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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Quality has been sacrificed in the 'melee of digital change' at the Daily Telegraph

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Hold the front page! The Daily Telegraph

It's not often that you see journalists openly criticise each other. For sure, there is the well documented ideological antipathy that exists between the Daily Mail and the Guardian, for example, but criticism of a particular writers work by another is relatively rare.

That's why the sarcastic tweet of Channel 4's economic editor Paul Mason last week, relating to a story about Ed Miliband's love life by the Daily Telegraph's chief political correspondent, Christopher Hope, was so noteworthy.

With a link to the piece itself, Mason tweeted:



Hope's article is a piece of fluff put together with information gleaned from a "Woman's Own" type interview that Miliband's wife, Justine, gave to the Daily Mirror. In the interview, she recalled that at the dinner party where she first met the "good-looking and clever" Ed, he had been "secretly" going out with the party's host.

When Justine found this out, she says, she was furious. They bumped into each other a couple of times after that but: "We didn't start seeing each other for at least a year".

Man dates woman shock

Not much to work with there, you might think. Man dates woman before he dates woman who becomes his wife. That's it. But not for Hope and the Telegraph who managed to find out that the "secret" woman was in fact the (then) BBC economics journalist Stephanie Flanders.

Evidently, Mason was not alone in his view of Hope's article – the tweet has been retweeted 856 times and the below-the-line comments on Hope's article were almost unanimously critical of him - and the Telegraph. What seemed to annoy the readership more than anything was that a chief political correspondent, and of a so-called quality paper, should be reduced to employing tabloid tactics. As one reader wrote:

The DT don't even need a scandal these days before trying to blacken a man's character. This non-story is down there in the bowels of The Sun and Daily Mail. For Shame!

There was so much more of the same, so much vitriol spewing forth, that as I read, I began to think that maybe the Labour party had orchestrated the response themselves. The only realistic conclusion I could reach, though, was that after a recent history of alienating its own journalists, the Telegraph was well on the way to disaffecting its readers as well.

Collapse in standards

It's only a few weeks since the resignation of its chief political commentator, Peter Osborne. Upon leaving the paper in February, at the height of the HSBC banking scandal, Osborne launched a scathing attack on its owners and management, alleging that the Telegraph regularly spiked reports about HSBC for fear of offending one of paper's most lucrative advertisers.

Writing in *Open Democracy*, he stated that:

From the start of 2013 onwards stories critical of HSBC were discouraged. HSBC suspended its advertising with the Telegraph. Its account, I have been told by an extremely well-informed insider, was extremely valuable. HSBC, as one former Telegraph executive told me, is 'the advertiser you literally cannot afford to offend'

