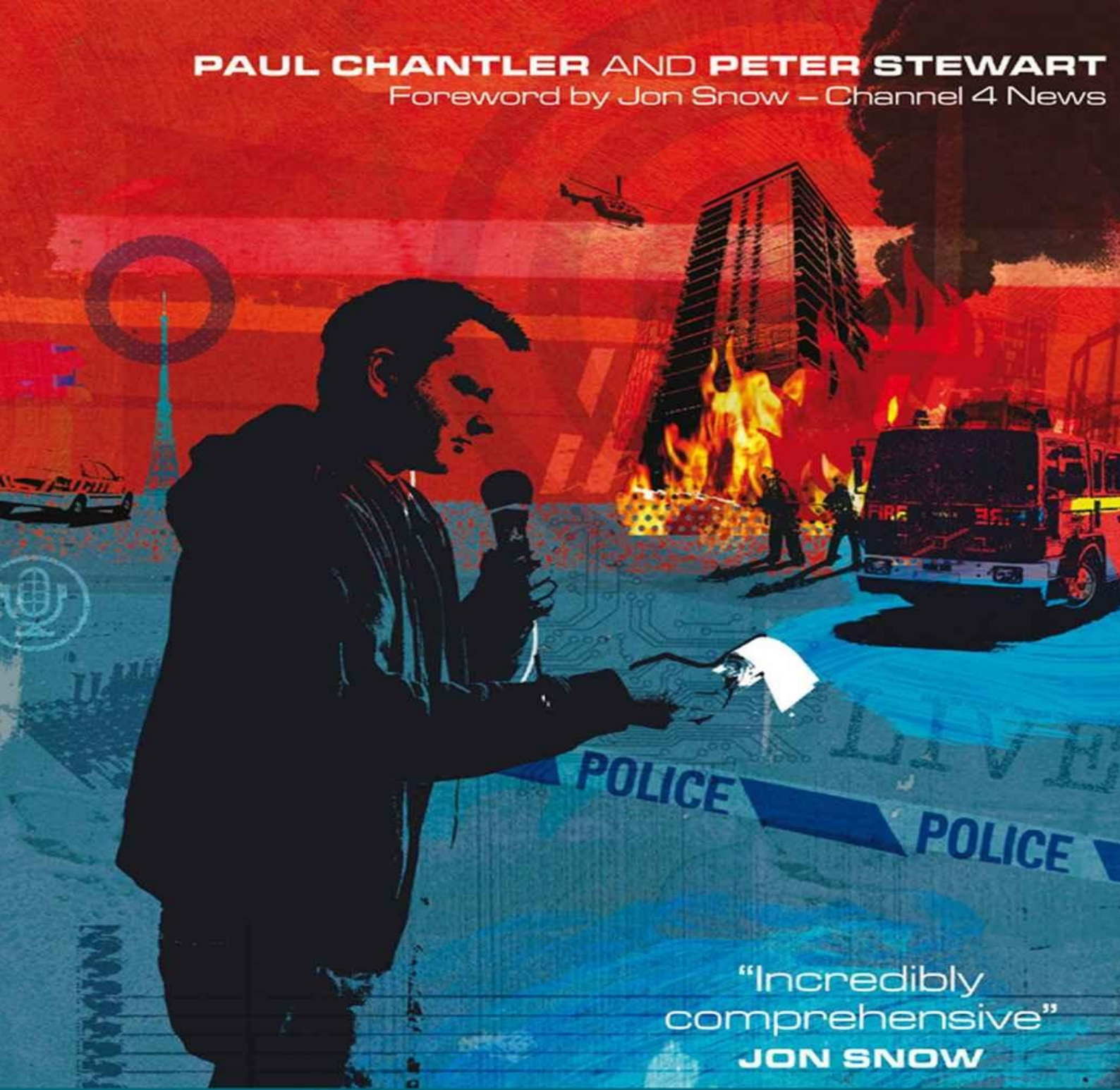


**PAUL CHANTLER AND PETER STEWART**

Foreword by Jon Snow – Channel 4 News



“Incredibly  
comprehensive”  
**JON SNOW**

# ESSENTIAL RADIO JOURNALISM

HOW TO PRODUCE AND PRESENT RADIO NEWS



# ESSENTIAL RADIO JOURNALISM

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PAUL CHANTLER AND PETER STEWART





