

No more voiceless people

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During the Congo's struggle for independence from Belgium, in around 1960, the war correspondent Edward Behr witnessed a British reporter striding through an airport hangar of Belgian refugees. At intervals Behr recalled him stopping and shouting, 'Anyone here been raped and speaks English?' This became the title of Behr's autobiography.

Those days are gone. A rape or war survivor today would claim, and be given, more control over their story than was the case then. That change has come about for a number of reasons. One is the rise of activist organisations, which question the role of the media (and the author) in how survivors are treated and represented.

Another is the rise of the internet. Social media allows the subject to question the power of the journalist and authorial voice. Although there were pioneering journalists who engaged actively with those about whom they were writing or broadcasting before the internet – such as Mark Saunders, who made the first citizen journalism film about the poll tax riots, *The Battle of Trafalgar* – they were the exception rather than the rule. Saunders says, 'I used the term counter-journalism then. But it was actually straightforward, simple journalism.'

The whole premise of the 'neutral' voice speaking for the voiceless: '*Anyone here been raped and speaks English?*' is out of date. There are far fewer voiceless populations now in the world of the cheap smartphone, which enables peer sharing through social networks. The question for writers of books and journalism is how this could affect their practices.

For journalists, news has become something not only 'gathered' by them but also shared by readers and viewers. Journalist Dan Gillmor identified this crucial shift in control, talking about the 'former audience' for news and welcoming an expansion in storytelling. Examples of 'the people' working as creators of the news include the Iranian election protests in 2009, known as the Green Revolution, and, most recently, the outcry in Ferguson, Missouri, after an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, was shot dead by a white police officer.

The journalist Jeff Jarvis wrote of Ferguson and the need of its inhabitants to speak for themselves, 'I'm glad that social media – that is, people using social media to report what they witness – forced Ferguson's issues onto national media.' He calls for 'social journalism', saying, 'It's not going to be easy to turn journalism on its head, starting with listening rather than publishing, with serving the needs of a community over telling its

story to others.'

Non-fiction and also, maybe, academic and educational writing may be on the cusp of change, because of their links to journalism. Authors and the publishing industry have rightly identified some effects of the internet – copyright changes and content change because of the shift to digital. But could a further change – in the dynamic between author, reader and 'former subjects' of our books – be upon us? In particular, groups that were previously seen as 'marginalised' now have the ability to tell their own stories, or at least have greater control over the narrative in which they play a part.

There are good reasons why things should change. Statistics show that few people from diverse backgrounds are working in publishing or writing in genres apart from literary fiction. Coming from a half-Iranian, half-white English background myself, I want to see a more diverse media. But there are dangers. We could end up in a situation where people can only write books, or comment, on their own narrow area of expertise – identity politics carried to an extreme. However, John Pring, a disabled journalist and author who runs the news agency *Disability News Service*, envisages a role for writers in this new world.

Enter co-production, which Pring explains thus: 'Co-production means you don't have to be part of that community – it gives you the opportunity to write about new things. I would hate only to have to write about being a white middle class man with depression.'

Co-production is a way of working that originated in social care, where those receiving services (for instance disabled and older people) are more involved in designing them. Some arts services also use co-production. Some museums recruit panels of people from different backgrounds who advise on collections, contribute oral history and, as 'experts by experience', deepen knowledge.

In the disability world, which I encountered as a journalist when I arrived as news editor of the magazine *Disability Now* in 2007, it is summed up as 'nothing about us without us'. This meant that disabled people should be involved in stories about them. I admit that when I first learnt about co-production, my heart sank. I thought it could compromise my freedom of expression. But I have found it intellectually challenging and have learned a lot by listening more deeply.

I applied the theory to the process of writing my first non-fiction book, *Scapegoat: why we are failing disabled people*, in which I interviewed activists and bereaved relatives of violent crimes against disabled people. During the writing process, I returned after interview

No Place to Call Home: Inside the Real Lives of Gypsies and Travellers is published by Oneworld, (2013), and *Scapegoat: why we are failing disabled people* by Portobello (2011).

to many 'former subjects' and talked through key sections with them. I applied the process to my second non-fiction book, *No Place to Call Home: Inside the Real Lives of Gypsies and Travellers*, discussing difficult sections with affected people. But, with both books, I also locked myself away to write before delivering my manuscript. I was the author and bore ultimate responsibility.

So if you are a mainstream writer, and you want to tell a story about an excluded community, will you be accused of, for example, 'white privilege'? Co-production can offer authors an ethical way out. We writers still hold many cards: craft skills, legal and industry knowledge, a publishing record and contacts, for example. A young refugee from Libya is highly unlikely to have all of these – but has a compelling story to tell, over which he or she is likely to demand more control than previously.

Another, more radical decision along the co-production spectrum might be to co-write with someone when you feel your own voice might be questioned – or is just not right on its own. I'm in the process of creating a puppet show about a Romani horse fair. I had been talking for years to the Romany Theatre Company, run by the English Traveller playwright, Dan Allum, about working together. We felt that we could utilise our different skills by co-writing the show.

In the case of citizen journalism there has been criticism that it promotes what one academic, Andrew Keen, called the 'cult of the amateur'. This could be said of an increasingly popular genre, ghost-writing, where a professional writer works with a person who often has no writing record but has a powerful story. With some talented interviewees, might this genre evolve to nurture more co-writing? Some projects are already 'democratising' story-telling – *Lowlifes* in California with homeless people, for example. But for co-productions, many writers are using transmedia (a format that tells a story across multiple media platforms), rather than just old-fashioned print.

One possible disadvantage is that co-production might compromise freedom of expression. John Pring thinks not: 'We can't hide the fact that we get a veto as the author or journalist on the final draft. But we are using co-production as a tool to get a clearer picture of what people are thinking. It's a more dynamic process of inching towards what the story is.' Very personal and controversial books, such as gonzo journalism, couldn't be shared. And you certainly don't share your material with everyone – not with those whose hands rest on the levers of power. This practice is about rebalancing power dynamics.

Another problem would be if co-production changed the authorial voice. The writer Kate Pullinger and digital artist Chris Joseph created a digital fiction project *Flight Paths*, in which readers were involved in creating it – an attempt to harness participatory media from the outset. Pullinger says that, finally, 'the authorial

voice emerges from the collaboration between myself and Chris Joseph. I think the collaboration doesn't mean the voice isn't present.' But she and Joseph were clear that they didn't want it to be 'a free for all' and both *Flight Paths* and a subsequent project have been heavily curated. Pullinger also published a novel last year, *Landing Gear*, based on the same original story: 'There were things I could write in a novel I couldn't do in *Flight Paths*', she says. 'I could explore psychological depth and insight.' Mark Saunders, for his part, is relaxed about his authorial voice being joined by others. 'I was happy to become just another participant. There was group authorship when we made *The Battle of Trafalgar*, for example.'

Lastly, there is the issue of copyright. With co-writing, of course, you share it. But with other co-production models, it's about honouring the story of those you are interviewing by involving them more. Paying multiple contributors for a book that is largely based on the journalism model of reportage can disrupt the relationship and interfere with the story-telling process. Copyright, like the risks of publishing, should rest with the author. But who will the author be, in five years' time?