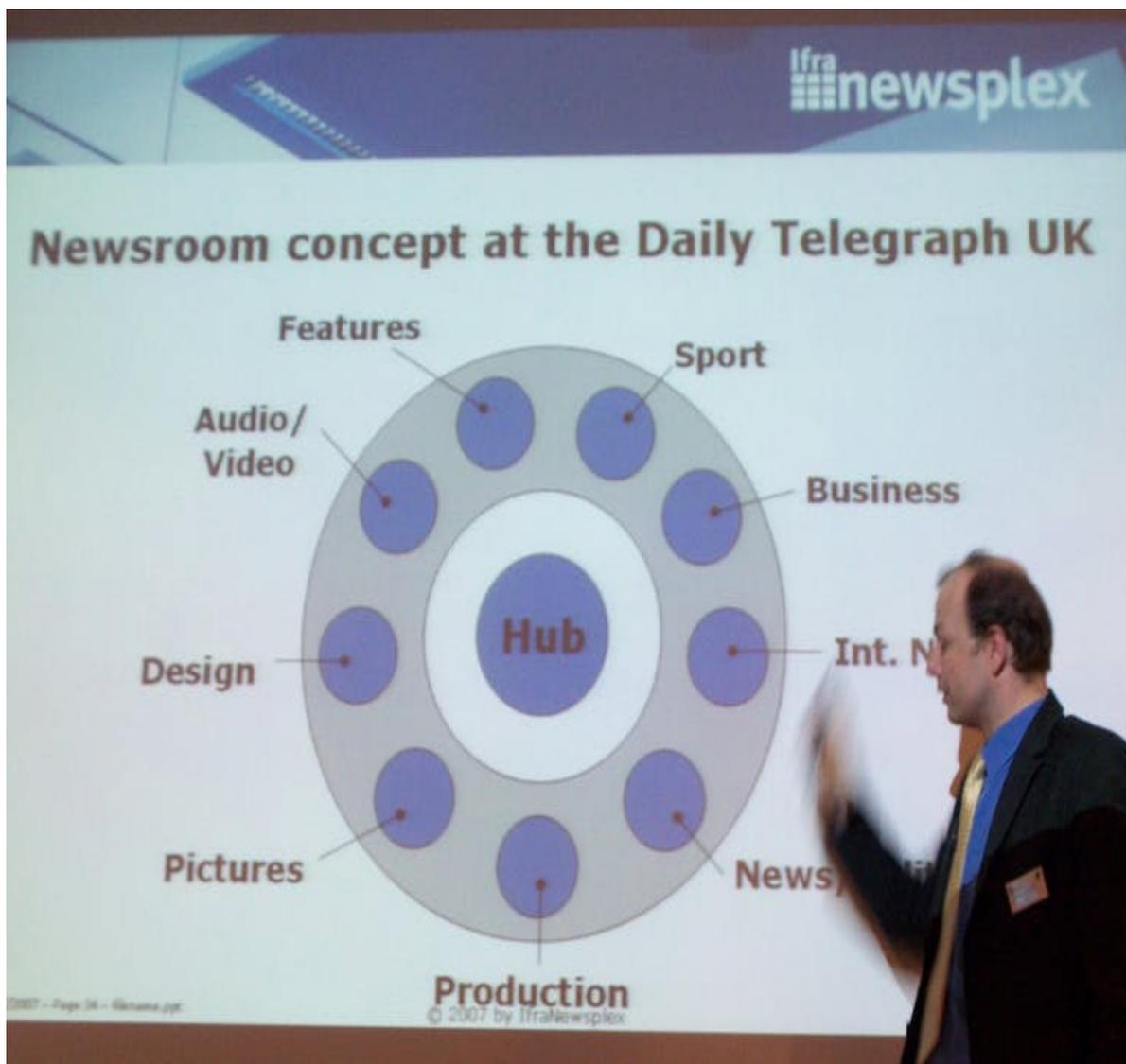
Osborne also catalogues a "collapse in standards" at the Telegraph and a series of sackings and management choices which, in his view, have completely altered the fabric of the newspaper. The foreign desk has been "decimated", half of the sub editors have been dismissed and, since the Barclay brothers bought the paper in 2004, there have been six changes of editor.

Osborne's decision not only to resign from the Telegraph but also to make his disquiet public was driven in large part by his concerns for the future of the Telegraph under the present ownership of the mysterious and reclusive Barclay Brothers. As Tom De Castella has written:

Surprisingly little has been written - in any depth - about the Barclays. Few photos exist of them on news picture libraries. One of the few shows them formally dressed, having just been knighted by the Queen. That was in 2000.

We know, as the *Financial Times* noted in February, that the Barclay-owned delivery business, Yodel, owed £242m to HSBC at the very time when the newspaper allegedly discouraged critical coverage of the bank. A spokesperson for the Barclay brothers dismissed this as “misguided and just plain wrong”.

Also less obscure than the brothers themselves is the fact that they have turned the Telegraph’s parent group into one of their “most profitable holdings”. This is a unique achievement - the *Daily Telegraph* is, according to the *Press Gazette*, the only mainstream national “quality” newspaper in the UK to run at a profit: at £61m on a turnover of £325m despite a big fall in print sales.