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# Foreword

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Despite all the elements of the technological revolution, to my mind radio remains the most stimulating and exciting medium of all. Music and the spoken word have the capacity to create and transmit images, ideas, and information that no other medium can rival. The internet generally, and podcasting in particular, together with digital transmission, have taken the medium to new heights of quality and availability. I have no scientific grounds for this claim beyond the anecdotal, but I believe aurally received stimuli enjoy a more intensive interaction with the human brain than any other. Drama, sport, classical, jazz, and rock music, and not least news and current affairs, thrive in the radio environment. In short, the pictures on radio are quite simply better, and I say that as a journalist who has only spent the vast majority of his working life in the apparently ultimate visual medium of television. My life in radio lasted little more than three years, yet I found it extraordinarily challenging and, at the same time, fulfilling.

For the working journalist, radio is an empowering medium. It's you against the world. You are effectively dependent upon no one else. You retrieve, process, and broadcast your entire report yourself. Television, for all the pace of change, is still labour intensive and heavily reliant on teams of other technicians and journalists, some of them unknown to you and unseen. Why, one duty man at a satellite switching centre in Honolulu can still make the difference to whether your report ever airs.

Yet radio, in common with every other medium, is still fundamentally dependent upon the flair and ingenuity of the individual journalist. That's why this text book needs to be seen in its true context. The authors have produced an incredibly comprehensive sweep of the basics of radio journalism. Learn and understand this lot and you will have a fine grasp of how it all works. But then there's the rest. Radio journalism is an experiential process. You pick it up and learn from every story you ever do. I am still learning, every day. It tests your capacity to observe and to distil and express what you have observed as nowhere else. You have to understand the nature of sound. Three seconds of natural sound can tell a thousand pictures. But it has to be the right three seconds. Memorable radio combines sound with a use of language that, whilst it may come naturally, can take years to perfect.

My day begins and ends with radio. I have no desire to cheat my senses with a hard image of what is happening. I want my rested imagination to wake gradually. I turn on the radio and begin almost instantly to visualise the news and the evolving day. I do not lie in bed pining for the televisual or photographic image. I want to take in the whole story. It is the same at the end of the day – I want the elasticity of sound to allow my senses to reflect on the day that has passed. It's these demands that we as radio journalists must aspire to fulfil. And not all that can be taught or even read about in a text book. We have to let our imagination run riot. How do I want to respond to this story? What do I want to find out? And whilst objectivity is a watchword, we cannot as journalists deny our own starting points. We are not all the same. I am a man, you may be a woman. Ethnicity, sexual orientation, yes even politics are bound to influence your starting point on a story. We cannot purge ourselves of our own life experiences as we approach a story. Instead we must build on the insights and understandings that those experiences give us. At the same time we must remain open to those experiences we have not had, those understandings we do not possess and we must seek help from other people and sources to reflect.

It's a fabulous chance, working in this field, and if after all this you really WANT to do it, you WILL. And if you do, one day you will, like me, find yourself saying, 'These crazy people, they PAID me for doing something I absolutely love doing.' Good luck!





# Preface

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There are many definitions of news. We have collected quite a few over the years including, ‘The news is what is new, interesting and true’ from esteemed radio expert and author Robert McLeish; ‘Subject matter which I want to know about in a short amount of time,’ from US radio consultant Rasa Kaye; ‘A timely and accurate account of a recent, interesting and significant event’ from US news expert James W. Kershner; ‘Something someone doesn’t want you to know’ from the late American broadcast news pioneer Reuven Frank; ‘The stuff I care about and the stuff I want to pass on’, from a woman in a focus group; and our favourite, from the satirical UK television programme *The Day Today*, ‘Fact multiplied by the importance equals news’!

