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Making the news: how Alan Rusbridger became a story

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Digital native. The Guardian

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At 16.38 on December 10th 2014, the casual viewer of BBC News24 may be forgiven for thinking that news had finally eaten itself. For there, on the screen, was the breaking news announcement: GUARDIAN EDITOR QUILTS. Alan Rusbridger to step down as editor-in-chief in 2015.

Rusbridger had announced to staff that in the summer of next year he would stand down from the newspaper he has edited for 20 years to take up the role of chair of the Scott Trust, which owns the group to which the Guardian belongs.



James Ball @jamesrbuk · Dec 10

Rolling news with the news about who edits some of the news. Because news. #news.



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Because news.... Twitter

As Guardian journalist James Ball tweeted, it was: “Rolling news with the news about who edits some of the news. Because news.”

The Spectator gave the event the gravitas it deserved with Steerpike asking: “Where were you when Rusbridger resigned?”

Healthy – and much warranted – sarcasm aside though, the Rusbridger summer departure will mark the end of an era for British journalism. He has been, in Professor Brian McNair’s view, ahead of the game in keeping The Guardian “vital and relevant” and is, according to Kim Fletcher in the British Journalism review, one of the last “old-style” editors who “wields total power inside the papers they edit”.

Power and the glory?

It is that last point which is most interesting. To outsiders, such as myself, Rusbridger’s demeanour suggests donnish detachment and intellectual security – a placid counterpoint to the supposedly dominating approach of rivals such as the Mail’s Paul Dacre. The reality is somewhat different according to those in the know. Peter Wilby, the much-respected former editor of the New Statesman and Independent describes the level of influence Rusbridger enjoys.

He is editor of the Guardian newspaper, sits on the board of Guardian News & Media (which encompasses the Guardian, Observer and digital operations) and already sits on Scott Trust boards. “What Alan wants, Alan gets,” writes Wilby of a man who has, “extraordinary power and freedom”.

It's against this background then, that we should view Rusbridger's most notable achievements. The bringing down of the News of the World and the setting in process a series of events, including the Leveson enquiry and the phone hacking trials, which have altered the fabric and structure of the traditional press, depended on his willingness to support the tenacious journalism of his employee and friend Nick Davies.

The Guardian's stance over phone hacking earned them few friends in some sections of the press. Tweeting about Rusbridger's resignation Piers Morgan wrote on Wednesday: I actually like @arusbridger & he's been a good editor. But he's tried to jail more journalists than Putin/Mao/Stalin put together.



Taking a stand

Incidentally, it was Morgan's current employer, The Daily Mail, which editorialised in 2013 that the Guardian was "the paper that helped Britain's enemies".

We believe the Guardian, with lethal irresponsibility, has crossed that line by printing tens of thousands of words describing the secret techniques used to monitor terrorists.

In this sense and others, Rusbridger made many judgement calls which made the Guardian unpopular and placed it into direct conflict with government.

It was his newspaper which from August 2012 printed the journalism of Glenn Greenwald who worked closely with Edward Snowden, the computer specialist employed by the CIA and the National Security Agency (NSA) who leaked details of numerous secret mass surveillance operations to the press.

Writing of the Guardian's association with Greenwald in 2013, Rusbridger told of a visit to The Guardian's offices by two GCHQ experts who stood and watched while two of the newspaper's hard drives were destroyed. In one of these meetings officials confirmed to him that if they did not get what they wanted then the government would move to close down the Guardian's reporting through a legal route.

In the same column, Rusbridger argued that the state was building a surveillance system where, before too long, it would be impossible for journalists to maintain the confidentiality of sources and

that governments, while paying lip service to the need for public debate, are making a concerted effort to silence whistle-blowers. Who could now doubt this to be true?



Who'll be next in the driving seat? Bryantbob CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY

Ironically, given the Mail's comments, the quality and importance of this type of journalism was recognised in the US, when in April the Guardian and the Washington Post were jointly awarded a Pulitzer prize for articles on NSA activities. The awarding committee praised the Guardian for its:

revelation of widespread secret surveillance by the National Security Agency, helping through aggressive reporting to spark a debate about the relationship between the government and the public over issues of security and privacy.

Digital steps

Quality journalism aside, Peter Wilby also contends that Rusbridger's achievements in establishing the success of Guardian online are worthy of praise. It's common knowledge that the movement from print to online consumption of news continues apace and the Guardian brand's success has come without having to resort to a paywall.

Remarkably, The Guardian website topped 100m monthly browsers for the first time in March and according to recent Audit Bureau of Circulations multi-platform figures, average daily unique browsers have also reached highs of 5.67 million.

Expansions into the US and Australia have been successfully charted and, according to Guardian figures, US traffic is up nearly 55% year-on-year. US traffic now represents a third of the Guardian's total digital audience.

There is no need for this article to become hagiographic, though and there are many responsible for the Guardian's global success. Hundreds of journalists who write responsibly, thoughtfully, provokingly, entertainingly, infuriatingly and consistently across the huge range of subject areas the Guardian covers.

There are many critics, too, of Rusbridger and the Guardian's journalism. Davids Edwards and Cromwell of Media Lens regularly accuse the Guardian of producing: "news propaganda, complacent 'journalism' and supine commentary" while relentlessly marketing itself as "a supposedly open and power-scrutinising flagship newspaper of fearless journalism".

As they note, reading their *Guardians of Power* and *Newspeak* books and hundreds of media alerts might persuade us that the Guardian is far from the frontline of truth and democracy.

Runners and riders

All this notwithstanding, the key point is that Rusbridger is to leave the post that he held for 20 years. An event so momentous that the BBC chose to present it as "breaking news".

Who will be his successor? The early money is on Janine Gibson, former editor in chief of Guardian US and now one of Rusbridger's deputies, to succeed. Another deputy being tipped is Katharine Viner, currently running Guardian US.

And how might the Guardian change? It's my guess, given Rusbridger's track record and the fact that his migration is across the office rather than across the pond, so to speak: not very much at all.

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