying that this industry is no longer media-led, I think it still has a huge media component to it. We're having to show the corporates are about something beyond making money and shareholder returns. While our financial communications and media handling remain strong, Brunswick also has a division here here called Business & Society, which is about us saying to clients, look, you need to have a conscience, a social purpose. I work with one of the biggest operators in the betting industry to demonstrate that they do understand that problem-gambling is an issue. And actually it's a bigger problem now, because politicians care more about it, society cares more about it and therefore we have to address it.

GP: We used to call it CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility].

AP: We're not allowed to call it that anymore!

GP: But the criticism is that it's a bit of a fig-leaf, isn't it?

AP: These things have to be authentic. People will rightly see through 'spin'. Clients have buy into it and get it and understand that they're doing it for the right reasons.

GP: From outside the PR industry, we might assume that the communications function has moved on to the digital, online environment, with phrases like "making a buzz in the blogosphere", with much more direct communication by corporates to their audiences. But you seem to be making the point there that we shouldn't underestimate the old newspaper groups and the effects that they can still have on the reputations and prosperity of your clients.

AP: Yes, I would definitely say your characterisation is right – we shouldn't underestimate the press. That's not to say that the impact of digital is overstated. You can see that, for instance, when someone like Gordon Ramsay opens a new Asian restaurant and it comes under attack from a reviewer who has her own website. She was invited along, she was the only Asian there, and a cultural appropriation row has ensued. That's Twitter for you. But the only reason I know about that story is because I read it in The Times that morning. And, again, I might be an outlier on this, but I still think that, while it can blow up on social media, it gets amplified by newspapers and broadcasters as well. Six million people still sit down and watch the television news every night.

GP: And it makes a difference, doesn't it, that it's The Times of London, or the Telegraph or the Mail? It's not just someone sitting in their underpants, blogging in their loft conversion.

AP: Blogging has become very sophisticated – and we've got a digital team here at Brunswick. A company can become very excited about seeing some guy Tweeting something – say it's a property company about a particular development they're having problems with. We're right to flag that up and sometimes it'll come from the client to us. Now, having this digital team, we can work out how many followers the blogger has, how many re-tweets, how many people have liked it, or impressions, or whatever. So then you're in a position to go back to the client and say, look, it is the proverbial one guy in his underpants who has had an issue about this for 15 years. But basically he's shouting about it in his corner, or to his three mates. You want to worry when you get a call from a freelance journalist who's picked up this guy's issue and is threatening to write about it in a newspaper that weekend. So, it's as well to have the early warning system, but it's also as well to

see the wider picture. How often in the past have we had “Oh I’m going to go to the papers with this” - my default setting is “Well, good luck”. That’s where people like us, who have been in newspapers, can sometimes see that the best advice is to hold your nerve, because you haven’t done anything wrong here and this is just someone who’s trying to agitate – and we’ve got the answers.

GP: What about the blurring of lines between editorial and commercial content – you know, when PRs say “We’ve got this graphic” or “We’ve got this comment piece” and so on?

AP: I was thinking about this on one of the biggest M&A deals of the last few years that finished last September. It was a complicated story, but we did have a graphic that was part of a Powerpoint deck and I took a photo of it because it explained something quite quickly and gave it to the media editor of the FT. I wasn’t asking him to use it, but it did explain how the company was structured quite well. That was subsequently reprinted in a few places. With sector correspondents, sometimes it helps them. It’s really up to them. We’re not saying publish the graphic, but sometimes it’s very helpful to readers. As long as you don’t pull the wool over anyone’s eyes, because then your credibility is shot. The one thing I do find astonishing is that if you pick up some newspapers and go to the sports section, almost every article has got a sponsor, be it Paddy Power or Vitality or Land Rover. You’re either taking that piece because they paid you money, or you’re being given access to somebody who is only doing it because they have to and are unlikely to say anything remotely controversial because whoever is sponsoring wouldn’t want that. The weakness of the industry is that it has to do that now.

GP: The economic weakness of the industry you mean?

