

# News shouldn't be a free ride

*Don Berry*

The Lord said, let there be Lite. And there was Lite – at first at lunchtimes in London, later at teatimes in Manchester and, in future, perhaps, at all times far across the land. Lord Rothermere's Associated Newspapers has again introduced a new kind of product into British print journalism to which the rest of the industry has to react.

Workers in central London – a high proportion of whom are young – have been offered *Standard Lite* at lunchtime since last December. It is a very good deal: 48 pages of sharply-edited, spin-free news and key listings, presented with incisive headlines and a punchy design, printed (and stapled) on high-quality news-stock – and absolutely free. Since March, a similar deal has been on offer in Manchester, where at about 4pm the *Evening News's* lite version is available. Even the *Financial Times* has got in on the act, with an afternoon freesheet called *FTpm* (A4 size, and on pink paper, of course) for corporate subscribers. And now the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has opened up the London Underground as a battleground for more afternoon and evening giveaways.

The Lites have joined the Metro morning papers, also introduced into Britain by Associated, as the latest additions to a new breed of free publication that is not only winning readers and advertisers, but also some respect in traditional – and hitherto dismissive – journalistic quarters. The breed's cheerleaders see it as a key to the future of print journalism. Is it? And, if it turns out to be so, should we rejoice or despair?

Let's make it clear what kind of newspapers we are talking about. The Metros and Lites are a far cry from those ad-jammed freesheets that have been stuffed through our letterboxes for years. Professional journalists put the Metro-Lites together and their content is carefully targeted at the papers' young, busy-busy commuting audience. The idea is that you can absorb just

about everything in them on a short train or bus trip. You can, if you wish, keep your iPod plugged into your ear or play with your mobile phone as you flick through the pages. There is nothing too demanding here.

In Britain these papers made their debut five years ago when Associated, copying Swedish pioneers, launched its giveaway *Metro* at London Underground stations. Similar papers (with varying ownerships and franchises) have since blossomed in more than a dozen big conurbations across the country. Early this year their total circulation topped a million and, in an event unprecedented in the world of the giveaways, the London *Metro* was nominated for Newspaper of the Year in the British Press Awards. *Metro* journalists were understandably cock-a-hoop. In an article in *Press Gazette* (March 4, 2005), *Metro*'s features editor, Kieran Meeke, pointed out that the *Metros*' million made it the "fourth largest circulation in the country". The paper is, he added, "the widest-read paper among the 18-to-45 urbanite audience it is aimed at".

Abroad, *Metros*' track-record is even more spectacular. Excluding the UK, *Metro*—its most recent launch was in Holland—now has 55 editions in 77 major cities in the world. No newspaper outside of Japan has a higher daily readership. These are impressive figures and no doubt explain why the *Metros*, and now the Lites, are marching on here. Though they struggled commercially at first, they are now said to be modestly profitable, their prospects look good—and their introduction is certainly better than doing nothing in the face of falling circulations among paid-for papers and the apathy to them among the "iPod generation".

Offering the papers free is, it is believed, the key to reaching this audience. Kieran Meeke echoed a prevailing thought in Metroland when he wrote: "Our readers are used to getting news free from the TV, radio or the internet, so why should they pay for a newspaper?" Why indeed? It is a challenging question and the answers to it will, I suspect, significantly influence the future of print journalism.

As indicated already, the new giveaways have many virtues. But what don't you get for not paying your money? Well, you don't get big-name writers and columnists, or long, detailed feature articles, or forcefully argued comment or expert, detailed analyses of important issues—for which some readers will no doubt be extremely grateful. But there is another built-in restriction in the *Metro* model that goes to the heart of what news journalism should ultimately be about. The *Metros* are excellent at presenting the information that is made available to them by the various news agencies and the other sources they monitor on their computer screens

in their offices. But they do not have the resources, or indeed the desire, to pursue the off-the-agenda stories that lie concealed outside the office. They are great processors of available news; they are not in the business of digging out the difficult stuff.

It is significant that when Associated set up its first *Metro* in London, the journalistic staff numbered about 35 compared to some 250 on Associated's paid-for *Evening Standard*. Nobody pretended the two papers were doing the same job, of course. On the subject of reporters, one of *Metro*'s early editors, Tim Jotischky, told *Press Gazette* (January 12, 2001): "What we are doing is sound-bite journalism. We are giving people very compact news stories. We don't have on-the-road reporters. Our reporters are internet-literate and do a lot of casting around on websites. Sometimes a reporter finds a great story and we turn that into a news story."

It should be noted at this point that *Standard Lite* and the Manchester *Lite* are currently enjoying the best of two worlds. Like the *Metros*, they are free but, unlike them, they draw on the full reporting resources of paid-for papers. To give a particular example that will no doubt bring blushes to the face of a very modest man, the readers of *Standard Lite* get free the numerous scoops of the parent paper's transport reporter, Dick Murray. Murray digs out his stories in the old-fashioned way of going out and winning the confidence of key contacts. He does not spend his time "casting around on websites" to see what other people have found out.