The amount and variety of news available to people worldwide has never been greater. Words and their meanings take on huge significance. We live in a sophisticated and complicated world where people are highly sensitive to all sorts of things racial, ethnic, religious and sexual. In this climate there has never been more of a need for the traditional news reporting values of fairness, accuracy and balance.

Notice we use the word *reporting*. We believe the word *journalism* has become a little tainted over recent years because of the increasing tendency to use it as camouflage for comment and speculation rather than old-fashioned reporting and analysis. It is this blurring of the line between reporting news and commenting upon it that worries us. We think there is a compelling need to return to solid professional reporting and original story telling – in other words, *pure journalism*.

Bill Keller, the executive editor of the *New York Times*, says reliable news reporting is dwindling despite the internet-driven worldwide information explosion:

‘The civic labour performed by journalists on the ground cannot be replicated by legions of bloggers sitting hunched over their computer screens ... What is absent from the vast array of new media outlets is, first and foremost, the great engine of newsgathering – the people who witness events, ferret out information, supply context and explanation.’

In an age of infinite choice made possible by new technology, we believe there has never been a better time to emphasise the importance of an editor. When there is less and less time available, people crave a ‘trusted friend’ to wade through what is on offer and make a selection for them based on an objective view of what is important, offering them effectively a daily or hourly news ‘digest’.

We cannot help but feel that the slant away from reporting and into colourful comment and never-ending speculation with an agenda is leading to question marks over the way people trust what we do.

A report by UK regulator Ofcom published in 2007 called *New News Future News* says the level of disengagement from news by some young people and ethnic minorities has grown since 2002. Both groups perceive bias and exaggeration in what they are told through broadcast journalism. The question of disengagement is also linked to concerns about detachment from the wider democratic process.

This underlines how important it is for radio to continue to safeguard impartiality with editorial decisions which are based on dispassionate objective criteria rather than on the basis of bias and prejudice as in some newspapers.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4 in 2007, Helen Boaden, director of BBC news, said:

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‘Impartiality for me is a process, not a state of grace. It is about open mindedness to all points of view ... it’s about catching yourself out in conscious and unconscious biases. It is about balance – but not balance on the one hand, on the other hand. It’s much more about getting a diversity of views so that the audience can choose for itself which approach and which evidence they find most satisfactory.

The way I was raised in the BBC is always to get beyond opinion and test evidence. That sounds simple. It often isn’t because even the methodologies of testing evidence can be open to claims of bias. Following the evidence is often the most useful way to get to the truth – but the truth is never simple.’

In his excellent book *Flat Earth News*, author and journalist Nick Davies suggests journalists are often required to be neutral. In other words, they become invisible and deliberately refrain from expressing the judgements which are essential for journalism:

‘Neutrality requires the packaging of conflicting claims, which is precisely the opposite of truth telling. If two men go to mow a meadow and one comes back and says “The job’s done” and the other comes back and says “We never cut a single blade of grass”, neutrality requires the journalist to report a controversy surrounding the state of the meadow, to throw together both men’s claims and shove it out to the world with an implicit sign over the top declaring, “We don’t know what’s happening – you decide”.’

The BBC has undertaken extensive research on audience expectations and perceptions of impartiality. In a report on the findings of the research, six out of ten people agreed that broadcasters do not give a fair and informed view. The report’s author, independent programme maker John Bridcut, wrote:

‘Impartiality in broadcasting (used to involve) keeping a balance to ensure the seesaw did not tip too far to one side. Those days are over. In today’s multi-polar Britain with its range of cultures, beliefs and identities, impartiality involves much more than two sides ... The seesaw has been replaced by the wagon wheel where the wheel is not circular and has a shifting centre with spokes that go in all directions.’

On the ground, BBC correspondents adhere to the principle of being first-hand witnesses dealing with raw facts. World Affairs Editor John Simpson says:

‘As journalists we have to be very clear about our function. It’s to give people the plain unvarnished facts as fully and honestly as possible. We must not tell them what to think; leave that to the newspapers. Let the facts speak for themselves; if we try to persuade people what to think, we’re being politicians instead of objective reporters.’

