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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Sunday Times a resurgent jewel in Murdoch's battered crown

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Resurgent title: The Sunday Times. Supplied

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Last year was evidently a traumatic time for many journalists who worked for the Sun and the News of the World during the Brooks and Coulson era. Arrests, prosecutions, convictions (and in some case acquittals) meant that the reputations of those working for the so-called “Murdoch press” could hardly have been more besmirched.

And 2015 has begun in much the same way as 2014 ended with, as I write, The Sun’s chief reporter and royal editor on trial at the Old Bailey accused of paying public officials for story tips including “gossip and tittle-tattle” about princes William and Harry. At the same time, in Kingston Crown Court, the jury in the trial of six other former and current Sun journalists accused of paying backhanders to public officials has retired to consider its verdict.

Difficult days, indeed. But time, I think, to provide a corollary to the familiar narrative. Time to celebrate the work of The Sun's related title, **The Sunday Times** and to remember that newspaper journalism is not fundamentally corrupt and still capable of producing work which can have a global impact for the common good.

Irrespective of ideological considerations, it's my view that the editors, journalists and commentators of the Sunday Times are responsible for creating a diverse and astonishingly accomplished almanac every single week. Let's consider its range: 11 sections at the price of £2.50. The main news section is buttressed and fleshed out in the news review, sport and business sections, while travel and driving and the magazines (general, style and "the culture" provide something to satisfy's most people's special interests).

Just in the past two weeks we've seen an investigation into the quality of cancer care in Malaysia, Brazil and China in comparison with the UK, more in the series on Britain's "secret slaves" by the excellent George Arbuthnott and, on January 11th, a first-hand report into the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by Margaret Driscoll. I'm cherry picking here and really could go on – but special mention must go the magazine edition of January 4 which contained a breath taking 26-page pictorial report by Kadir Van Lohuizen on the world's rising sea levels.

Finally, let's appreciate the consistently excellent **culture** section which manages to seamlessly combine criticism of literature and the arts with interviews, what's on guides and reader feedback. It is, again in my view, worth the £2.50 cover price alone. In its pages you can marvel at the erudition of Waldemar Januszczak or the insight of Brian Appleyard and either admire or disregard the TV criticism of AA Gill, whose prose is often provocative but always readable.

In contrast to the beleaguered Sun, the stock of The Sunday Times has risen considerably in recent years – both in financial and critical terms. At the 2014 British journalism awards, the newspaper was the best-performing title, winning three separate awards. The afore-mentioned Arbuthnott was recognised for his work on slavery in Britain. As reported in the *Press Gazette*, the judges said that his journalism "exposed a little-reported scandal affecting some of most vulnerable people in the world and helped prompt the Government to table the Modern Slavery Bill"

As well as this, the newspaper's much celebrated Insight team won the investigation prize for its dogged inquiries into the alleged corruption of football's world governing body, FIFA. The judges said: "The initial Qatar Files 11-page investigation of June 2014 was tour de force of broadsheet investigative journalism: a superb exclusive story, brilliantly told exposing genuine corruption and injustice in the world's most popular and financially lucrative sport."

In a market where falling newspaper sales are **regularly recorded**, News UK (the rebranded News International, parent company of the Sun, Times and Sunday Times) reported in December last year that combined sales of the Times and Sunday Times were up, showing a profit for the first time in 13 years. Their **press release** stated: "Both newspapers have increased their share of print sales and

secured a healthy growth in membership. Members are now paying £6 a week for seven-day print or digital membership packages. At launch, digital members paid just £2 per week.”

It appears that the decision to put the online versions of News UK titles behind a paywall is beginning to pay off. As Abigail Edge has pointed out, since introducing a digital subscription model in 2010, The Times and Sunday Times have attracted around 375,000 monthly subscribers and reduced financial losses. Figures released in February last year also illustrated that The Sunday Times was the UK’s most popular newspaper tablet edition in February, attracting an average of 88,080 “active views per week”. Speaking in March last year, Alan Hunter, News UK’s head of digital operations at Times newspapers, said:

In 2009, Times newspapers lost £72m in a single year. Now we’re down to £6m [for trading year ending June 2013] and we’re actually moving towards profit. The situation actually is much more rosy than I think any of us would have thought five years ago.

One hopes that the upturn in fortunes is down to the draw of quality journalism but I’m aware that a vast number of potential readers and subscribers will be irrevocably disinclined to afford the Sunday Times any credit because of the “Murdoch factor”. His crass tweet about the responsibility of all Muslims for the Parisian tragedies will only serve to reinforce that opposition



For what it’s worth, I too broadly conform to the opinion that the influence of the Murdoch empire on the British political and media landscape has been largely destructive. But that does not mean that I cannot recognise and applaud quality journalism when I see it, particularly if happens to be produced under the constraints of his perceived influence.

It was for this reason, in this most tragic of weeks for journalism and freedom of expression, that I turned to last weekend’s Sunday Times. I expected that the journalists and commentators assigned with task of explaining and analysing the massacres in Paris would do so with skill and diligence.

I was not disappointed: there was extensive coverage including a five-page “Focus special”. I didn’t share the views of all the opinion pieces I read – and I can take issue most weeks with the writing of Rod Liddle. But that’s OK isn’t? Should it be any other way? As the editor of the Sunday Times,

Martin Ivens, puts it: “People turn to our team for the award-winning reporting and comment that challenge, provoke, entertain, inspire and inform them.”

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