



Freedom of the Press

Journalism in *GURPS Discworld*

by Phil Masters

*(Note: This article is primarily intended for **GURPS Discworld** GMs whose campaign is set after the events of **The Truth**. However, it could also be of interest to any fantasy game GM whose worlds somehow acquire a certain item of TL4 technology -- and certain associated social behaviors.)*

Following the events of *The Truth*, Ankh-Morpork has acquired its first newspaper. Now, one thing about newspapers is that, even if they don't actually make money, some people are always convinced that they *could*. Meanwhile, other people just want to own them, out of vanity, idealism, or whatever derangement afflicts them. Thus, while the first attempt at a competitor for the *Times*, the *Inquirer*, was less than glorious, it seems pretty safe to assume that Ankh-Morpork will soon acquire its third, fourth, and fifth newspapers. Furthermore, on the reliable principle that when Ankh-Morpork scratches, the Sto Plains get eczema, it's pretty darned certain that the idea will soon start spreading. And on top of *that*, with the growth of the new semaphore tower system (see *The Fifth Elephant* or [GURPS Discworld Also](#)), newspapers based in major cities will surely soon start employing correspondents in Foreign Parts, whether salaried or freelance.

All this, it must be obvious, opens up whole new areas of possibility of excitement, adventure, and confusion for RPGs. How they get mixed up in the wonderful world of journalism is up to them and the GM, but once they're in, things can get very interesting very quickly.

After all, in the old days, people usually only wanted you dead because they wanted your money, or you'd taken their money, or you'd been *exceptionally* rude to them, or you were standing between them and power or glory, or because they were mad as hell and not going to take any more, or because of something your grandfather did or didn't do to their grandfather. In this new world, you can get into big trouble for telling the truth, or for telling very *little* lies (to several thousand readers). The possibilities for fun are *endless*.

Journalist Template

(45 points)

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [20]; HT 10 [0].

Advantages: Contacts (two local individuals, both 1 point base value, quite often, somewhat reliable) [4]; Literacy [5]; and a total of 15 points from: Acute Vision [2/level]; Alcohol Tolerance [5]; Alertness [5/level]; Ally (sidekick, photographer, etc.) [varies]; Charisma [5/level]; Collected [5]; further Contacts (almost anyone) [varies]; Cool [1]; Danger Sense [15]; Daredevil [15]; Empathy [15]; Fearlessness [2/level]; Higher Purpose (report the truth) [5]; Intuition [15]; Language Talent [2/level]; Less Sleep [3/level]; Light Hangover [2]; Patron (editor) [varies]; Pious [5]; Sensitive [5]; Single-Minded [5]; or Strong Will [4/level].

Disadvantages: A total of -15 points from: Alcoholism [-15]; Bully [-10]; Code of Honor ("good

reporting" -- always protect your sources, stand by fellow reporters who haven't let the profession down too badly, treat secrecy as a personal challenge, never actually *lie* in print) [-5]; Attentive [-1]; Broad-Minded [-1]; Callous [-6]; Curious [varies]; Delusions ("people really want the truth") [-5]; Duty (to the paper -- *usually* non-life-threatening) [varies]; Glory Hound [-15]; Imaginative [-1]; Impulsiveness [-10]; Jealousy [-10]; Nosy [-1]; Oblivious [-3]; Odious Personal Habits (various minor foibles, for -1 reactions) [-5]; Overconfidence [-10]; Responsive [-1]; Sense of Duty (exploited people *or* the truth) [-10]; Struggling [-10]; Stubbornness [-5]; Undiscriminating [-1]; or Workaholic [-5].

Primary Skills: Profession (Journalist) (M/A) IQ [2]-12, and *either* Writing *or* Photography (Discworld) (both M/A) IQ [2]-12.

Secondary Skills: Acting (M/A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Area Knowledge (current or former base of operations) (M/E) IQ [1]-12.

Background Skills: A total of 10 points in any of Appreciate Beauty (M/VH); Artist (M/H); Bard (M/A); Body Language (M/H); Carousing (P/A:HT); Hidden Lore (City Secrets for home city) (M/A); Climbing (P/A); Detect Lies (M/H); Diplomacy (M/H); Economics (M/H); Fast-Talk (M/A); Languages (any); Law (M/H); Profession (Printer) (M/A); Punning (M/A); Research (M/A); Riding (P/A); Savoir-Faire (M/E); Shadowing (M/A); Shouting at Foreigners (M/H); Stealth (P/A); Streetwise (M/A); Tracking (M/A); or any Primary or Secondary skill (including whichever Primary option was *not* chosen).