Quite.

As radio expert Robert McLeish wrote in his excellent book *The Techniques of Radio Production* first published in 1978:

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‘The reporter does not select “victims” and hound them – he does not ignore those whose views he dislikes – he does not pursue vendettas nor have favourites. He does not promote the policies of sectarian interests and he resists the persuasions of those seeking free publicity. He is fair. Having no editorial opinion of his own, he seeks to tell the news without making judgements about it. He is the servant of his listener.’

Writing on journalism resource website [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org), Max Frankel makes the point that good reporting should aid understanding:

‘News is the portrayal and ordering of information in vivid image and narrative. News is the transformation of facts into stories so they can be understood and remembered in ways that inform and instruct, even as they delight or dismay. News not only portrays events, it ranks them in some order of importance as defined by public needs and interests. And besides recounting events, meaningful news digs to discover their cause and assess their consequence.’

When the original version of this book was published in 1992 under the title *Local Radio Journalism* the introduction argued that many people thought of radio news as the purest form of news available because of its sheer brevity; news on the radio has to be pure because it is so short. There is still some truth in that statement today. Research in 2007 called *The Big Listen* undertaken among 10,000 listeners by The RadioCentre, the trade organisation that represents commercial radio in the UK, showed that nearly three quarters of them describe radio as trustworthy – double the number that trust TV and three times the score for the Internet.

To maintain that precious trust and to maintain the confidence of the listening public, professional radio news is therefore under an obligation to be pure: the pinnacle of journalism – wide-ranging and well-informed, presenting the facts, the whole facts and nothing but the facts. Perhaps in doing so radio journalists will become the role models for new audio-providers such as podcasters.

The idea of *Essential Radio Journalism* is to help towards journalistic purity and integrity. It is a working manual and handbook for radio journalists as well as a textbook for broadcast journalism students. You should find it helpful whether you are looking for your first job or have many years experience in radio.

Although much of the book focuses on the UK radio industry, we have tried to make the principles as universal as possible. We have also included a chapter which gives an overview of radio across the globe.

This edition is more detailed and comprehensive than previous versions. You will find chapters on technology, legalities and ethics as well as production and bulletin techniques together with presentation tips and advice on how to break into radio journalism.

Perhaps for us the most important parts are the chapters on writing and reporting for radio. Words are at the heart of what we do – and our use of them needs careful thought based on knowledge of the full range of techniques available to us.

There are many potential pitfalls facing radio journalists today, ranging from the importance of trust and impartiality through to a return to the basics of good reporting. In a world of digit

television, blogs, podcasts, video-on-demand, search engines and the iPod, traditional radio risks being left behind.

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Indeed, more and more journalists from other fields are encroaching on the territory of radio journalists; for example, many newspapers now offer podcasts and news bulletins on their websites. Newspaper reporters are often sent out to report stories with a video camera or portable recorder as well.

Happily though, it seems listeners are more in love with radio than ever before. We should remind ourselves why that affection is so high. It is because radio is free, easy to use, a friend and – crucially – a medium they can genuinely trust.

There is of course a final danger, arguably the biggest danger of all. We have to guard against journalism becoming what has become known as ‘churnalism’.

In *Flat Earth News*, Nick Davies argues that newsrooms must avoid becoming news factories where the imperative is feeding an ever-growing number of outlets at great speed:

‘Working in a news factory, without the time to check, without the chance to go out and make contacts and find leads, reporters are reduced to churnalism, to the passive processing of material which overwhelmingly tends to be supplied for them by outsiders, particularly wire agencies and PR. In these circumstances, the news factory will produce an effective and reliable product for its readers, viewers and listeners only if those outside suppliers are delivering an effective and reliable account of the world.’

As a radio journalist, you should never think of news as that which simply appears on a screen in front of you in the office. Never forget that *real news* is what you go out and find through your own efforts.

Do not simply cover stories – uncover them.

*Paul Chantler  
Peter Stewart  
Autumn 2000*



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sample content of Essential Radio Journalism: How to produce and present radio news (Professional Media Practice)

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