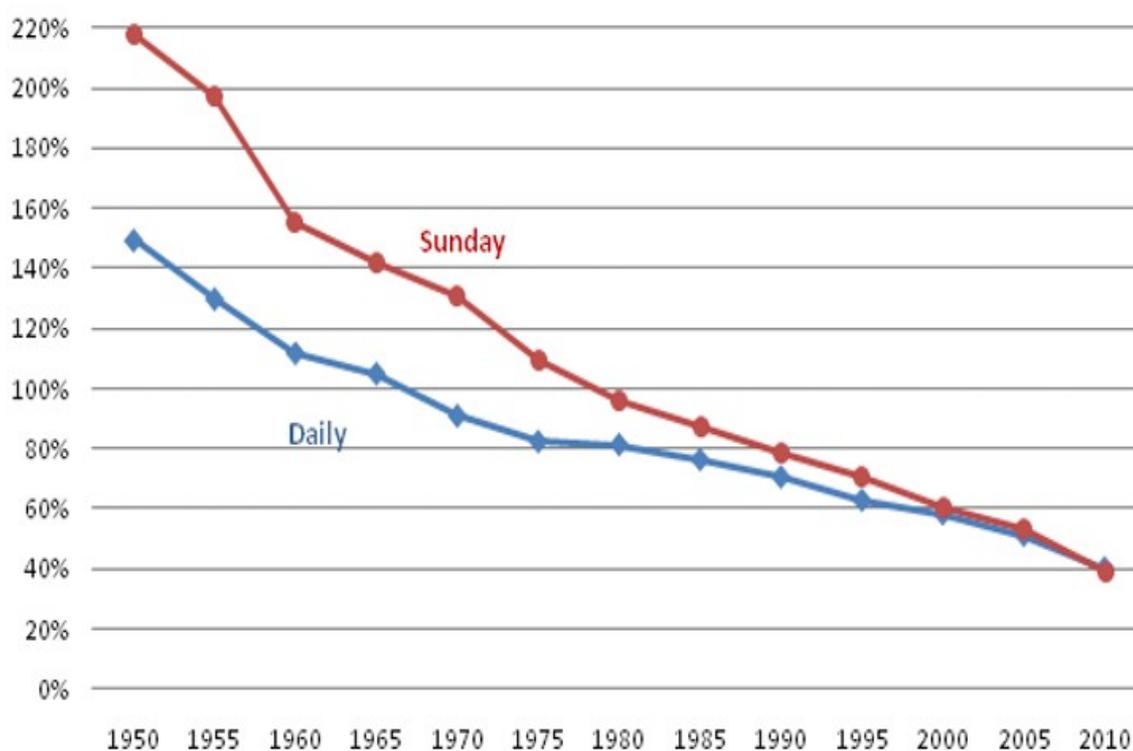
But has it worked? Luc Legay, IFRA, CC BY

This financial success has come at a cost as the digital transformation of Telegraph newspapers has developed, especially since the recruitment of American digital guru Jason Seiken in 2013 to the role of chief content officer and editor-in-chief (though a swift departure followed Osborne’s “exposé”). Other staff have been axed in the the march towards digital. In March 2013 Telegraph Media Group

got rid of 80 of its editorial staff and then in October last year a further 55 editorial jobs were lost. In the past few years, high-profile, talented journalists have left, including Benedict Brogan, Damian Thomson and the well-regarded editor, Tony Gallagher.

Most recently it was reported that sports writer, Henry Winter, possibly the most widely read and high-profile of all of the Telegraph's journalists, was leaving to join The Times.

In terms of print sales the Telegraph's downward trajectory, which is now a common feature of the national press, continues apace. I remember the significance of when sales fell below 700,000 in 2010.



Not just The Telegraph: decline in print circulation. Open Democracy, CC BY

Latest figures for March 2015 show the Daily Telegraph's circulation at 479,290 which is a year-on-year drop of 8%.

Clicks and bucks

But the shift in emphasis from print to digital content appears to be bearing fruit. The Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), the industry body for media measurement, showed that in the period between June 2013 and July 2014 the Telegraph's worldwide digital audience rose 46% while in June 2014 the number of people accessing the Telegraph online and on mobile phones reached 79m.

For some seasoned commentators the above developments have been to the detriment of journalistic standards at the Telegraph titles. Former Guardian editor, Peter Preston, wrote in the Observer in February that in "the melee of digital change" the Daily Telegraph no longer has an editor.

What they have instead is content managers who don't sit on the editorial floor but reside elsewhere trying to make more clicks and more bucks for the [Barclay] brothers.

And, since the departure of Seiken earlier this month, the paper's digital strategy is now uncertain.

One thing is certain, though. As Telegraph editorials celebrate *its passionate commitment to journalism of the highest quality ... with investigations that have helped hold the powerful to account*, many are challenging this view.

And worryingly, the criticism is not just coming from disgruntled ex-employees and business rivals – it's coming from the readership, too.

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