Notes: This template represents a reasonably experienced and capable journalist, or someone with a natural talent for the job. Because the profession is so new, there will be a lot of people pursuing it whose skills and abilities are somewhat askew to what makes a fully effective reporter. High skill in Photography will get the character forgiven a *lot* of other deficiencies, whereas a high score in Writing without actual Journalist skill will merely make one's editor angry at the amount that has to be done to make one's pieces usable.

In this setting, the Professional Skill "Journalist" covers knowing how the publication system works, who to talk to about some fact or problem, what the public are and aren't likely to be interested in, and how to put together a short, attention-grabbing caption or headline. The latter task *only* can also be accomplished with a roll against Writing-3. (The penalty reflects the fact that "ordinary" good writing for most purposes is rarely as terse and snappy as good journalese.) A roll against this skill may also enable a character to assess the political and social dynamics of a situation or place with which he or she is familiar, but *not* to manipulate that situation; it gives a pragmatic outsider's view of the matter, and a basic (and cynical) grasp of motives, but actually getting on in that world requires skills such as Administration, Politics, or Streetwise.

Because journalism on the Disc is still very much in its infancy, with small staffs and a lot of job mobility, there's little distinction between "news" reporters, "features" writers specializing in background and "human interest" pieces, and "critics" writing about the arts. This template encompasses specialists in all three areas as well as professional "photojournalists," and also hacks-of-all-trades who chase whatever stories are going. Appreciate Beauty skill may take a specialty if desired -- preferably an art form which demands specialist critics, such as theater or opera.

Careers in Journalism

For GMs using the Jobs Table to handle PC occupations, four new job entries are detailed below. To reflect the variations in this profession (whose members are actually still trying to decide how it works), distinct entries have been provided for *Freelance Reporter* (obviously a freelance post) and *Staff Reporter* (covering anyone in the full-time pay of a newspaper). In addition, *Editor* covers the benighted, overworked souls who try to run these papers, and *Printer* is included simply to reflect the fact that journalism has appeared largely as a side effect of the spread of movable type in the Disc's cities.

<i>Job (Required Skills), Monthly Income</i>	<i>Success Roll</i>	<i>Critical Failure</i>
<i>Struggling Jobs</i>		
Freelance Reporter* (Profession (Journalist) 10+, Writing <i>or</i> Photography (Discworld) 12+), \$180	Profession (Journalist)	-1i/2d
Staff Reporter (Profession (Journalist) 12+, Writing <i>or</i> Photography (Discworld) 11+), \$200	Best PR	-1i/LJ
<i>Average Jobs</i>		
Editor (Accounting 9+, Administration 9+, Profession (Journalist) 12+, Writing 12+), \$320	Profession (Journalist)	-1i/LJ
Printer (Profession (Printer) 12+), \$350	PR	-1i/1d

* Freelance Job.

Kind-hearted GMs may give staff reporters who get an 18 on their Job Success Roll 1d days to find a big scoop; if they succeed, they *may* keep their jobs (GM's option, depending on their editor's personality and how good the scoop was).

Editors may be owner-editors, if they have enough wealth or could plausibly have raised loans (which must be repaid!) or found partners to enable them to buy or start the paper themselves. In that case, they can't lose their jobs, but on a Job Success Roll of 18, the paper is in crisis and the editor must work double hours for 1 to 3 weeks, bully as many of his staff as possible into doing the same, and make a series of skill rolls of all sorts to scabble together funds, scoops, and credibility. If at least half of these rolls succeed, the paper survives, but the editor may have to make a Will roll at -2 to avoid becoming an alcoholic. (If the editor was already an alcoholic, he can end up on a binge for 1d+2 days when the crisis is over, and must roll vs. HT+1 or lose a point of HT permanently.)

Non-owner editors *can* lose their jobs, but if they get this result on the table, kindly GMs can make a reaction roll for the newspaper's proprietor, with arbitrary modifiers for how many scoops the paper has achieved lately and how well it has been mirroring the proprietor's own prejudices. If the result is Very Good or Excellent, the editor merely has to work double hours for 1 to 3 weeks; if it's Neutral or Good, follow the rules for an owner-editor above (but it's *probably* just the editor's job that's at stake rather than the whole paper); otherwise, the editor is out.

