

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

May I say what a privilege it is to be here today and to be given the opportunity to heartily endorse the work of the National Council for the Training of Journalists and in particular the work that you do as experts in shorthand.

I firmly believe that your work has never been more vital than it is today. You don't need me to tell you that the mainstream media is in peril for all sorts of reasons but I believe your work can help it survive and thrive.

I'll explain what I mean in a moment, but first, I stand before you as a frankly inferior student of your art.

I left school at 18 and joined the Portsmouth News, a big city newspaper selling 100,000 copies a night. Back in the early 1970s newspapers such as the News took on several cub reporters a year and trained them thoroughly through the NCTJ.

We were expected to attend regular shorthand classes through the working week and to bolster these with intense sessions at block release courses at nearby Highbury College, an institution still going strong today.

Every week I would find myself in the grip of Mr Mudge, an industrious Teeline and Pitman teacher whose terraced house in Southsea rang to the chorus of a dozen cassette recorders all simultaneously churning out shorthand tests of varying speeds, like some frenzied Tower of Babel.

He seemed not to possess headphones. Imagine a dozen transistors tuned to Radio 4, all playing different episodes of *Just a Minute* at the same time but without the laughs.

Somehow we callow youths struggled our way to 80 words a minute in this tumult before attempting the summit of 100 words a minute at Highbury. I tried. I failed. I tried. I failed. I tried again. I failed again, until finally at my ninth attempt I achieved nirvana and with it my proficiency certificate.

I blame my appalling handwriting. You know better than most that neat handwriting leads to neat shorthand. If you write like a drunken spider your shorthand will suffer.

However, I gained more than a proficiency certificate when at the News; I gained a wife as well. Claudia has always had excellent handwriting and I was frankly shocked to learn when I met her that she had already attained 120 words a minute Teeline at her postgrad diploma course at Cardiff, taught by George Hill, no less.

Her skill with shorthand meant she was often sent to cover courts and councils. One day, on a drowsy afternoon at Chichester District Council, Claudia was the sole

occupant of the press bench in the chamber. The chairman decided that a particular item on the agenda should be conducted in camera – off the record – and the press was invited to lay her pen down.

A few minutes later the chairman was interrupted by an alarmed councillor: “Mr Chairman, Mr Chairman, the press is writing!” To which, when challenged, Claudia replied: “Yes, the press is writing to her mother.”

Nearly 40 years later we are still happily married but I still can’t quite shake off that sense of inferiority at having a speed merchant in the family. While I have let my Teeline slip away in my years in newspaper production and management she still uses hers every day in her work as a journalist and, like me, abhors those who spend long hours transcribing a taped interview when a shorthand note would have saved them – and the newspaper – so much time.

And anyway, taped interviews, while useful backups, are not infallible. Subeditors at the Observer were baffled to find a reference to “Irish centurions” in a long interview that had been laboriously transcribed. “Irish centurions?” When they tackled the author, she replied: “Well I’m sure that’s what he said” but still baffled, they asked to hear the tape. Those mysterious figures were not “Irish centurions” but “Aristotelians”.

Similarly, I have seen unthinking transcription turn “God’s Chosen People” into “God’s Frozen People”.

But to return to my opening remarks about the value of what you do.

The press is under enormous financial pressure at the moment; the very future of the mainstream media is threatened. As more and more people consume their news through the internet, print sales and print advertising is in decline. But Facebook and Google have taken 90% of internet advertising too, so newspaper websites, while commanding huge audiences, are not making enough money to support the journalism they publish – the very journalism that is distributed by Facebook and Google but not produced by them.

And while traditional newspapers are losing readers, unreliable sources of information are springing up everywhere, which leads to a situation where a US president can condemn stories uncomfortable to him as “fake news”. He knows the internet is full of it – all he has to do is convince people that *legitimate* stories are fake too.

There are real dangers here. As a readers’ editor, it is my job to receive complaints about our reporting and, where necessary, correct the record or seek redress on behalf of those injured by our coverage.

Increasingly, since the election of President Trump, I have received complaints not taking issue with the facts in a story but simply condemning it as “fake”.

A reporter with an accurate note, taken at speed, can furnish me with the necessary evidence to support that story and rebut the claim that it is fake. It becomes more difficult if that reporter has no shorthand but just a scrawled impression of a conversation.

To survive in this parlous landscape the media has to fight assiduously to maintain and nurture its credibility. Your work, ensuring the troops in the newsroom are accurately recording what they are hearing, is vital in that process. You are the drill-sergeants in the war against fake news.

It's fashionable today to dismiss the mainstream media as venal, cowardly and partisan and to claim that modern online news portals are free of such taints. That may well be true, but in moments of genuine crisis – the Westminster Bridge attack, the Manchester bombing, the London Bridge outrage, the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower – people turn to the established media in their millions for reliable information, while at the same time they condemn the rumour-mongers of social media for their irresponsibility.

Ethical, reliable reporting is vital to the health of a nation and to its democracy and it begins with an accurate record of what people say, whether they be ministers or mechanics, bishops or bikers. As shorthand teachers you play a vital role in that process and we in the media salute you.

Enjoy your conference. Thank you.