

# News for a round Earth

THE PROFESSION of journalism “is disintegrating”, a trend which has been “accelerating alarmingly” in the last 12 months. That was the warning from Nick Davies, author of *Flat Earth News* ([www.flatearthnews.net](http://www.flatearthnews.net)), speaking at a special meeting in February co-hosted by London Freelance Branch and Press & Public Relations Branch.

Nick believes that the business model sustaining the media is failing, and there’s nothing to replace it. “We might be on the edge of an era

of information chaos where we can’t find out what’s going on.”

How did this happen? As described in *Flat Earth News*, family firms that ran newspapers fell into the hands of big corporations. Commercial concerns took over and destroyed the “quality and reliability” of news: readers started to drift away. Then came the internet, and a lot of advertising went. And then along came the credit crunch. Nick sees a clear linkage between commercial pressures and the spread of “falsehood” in news: his research shows that compared to when News International moved to Wapping in June 1986, the average reporter now has three times as much space to fill as they did then. Only 12 per cent of stories (one in eight) come direct from journalists: 8 per cent have a source that can’t really be traced, and the remaining 80 per cent come from agencies and “our friends in PR”.

“Rules of production” have also grown up whereby the media choose safe stories that won’t cause trouble, and produce “moral panics” in which all outlets have to play back a prevailing emotion, whether alleged grief at the death of the

Queen Mother or the mandatory hope of the souvenir editions for Barack Obama’s first days in office.

None of the media asks hard questions in this prevailing atmosphere, like: why is Obama’s America still bombing Pakistan?

And none of the media is reporting on its own demise, says Nick. Rather than dwelling on this demise, journalist need to find “what’s the new model” for making money out of reporting news. The days of mass media may be gone, but Nick predicts that low-cost “mini-media” organisations may take over – for example, three freelancers who know everything about Shrewsbury, or everything about the arms trade.

It’s up to us as journalists, says Nick, to find new sources of money for the media, and to convince the public that they need to hold onto media outlets like their local paper (in print or on the web.) He pointed to models like the US Center for Public Integrity, a non-profit foundation which funds investigative reporting and calls press conferences to give away the news it uncovers to the mainstream media, and makes deals for paid-for exclusives.

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Nick Davies: Photo © Julio Etchart [www.julioetchart.com](http://www.julioetchart.com)



## A random walk through work

IF I’M AN expert on anything, “it’s me”, broadcaster, radio presenter, journalist and scriptwriter Andrew Collins told the February London Freelance Branch meeting. We’d asked him to give tips on how he re-invented himself in a previous recession, so he got to talk about him.

“My experience snakes all the way through the media”. Asked to do careers talks in schools, he has to say “I don’t know what I want to do when I grow up” – after 20 years as a freelance scriptwriter or journalist or author, that after seven years on the staff of *NME*, *Select* and *Q*.

The great thing about being freelance “is that one thing genuinely can lead on to another. You don’t have to resign to move on to the next thing.” Andrew reached into his props bag and pulled out his first payslip: £49.08 for a week sticking things down with cancer-in-a-tin solvent-based glue as assistant to *NME*’s art editor: “a lot of money in those days, and I would have paid them to work at the *NME*”.

So how did he get from there to here? “If I have a skill, it is asking for work.” At the other end of the floor from the glue wielders were the cool people with the typewriters: “when I was showing them pages I’d

ask, ‘can I review an album?’ ‘Yes, maybe, one day...’ they’d answer. I had no shame.” No-one should be arrogant enough to assume the world will come to them. Eventually, there was a film screening, and there were sandwiches, and there was a review.

Back in the prop bag, we find a letter from the *NME* art editor rejecting Andrew’s teenage cartoons: “We’re not using this kind of caricature: if it’s just money you want, try *Record Mirror*”.

Rather later, a proudest moment was this phone-call: “Hello Tanya, please can I be on *Newsnight Review*?” There were really good sandwiches in the green room “and I enjoyed it and never got asked again. It is my destiny to be on things once.”

To celebrate his 20 years’ freelancing, Andrew has earned much less money than before – partly because of a contractual dispute over the sitcom he writes for. In its third year there was a possibility of it being sold to the States – so it was time to sort the contracts at last. Which meant missing seven of eight episodes and still not getting the right contract.

“Last week I barely earned any

money. I don’t get depressed, I just book another meeting and put my foot in another door.”

In the meantime he’s been doing lots of things for free – such as a podcast with comedian Richard Herring, going out on iTunes. Some number of thousand people downloaded it. After they’d done 35 hours of stuff a listener sent a cheque for £5 and they spent it on coffee and biscuits. That’s as much as anyone knows about making money from new media. “I look forward to doing it: I’ve not been able to ascertain whether it’s got me any work, but radio and TV producers do mention listening to it.”

Equally, if you go to a formal pitch meeting at the BBC, you take something you’ve written up – on your own time. “If there are sandwiches around, always try to get some, because usually you won’t get anything else.”

A member asked whether Andrew used an agent. Yes, to deal with contracts: “she’s invaluable because when people come to me and it gets to the subject of money, I can say ‘talk to my agent’.” And how does he pay the bills? Oddly enough: by journalism. Writing.

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### Digital imaging course

As we go to press, it seems that the London Freelance Branch one-day introductory photographers’ course on image workflow and digital imaging, postponed from last year, has a date, which is – provisionally – **Tuesday 31 March**, to be confirmed, in a venue in Central London. Watch this space for further details. To express an interest, and for more information, email [photoshop@londonfreelance.org](mailto:photoshop@londonfreelance.org)