

The Sun's not what it was but there's no sign of an eclipse just yet

The tabloid is celebrating turning 50...



(Image: WalesOnline)

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Over the last few weeks or so The Sun newspaper has celebrated its 50th birthday with a series of public relations measures designed to illustrate its colourful history and ongoing commitment to the rich fabric of British life.

There was the vote for the most popular front page, the launch of the special £1m Sun Readers charity fund and a trawl back through the “biggest showbiz exclusives” of the last 50 years.

It is slightly disingenuous to insist that The Sun is celebrating a half-century. More accurately, the paper is 55 years of age - emerging as it did in 1964 from the ashes of the Mirror Group's Daily Herald. What is really being celebrated is its launch as a tabloid by Rupert Murdoch, who bought the title for £600,000 in 1969.

What cannot be disputed, though, is its impact on British journalism and by extension, British life.

The birth of the tabloid Sun ushered in a period which saw mass-market newspapers move to the political right with a decrease in the coverage of “serious” news issues. This was allied to, if we are to believe the testimonies of various Murdoch employees, an increase in proprietorial interference in editorial decisions.

As [Chippendale and Horrie make clear in their wonderful book](#), Stick it Up Your Punter - the Uncut Story of the Sun Newspaper, readers were promised something very different from the new Sun in 1969.

The first edition, printed on November 17 that year, was heralded with a banner headline in the previous Saturday's paper, which proclaimed: “REACH FOR THE NEW SUN:

"The most important thing to remember is that the new SUN will be the paper that CARES. The paper that cares – passionately - about truth, and beauty and justice. The paper that cares about people. About the kind of world we live in. And about the kind of world we would like our children to live in.”

Right here is the tone it has sought to adopt ever since; to be inclusive, for and of the people and interested in truth and justice.

And also, importantly, “beauty”, which was to manifest itself in the creation of the page 3 girl, who first appeared topless with nipples visible in November 1970. It's perhaps amazing to think that even though The Sun still features glamour models in various stages of undress, the topless images lasted as long as they did, with [the final bare breasts appearing as recently as 2015](#).

Sales of the new Sun began to rise almost immediately, as the Daily Telegraph reported, and [under the editorship of Larry Lamb](#) The Sun was selling two million

copies a day by 1971 - gradually fighting its way to outsell the Daily Mirror in 1978, with four million copies a day.

It's fair to say that, despite its best efforts to portray itself as the nation's super, soar-away favourite with "lashings of fun", the paper has always been overtly political.

In 1979 The Sun urged its readers to vote Conservative and thus began a relationship of mutual support which continued throughout the next decade. Most of the British press gave open and widespread support to a wide range of policies adopted by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s but it was the Murdoch-owned press, however, (The Times, Sunday Times, News Of The World as well as The Sun) that was her closest ally.

In fact it's fair to say that Murdoch used his substantial UK media concerns to support the Prime Minister, while his companies received direct benefits as a consequence of policy decisions taken by her government.

In the various wars the UK has been involved in, The Sun has been unflinching in its support for the armed forces.

During the Falklands conflict, for example, it was jingoistic, utterly one-sided, juvenile and inflammatory. It was the paper that "backed our boys" as it tried to recreate the Dunkirk spirit. There were single-word headlines - INVASION! - There was the infamous and heartless GOTCHA! which reacted to the sinking of Argentine battleship the General Belgrano. There were three-word headlines which made war sound like a trip to the swimming baths - 'IN WE GO!' - and a tireless capacity to report war as a series of adventures and high jinks.

Not only did The Sun support Thatcher, it has also gone to great lengths to denigrate leaders of the Labour Party. Jeremy Corbyn, as was the case with Ed Miliband before him, gets a torrid time, but as I've noted before, Michael Foot was particularly vilified in the 1980s.

Constantly criticised for being outmoded and shambolic, he was mercilessly lampooned for his decision to wear a donkey jacket to the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day (when he wore nothing of the sort - it was, in fact, [a smart coat chosen by his wife, Jill](#)).

This most principled of leaders was completely unsuited to running an election campaign in 1983 against the sophisticated Thatcher media machine and a particularly

feral Kelvin Mackenzie-edited Sun, which asked, incredulously: “Do you seriously want this old man to run Britain?”

The clear fact is the modern-day Sun sees Corbyn as Foot’s rather more dangerous spiritual successor.

It’s never been a stranger to controversy, either, and its most shameful episode is undoubtedly the coverage of the Hillsborough disaster. On April 19, 1989, four days after the disaster occurred, The Sun printed its “THE TRUTH” edition, where its front page alleged that Liverpool fans had stolen from the bodies of the victims and urinated on “brave cops”.

The legacy of The Sun’s Hillsborough coverage is easily quantifiable. Despite seemingly heartfelt apologies in 2004, 2011 and again in 2016 where an editorial offered the people of Liverpool an “unreserved and heartfelt apology that is profound, sincere and unambiguous”, The Sun remains largely unsellable on Merseyside. [As Roy Greenslade has written](#), “spontaneous outrage turned into a long-term boycott”.

It should be remembered, though, that it remains Britain’s top-selling tabloid and that the paper has led some very worthwhile charity campaigns through its 50 years.

There’s the £350,000 raised for cot death research in 1991, or the Change for Kids drive in 2002 which saw more than £1m donated to the NSPCC. The current venture is the You’re Not Alone suicide prevention campaign, which is supported by this newspaper’s Nigel Owens.

All this notwithstanding, the truth is that The Sun, as is the case with the rest of the newspaper industry, is negotiating a period of decline. It may boast of being the most-read newspaper and website in the UK with “33.3 million adults now reading The Sun every month” but [in 2014](#) daily sales slipped below the two million mark and current sales stand at 1.3m.

The key for The Sun now is maintaining its identity and adapting to modernity as the print market dwindles. The turmoil of the phone-hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry into the ethics and standards of the press, did not, against some predictions, hasten its demise. The Sun is nowhere near as strong and influential as it once was, but it is still there - leading its tabloid competitors and infuriating its many critics.

ALSO BY JOHN:

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