

one of my favourite interview questions was always: “But why do you say that?”

Journalism should be about listening, and that means listening to what is not said, as well as to what is said. Trying to imagine what it would be like to change places with an interviewee. What does it feel like to be a politician in the spotlight? An abuse victim who has been disbelieved for decades? A refugee who watched

their family drown as they tried to reach Europe from north Africa?

But empathy requires time. And time is the one thing that, in the frenetic digital age, reporters are being denied. You can't walk around in someone else's skin in the space of a clickbait headline, a 140-character tweet, or a 20-second video clip.

So let's slow down and show a bit more empathy. For all our sakes.

Robin Lustig

*The writer is a journalist and broadcaster, and a former chairman of the BJR editorial board. In 2013, he received the Charles Wheeler award for outstanding contribution to broadcast journalism. His memoir *Is Anything Happening?* is published by Biteback.*

🐦 @RobinLustig

Clicks versus facts

Trusted sources are more important than ever in this post-truth, fake news era. But as traditional publishers cut staff in the wake of Google and Facebook gobbling up advertising revenue, reporters say they are finding it increasingly difficult to get out of the office.

Without sources built up over time, fact-checking becomes more difficult. Some journalists keen to hunt out exclusives find it frustrating when herograms are given to others for re-versioned takes of trending stories that have got big hits.

With print in decline, who can blame news desks for looking for things that garner immediate clicks? Measurement data can be converted into advertising revenue to put more

fat on the bottom line. But in the pursuit of clicks, is the next generation of young journalists going to miss out on the sources that can – if they build up enough trust over time – give them the truth?

One example some journalists point to is *The Independent*. Observers have noted a decline in the attendance of its reporters at events since its print edition closed. Around then, there was a presentation by digital editors that included a Top 10 of the kind of stories they were after. Some there say those singled out for praise were mostly rehashes of trending stories, repackaged with “reaction” tweets. One idea put forward was for journalists to work extended shifts, turning round takes on hot topics,

leaving little time to leave the office.

For young journalists entering the profession hoping to win a Pulitzer Prize it can be an eye-opener. A friend was ecstatic when her son got a job at *MailOnline*. He left soon after to join a news magazine in order to get out on the road. “Digital natives” have the skills to reach younger audiences and get their attention, so they are of great value. But some have found themselves becoming the journalistic equivalent of battery hens: intensively laying story eggs in the hope they hatch into clicks.

Of course, not all publishers are using such factory-farm-style methods. Some promulgate a mixed economy – allowing their hacks some free-range time. And to say old-school print is good, online is bad diminishes the brilliant investigations done by sites such as BuzzFeed and ignores newspaper scandals such as phone-hacking. But reporters I’ve spoken to, across tabloids and broadsheets and magazines, say a divide between the new and the old has emerged.

One told me: “Online editors are often very young, with a couple of years of experience on a website before being promoted to a senior news editing role. They have little traditional journalistic training or reporting experience so their instincts – to echo a ‘story’ being tweeted elsewhere, true or not, to get numbers – can be at odds with the grizzled print newsdesk veterans, who still prefer getting a reporter out in the field.”

The question is what effect will

this short-termism of clickbait have in defining the values of the journalists of tomorrow? As one experienced journalist said: “The most surprising thing about the new journalism is how an online story is never wrong if it’s gaining views. It simply is updated and relaunched with a new catchline: ‘Soap star says sex with guinea pig story is completely untrue’.”

Some report a decline in young journalists coming from online backgrounds having shorthand. Spotting something that is trending on Twitter is no substitute for shorthand if your phone dies in court or you have 20 minutes to turn round a story following a press conference. As Laura Kuenssberg’s questions to Donald Trump during his appearance with Theresa May showed, there is no substitute for sending a reporter to an event where figures and facts can be questioned or challenged live.

Things are “horribly skewed towards Twitter reactions to stories rather than the actual story itself,” regrets one journalist with years of experience. “Instead of a story about someone winning an Oscar, we are given the thoughts of three random Twitter users about whether he should have won. Sometimes the reaction, as we all know, can become the story, or be a way of taking the story on. But it shouldn’t be a substitute for doing the basic journalism of getting a story and verifying it. It just feels like the erosion of basic journalistic standards.”

Tara Conlan

The writer is freelance, principally for The Guardian, where she was on the staff for seven years. She is a former TV editor of the Daily Mail.

🐦 @taraconlan