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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

The future is digital – let’s hope the online-only Independent will be part of it

February 15, 2016 6.29pm GMT



Reuters/Neil Hall

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When it was announced that the The Independent was to cease producing the print editions of its daily and Sunday titles from March 26, the reaction of journalists and columnists to the news (and the inevitable redundancies to come as a consequence) was of course one of palpable sadness.

On this site, Jonathan Foster, a former journalist who was in at the Independent’s birth, wrote of a sequence of events which turned “the greatest Fleet Street success story of modern times into a protracted tragedy”. The political editor of the New Statesman, George Eaton, tweeted:

George Eaton 



And then Daily Mirror associate editor Kevin Maguire wrote that he was:

mourning loss of The Independent, a vital liberal voice in a British press dominated by Tory papers. Thoughts with good journos losing jobs.

Online news site, the Huffington Post published 11 “Independent’ Front Pages That Moved Us All And Changed The Debate” and praised the Indy on its “proud status as an ‘outsider’ newspaper, one that pushed the boundaries of design and reporting to earn itself a respected, established space on the British media scene”.

It took journalist and academic Brian Cathcart in the Guardian to remind us that, hang on, this wasn’t about complete end of a great tradition – this was about the death of a “redundant medium”. It is what journalists find out and write, and are able to tell their audiences and readers, that really matters – and we should not waste our energy lamenting dead-tree technology, wrote Cathcart.

This is precisely what struck me about the coverage and analysis: job losses notwithstanding, the end of the print version of The Independent was greeted as if it were the end of journalism itself. Are the likes of Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn, Mark Steele and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown to be silenced? We must assume not and trust the word of current editor Amol Rajan who wrote in a letter to readers that the spirit and quality of The Independent will endure.





Amol Rajan. The Independent

But among the nostalgia and reminiscences about the Indy's glory days was the acceptance that the decisions taken by owners ESI media were, in a business sense, entirely rational. As Rajan put it, the plain fact is that there simply aren't enough people willing to pay for printed news. With circulations continuing to spiral downwards (daily sales of the Independent stand at around 40,000, down from the highs of 423,000 in 1990) the future of the print edition would have been one of managing further decline.

Interesting times

There are those who think that this is just the beginning of a process of radical change for the national newspaper industry. At least that was the view of Evgeny Lebedev, owner of ESI, who wrote in an email to Independent staff that their news titles would be the first of many leading newspapers to embrace a wholly digital future, stating that the UK print newspaper market conditions meant such change was inevitable. In an interview with **The Guardian** he said:

I genuinely believe that the future is digital and that the industry in denial ... the figures speak for themselves ... The question should not be why we are doing it, but why others in the industry are not.

It's a very pertinent question, one which the Guardian has itself pondered on occasion. In 2012 the **Daily Telegraph** reported that Adam Freeman, then the Guardian's commercial chief, stating the newspaper was on a "mission" to be able to stand alone as a digital-only publication. And in 2013, the **New Yorker** magazine quoted the (now former) editor Alan Rusbridger saying that "he could envisage a paperless Guardian in five to ten years".

Well, we shall see about that but Lebedev's views are by no means universally held. In an editorial on Saturday, **The Times** assured its readers that print would continue to exist alongside the digital format "for a long time to come" going on to say:

Long before the digital revolution, newspapers confronted the migration of news to broadcasters. Newspapers will continue to innovate in the face of the internet revolution and it is our belief that print will co-exist with digital for a long time to come. A loss of diversity in media voices is to be regretted but there is no reason for gloom about the future of newsprint.

In the **Press Gazette** **Dominic Ponsford** maintained an even more optimistic tone. In a piece entitled: "Contrary to what Evgeny Lebedev might say, ten reasons why the death of print is not 'inevitable'" Ponsford pointed to the success of children's weekly newspaper **First News** which has grown its sale

nearly every year since its launch in 2007 and now averages more than 76,000 copies a week. He also cited the success of the free Metro, the free NME and Lebedev's own free London Evening Standard. As Ponsford rightly iterates, it's not getting people to read print that's the problem: it's getting them to pay for it.

There's the rub. Who is now going to pay for the news The Independent will produce? Lebedev has the answer: "The Independent will now offer advertisers access to the world's largest commercial platform for truly independent journalism."

Sane and salient

While we wait to see how that one plays out, a final detail worth noting about the demise of the printed Independent is the space it will leave on the newsstands across the country. As Jane Martinson argued, the lack of its physical presence raises issues about media plurality in a market dominated by right-wing titles.



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Supposedly "Independent" newspaper goes all out for the 'in' campaign. ind.pn/23Y7qER

4:34 AM · Feb 11, 2016



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The Independent is rare pro-EU voice in a anti-Brussels maelstrom and the fact is that three months before the referendum, we will no longer be able enter shops and see its often sane and salient front pages sitting next to the Sun and Daily Mail. That is a real shame.

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