

New *Times*, good times

Robert Thomson

The debate about the dimensions of *The Times* has been quaintly one-dimensional, largely due to the self-referential and self-reverential nature of media criticism in Britain. The ritualised obsession with self and the profound ignorance of audience have combined to become an almost senseless act of seppuku by newspapers which have failed to comprehend that competing papers are but one of many threats to survival, and that the greatest enemy of all is irrelevant to contemporary life. Journalism, in print or online, which fails to address the readers (or is inherently contemptuous of them) is a slightly deranged soliloquy whose discordant echoes are a reminder that the speaker has stopped taking his medication.

Reading a newspaper is a conversation, a dialogue with a listener who has never been more distracted, digitally and habitually. Interactivity is supposed to be a digital concept, but is necessary for a newspaper, which must be endlessly engaging and make physical sense to a purchaser, who, by modern standards, is taking part in an unusual transaction – actually paying for news. In the case of the tabloid *Times* – the compact, as we coyly called it – the extraordinary success is a tribute to the journalists who have proved that convenience and quality are not a contradiction.

Journalists often like to perceive themselves as a combination of autodidact and auteur, with a certainty and confidence fashioned more by personal experience than by formal, institutionalised study. (Book learning will get you nowhere on the Parly team.) And yet despite that honed instinct, we are strangely conservative. Change can be an insult to our carefully cultivated intuition and radical change an abomination. It was a relief when William Rees-Mogg told me he had considered converting *The Times* to a tabloid in 1980, but the idea was self-evidently ahead of its moment. The

important point was that William saw no historical reason to reject the concept, and he was supportive of the paper and its journalists during the difficult early days of downsizing, when broadsheet specialists were learning how to develop a canvas of a completely different shape.

The project began, secretly, in a windowless room far from the main editorial floor with a team under the masterful George Brock, who was then managing editor, a job whose responsibilities are vague enough for the incumbent to disappear from sight for weeks before serious questions are asked. That was the autumn of 2003, when we were following in the small but perfectly formed footsteps of *The Independent* compact, whose success had suddenly made it more socially acceptable for *The Times* to shrink. Newspapers do not live by journalism alone, and it was clear that we were fortunate to have the support of a company whose proprietor has been a patron of what, at times, must have seemed a lost commercial cause. There is a temptation for journalists to be contemptuous of our commercial comrades, but without their energy and their creativity we may as well be sending messages in a bottle.

History weighs heavily on *The Times*, but to be haunted by history is to be history. *The Times*, then known as *The Daily Universal Register*, was first published on 1 January 1785 and its founder, John Walter, declared that it “ought to be the register of the times and faithful recorder of every species of intelligence... like a well-covered table it should contain something suited to every palate”. That does not imply a tiny audience of “top people”, but means democratising quality journalism rather than smugly celebrating exclusivity. Cultural sophistication is no longer the preserve of a self-conscious elite, but has been achieved by a great many well-educated individuals who are, in their own way, renaissance readers. They are both eclectic and spoilt for choice.

The paper’s provenance may not be known intimately by every reader, and yet many sense that they are continuing an important tradition, so it was inevitable that some would fear that downsizing meant dumbing down. However, most readers recognised that the newspaper had never been more committed to international coverage and to business news, two of the more “difficult” subjects that are the first to suffer when trivialisation takes hold. It is easy to spot a “dumb” newspaper – its business section is a collection of personal finance plugs and its foreign coverage is distinguished by the antics of Brits abroad.

When we first began the tabloid experiment, running the broadsheet and

compact in tandem, we received dozens of letters from concerned readers and, a year later, when we retired the broadsheet, we received hundreds of letters and e-mails, and yet even the most insulting ad hominem attacks were eloquent. *Times* readers don't do prosaic. One wrote: "As a *Times* reader of 60 years' standing, may I suggest that you pull the plug on that horrible shrunken little object?" And, in trashing me, another captured the sense of tradition: "Your stewardship will be remembered for one thing. You will be the man who presided over the demise of *The Times*. What a footnote to history your name will have earned!" After a continuing correspondence, he wrote back to say that he had adjusted to the new format and would remain devoted to *The Times*.

