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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Guardian fortunes appear revived as leadership contest enters home straight

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Brave new era? PA

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For a terrible moment last week, it seemed that the biggest talking point in the world of newspapers was going to be the frankly bizarre spectacle of Elton John shaving off Evgeny Lebedev's beard.

Lebedev is owner of The Independent and London Evening Standard, lest we forget, and even though the event was for Comic Relief, this did little to alleviate feelings of astonishment that a) anyone would own up to thinking of such a ruse and b) who on earth, outside of those au fait with the toxic world of media ownership, would find the process remotely interesting enough to donate any money? Now, if Justin Bieber were to give Rupert Murdoch a pedicure ...

So it was very welcome news that Katharine Viner had been overwhelmingly successful in a ballot to determine who might succeed Alan Rusbridger as editor-in-chief of the Guardian. Indeed, 53% of the 964 staff at the Guardian and Observer eligible to vote chose Viner, currently heading up the US Guardian, over three other candidates.

She is not a certainty for the job – the only thing actually guaranteed is that Viner’s name will be on a shortlist of three people from which the Scott Trust, which owns the Guardian group, will choose Rusbridger’s heir later this month. Nonetheless, it’s a great democratic gesture to allow journalists and editors such a voice.

As **Brian Williams**, father of the chapel of the National Union of Journalists, said: “Ultimately if you are going to be an effective editor here, of all places, you need the backing of the majority of journalists. Without any shareholders the staff are probably the biggest stakeholder in the organisation.”

And Viner is very much a Guardian woman, as her **candidate statement** demonstrates. She has worked for the paper for 18 years, editing a variety of “flagship sections” and before her move to New York she was instrumental in launching the highly successful **Guardian Australia** enterprise. As editor-in-chief at the Guardian US, she has been very impressive.

According to the Guardian’s own figures, US traffic is up nearly 55% year-on-year. Hugely significant when one considers that now represents a third of the Guardian’s total digital audience.

Viner writes of being “liberated” by digital while keeping mindful of the need to safeguard the future of print – something that needs urgent attention. The latest **ABC figures** show that Guardian sales fell by 10.34% year-on-year in February to 176,124 sales a day on average, which leaves it some distance behind its quality rivals, the Times and the Telegraph.

It could even be that in the near future the print version of the Guardian ceases to be. In 2012, Adam Freeman, then its commercial chief was quoted as saying the paper was on a “mission” to be able to stand alone as a digital-only publication, and was mixing its stable of traditional journalists with enthusiastic citizens who would work for free.

Well, that may become a reality sooner rather than later if one considers the most recent Guardian News and Media full year trading update. Jasper Jackson in the **Media Guardian** reported: “A 20% increase in digital sales over the year has more than compensated for declines in print circulation and advertising.”

Print aside, much seems in fine fettle – as the **Press Gazette** points out, GMG has a cash and investment fund of more than £800m, its Australian unique browser audience has grown by 60% year-on-year and overall its digital revenue is up by 20% to more than £80m.

Throw into the mix the global significance of the NSA revelations recognised by the **2014 Pulitzer prize**, the 2014 Newspaper of the Year accolade at the UK Press awards and the launch of Guardian

Labs, its branded content and innovation agency, and you appear to have the makings of a healthy beast.

According to Alan Rusbridger further global expansion is on the horizon. He said: “Thanks to our balance sheet transformation, we can look forward to a period of targeted investment in the world-class journalism, digital excellence and increasingly international readership that is now the hallmark of the Guardian.”



Alan Rusbridger is going out with a bang. Jaqen, CC BY-SA

As Rusbridger moves into the end phase of his role as editor of the Guardian he aims to leave his mark with a major reporting and coverage initiative dedicated to, in his words, “events that have yet to materialise [which] may dwarf anything journalists have had to cover over the past troubled century”.

Referring to climate change and what governments can do to fight inexorable impending disaster, the Guardian’s new campaign will attempt to halt the progress of states and corporations involved in the plundering of planetary resources.

This is quite a task to undertake; not least because some of the companies and corporations that will no doubt be offended by the Guardian’s rigorous new approach will be those advertisers upon which all media operations depend.

But let's not be churlish, and let's hope that the integrity of Rusbridger's crusade is maintained whoever takes over at the top. Katharine Viner clearly has the support of her colleagues, a commitment to journalism and vision for the future.

As she sums up in her candidate statement: "We should focus everything on why we are determined to sustain the Guardian: to report, inform, debate, entertain and reflect our values on a global scale."

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