AP: I think so. Why would a sports section only fill its space with stuff that’s sponsored by a betting company, or the England Rugby captain only give an interview because a car company has negotiated a deal where the paper takes it every Six Nations Friday? It does strike to integrity, I think, and it’s something close to my heart. The great sports writers, like the late great Hugh McIlvanney, would never be compromised.

GP: What about the next generation, Andy? Would you advise your own child to go into journalism?

AP: Before she went to bed last night, my daughter presented me with a newspaper front-page which she’d done, for her friend, who’s gone into hospital that day. She’d cut out, in the style of all good ransom notes, the headline from different papers and magazines that she found lying about. She’d done a really good story, picture, timeline. It was a great, I loved it. She’s eight. And every night for the last couple of years, if I’m back by her bedtime the first question she asks me is: “Anything in the papers?”. So I have to have stories ready for her. Sometimes it’s quite difficult to go through The Times or the Evening Standard and find a couple of stories that are suitable to tell an eight-year-old. Sometime there’s a bit of artistic licence, sometimes there’s historical or archeological finds or whatever. Like everyone else she’s got fed up with Brexit so I can’t go back with that, but she’s very attuned to news. There was a hilarious one last week. We work for Debenhams who are having – how shall we say – their issues at the moment, and she repeated to me three reasons why Debenhams had been struggling: Too many sales, as in discounting, too many shops and the rise of online. So I reported back to the team here – I said your messages are going down well, because my eight-year-old has picked them up. But, yes, they did ask if she wants to be a journalist.

GP: She’s got the gene...

AP: Well, I don't know, it's a bit like my dad putting me off going into the police. He was a policeman – it's the sort of thing that it's never quite as good as when you were there. And I don't know, if my daughter went into journalism, I'd never stop her, but I also think the obvious mercenary point is that there's no money in it. I came out of university in 1994 and because I didn't know what else to do I went and worked at an accountancy firm. Then I went back to do a post-graduate one-year course in Journalism at Cardiff. I went from earning about £16,000 as a trainee accountant to my first job in journalism at the Western Morning News, which paid £10,500 in Plymouth. So, while I didn't go into journalism for the money, there was always an assumption – and I was very lucky, I got some good breaks – that if you got on and got a big job you would be paid accordingly. I think there's been huge wage deflation in the industry. These days you can get up there into senior jobs and still not be paid enough. People said I was too young to get into this PR world at 38, but two years later we were hiring a guy who had been at the Spectator who was about 28.

GP: So in 10 years' time, when you girl asks you whether journalism is worth pursuing as a career, do you say no?

AP: I don't think I would say that actually. If she wanted to do it, great. It gets us into totally different territory, but I do think there's still a problem for women in media – and by that I mean in advertising as well as editorial media. I'm hoping that in 10 years' time that will have switched around and she'll have great opportunities. But I think there is a big issue with that. I wouldn't stand in her way if she wanted to do it. My career in papers has given me a huge amount – I've made friends for life, really close mates and contacts and networks, and that has also helped in the world I am in now. And it was great, great fun. I'm sure it's still fun, though I'm not sure it's fun down in the Parliamentary Lobby right now where I used to work. In terms of politics it's a slog now. I do not envy those guys. I occasionally get text messages from people saying "I bet you wish you were down there". And, no, I really don't. I possibly had the best of it, I felt very privileged to be in that world I was in and I'm very grateful for all those newspapers that employed me, because it was good fun. We worked extremely hard, but it has to be fun, and it was fun. I saw great stuff.

GP: Is it getting easier or harder to get into?

AP: I worry about that. If it becomes, like quite a few professions have become, the sort of job where you see the same names cropping up, and you think you must be so-and-so's son, or an editor's nephew or something. Without getting all Neil Kinnock about it, my dad was a police constable for 30 years and went on to work at Bank of England security, so that's the nearest I got to the City. So I had no advantages in terms of getting into journalism – I got in the industry because I wanted to do it and got lucky by meeting a few people that decided to employ me. There are always people who have had the path eased for them and have probably turned out to be great at their jobs, but there's no doubt they found the path into it easier. And again that's always been the way in industries, I suppose. But it doesn't make it right.