### *Tied to the screens*

Even though the *Metros* employ some very bright young journalists, they are unlikely to grow their own Dick Murrays. But – I can hear hundreds of reporters crying from many paid-for papers, especially in the provinces – this is also true of our publications: we too are tied to our computer screens and engaged largely in rewriting known information. This, sadly, is true. But while those paid-for papers probably know that they really *ought* to have the odd Murray-like character to discover the information their readers demand, the economics of the *Metros* are such that they accept such reporting is not part of the equation.

This brings us to the other great built-in restriction in the Metro model: the fact that revenue is derived entirely from advertisers. Now we all know that in the real world, paid-for newspapers do not strive officiously to offend big advertisers. After all, upwards of half their revenue comes from that source. But from time to time they do publish what advertisers regard as

“negative” coverage; good newspapers actually hunt around to see whether any “negative” information is being concealed from the public. This can cause big trouble. An offended company might, for example, withdraw its advertising from an offending paper. As it happens, Associated Newspapers were reminded of this as recently as March when the *Mail* papers upset Marks & Spencer, who withdrew their advertising. Associated is big enough to take this on the chin (as it has taken similar blows in the past). But I can’t imagine even Associated would be happy if a *Metro* editor started a fight with a major advertiser. Again, one has to concede that being aware of the sensitivities of advertisers is not something unique to the editors of giveaway papers, but it is a factor that is more deeply entrenched in the Metro commercial model.

Yet, within these restrictions, the *Metros* are clearly providing a useful service to a growing readership and, as their champions point out, are attracting people who would otherwise not read a newspaper at all. So what’s wrong with that? It seems to me there are three dangers.

First, the success of the *Metros* will further encourage managements on some paid-for papers to cut journalistic staff to the bone, particularly on the reporting side. Reporters who want to get out of the office are a real worry for cost-cutting accountants (and possibly for budget-restricted news editors). How do you know they are really pursuing stories and not wasting their time in the pub? What if they come back with nothing, saying the inquiry was worth pursuing but the tip didn’t stand up in the end? Is this a genuine explanation or a cover for malingering? Much better to have fewer “reporters” and keep them in the office where, thanks to the marvels of the internet, they can dress up half-a-dozen or so stories a day.

The second danger is that a free Metro or Lite might be so good at its job that it seriously damages, or perhaps even kills off, a paid-for paper. As a former paid-for *Standard* hack, I don’t like to say this, but I fear it could happen in London. The public position of Associated is the optimistic one: you attract the interest of the usually non-newspaper reading young at lunchtime with a giveaway that impresses them so much that they can hardly wait to buy the full-fat version on their way home from work. Hmm...

But anyway, continues the argument, until this happens you are at least contacting new customers. Roy Greenslade reflected this point of view in his *Guardian* media column (14 March, 2005): “The paid-for sale (of the *Standard*) had an average daily sale last month of 345,776 copies while the *Lite* is recorded as having added 71,567, making a combined total of 417,343. According to research carried out by the *Standard*, 34 per cent of the people

who read the giveaway edition had never previously bought the *Standard*. If they gravitate from free to paid-for it will be worth all the trouble.” It certainly will. But if they simply return to their iPods, and if the paid-for *Standard* continues to lose readers (down 12 per cent year-on-year, in April), then what? A sheet of pink paper might well encourage City readers to buy the full *FT* next day. I can’t see *Standard Lite* having the same beneficial effect on its paid-for parent.

This problem will become even more acute now the OFT has opened up the market on London’s Underground. London’s Mayor Ken Livingstone literally couldn’t wait to encourage Associated’s rivals to sally forth. Even before the OFT announced its decision he had invited bids for the privilege of distributing afternoon and evening giveaways there. He has made it plain that the last group he would like to win these prizes is Associated, though it remains to be seen if he can ensure this. And whatever happens, Associated will not withdraw meekly from the field. We know from past experience, the company always mounts a ferocious battle to hold its ground. My fear is that, in such a conflict, the paid-for *Standard* will be fatally wounded. Such an outcome would deprive one of the world’s greatest capital cities of its only “real”, properly-staffed daily newspaper. Mayor Livingstone would rejoice. Other Londoners, even those who have their own criticisms of Associated’s titles, should not.

The third danger in the march of the Metro-Lite brigade is longer-term, but the most ominous. It is that the young readers at whom the giveaway is aimed will not only, as Kieran Meeke indicated, come to expect all newspapers to be free, but also to believe, and to accept, that what they get in free newspapers is all that most newspapers offer. So why bother with one of those paid-for dinosaurs that are still hanging around?

Speaking as a dinosaur who is still hanging around, I am deeply disturbed by this prospect. The *Metros* and *Lites*, however slickly produced and targeted, cannot provide the depth and detail of information on which a healthy democracy depends. Somehow the iPod generation will have to be convinced that this information is so important it is worth paying for. They have seen the *Lite*; sooner or later, we must hope, they will see the light.

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