Our first priority was not to dazzle potential readers with a cutting-edge, alienating design, but to reassure the existing readership, which was much larger than the pool of new readers. The strategy was R&R, Replication and Reassurance, with, for example, the use of a digest ensuring that we had more headlines on the front of the compact than on the broadsheet. That meant we had less space to display dramatic images, but to be cramped was better than to be compromised on quality. Those readers who cared enough to write were often expressing frustration that virtually every piece of familiar furniture was moved around the room, whether it was the crossword, the business pages or the weather. Navigation with nous was crucial in ensuring that exasperated readers did not migrate to a lesser, larger newspaper.

A scrolling sensibility

Another design imperative was to appreciate how the spatial awareness of younger readers has evolved. Frequent computer users found the compact a much easier paper to read, in part because they have a scrolling sensibility and not the traditional scanning sensibility encouraged by a broadsheet layout. More broadly, the young use *The Times* as complementary content, meaning that they expect us to be an alert service and then use the internet to, as they say in the techno trade, "drill down". It is also clear that the compact has brought in more women, many of whom had found the paper overly august, without necessarily having read it regularly, and awkward to handle. You could argue that it is an act of misogyny to publish a broadsheet.

News judgments are more delicate and unforgiving in the compact, which doesn't have the vast tracts that allow broadsheet news editors to hedge their less certain decisions. There is no doubt that we took time to

understand the rhythm of the pages, but *Times* journalists now have a far better sense than any competitor of the need to exploit every square centimetre, whether it be with fact boxes—hopefully, full of facts—or graphic devices that are useful and not merely ornamental.

Running the two editions in tandem for a year was a Herculean achievement by the editors and reporters, who, under the toughest of deadline pressure, were determined that both versions of *The Times* would thrive. There are many conspiracy theories to the contrary, but we genuinely began with no specific plan to make the broadsheet disappear within a given period. What changed the calculation decisively was an experiment with compact-only copies in, among other places, Northern Ireland, where sales rose about 25 per cent, and the Republic of Ireland, where we got a 48 per cent lift. Those figures were impossible to ignore and were a reasonably accurate indicator of the sales success that has fundamentally changed the British newspaper market.

Remarkable changes

In a sense I have buried the lead, which is the statistically provable, genuinely dramatic change in the British newspaper market over the past 18 months. At full price (by far the most accurate measure of sales), we were about 100,000 copies behind *The Daily Telegraph* and our lead over *The Guardian* was a mere 100,000 copies. (The quest for readers can be a futile numbers game, with foreign and bulks, and bulk foreign copies, subscriptions and giveaways, and subscriptions that are more expensive to maintain than giving the paper away.) The most recent ABCs show that we now sell about 20,000 or so copies more than the *Telegraph*, and about 200,000 more than *The Guardian*. These are remarkable changes. On the average weekday, we now sell more at full price than *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Financial Times* combined, and the average Saturday sale of the paper has increased from around 680,000 to 780,000, and is still rising.

It is a good year for a newspaper to be having a good year, given the cyclical and cultural pressures bearing down on us all. But a newspaper, regardless of its size, will not continue to be successful if it thinks of itself only as a newspaper, and sees Britain's borders as the edge of reality. As the paper's sales have grown, so has the audience of Times Online, which had 4.7 million different ("unique" is the technical term) readers in April, an increase of 150 per cent in the past year. Cannibalisation-conscious

newspapers that fear their own website misunderstand the very nature of the internet – the threat to newspapers is the aggregated internet experience, not a single site.

The Times of London has never had more readers at any point in its 220-year history, and we no longer fret over whether we should refer to the tabloid *Times* or the compact *Times*. What you now see every morning is simply *The Times*.