GP: Is it that Oxbridge thing in journalism?

AP: Yes. I didn't go to Oxbridge and, again, I've done all these things, so I've felt quite smug saying I went a redbrick university, Warwick, which was seen as quite a shiny, new university. But if journalism becomes an industry that is only available to people that can afford to live in London, because their mum and dad can look after them and subsidise internships and almost subsidise their life, that's a problem. Otherwise you get journalists for whom it's a bit of a game, rather than people wanting to turn stuff up and ultimately hold people to account. We had the absolute high point of that when we had MPs' expenses ten years ago, because that was the ultimate holding of people to account. It resonated and it still rumbles on today. Now, where we are is not a brilliant place, but

that was only exposed because of an enterprising and brave journalism, presented in a way that brooked no argument, despite some of our competitors in the early days trying to pour cold water on it or trying to make us the story. It was about what had been going on down there systematically.

GP: It sounds to me that you say that could still happen today.

AP: Well I hope so. In terms of uncovering the story you mean?

GP: Having the resources, doing it, thinking that it's the right thing to do...

AP: You look at the good newspaper editors, they are hard people that understand the value of journalism, all of them – Evans at the Telegraph, Geordie Greig and Gallagher and Witherow, they are hard news people who understand the value of that sort of journalism and you hope there's more of them coming up and you hope they're employing the right sort of people – and I think they do. I do see young journalists, they're hungry, they're ravenous, you can see a bit of yourself in them and I hope that continues. My worry is that it becomes so difficult to earn decent money in it – and I don't mean decent money as in a lavish lifestyle, just enough to be able to have a life in London if that's where the newspapers still are. Because let's make no bones about it, when I was out in the regions, my old paper, the Western Morning News – and I owe them a massive amount for giving me such great opportunities - used to have six or seven regional offices across Devon and Cornwall. I doubt if it's got two these days. I always get the paper if I'm going down to Devon, it's still a powerful voice and should be, but it is undoubtedly a bit thinner when it comes to hard local news. Who's covering Exeter Crown Court, or Plymouth Magistrates Court, where some of these stories are going on about misbehaviour at councils or politics or whatever it is? Everyone thought that it would all move online and some of them are, but they're not staffed enough to make it work. There was a recent study about how few court cases were covered these days. People are getting away with stuff.

GP: And there is that proposition that in a healthier period of journalism Grenfell might have been picked up before it happened? Where were the journos? The local west London journos? Interrogating the council about safety standards...

AP: You're absolutely right and that's a matter of life and death – that is one of the huge issues.

GP: And finally, I wonder if the advance of technology provides an optimistic outlook, precisely because the more basic functions that are taken over by AI, the more the kind of calibre of journos that you're talking about are liberated to do the kind of work that they should be doing?

AP: Yeah, it's a good point. I mean where is it going? I think you're right, I think that if there's enough journalists that are inquisitive, still think that there's a role for them, and it's not about making money but it is about uncovering the truth...I don't know, it sounds very sort of...

GP: Noble?

AP: Yes, noble, but then it should be and hopefully it will mean that these kinds of people are still around. Big news organisations are still around and hopefully there can still be a vibrant newspaper sector in the UK, in the way that perhaps it isn't in the States, in terms of most big cities are lucky if they've got one newspaper. I mean, here we are in the UK, we're still pretty hungry for news, it's very competitive, all those good things. And by newspapers I mean the online offerings of them as well, so plus the FTs and the Wall Street Journals and these sorts of places that are adapting well. And the old FT came out with a big scoop last year, that Presidents Club story, which was of its time and made a huge impact. In my own world the Sorrell disclosures were huge corporate

stories, so there are a lot of enterprising journalists out there that are still keen to make a name for themselves.

GP: That's great, Andy.

AP: No, it's good to talk.

GP: 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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