Campaigning Reporters?

As for actually using this in a game . . .

One option is to run a campaign in which the PCs are closely associated with a newspaper. They don't all have to be journalists as such; reporters might well cultivate useful friendships in the underworld (Thieves' Guild or freelance), the Watch, or even Unseen University or the temples, while a paper with adequate funds, which finds itself sending reporters into dangerous situations, might actually employ reasonably combat-competent bodyguards or "minders" to look after them. (That said, papers are unlikely to be able to afford to pay very good wages, while reporters will probably find that trailing hulking bodyguards everywhere makes it very hard to get contacts to talk much.) Campaigns could then revolve around the quest for good stories, trying to stay one step ahead of law enforcement without either getting into *fatal* trouble or annoying the likes of Commander Vimes too much, building contacts and tracking down mysteries and conspiracies. Of course, if most of the PCs aren't actually employed by the newspaper, there may well be conflicts within the party -- just as there might be if one mixed one or two reporters with a party of watchmen, explorers, or thaumaturgists -- but comic, *Discworld*-style campaigns can usually withstand and even benefit from a bit of mild friction.

A different campaign might be built around non-journalist characters interacting with the press. Non-journalists who are employed to deal with reporters on a *regular* basis are usually actually paid to lie to them, and playing a pack of Discworld spokesmen and spin doctors could have a certain entertainment value. Working for the household of some duke, and trying to stop a bunch of nosy and increasingly suspicious snoopers from discovering that one's employer is bankrupt, planning to invade his neighbors, or just mad as a ferret, could be quite a challenge.

But this is probably an idea with a somewhat limited lifespan; such dealings with the press might work better as one-off scenarios in the course of a more varied campaign. PCs working as watchmen, soldiers, or explorers might enjoy a "change of pace" game in which all they have to do is handle a few questions from some wet-behind-the-ears cub reporter, and keep him out of harm -- until he turns out to be *keen*, unrelentingly energetic, and annoyingly quick-witted. PCs who are all on the illegal side of things will probably regard reporters as an unalloyed nuisance, and may have to be deterred somehow from doing something final to remove the problem. (A few hints that the Watch have come to regard this particular reporter as a good thing on balance, and something of a friend, *might* suffice.) On the other hand again, the Ankh-Morpork Thieves' Guild might decide to build their own friendly relationship with the press; after all, they're an open, public organization, individual members of which fully understand the benefits of advertising their reasonably priced services. Taking a reporter out to observe the diligence with which they perform licensed muggings, pre-booked burglaries, and the removal of public nuisances (i.e. unlicensed thieves) might seem like a good idea, to them.

Finally, there's the issue of the supernatural to consider. Typical wizards would probably consider reporters as minor pests, and might occasionally fire up their Shapeshift Other spells for pest control, but once a degree of initial mutual suspicion was overcome, the two groups *might* even get on passably well; there's something about shared traditions of hard carousing, heavy smoking, and excessive curiosity about the workings of the world, and wizards would be quite happy to explain that they don't actually *intend* to unleash all those tentacled horrors on their environment (so that's all right then). If journalists collide with witchcraft, the potential confusion is greater; shrewd witches are likely to be cynical about journalists' real motivations, while too many journalists may instinctively wonder if there's a *Naked Rustic Orgy!* headline somewhere in this story. (If there is, it'll surely be nothing to do with any witches, although they'll probably be as interested to find out about it as any journalist, one way or another.)

And as for the divinity business -- well, deities being conservative beings, they probably won't even have much of a clue about what this new human idea is all about, although they might dimly grasp the potential for self-promotion implicit in the printing press. (If a god of journalists should ever manifest, he'll likely be a strange being, prone to being ejected from Dunmanifestin every couple of weeks for asking impertinent questions; his worshippers' prayers are likely to take the form of leading questions and the occasional dubious expenses claim.) Their priests, on the other hand, will surely be divided between crusty old fogeys who regard journalism as a new-fangled menace to be ignored or suppressed, and thrusting, self-important preachers (mostly but not all young) who see it as a way to promote themselves, their good works, their radical theological ideas, and the times of their next big prayer meetings.

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